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Fear

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters – Summer 1999*

I very much appreciate your positive responses to my last newsletter. I had planned a series on emotions and wondered how it would be received. Because of your response I am now even more convinced that the subject is appropriate. In this newsletter I have chosen the subject of fear.

In my researches I found a book on my shelves I bought many years ago. Surprisingly I had never read it. I decided to read it first since it was old and would not be biased by modern ideas about emotion. It was published in 1927. *Fear*, was authored by John Rathbone Oliver. It came into my possession somewhere in my peregrinations through used bookstores around the country. Why I bought it I don't know except that I could have been influenced by my lifelong interest in emotion. It was not your conventional scientific treatise on the subject as it was written as a biographical novel. It recounted the story of a man who had what today would be called a panic disorder. The first two chapters are essentially the history of the onset of his illness. The rest of the book is a first person account of his treatment by a Christian psychiatrist. As I read I could hardly believe my eyes. The psychiatrist used almost every spiritual intervention that I have identified and now use in my practice.

I wish to emphasize again that this book was first published in 1927. In 1966 I searched the library for books that would tell me how to integrate my faith into my work. I found only two that were at all helpful. I am glad I did not discover this one because I would have adopted his approach instead of developing my own. God's ways are not my ways, so I am sure it did not come into my hands until later for good reason. I am certain He wanted me to discover the truth for myself. Truth is eternal, and he promises to reveal it in his Word. Each of us can discover it for ourselves if we seek it. Discovering it for myself gave it much more meaning, because I learned so many more things that would not have been revealed to me if I had read Oliver's discoveries and immediately applied them. Instead I had to search and search to discover all the truth He wanted to reveal to me.

Fear is an emotion, but it has two meanings for Christians. It can be a strong emotion that is elicited by the anticipation of danger. The second meaning is profound reverence and awe, especially toward God. Therefore, when we talk about the fear of the Lord, we are not always talking about the same emotional response. As I explained to you in an earlier letter, awe is a pleasant emotion whereas fear is unpleasant. I will return to the subject of fear of the Lord later.

Right now I want to talk about the fear that arises out of anticipation of danger. Real danger elicits fear. Recently I heard the story of a woman whose home was broken into by a man who intended to rape her. He had a gun and put it to her head demanding that she submit to him. Her two children were asleep in the next room. She was alone with them so there was no one to protect her. She was terrorized. Even so, she still had the presence of mind to tell him that she had AIDS. He relented in his intent to rape her, but forced her to perform oral sex on him. He then left cursing her for having AIDS.

What do we experience when we are afraid. First there is a tensioning of all of our muscles. We ready ourselves for action. Second our heart rate increases. Third we breathe more deeply and rapidly. Fourth there is a sense of constriction in the upper part of our abdomen, and sometimes in our throat. We may develop goose bumps (piloerection) with the accompanying feeling that "chills" are going over us, especially our back and neck. There are similar sensations in our scalp. Other autonomic changes occur, but one has to observe the person carefully to see them. Mentally we are extremely alert, and begin searching for ways to escape the danger. When the danger is ended we gradually return to our normal state.

We are born with the capacity to fear. In my last newsletter I told you of some experiments that we did with newborns when we elicited the Perez reflex. The first emotional response of the child was to show fear. Certainly as we begin life we are afraid of many things because we do not know what is dangerous. We are afraid of large animals, of strangers, of loud noises and a host of other things. It is our parents duty to teach us to appropriately inhibit fear or to respond to it. We live in a dangerous world and for survival we must learn to respond correctly. It is inappropriate to be absolutely fearless or to be fearful of everything.

Fear like all emotions has two dimensions intensity and duration. The lady who was sexually assaulted experienced fear at its greatest intensity. She was terrified. It was present during the entire encounter and for a long time afterwards. Most of the time we experience fear only when the stimulus is present. I remember an episode in Krueger National Park when we were observing a female elephant who had baby with her. These elephants are most dangerous. Our guide drove closer and closer. Suddenly the elephant pulled her ears forward, trumpeted and took a menacing stance as if she was about to charge. I was afraid. Why? because I had seen pictures in the Ranger station of automobiles that had been demolished by elephants. I did not want to be in one that was crushed like those in the pictures. You should have seen what one elephant did to a Volkswagen "Bug." As soon as we backed away and drove off my fear disappeared. There are many words that describe the emotion of fear. I have already defined fear as an emotional response to danger. Although there are other words that describe the emotion, they also describe its intensity and duration. Foreboding or apprehension are mild forms of fear. They usually are experienced when one suspects something fearful may be about to happen. Anxiety is fear without an object. To be frightened is to be made afraid. Terror is the most extreme form of fear.

