

Department of  
**Hermeneutics and Apologetics**

SHOULD A CHRISTIAN BE AFRAID?

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The answer to the question "Should a Christian Fear?" is not so obvious as it might seem to be. Although one's immediate reaction is in the negative because of the perfect peace which the Lord Jesus gives to each believer, this is only part of the answer to the matter.

Two abuses of the doctrine of fear which are abroad today make the study of the proper doctrine mandatory. They are both based on the idea (if not the words) of 2 Timothy 1:7: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." The one concludes that, since fear ought not be a part of any Christian's makeup, it should be avoided at all costs lest that Christian become inhibited. It often follows that carnal principles are used to accomplish this end and cure the Christian of his fear. The other abuse takes the idea of the verse as an excuse for familiarity with the Lord in His worship and service. Boldness, being made the opposite of fear by such ones, becomes then an excusing cover-up for any sort of conduct in Christian work. God preserve us from either of these abuses!

What is the proper doctrine of fear as set forth especially in the New Testament? The answer to this question is found in the study of the three Greek words for fear which are used there. (A fourth word is found in a variant reading of Hebrews 12:28 and will not be considered here.) The three words are *deilia*, 'cowardice'; *eulabeia*, 'reverence'; and *phobos*, 'fear or alarm.'

I. THE CHRISTIAN AND COWARDICE

Five times in the New Testament the Holy Spirit has

used this first word, *deilia*, 'cowardice' (2 Tim. 1:7; Jno. 14:27; Matt. 8:26; Mark 4:40; Rev. 21:8). In the Greek literature outside the New Testament the word regularly has this meaning of cowardice,<sup>1</sup> which meaning carries over into the New Testament always in a bad sense. This base spirit will manifest itself in the professing Christian in the time of persecution, proving that his profession was not real. Therefore the Scripture declares that cowards will partake of the second death, for they were never saved (Rev. 21:8).

Sadly enough, even a true believer may evidently show this same spirit, since the carnal believer has qualities similar to those of the unsaved man (1 Cor. 3:3). That is why Paul, after declaring that the spirit of a coward is not God-given, exhorts the Christian not to be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord (2 Tim. 1:8). But the Scripture not only warns; it also gives the cure. The cure is the appropriation of all that Christ has given to His disciples (Jno. 14:27), and the means of appropriation is, as with all spiritual blessings, faith (Matt. 8:26). However, faith apart from its object is worthless; therefore, faith increases as acquaintance with the object increases. Hence the handmaid of faith is knowledge—knowledge of the Object of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Should a Christian be afraid? In the sense of *deilia*, 'cowardice,' the answer is an emphatic No.

## II. THE CHRISTIAN AND REVERENCE

In its various forms the second word, *eulabeia*, 'reverence,' is used seven times in the New Testament (Acts 23:10; Heb. 11:7; Lk. 2:25; Acts 2:5; 8:2; Heb. 5:7; 12:28). "The image on which it rests is that of the careful taking hold and wary handling, the *eu lambanesthai*, of some precious yet fragile vessel, which with ruder or less anxious handling might easily be broken."<sup>2</sup> This basic meaning is also found in Greek literature, and it is not difficult to see how it came to

<sup>1</sup>Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup>Trench, *New Testament Synonyms*, p. 36.

mean reverence. Indeed, Moulton and Milligan found the noun form used "as a title of respect, like our 'Your Reverence.'"<sup>3</sup>

The writer to the Hebrews ascribes to this reverence the reason for Christ's being heard while on earth by the Father (Heb. 5:7). He points out further that this same quality is to be apparent in our service for God (12:28). We too must demonstrate the same yieldedness to the will of the Father accompanied by continuing, unbroken fellowship, such as Christ demonstrated in His earthly life if our service is to be acceptable. In his commentary on Hebrews, Delitzsch says: ". . . We may interpret *eulabeia* as expressing that religious fear of God and anxiety not to offend Him which manifests itself in voluntary and humble submission to His will."<sup>4</sup> He also notices the idea of circumspection in the word. In other words there is both a Godward and manward aspect to reverence. His relationship to us in salvation can never be broken, but His relationship in communion is indeed fragile. We must handle carefully that relationship by complete obedience to His will, which will include being wary of things about us. This is true reverence.

Should a Christian be afraid? When fear means 'reverence' the answer is an emphatic Yes.

### III. THE CHRISTIAN AND PROTRACTED ALARM

*Phobos*, the third word for fear, is the common New Testament word, but it is used in both a good and bad sense. Thayer links the meaning of this word with having been struck with terror or a sense of alarm, and says that *phobos* is the protracted state resulting from that.<sup>5</sup> Unsaved men stand in this protracted state of alarm from having been struck with the awesomeness of death (Heb. 2:15), of eternal condemnation (Heb. 10:31), and of future earthly judgments (Rev. 11:11; 18:10, 15). As believers, we have (thank God!) passed from a state of terror concerning these things into a

<sup>3</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 262.

