

Love Drives out Fear

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I'm from a single parent family. My Dad died when I was 6 years old. So growing up it was just me and my Mum. My childhood had no real religious influences, mum was neutral about God. But I always felt there was something more... I guess it was at school assemblies where I was introduced to the concept of God and I can remember how intrigued I was that this entity who created everything wanted to be called Father. It felt to me that I was being offered a relationship that I had missed out on.

As a young adult I developed a need to explore this in more detail. To cut a long story short eventually I came across the Christadelphians. Everything they said to me made sense. And so I got baptised at the age of 22. I was so excited. I'd finally got to begin my relationship with God as my Father.

I remember not long after I was baptised someone gave a bible talk that went on the lines of 'You must fear God because you will be held accountable for all your actions when the kingdom comes, and it will be then when you find out if you are good enough.' I have to be honest, this concept bothered me for a long time. It felt like this contradicted what I'd come to understand, and it made me pose a challenging question to myself: Would I ever be good enough? I looked around me and saw people who were obviously better than me. So did that mean they were loved more than me? I worried. Would God turn his back on me? My heart felt sick at this thought. I'd spent so long wondering about God and wanting to know him, to be told I might not be good enough and the relationship I needed might be unattainable was paralysing.

There are many verses that appear to back this up. For example, we are told in Hebrews,
It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb 10:31)

Compare this to Deuteronomy,

It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. (Deut 6:13)

And,

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. (2Cor 5:11)

It's easy to be persuaded by the argument that we need to fear God to know him. So, does the logic follow that we should be in constant fear of God? To use the words of Solomon,

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl 12:13)

I began to find the whole thing terrifying and began to wonder, what's the point? I think figuratively I took a breath and asked myself. Is this the relationship that God wants with me—one of fear? One of my potential failure? So I began to explore. Because the other option was to walk away.

Now, I'm a Dad and a husband. My kids are 16, 17 and 20. And I've been married for 26 years. God has given me a family. And the relationships within our family over the years have developed and grown into something special—God given. Sometimes we've got it wrong, sometimes we've got it right. But what's clear to me is that my family is based on an ongoing active two way relationship that is built on love. It started before they were even born and has carried on through their individual childhoods and into their lives now as young adults. We love them on a level we couldn't have imagined was possible.

So, surely the relationships developed within a family are the echoes of a potential relationship with God? He is our Father, we are his children. Our lives are lived, we grow as we walk to the kingdom.

It's easy to be persuaded by the argument that we need to fear God to have a relationship with him. But let's consider, what kind of relationship does God really want with us, his children? Would I want my children's love for me to be based on fear? Do I want my kids to behave in an acceptable way because they are scared of me? Absolutely not. I'll be honest there are times where I have got angry and shouted. But afterwards, I just felt wretched and sorry.

Let's take it to another level. If you saw a child who in the presence of their parent displayed behaviour that suggested they feared their parent. What would you think? How would

you react? I suggest to you that you would be concerned that the relationship was abusive and you would be concerned for the safety of the child, to the point where you may feel the need to report your concerns.

So surely if God sees us as his children, do you think our Father wants a relationship with this abusive dynamic?

To try and answer my dilemma I looked for the first use of the word fear in the context of God. We find that it is God who is speaking to a man of faith, who appears in Hebrews 11, the faith chapter.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." (Gen 15:1)

Interesting, isn't it? The first time God uses the word fear in relation to himself he says, "Fear not." And why doesn't Abram, this man of faith, need to fear? Because God himself is there offering salvation and protection. (Fear not, Abram: I am your shield, your reward shall be very great.)

So, surely, this becomes the standard for us, rather than fear, fear not. Because the first mention of the word fear, God is saying to a faithful man, fear not.

If we seek for the context of this scene in Genesis 15, we see something incredible,
And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" (Gen 14:18-20)

To paraphrase, Abram wins a battle against several groups of kingdoms of men with just 318 men—against the odds humanly speaking—but wins because God delivered them to him, and in essence saves Abram's house. The kings offer Abram the spoils of the battle, but he turns them down. And immediately after this battle, Abram meets the king of peace, who is also a high priest, shares bread and wine with him and then after this is told by God himself, "Fear not."

I think there is a parallel we can draw here for ourselves. We live our lives in a battle, surrounded by a world that serves itself. Offering us its spoils... drawing us in. But we have a Father who wants us, so by God's grace, we survive the battle on a daily basis. Some days we get more bruised and battered than others, but that's ok. Because we have been delivered out of

certain death, because of God's love. A love so deep the father, provides a king priest for us, Jesus. Who provides bread and wine for us. And we walk with the plan and purpose of God before us and there is no need to fear our Father.