Fear can be the primary symptom of mental disease. Anxiety or fear without an object occurs as part of the emotional disorders that are biologically determined. These attacks are characterized by rapid pulse rate, palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating, dry mouth, and a feeling of constriction in their chest. They are associated with a feeling of nameless dread. They can be so severe that they are thought to be heart attacks. The sufferer is examined extensively only to discover that they have no heart disease. Several years ago while attending a meeting one of my colleagues had such an attack. I recognized it as an anxiety attack. After I gave him a medication for anxiety his symptoms resolved. His anxiety was due to burnout. He had pushed himself far beyond his limit of tolerance and the stress brought on the symptoms. After he took a month off to rest and restructured his life he has been well. On another occasion my barber had an anxiety attack while cutting my hair. Since I knew what a workaholic he was and the troubles he had in his many business interests, it was not hard to diagnose his problem. Again medication helped him, but he did not reduce his workload so he has continued to have symptoms off and on since then. Few persons with a major load of stress escape having anxiety attacks.

In contrast to anger, fear is not a usual concomitant of organic brain disease. The only time it occurs is when a patient has a pheochromocytoma. This is a tumor of the adrenal glands that secretes adrenaline. After this cause is ruled out there are left four common causes of pathological fear that are pure psychiatric problems. (1) When we are subject to too much stress we may develop anxiety. (2) Childhood traumas also can leave scars on a person's soul that manifest themselves later in fears and phobias when under stress. (3) With a biologically determined emotional disorder (depression) we can have severe anxiety. The last (5) cause of fear is obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) in which an irrational fear gives rise to a compulsive effort to avoid something perceived as a danger.

The fear (anxiety) that occurs as part of a major biological emotional illness can be the primary symptom that occurs. The person has, though, the classical symptoms of depression. They have disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, get tired easily, lose interest in things, have decreased sexual appetite and ability to perform, think hopeless or self-accusatory thoughts, have crying spells and worry constantly. The anxiety attacks they have occur only sporadically. These illnesses are biological ("chemical") and require medical treatment.

One of the other common causes of anxiety attacks is stress. Since we are all subject to more or less stress in life, I wish there was space enough to list the common causes of stress and their degrees of significance, but I only have enough to mention a few of them. The most significant is the loss of a spouse by death. It is considered the most stressful and carries 100 degrees of stress. The second most stressful event is divorce. It is rated as having 75 degrees. The third is marital separation with 63 degrees. Getting married has 50 degrees; business readjustment has 39. Christmas carries 12 degrees. Holmes and Masuda compiled a list with 43 items all rated by the degree of stress. It is said that a score of 200 or higher in one year will result in the development of

psychiatric symptoms or make the person susceptible to some physical disease. Obviously stress does not always cause fear (anxiety), but it can be a primary determinant in everyday life.

When I was in undergraduate school I worked 30 to 40 hours a week and took 20 hours of classes. One day as I was walking across the campus I had an acute anxiety attack. I had never suffered anything like this before, so I went to the student health office and told them of my symptoms. The nurse who was there asked about my work load, and then suggested that instead of working through my next break, that I go to the beach. I took her advice and had no more anxiety attacks. The stress of working so many hours, studying, and going to classes and labs had stressed me beyond my limits of tolerance. I, like many people who are workaholics, had burned out.

Fear as an emotion is an action word. In contrast to anger that moves us toward the threat or danger, fear moves us to either flee the danger or inhibit our activity in preparation for defense from the danger. Like anger, fear can control our lives in many ways, even when there is no obvious threat. One of the best treatises on the subject is by H. Norman Wright a pioneer in Christian marital therapy. His book, *Afraid No More*, (Tyndale House, 1989) is the best I have encountered. In it he lists and discusses in detail the ways that fear influences our lives.

