

Fear is the Mind Killer: A Christian Perspective

I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.
--Frank Herbert, *Dune*

In a series replete with original iconic imagery and themes, this passage from *Dune* stands out as one of the most memorable. The giant worms, Shi-Halud (which were known to grow to be 450 meters long), are perhaps the only other image that could claim to be more iconic. There is something about this soliloquy that transcends mere literature. It addresses a truth of religious proportions -- that fear is death itself. We see many times throughout the Bible where God calms the fears of His faithful, and even His not-so-faithful (Cain was calmed by God in Genesis 4:13-15). But biblical fear is a bit nuanced, so let me first address what it means to say that "fear of the Lord is holy."

Words are equivocal, and the different meanings can be problematic in the best of times. And when one has to read a translation from another language, it is never the best of times. When we see "fear" in the Bible, it can often mean something other than terror, such as "awe" (an example being in Psalm 47:2 (some translations have it numbered 47:3 because the author of the psalm is identified as verse 1)). More commonly however, the word "fear" can be replaced with "obedience" (consider Proverbs 4:10). Indeed, fear and obedience are two sides of the same coin for those at the beginning of their learning. A toddler is obedient to his parents out of fear, not love (something our culture seems to forget). But loving parents do not use this fear to terrorize the child, but rather to teach the child. The child does not have the capacity to understand the consequences of his actions, so he must be shown that his improper actions are disagreeable in terms he can understand. Once the child has sufficiently learned, however, he will then obey out of love (based on faith in their goodwill) instead of fear. We see both these lessons taught biblically. In the negative sense, it was the lack of fear that led to man and woman eating forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:2-6). In the positive sense, the same Jesus who constantly tells his disciples of the "loving father" ("If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him." Matthew 7:11), also warns of terrible things the Father may allow in our lives if we don't obey ("Do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one." Matthew 6:13). Jesus is telling us that we need to fear God, but not because he is malevolent, but because of what will become of us if we don't obey him.

There are those who try to pervert this truth by claiming something along the lines of God being a "do what I say, or else I'll punish you" God, and this is a god they don't want to believe in. I don't blame them, as I don't believe in this type of god either. What they fail to realize is that the "or else" is not God punishing us, but us suffering the consequences of actions we take out of ignorance. If He appears to react to disobedience in a terrible way, it is only because the consequences will be so much worse if we were to continue down the path to destruction.

But getting back to the main point of this article, the fear we are concerned about *is* the terror side of fear, the kind with no redeeming value (other than a chance to offer our suffering to God). And yet, even here we have much to learn from Christian teachings.

Herbert was very interested in the complex nature of the human experience, yet he never really gave any answers to all the possibilities that exist for mankind. In short, he really wanted his readers to

figure out things for themselves. Still, he had an amazing talent of presenting real world issues and showing how they interact with each other through his fiction. And religion played a massive part in his *Dune* books. While I don't know if the parallels I will speak of were deliberate or not (I suspect a little of both), they are there nonetheless.

Right off the bat, Herbert claims that fear is the mind killer. Note that Christians believe that sin is the killer ("The wages of sin is death," Romans 6:23). And while sin can be described in many different ways, disobedience to God's will is chief among the definitions. And we do have biblical commands to not fear in certain circumstances. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna" Matthew 10:28. In this commandment, we see fear used both as raw terror and as a warning to not harm ourselves. To fear anything but disobedience to God does indeed lead to death.

Next, we see Herbert bridging the gap between the transcendental death (fear is not a literal cessation of bodily functions, but death of the mind) and the reality of Hell. As this type of fear is not of God, but rather of our own imagination, this fear truly is the mind killer. It takes our minds off the life we get from God, and focuses on the non-existence God did not create. Reality can only be found in what God has made and maintained. What God does not make or maintain is not real. To disobey God, to separate oneself from God, is to seek non-existence. Herbert's choice of using the word "obliteration" is therefore very much in step with Christian meta-physics.

The next two sentences are in accordance with what Jesus promises us through the Holy Spirit: help in times of trouble ("Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that hour. For it will not be you who are speaking but the holy spirit," Mark 13:11). Herbert is telling us *what* to do when we are fearful (i.e., nothing), and Jesus, by sending the Holy Spirit, is telling us *why* we need to do nothing.

The last two sentences bring us back to the meta-physics of what reality is. The fear of pure terror is not God's love, therefore it is only an illusion. This type of fear only has a pseudo-existence, and this pseudo-existence can only be found in our minds (we come back to the "mind killer"). When we face this type of fear and look at it for what it really is, then this faux existence is exposed for the deceit it is. Being thus exposed, it evaporates like the phantom it always was.

As long as we know the truth, as long as we seek what is really real, then we have nothing to be afraid of. God only uses fear to show us what is real and what is not real, until we get some skill at identifying it on our own. Once we learn this difference, we feel His peace. Any fear beyond that is from the evil one, and he only has power over us that we freely give him. His power over our body may result in pain, but this attack is only temporary and not worth fearing. His power over our souls, which *is* worth fearing, is completely in our control -- all we have to do is choose to turn it over to God. No matter how one looks at these various platitudes, they all come to the same conclusion: be not afraid.

Nor will God force any door to enter in. He may send a tempest about the house; the wind of His admonishment may burst doors and windows, yea, shake the house to its foundations; but not then, not so, will He enter. The door must be opened by the willing hand, ere the foot of Love will cross the threshold. He watches to see the door move from within. Every tempest is but an assault in the siege of Love. The terror of God is but the other side of His love; it is love outside, that would be inside -- love that

knows the house is no house, only a place, until it enter.
--George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Second Series, *The
Cause of Spiritual Stupidity*

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