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BEING GOD-FEARING

Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Wilma, Hugo, Andrew. 9/11. Terrorist bombings, gas attacks. War in Iraq, Israel, Ivory Coast, anywhere. Bird flu, Asian flu, anthrax, smallpox, mad cow disease. Meth houses, crackheads, spouse and child abuse. What do you have to fear?

I used to live in Southern California. We often heard about the “great earthquake” that was coming. A satire magazine called *The Journal of Irreproducible Results* once published an article saying that the great California earthquake would be caused by the weight of all the *National Geographic* magazines stored in garages throughout southern California. So I did my part to save California. I moved, with all my *National Geographics*, to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Then the other day I heard about some earthquakes hitting that state. What do you have to fear?

Mr. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that the first section of the newspaper he looked at was the sports page “because the sports page records men’s accomplishments while the front page records men’s failures.” Many people have adopted his practice under the theory that if you don’t know about it what do you have to fear?

Solomon says there is something, or someone, you have to fear. “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good, or whether evil.” (Eccl 12:13-14) Rabbi Israel Rudman says (www.e-geress.org, August 10, 2001)

People think that the choice is between being a G-d-fearing person or nothing. But it is a misconception. The choice is between being a G-d-fearing person or being an AIDS-fearing person or unemployment-fearing person.

Jesus further emphasized this choice between fearing God or fearing less pressing matters. “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matt 10:26) There is something worse than death, and only God has power over that.

Jesus goes on to tell his followers not to fear (Matt 10:31). This is the paradox of fearing God. When one has that fear, he need have no other. The fear of God casts out

all other fears. This explains an unusual choice of words in one passage. After the angel told the women that Jesus was risen from the tomb, “they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy.” (Matt 28:8) Fear and joy are not usually words used to describe the same person at the same instant. Acts 9:31 uses another such an unusual juxtaposition: “walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.” When it is the fear of the Lord, fear and comfort do not exclude each other.

Some people will say that the “fear of God” is only awe, and not the same as fear of death or destruction. This is not necessarily true. While this fear may eventually develop, or possibly degenerate, into some sort of fearless awe it usually begins the way the scripture describes it, as true fear of God. “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb 12:28-29) Verse 29 indicates that this is a fear based on God as a consuming fire, not mere reverence. Paul further associates this fear with trembling. “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Php 2:12-13)

It is true that we should love God, and want to do his will because of that love. Until we are perfected in that goal, then it is healthy and helpful to maintain a certain level of that fear of God and how he can punish us. Others try to get us to fear everything from bad breath to drinking the wrong beer, from flu to fluoride. What do you have to fear? Only God, and then you need fear nothing else.

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THEY COULD BE FREE

It is strange how one illustration can go two or more different directions. Two articles this month begin with the same paragraph, but I proceed in two totally different paths.

A coworker of mine used to have an electric dog fence. This was the single electrified wire around the outer edge of the yard. It would give a mild shock to a dog (or person) that touched it. My coworker used to have an electric dog fence. He doesn't anymore. It's not that he got rid of the dogs; he still has them. He just stopped needing the fence. The dogs don't try to get out of the yard anymore, even without the fence. In fact, they probably don't even realize the fence is gone. This is because the shocks from the fence trained them not to approach where the fence was. When the fence went away they had stopped going near it. His dogs are held in the yard by a fiction. They are held captive when they really could be free.

A lot of people are like those dogs. They are held captive in sin by a fiction. They used to get shocked when

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they tried to be free, so now they believe the fence is still there.

I'm too bad

One of the fictions that hold people captive is the idea that "I'm too bad a sinner for God to save." Their idea of what is too bad for God to forgive varies from person to person. For some it is drug abuse. For others it is murder. Another might think marital infidelity is beyond God's grace. Maybe it is gossip or lying. Whatever that person's great sin is, it must be too hideous for God to forgive.

There was a man who was an accessory to murder, although he justified it in the name of religion. He obtained authority to throw innocent Christians into jail just because he disagreed with their religion. He ended up in jail, and even executed for being a Christian, himself. That man was Saul of Tarsus,

known to most of the world as Saint Paul. Here is what he said about God being able to forgive him.

The grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:14-17)

God saved this "chief sinner" as an example that he can save anyone. There was a man who preached for a while onboard USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70), a Navy aircraft carrier. He was a regular at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings because he was a recovering alcoholic. He was also a recovering drug addict, a divorcee, and had problems with pornography. He, like Paul, used to tell people to look at him. If God could forgive him of his sins, God could forgive anyone. The newspapers have had stories of a convicted serial killer and a woman who killed her own children, yet who had turned to God and been forgiven through Christ's blood. All of these could have said, "My sin is too bad for God to forgive." Instead they realized that the price of a perfect sacrifice, the son of God, was greater than all their sins (all of mankind's sins) put together.

I'm a good person

On the other extreme are those held captive by the electric fence of "I'm a basically good person." These people reason that they aren't bad enough to need salvation from sin. "I never killed anybody. I don't swear, cheat on my wife, or tell real lies." (I guess that means only false lies.) Why wouldn't God save anyone who is not "a really bad person?" The problem is that they have been blinded to the nature of sin.

