

The Fear of the Lord

Some years ago I listened to a friend who I respect greatly discuss the fear of the Lord. He remarked that this is not the fear that we associate with fear of flying, or fear of death, but he related it to the feeling that he has toward some of the heavy machinery he uses. It is wonderful stuff, but if you don't treat it with the appropriate respect, you can be hurt.

Interestingly, that illustration, although insightful, has not really helped me. Consider these verses:

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you; (For the LORD thy God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth. (Deut 6:13-15)

Or how about:

And it shall come to pass that he that feareth me shall be looking forth for the great day of the Lord to come, even for the signs of the coming of the Son of Man. (D&C 45:39)

These sound more like the fear-of-flying stuff. This isn't something that really worried me, but it was one of those questions floating around in the back of my head that I couldn't quite resolve.

I think that, for me, the breakthrough was considering Mosiah 26:13

And now the spirit of Alma was again troubled; and he went and inquired of the Lord what he should do concerning this matter, for he feared that he should do wrong in the sight of God.

This is not couched in terms of a commandment, but I think this is what I envision as being the key to "the fear of the Lord" – the fear of disobeying or disappointing God. If all of the intents and desires of my heart are to serve the Lord and abide by his counsel, then my greatest fear may well be that in a moment of weakness I will not hearken to that counsel and do that which will hurt the Lord.

After I had reached that point I left the question alone for some time. However, during some of my sessions of pondering the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, another idea has started to grow in my mind.

I know that the atonement – and every other eternal and infinite consideration – is beyond my ability to comprehend. However, I have been granted the ability to ponder and wonder, and so from time to time I form hypotheses, with the understanding the further

light may show I am completely wrong. That said, I think it is almost impossible to reconcile the concept of an infinite atonement with teachings on agency and individual responsibility if we look at things from a mortal view. How could Christ atone for sins that had not yet been committed? Are we “destined” to commit those sins? Did he atone for all possible sins? Neither of those seems totally plausible to me, so I have tried a third view-point: The atonement was only a “point in time” from a mortal point of view. In an eternal sense, it is still going on. Christ’s suffering is as immediate as our sins, because the payment is actually made in concert with the debt. I don’t know how the mortal (or mortally observable) portion of the atonement occurred almost 2000 years ago, and yet the action (not just the effect) keeps going on, but I think that is the best way for me to describe it to myself.

Now, if we buy into that concept, we are led to another rather frightening conclusion: Every sin I commit, at this moment, adds to the Savior’s suffering. Not to some mystical event 2000 years ago, but to his real pain and anguish *right now*. There is fear. The fear that, by committing a sin, I am inflicting anguish on a perfect being who desires only the best for me, and has never done *anything* to harm me, and in fact has helped me in ways I cannot fathom;.

It is not hard to identify a bunch of tenuous links in that reasoning; and as I look at what I have written I suppose that you might say my comments on the atonement do not significantly extend my ideas about the fear of the Lord based on Alma’s experience. But those thoughts have made things more clear for me. I am afraid of not living up to the Lord’s expectations of me. Now I know that I will not live up to perfection – that’s impossible. I know that I will inevitably add more to the Savior’s suffering on my behalf. But that doesn’t mean that I have to be careless about those things. I want to keep in mind the extremely dear nature of the free gift of forgiveness – the gift was given freely, but at a terrible cost to the giver. May I never forget that.