The most common effect of fear is to cause worry. Worry is the cognitive component of anticipated and unresolved fear. If I have grown up in a home where the family resources are limited, and if my father and mother are always telling me that we will not have enough to eat, that we are going to be evicted from our house any day, and that we cannot afford adequate clothing, I may grow up to fear economic deprivation. In my adult years I will strive to be successful enough to have security. I will live a frugal life and save any surplus that I might have. I will make all of my economic decisions influenced by the fear of losing money. I will reject even good investments, because I am afraid we will have another economic depression. I worry all the time about money because anything that involves spending will arouse my fears.

Fear profoundly influences our relationship with God. If we grow up in a home where our father is dominating, controlling and wrathful, we will see God in the same way. Since we grow up with fear of our father, we will pass it on to God. Since the human will does not tolerate the imposition of another will above its own, we do not want to relate to a God who is going to wrathfully control our lives. Our view of a wrathful God is confirmed when we read the Old Testament where God destroys people when they are disobedient. Churches where hell, fire and damnation are preached also reinforce our fear of God. We have two choices to deal with this kind of teaching. We can rebel or we can submit to God and become so legalistic that we strive to be perfect. We do not want his wrath to come down on us! If we suffer from this fear we will pass this same attitude on to our children, by insisting on perfection to get our love.

It is the same with all of our human relationships. If our parents do not affirm us but instead are rejecting, critical, demanding and punitive we are not able to develop a true love relationship with them and become fearful of a relation to anyone. Boys who have not had a love relationship with their mother may have great trouble relating to girls when they begin to date. The same is true of girls. It is absolutely imperative that we have a right loving relationship with both parents if we are to have good relationships with both sexes in our adult years. It is amazing what a stable loving home will do in creating children of worth. It is absolutely imperative. Fear of relationships (people) will profoundly stunt the lives of a person.

Fear of intimacy is one of the most common problems I see in Christians. Many times they have made vows to not let anyone get close to them. One young man I knew was afraid of intimacy. He had never dated, and only had a few male friends. His relationships with every one were superficial at best. He did, however, establish a close relationship with a roommate. They could talk to each other and bear their souls. He came for therapy when his roommate left to take another job. He was devastated. As I quizzed him about his relationships I discovered that when he was about 9 years old, his mother had forced his father to leave home after she caught him having an affair. He loved his father very much. As he watched him leave, he vowed to never love anyone again. He was afraid of the pain of losing someone he loved. After we broke the vow and healed the memory he was set free, and began for the first time to establish intimate relationships. Today he is married and has several children. He is a devoted husband and father.

Not only can we be afraid of others but we can be afraid of ourselves. In this instance people become afraid of losing control. They are afraid of saying the wrong things, of doing the wrong things. Dr. Wright calls these doomsayers. They expect the worst things to happen. He gives a list of things like going to a party on the wrong day, of arriving to early, or too late. They are afraid of being overdressed or underdressed and many other things. People who are afraid of their ability to perform always expect the worst to happen.

Fear of failure is another problem that we have to face in life. People who have been reared in homes where perfection is demanded and where affirmation is absent but where condemnation for failure brings love withdrawal often develop a fear of failure. Fear of failure leads to all kinds of behavioral abnormalities. It can even lead to psychosis. When I taught at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, we had a patient who had five attacks of major depression. All of these had been precipitated by the offer of a promotion in his job. This man was a competent engineer who had an excellent work record. He was a diligent worker and got rave notices about his ability. As soon as he had accumulated enough of these he would receive an offer of a promotion. Within a few weeks he would become severely depressed. When I asked him why this happened he told me that he was afraid of failure. "I just don't know if I can do the job," he said. The interesting thing about this man was that when he changed jobs he was put in a job that required more skill than the one he had before. In a sense

he was promoted and was quite able to perform at the higher level. A less serious complication of fear of failure is a refusal to apply for promotions. I have seen several patients with this problem.