<sup>4</sup>Vol. I, pp. 246-47.

<sup>5</sup>*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 656.

state of perfect peace about them. Of these matters no Christian is afraid.

In another sense, however, the Christian is to be afraid in the sense of the meaning of this term *phobos*. In a word we may say that there is a proper sense in which the Christian should remain in a protracted state of alarm, as new feelings result from having been struck with God. One must always balance such a statement with the truth of the peace of God, that which keeps the heart of every child of His. On the other hand one must be very careful, in these days especially, not to forget that there is a very real sense in which the believer is to fear. The Scripture in speaking to the "royal priesthood" plainly says, "Fear God" (1 Pet. 2:17). Be struck with Him and live in that state is the idea.

This right kind of godly fear will manifest itself in many and various ways. It will cause the Christian to be rightly related to and respectful of governmental authorities, since he will realize that they are ordained of God and that part of our responsibility to God is through them (Rom. 13:7; 1 Pet. 3:14:15). Godly fear will keep the believer properly related to others both in domestic and non-domestic relationships (Eph. 5:21). It should cause the husband, wife, and children to keep their proper positions in the home. It should also affect labor relations; for written over this entire section of the Ephesian letter (5:21—6:9) are those significant words "in the fear of God." Furthermore, it will affect the spiritual toil of the servant of Christ, if his service is motivated by the realization that someday he must appear before God for examination of the record and settling of accounts (2 Cor. 5:11). This will in turn cause him to examine his whole spiritual life now, to see if he has entered into all of God's provision for him (Heb. 4:1). How extensive are the ramifications of godly fear!

All of this notwithstanding, the most striking feature about the fear of God is the effect it will have on the church of God on earth when all its members are walking in it. At the very beginning, shortly after Pentecost, fear was a chief characteristic of the church (Acts 2:43). This evidently was

not the result of chastisement; for the church was as pure in those days as it ever has been, and she was continuing in teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. One could hardly imagine a more unadulterated service of God, and yet fear came upon every soul because they were struck with the person and power of almighty God. The very purity, no doubt, contributed largely to their clear vision of God. Later on when sin entered the group and God judged it openly, striking down Ananias and Sapphira, we find the church again characterized by fear (Acts 5:5). In this case we are clearly told that the feeling of fear was not limited to the church alone but was felt also outside the company of believers (Acts 5:11). Again, still later, the record mentions the fear of the Lord as a characteristic of the walk of the churches of Palestine (Acts 9:31). The church at Ephesus knew this fear of the Lord, and it was effectual in bringing revival among the believers when they voluntarily collected and burned their books of curious arts (Acts 19:17).

In each of these instances the record states that, when the church was walking in the fear of the Lord, souls were saved. This is very significant, for it gives us more than a hint of the need of the hour. It should remind us of a long-neglected principle for winning souls. Unsaved men have no fear of God, because for one thing they see so little of it reflected in the lives of those who profess to know him. The church could get along without her lobbies, pressure groups, campaigns, etc. if she were saturated with a sense of reverential awe. In the worship of the church God is often lowered to the place where there can be but little respect for Him. There is a vast difference between the proper doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ as our elder brother and the usual impression given that He, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, is a sort of—and I must be plain—'big buddy.'

From whence comes such an impression? From whence come whispering, laughing, and talking in church? From whence come bickering, backbiting, gossip? From whence religious jazz, festivals, entertainments? Certainly not from the fear of the Lord. And it may be concluded also that the

church of Jesus Christ will never be able to fulfill her mission to win men to that Lord Jesus Christ until she is walking in the fear of the Lord. In all our worship and service there must be a manifest sense of the power and presence of the living Lord.

Should a Christian be afraid? Yes and no. He must never be cowardly; he should always be reverent; he need never fear the things of condemnation and judgment; yet he should live always in the protracted state of awe that results from having been struck with God.



“How great is the love of my Savior,  
Who bore all my guilt on the tree,  
And compassed sin’s judgments forever,  
And bade me believe and be free!  
The mercy of God is behind me,  
His glory is shining before.  
I stand on the blest Rock of Ages:  
I am safe in His grace evermore.

I know in the ages before me  
The weight of His glory I’ll bear,  
And dwell in the light of His presence  
In the place He has gone to prepare.  
The mercy *etc.*

He took me from sands ever sinking  
And lifted me up with His arm,  
He placed my feet firm and unchanging  
On Him, where I stand safe from harm.  
The mercy *etc.*

What power can alter His purpose?  
What creature can separate me  
From the love of my God, who now saves me—  
For the flood-gates of grace are set free?  
The mercy *etc.*”\*

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