

FOUNDATIONS FOR FAITH

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: Job 28:28. And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

It is often said that a doctor usually dies of the disease he specializes in, and in like manner it is said that a preacher talks about the sins that he is suffering from. I do not know how true this is as a generality, but there is probably more than a hint of truth in it. I often think of this when I find my own interests centering more and more on the problem of Christian faith, and how we can make it stronger today when it is so desperately needed. Perhaps this problem which seems so important to me is not really a vital issue; perhaps it is a problem to me alone, and others are not bothered by it; perhaps I need but strengthen my own faith which falls short of the goal before us, and the problem would then not concern me. But as I look around I see ample evidence that this problem is not an individual one; everywhere one looks there is evidence that people are seeking a faith which will strengthen them in times of sorrow and adversity, and a faith which will guide them to the good life in times of calm. We are living at a time when life is stripped of its superficialities and we are forced to face squarely basic and fundamental issues; when nations are forced to sacrifice their resources in wealth and manpower for their existence, we must needs stop and examine our values, decide what we can have faith in. We can look back rather wistfully to the twenties when we were concerned with bootleggers and gangsters; these worries seem insignificant in comparison with what we face today. We have not only the immediate problems that life in war-torn world places upon us, the effects of death and suffering on all humanity, but also the deeper problems of making a future in which we will not be called upon to go through a similar experience. As we wonder how peace can emerge from war, and reflect how this war could emerge from peace, we are faced with a task which challenges the strongest faith, a prospect which forces us to develop the kind of faith equal to the task.

It is my firm conviction that the evils which have brought upon the world this war are caused by a long history of a developing philosophy in which we have ignored God progressively more and more. Beginning way back in the sixteenth century at the time of the Reformation and the Enlightenment to the present day, man has learned more and more about the world and as he has become impressed with his own knowledge and power over nature he has tended to ignore the power of God which lies as the source of his strength. As he has learned more and more of this mysterious universe, and found how he can control the forces of nature, he has developed the idea that he is the master of his fate, the captain of his soul, that he alone shapes his destinies, and has forgotten the guidance of God that he needs. As a result he has used his newly acquired powers to the wrong ends, and with all his great learning and science has shown himself as a very foolish creature for this knowledge has not taught him how to live at peace in the world. If, as Aristotle once said, happiness is the goal men seek in life, modern man has been the most unwise and foolish of all the generations of men, for he has brought upon the world its worst era of misery and destruction, and has made for himself anything but happiness. And he has made this misery instead of the happiness which should result when man learns so much about nature and how to control it to his purposes, because he has forgotten the laws of God; he has violated

the laws regulating human conduct which are as inviolable as those controlling inanimate objects, and thus reaps the destruction which follows when any of the laws of nature or God are violated. [Judgment of God] Thus the learning and knowledge of modern man falls far short of the goal of true wisdom, and the reason for this is that he has forgotten the great truth repeated over and over again in the Bible that “the fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.” We read this same idea over and over again in various forms: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, said the Psalmist; the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, we read in Job; the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge reads one of the Proverbs. This thought is repeated so often for only one reason, because it is vitally important. And yet it is an idea that seems strange to us today. But as we think about it, and as we reflect on the results of our independent wisdom apart from God, we see that this thought bears frequent repetition for it is indeed vitally important. Without such a foundation for our knowledge and our faith our learning is of no use. Because I feel the idea embodied in the text is so important for us to consider today, I want to discuss this idea from various angles in a series of sermons. Today let us think for a few moments on the reasons why our modern materialistic view of life fails to give us an adequate guide to life, why the fear of the Lord must be the foundation for our knowledge and our faith. Next week we will think on the kind of God that such a God-centered view of life implies, and then I should like to prove my points by showing how Germany and Japan developed the way they did because they ignored this main principle and thus point to some lessons we may do well to learn in thinking out the problems and the future of our own nation.

The conditions which have given rise to the present crisis in the modern world have been brewing for a long time, ever since the close of the middle ages. Before this time the world was far from ideal but it was relatively calm. Everything in our western civilization was under the control of the Catholic Church. The kings and lords who controlled the medieval world were for the most part under the control of the church. The pope was strong enough to stop wars, and to start them, and all learning was under the control of the church. As today the church would give the authoritative answer to any question. If a scholar were interested in knowing how many teeth a horse had, it would never occur to him to open a horse’s mouth and look- he would instead hunt up the answer in Aristotle. But gradually the mood of the times changed. Certain rulers objected to giving the pope authority in all matters; a man called Martin Luther decided the pope wasn’t fit to control anyway and started a revolt from the authority of the church. Men like Galileo began to question the wisdom handed out to them. When he read in Aristotle that a heavy body falls faster than a light one, he took two different weights to the top of the tower of Pisa to find out, -and showed that Aristotle was wrong. Thus the era of freedom in the state, in the church, and in the halls of learning was started.