Contrary to popular belief, which is probably a rumor spread by Satan, it doesn't take a multitude of sins to separate man from God. It only takes one. And that one doesn't have to be a "big" sin, either. Any old run-of-the-mill, common, everyday sin will do it just nicely. The kind that every one of us commits. Jesus did not die because only a few people were bad enough. He died because everybody needs forgiveness.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men,

for that all have sinned. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. (Rom 5:12, 18-19)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 Jn 1:8-10)

Jesus said he did not come "to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Lk 5:32) Unfortunately, that includes all of us, even the "basically good" people.

Everyone is going to heaven

This dog-fence of a fiction is the next response of the basically good people who finally realize the gravity of their sin. It, and its corollary lie ("There are many ways to heaven."), is usually preceded by the statement, "God is love." The idea is that God is so loving that he could never punish anyone eternally.

Never mind that a God who knew that the only way to save mankind was to send his only-begotten son to die on a cross would be unloving to do so if there was another way to heaven. Never mind that a God who says that there is only one way to him would be unloving to those who followed that way if he allowed anyone else to be saved differently. Never mind that failure to punish is, even among parents in this world, not love but indifference.

How could a loving God punish sin? How could he not? "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation." (Heb 2:1-3) To say that God's love demands that he not punish sin, besides being contradictory to the nature of love, would also make God a liar.

"Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) This promise comforts those who follow his way, because they know they are not giving up the pleasures of sin for nothing. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name [than that of Jesus] under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Be assured, God is no liar. If he says there is only one way it behooves everyone to find that way. If he

says "few there be who find it" (Matt 7:14), then we must look all the harder.

God couldn't love me

In contrast, many believe that God may be love, but he is not all loving. They think that they are even beyond the love of God. This is related to those who believe their sin is too great. Unlike those, however, this group may be good, moral people. They have not known love, so they are seemingly incapable of feeling loved. They may have been told repeatedly that they are unlovable. They are seriously in need of the love of God, and when they experience it they become truly free and joyous. They haven't even tried to cross the fence because they have been chained in the middle of the yard.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the New Testament (Jn 3:16) says, "God so loved." John, commenting on the words of Jesus, says that God *so loved* that he gave the most valuable thing he had for the most unlovable people. It is a free gift. All one has to do is reach out and take it. "Herein is love, not that we loved

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God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation [covering] for our sins." (1 Jn 4:10) In his justice God could have let all men be punished for eternity. In his love God provided a means for man to be free of sin. God can, and does, love anyone.

I can wait

Perhaps Satan's greatest tool is the electric fence of "I can wait." This is the infelix attitude of one Governor Felix. "And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." (Acts 24:25) The problem is that no time becomes convenient, and then there becomes no more time. If we knew when we would die, we might find a convenient time. Instead it is too easy to say, I can wait.

"But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Heb 3:13) Even that writer knew the power of an electric dog fence.

AN ELECTRIC FENCE

A coworker of mine used to have an electric dog fence. This was the single electrified wire around the outer edge of the yard. It would give a mild shock to a dog (or person) that touched it. My coworker used to have an electric dog fence. He doesn't anymore. It's not that he got rid of the dogs; he still has them. He just stopped needing the fence. The dogs don't try to get out of the yard anymore, even without the fence. In fact, they probably don't even realize the fence is gone. This is because the shocks from the fence trained them not to approach where the fence was. When the fence went away they had stopped going near it.

I have an electric people fence, and so do you. Paul calls it our conscience. It is that part of us that God gave us to help us obey him. When God put it in us it was good. Unfortunately, we can change it from good to defective. When a dog fence is installed, the technician tests it and makes sure it works. There may be something that breaks the circuit, making the fence just a piece of wire. So it is with our conscience.

Paul talks about those who shut down their fence, or short it out. Some people just turn it off. "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck." (1 Tim 1:19) Men like Hymenaeus and Alexander (verse 20) just choose to shut down their consciences. The result is disaster. Without the fence to teach them limits, they don't even know the dangers of blasphemy or other sins.

Then there are the others, who would not intentionally turn off their consciences. "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in

hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron." (1 Tim 4:1-2) Their problem is not that they put it aside, but that it is shorted out. If a dog touches a live wire one time, but it is not live the next time, he is not conditioned to stay away from the wire. Even if it works frequently, but irregularly, he doesn't know not to leave the yard. It is the same when we short out our consciences. Sometimes we know what is right, but at other times we ignore that and do the wrong. The more often we convince ourselves to sin, the easier it becomes to ignore our conscience, to "sear it with a hot iron."

Thankfully many people continue to have a good conscience. This doesn't mean they don't sin. It just means that when they do, they get a shock from the fence. Every time they get a shock, their conscience actually works better. Recognizing sin for what it is, an attempt to leave the safety of the yard, they stay farther away from the fence. "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men." (Acts 24:16) It does take exercise. Paul mentioned some whose consciences were weak. (1 Cor 8, 1 Cor 10) They have only been shocked a few times. Soon, however, if they (we) pay attention to the conscience, the fence is no longer needed.

This does not mean we can stop studying God's word. After all, men are not dogs. We operate on more than just instinct and programming. We need to keep the conscience educated and working. We have to stay in contact with God. If we don't, we shut off the power to the fence. The next time we begin to lose, again. My friend no longer has an electric dog fence. But I need to keep mine.

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