

I recently heard a survivor of childhood abuse say that she spent much of her young life blocking out her emotions and now that she is dealing with the abuse she suffered she wants to feel everything life has for her – the pain and the pleasure – she knows now that her entire emotional life is a blessing. Somehow the experience of life just isn't the same for this woman without being able to feel her way through it.

We humans have been blessed with an arsenal of feelings – while the world tends to embrace systematic, logical and explainable aspects of life like science and business, it tends to be sceptical and uncomfortable with the more flowing and unpredictable parts of life that are represented by the artistic, the emotional, the mysterious. Of course anyone who has delved deeply into science or business has discovered that each holds its own mysterious art and indeed systems eventually breakdown as we get closer to the heart of a phenomenon. For every living thing we try to categorize we find exceptions to the rules. For

every financial climate we try to predict we find only new combinations of life circumstances that result in a unique moment in history. While we profess systems of knowledge as our strongholds we are secretly tossing to and fro on a sea of emotions that I would assert is where the true richness of life lies – it is in our experience of life highlighted by our feelings and emotions that blind our home-made systems and halt our sense of control, bringing us open to the presence of God all around us.

The Book of Psalms presents us with a wide variety of extreme emotional experiences, from fantastic joy and thankfulness to utter sorrow and strong anger. Many of the emotions we read about in the Psalms are familiar to us. These ancient writings span time, space and culture to breath their human longings, fears and elations in ways that still ring true to us today. As much as we can detect our own struggles in the words of the Psalms we at times come up against foreign ideas, and expressions of emotion that we find difficult to understand or accept.

One prime example of this is the concept of having “the fear of the Lord”.

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible has an extensive article on fear in the Bible, one aspect of which is presented to us in Psalm 34 – the fear and worship – the “fear of the Lord” hand-in-hand with faith and praise is described this way:

“The OT repeatedly associated the emotion of fear with the complex of faith, trust, love and communion; and it is perhaps at this juncture that the biblical mode of thinking is most startling to the modern Western mind.”

For the ancient Hebrew, a member of the holy people, in relationship with a holy God, there is no paradox in the command, “Serve Yahweh with fear, and rejoice with trembling!” (Ps. 2:11).<sup>1</sup> In this way of looking at things, God delivers us from worldly fears and our faith in Him is experienced as a fear based on the recognition of God’s holiness – this type of fear is a commingling of repulsion, attraction, fascinations, awe,

reverence, love, trust, faith, worship and adoration<sup>2</sup> felt when one becomes aware of God’s presence, aware of God’s work in the world. In our Psalm today we see these connections – in verse 4 the psalmist proclaims his deliverance from all of his fears upon seeking the Lord – his worldly fears are relieved. While later in verse 7 he describes the deliverance of those who fear the Lord – those who fear the Lord are delivered from their fears – the Hebrew poet would appreciate this modern day play on words!

In all that I read on this idea of fearing the Lord I was surprised to find that the common thread is a growing awareness of God. To be aware of the presence of the living God strikes this complex emotion into being. To fear the Lord to begin with is simply to acknowledge He exists.

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<sup>1</sup> Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, “Fear and Worship”, 258.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 256.

Seek, look, cry out, taste, see, come, listen – these are some of the verbs the Psalmist uses in his exhortation to us as he teaches us the “fear of the Lord” in verse 11 of Psalm 34. These are ways of sensing our world, of reaching out and being open to what we are surrounded by – and when we hone our sense of our surroundings we detect in ever greater amounts the grace of God. It is like a scientist who just needs a more sensitive instrument to make measurements with; the more magnification we have the more bacteria and other microscopic organisms we find! The more we turn out into our world, the more we see, taste, listen and seek the more we sense God at work in the world. Our ability to feel “the fear of the Lord” is a wonderful blessing!

Here are some more verbs for you: answers, delivers, hears, saves, rescues, keeps, redeems – these are some of the verbs used to describe God’s actions toward those who “take refuge in him” as in verse 22. We seek and God answers, we come and

He delivers. We cry out and God saves. We listen and God redeems.