According to our Catholic friends this is the cause of all our troubles; if only we had remained with mother church, the modern world would not be so sick. But by demanding freedom, we have traveled far from the truth. There is just enough truth in this to give us pause to think. And yet we know this freedom is the only way to progress; we see how science developed with this freedom, how democracy was born under Protestantism. We prefer this freedom to the darkness of the Middle Ages, which we call the Dark Ages, under the totalitarian control of the Church.

And yet there is no doubt that we soon let this freedom run out of hand; judged from the absolute standard of God it soon changed to license. In spite of the influence of the great reformers Luther and Calvin who insisted that the state be run as by the will of God, that loyalty to God be the chief principle of ruler and subject alike, we soon developed the idea that the church must be separate from the state. This was not entirely a bad development, for when the church has absolute control it becomes corrupt as history shows; but by putting the church off in a sphere all by itself, the state tended more and more to run its affairs according to expediency and self-interest rather than the principles laid down in the Christian religion. This tendency finds its logical conclusion in the modern state which frankly admits that it cannot be run according to Christian principles when it must needs care for its own interests. Thus a modern theologian can write a book about moral man and immoral society showing that the individual may perhaps be Christian but the state or society cannot. And the modern clergyman is warned to stick to his business of religion and not meddle in political and economic affairs, as if religion had nothing to do with these. Thus a man can go to church for some comforting words on Sunday and spend the rest of the week acting as if he had never heard of Christ. It is true that the church often thunders against evils without taking into consideration the hard job it is to be strictly Christian in mundane affairs, but it is its function to disturb the saints in the pews when evils are apparent and no effort is being made to check them. Because the church has retired away from the world into some transcendental sphere and neglected her duty to watch over civil and secular affairs, the world has more easily reached its present state of confusion.

It is a similar story with the great increase in our knowledge of the world about us. The more we learned, the more pleased we became with ourselves, the more power we felt we had, and the more we tended to forget God. We have reached a point in the modern world where our philosophy is one of frank materialism, where we recognize values and powers only in material objects, and explain the order of the world in terms of material phenomena. We start with what we know, what we can see and handle and refuse to recognize powers we cannot see such as the hand of God controlling our world which we think we manipulate. This attitude is not so bad as it was, for the great scientists and thinkers see that such a point of view is inadequate, but there is always a lag between the thought of the advanced minds and the men on the street, so that it is safe to say that for most men it is the material world which seems most real, or the only thing real. Thus we tend to discard all values which cannot be explained in terms of the material.

There is a queer perversion in the way man tends to evaluate himself lower and lower as he learns more and more about the material world. When man did not know much about the world he thought himself quite an important fellow, related to the godlike, and capable of the noble and good and beautiful. But modern science has discovered that man is an animal and has been so charmed with the idea that it hesitates to give him any virtues that any animal doesn't have. Darwin proposed that man's remote ancestor was an ape, so modern science decides we are apes, forgetting we have traveled a long way since then. The psychologist studies the laws of behavior by observing rats in the laboratory, and then feels he understands man better. Why must we understand ourselves by the lowest that is in us instead of the noblest? It is time that we cease measuring ourselves as animals; cease to be a rat and be a man. And even though we cannot measure the ideals and values we instinctively feel as men and sons of God it is better to put our faith in these than think of ourselves as mere animals performing bodily functions. It is the

idealistic values and vision of man which made the Psalmist say that he is little lower than the angels. But if our modern knowledge is to destroy these by ignoring them, we are not progressing, for such knowledge may show us facts but can never show us happiness. [Science leaves out the scientist.]

We have enthroned the intellect too high; we think that with our great intellects we can plumb the mysteries of the world. But we must realize that we know only in part, that we but see in a glass darkly, that the fundamental truths about the world are the last things we reach with our reasons. There are two methods we can follow in working out our ideas of the world. We can start with our idea of God and fit our experience into this framework, or we can start with what we see and try to find God. Aristotle put the choice this way: we begin either with Zeus or with Chaos; but if we start with Chaos we never find Zeus. Thus we today find it hard to move from our popular scientific view of the world to the Creator ruling it.