There are other behavioral problems associated with fear of failure. The second is that the person may put things off. If one does not try then they cannot fail. Sooner or later this catches up with them especially when they have work that has a deadline. This unfortunately causes them to have to work at a feverish pace to finish the job that may be an inferior production. One often sees this in college students who put off writing a paper until the last minute. They then have to “pull an all nighter” to get it done. This mechanism is called procrastination. The third problem that arises out of fear of failure is to over schedule himself. The person can then make the excuse that no one can do what is asked of him. The last problem that arises out of fear of failure is to do everything the hard way. Make the task so difficult that you cannot possibly get it done. Phobias arise out of fear. All of us have heard of aquaphobia (hydrophobia) or a fear of water. But there are many others. One of the most debilitating is agoraphobia or a fear of open places. One of my patients who had been horribly abused in her childhood could not control her own behavior. After several years of erratic behavior when she was in constant trouble, she gradually developed severe agoraphobia. For five years she did not go out of the house alone. She could do nothing without someone going with her. She had consulted a psychiatrist who offered to have sex with her as part of her treatment. She came to me because she did not think I would want to do such a thing because I was a Christian. After becoming a Christian and a year of therapy she recovered from the phobia.

Claustrophobia is another phobia that commonly affects people. Here a person will not get in closed places. Elevators are especially to be avoided by people who suffer from this phobia. People with OCD commonly suffer from mysophobia or a fear of germs. In extreme cases they will not touch any article they think is contaminated.

There are, of course, many other fears and phobias that can cause problems, but God has recognized this and has told us to “fear not.” Of course that is easy to say, but why should we not be afraid. The world is full of dangers. As morality becomes a thing of the past, we live in a world where murder, rape, robbery, car hijackings, and violent assaults of all kinds are commonplace. Until a few years ago we would not lock our houses in the daytime, now we would not think of leaving them unlocked. It is not surprising that we are becoming a nation increasingly immobilized by fear. Our fear is justified.

When the shootings took place in the schools in Kentucky, Colorado, and Arkansas fear was experienced not only in those communities, but all over the county. Many of the adolescents who were present and witnessed those episodes will fear going to school for some time. They will have what we call acute traumatic stress disorder. Efforts will be made to counsel those children to help them get over their fear. In all likelihood the counselors will help them relive the events and reassure them that it will not happen again. But can the children believe them? Who is going to protect them? We cannot put up metal detectors in all of the schools. We do not have enough police to staff each

schoolroom. We certainly will not arm the teachers with guns. We really cannot assure the students that it won't happen again. Those who are in charge of enforcing the law and protecting us have clearly demonstrated that they are not good at their job. The most that they can do is to try to apprehend the culprits after they have committed the crime. Even then they have a low batting average. Who do we turn to?

Our God says, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish. Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all. For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you (Isa 41:10-13)." He is the one we can turn to.

As I reflect on my life, God has been with me all the time. I have done things that most people would not do. I have been in dangerous situations and come out unscathed. My life has been threatened with weapons, and I have been physically attacked many times. I have even been stoned by some natives in Panama, I have been through hurricanes and storms at sea, but God's righteous hand has upheld me.

Over and again the Bible tells us not to fear. Still many Christians do fear. Why? Because they do not completely trust God. Their argument is that bad things happen to God's people, and will cite case after case to document their contention. They are right, but they do not consider the total picture. God knows what our entire existence is to be. When bad things happen to us He knows what is coming next. We don't. This is why we fear.

When we have faith that our God is a trustworthy God, we can have hope. David said it so well when he said ". . .the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name (Ps. 33:18-21)." Because we know who holds the future we can rest secure.

Finally we need to return to the concept of fear of the Lord. To fear the Lord is to respect him and to stand in awe of him. I realize that the Bible uses the term fear to describe man's emotional response when they encountered God because they saw him as a danger. But God poses no danger to the righteous man, He is love, and he does not punish us. We bring punishment on ourselves. Therefore, we Christians should not fear him as a danger. Those who do not know him should fear him for he is a danger to them. Their future is not something to look forward to. Jesus made that plain when he said, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him (Luke 12:4,5). Complementing His statement is that of John who said, "If anyone acknowledges that

Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgement, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:15-18).”

As Christians we have so many promises of security that we do not have to fear. We do not have to fear intimacy, relationships, losing control or failure. God is always at work in us to make us willing and able to do his purpose. He is interested in every aspect of our life.