The actions and reactions are tricky in this psalm as in other scripture – if one reads along in the order things are offered, the logic of cause and effect seems at play – vv 11-18 – it seems that one calls out to God and he answers, does this mean the call is the starting point of being saved? Does this put the ball in our court so to speak, are we to initiate the exchange that results in our redemption? Is it in our righteousness that our redemption lays? Or can we back up and take into account the deeper meaning of what it is to “fear the Lord” – so that we find the Lord and all that He is to be the bedrock of our redemption and our righteousness is rather a wondrous side-effect of our being saved. God’s grace-filled presence is always near, is our ability to sense it always enabled?

What we really have here is the famous case of what came first, the chicken or the egg? When it comes to salvation we have often been confused and begun down various paths that lead away from a healthy and bold embrace of God's grace. What did it mean for an earlier church to offer indulgences, a system by which one could store up prayer/good works for the benefit of a loved one lingering outside the doors of heaven – what does it mean today to believe that our health and wealth are dependant on our personal piety and the degree to which we live a faithful life? These temptations to reach for the reins, to barge into the management position of our own redemption are multiple and ever so prevalent. And so with the study of scripture what seems a chicken and egg question – what came first God's love of us or our good behaviour, His redemption of us or our praise of Him, suddenly contains no mystery – clearly it is grace that under girds all of our expressions of faith and praise, clearly it is grace that elicits the response of praise – and so we have our little logic recipe of

comfort: first comes God's grace, then our fear of the Lord or overwhelming awareness of grace, which then elicits our praise – grace, fear, praise.

Clearly to cultivate our own fear of the Lord is only a matter of seeking, tasting, reaching, looking, calling and then receiving – with our openness to God's surrounding grace we hone our skills of recognition and with the recognition of God's love at work in our world our own sense of thankfulness is spontaneously stoked, and praise comes like fire from our hearts, continually in our mouths, drawing ever more attention to the love of God in the lives of each other.

Can you hear your neighbours asking themselves what about all those Sunday mornings or mornings in general when praise for God is not on my lips – what about when spontaneity is far from the case? When we struggle to get out of bed or to prepare for our worship on Sunday morning – when the words we sing seem like just words – what of the response of praise that is compelled from us at other

times? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a small book about living in Christian community called “Life Together”. In it he observes that when our own faith is waning and we come into our Christian community, we see the faith of others, we hear the gospel on their lips and the praise in their hearts and the “Christ in them” lifts us up, buoys our faith and keeps us in good stead until we are able to do the same for another whose praises are not spontaneous one day. Here is a case of not indulging our feelings, but depending on our Christian commitment, on our relationships, on our regular prayer life to maintain our praise life – if we partake in activities that cultivate our fear of the Lord, our sense of God’s presence and activity all around us, then our praises will be spontaneous and effervescent – and when we fall down, and feel disconnected we have God’s gift of our brothers and sisters in Christ to witness to us their thankfulness and praises.

This phenomenon, this working of the relationships between us as the Body of Christ, is upheld by the practice of sharing testimonies.

Some of our Christian traditions do this very well while others shy away from the more emotional aspects of it – in good balance a regular practice of sharing our experiences of God in our lives is a powerful way of encouraging each other to see God at work in every life. The youth leaders at Camp Douglas were just saying that their most memorable moments at camp have been hearing the testimonies of each other and visitors to the camp. Imagine if our ancient Hebrew brothers and sisters didn’t take the time to record their experiences of God - these are still being shared thousands of years later – still ministering to us, still speaking God’s holy word to us, still enlivening our worship, encouraging our praise, echoing our heartache and sorrow, expressing our courage and trust found only in our Lord – still inciting the fear of the Lord – that awesome, heart racing awareness that we are naught in the face of God’s greatness and yet His love for us carries us forward into eternity. Thanks be to God! Amen.