We are considered sons and daughters of God who called us out of the world and offers us salvation through his son.

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1John 3:1-3)

Those verses are quite clear to me! Right now we are children of God and this is a relationship based on love not fear. We are worthy of that love (that's what beloved means).

God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. (1John 4:16-19)

This verse answered all my questions. For me this was a pivotal discovery. The plan and purpose of God is not built on fear—God's love drives out fear! There is no fear in love, perfect love casts fear out. The essence of God is not one of fear. God is love! This is the God who wants us to call him Father. Love is perfected in us so we may have confidence in the day of judgement. So if we walk in love, this two-way relationship casts out fear. And this love first came from God to us. We love because he first loved us.

But we've been given a walk, with its ups and downs, so we can grow closer to God. And this is how love is perfected. Life happens and we learn from the experiences we have. And this learning brings us into a closer relationship with God

As a parent, I am far from perfect, but I'm doing my best. We have tried to develop a relationship with our children where they can talk to us about anything and not feel that they will be rebuked or feel like they have disappointed us. Surely that's the pattern? When I approach

God in prayer is there anything I can't discuss? As a child of God, I try to do my best. I don't always succeed, but I know my father is there ready to listen.

As a parent is there anything I can't forgive? Is there anything I'm not willing to forgive? There the echo again. If my child is sorry, then they are forgiven—as if it never happened.

I am a child of God. In Psalm 139 it says:

"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Ps 139:14)

God loves me. What can I offer in return? All I can do is marvel that the creator of the universe called me, and love him back. There is nothing I can do to earn my father's love, it's already been given. All I can do is be thankful.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (Eph 2:8)

Is there anything I wouldn't do for my children? No! Is there anything they could do to earn more love? No! But despite that, my love grows as they live their lives. My love for my children is limitless—because they are my children—and I would do anything for them. Surely that's how God sees us?

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (Rom 5:8-9)

Isn't that incredible? God let his son die for us to show us how much he loved us. And through the blood of Jesus we have been forgiven of everything. We are innocent. And if we are innocent that can't be reversed. Can you imagine the turmoil in my family if I forgave one of my children only to change my mind? That would undo all the trust my children have in me.

I chose to be baptised and now I am a child of God. This created a battle in my mind of flesh versus spirit. I know how I should be, but there are times where I take my eye off God. Does this mean I have failed?

In Rom 7:13-23 Paul describes the ongoing struggle of a child of God against sin. *'I am of the flesh, sold under sin'* he says in v14. At the end of the chapter he cries out in frustration that he is a wretched man and asks who will deliver him?

This could be seen as a man who despairs and is lost. But of course he's building to a point. He thanks God through Jesus, that he has been saved through faith and ends the chapter with:

I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin (Rom 7:25)

I believe that all who follow God through Jesus share this battle. If that is the case, the next verses in Romans 8 apply to us.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom 8:1-4)

When I first saw Romans 8:1—I mean really saw it—I felt like my eyes had been opened. I am alive in Jesus name and I have been set free by my Father. And although I'm far from perfect, by God's grace I am able to walk after the spirit (but still battle with my flesh/humanity). And because of the battle, v9 applies to me and you

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Rom 8:9)

And if we battle then He is our Father and we are his children

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Rom 8:14-15)

Where is the fear? Abba is an incredibly intimate title. Closer to the English 'Dad'. There are only three people in this world that call me by that name. We have been invited to this level of closeness by God.

'Fear not' is a concept that stretches right through the bible. It was said to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob, the heirs to the promise... How much does that tell you?

In the Gospels how many people/ groups heard the phrase, "Fear not"? (1) Joseph, (2) Mary, (3) the disciples, (4) Mary Magdalene, (5) Zacharias, (6) the shepherds, (7) the woman with the issue of blood. It's said to seven individuals or groups in the gospels. The eighth occurrence is to Paul in Acts. Paul (known as Saul at this point) who made it his mission to persecute Christians, heard Jesus himself say, "Fear not." Surely if ever a man had to fear God, it

was Saul. This was a man who stood and watched Steven be stoned to death. Yet this man who became Paul is loved by God; Paul—who was able to write Romans and say there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

We began with the first occurrence of “Fear not”, so let’s finish with the last,

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore,…” (Rev 1:17-18)

When I get to stand before Jesus, I will fall to my knees and I will tremble. Not because I’m scared, but rather because this man died for me. Imagine being able to see Jesus face to face. I often wonder what I will say. More importantly what will he say—he knows me after all. But, I know one thing. In his grace he will not condemn me, or punish me, or tell me I’m unworthy of the kingdom.

He will reach out his hand to mine and say, “Fear not.”