But unless we believe in some central power and value as from God we have nothing upon which to base our knowledge. Unless we start with a faith, we have no guide to our learning. There must be some anchor of faith upon which to base our view of the world, an anchor fastened deeply into our belief in God, else we have no means of knowing whether we are traveling in the right direction or not. The fact is that we must live by some sort of faith anyway; the trouble is that most of us do not stop and examine our faith to see whether it is worth trusting. In our climb up the mountain of learning we must depend upon some anchor of faith, like the pick which the mountain climber uses to scale cliffs. He digs this pick into the rock above him, tests it gingerly with his weight to see if it is firm, but he must some time trust its hold and swing out upon it. And so we trust to some basic faith in leading our lives. But unless we anchor this faith in something solid, it will not bear our weight, and we will be plunged into the depths below. That is why we must begin with our faith in God; that is why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; we must trust not in the sliding shale and shifting sands of man-made values and faiths, but anchor ourselves firmly in the rock foundations of God, which remain the same yesterday, today and always.

The fear of the Lord must be the basis for our knowledge, the beginning of our wisdom, if our wisdom is to guide us to the good life. And if this is the basis for our knowledge, then it would follow as our text tells us that understanding means to depart from evil. If all of our knowledge is based upon a faith in God and a reverence for his will, then this knowledge must be reflected in leading the life acceptable to him, the moral life which follows the good and departs from evil-doing. It takes little study, however, to see that as we have forgotten God in our everyday lives, we have neglected to guide our actions according to his moral laws. As we have learned more and more about other civilizations and societies, we have tended to question that there is one basic moral law which must be followed. Thus we have tended to emancipate ourselves from moral requirements thinking that they are not needed. An inner moral compulsion gives way to an external obedience to laws, so that we are all too likely to call any action right so long as we do not get caught. Or we rationalize our disobedience of moral laws by developing some sort of standard such as this: any action is all right so long as we do not harm anyone. But so often we cannot look into the future and see how our actions will affect ourselves and others; we cannot see the tares we sow until they sprout up, but then we will have to clear them from our lives

before the harvest. We see this tendency to move away from belief in inviolable moral laws in the way modern sociology has taught that all of our actions are determined by the society in which we live, that we cannot really judge a man's moral conduct because it is a product of the world in which he lives. This point of view has merits, of course; there is little point in blaming a man for stealing if the society in which he lives does not allow him to earn his bread; but when carried too far, this removes all obligations to follow the rules we know are right, and leaves no room for moral improvement because it destroys the standard. Many people today feel that the psychiatrist can best cure man's immoral tendencies by curing the psychological and sociological causes of them. Again this new knowledge is all to the good, and the best clergymen I make use of psychiatrists in handling difficult problem cases which clearly indicate mental disturbances. But we must not forget that the important psychiatrists often send their patients to churches, because they lack the balance wheel of religious faith and thus make a mess of their lives.

There is no need to pile up illustrations showing how we have allowed the freedom that modern knowledge brings to turn into license and the moral sphere. The evidences lie all too heavily upon the hearts of those who think seriously on the social evils of the present day. Freedom from moral laws leads to the license which fills our divorce courts, breeds the conditions which caused juvenile and adult delinquency, and spawns the germs of war. If we value a peaceful society of well ordered homes we must obey the rules of God which guards such a society; we must see that to depart from evil is true wisdom and understanding.

In conclusion: I have been trying to show that the freedom and learning of the modern world has changed to license and foolishness, because we have neglected to guide our development by the sure foundations of faith in God. We have forgotten that the fear of the Lord is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding. Just as the freedom of our democracy would turn into anarchy without the checks and balances of our form of government, so society as a whole degenerates into confusion when it neglects the basic regulations and patterns laid down by God.

I should like to illustrate this with a modern parable, which reflects I believe, the temper of the modern mind. On a certain street in a city a group of men were busily engaged in tearing down a lamppost because it was in their way and they saw no use for it. A man passed by, observed what they were doing and suggested that they had better examine the functions and purposes of light before they destroyed the lamp. But the man would not listen; they were too busy in doing something, accomplishing things, so the lamp came down. But later, as night came, they began to see the value of light, and realized that they must restore what they had destroyed, that they must examine now the theory and functions of light, - but now they had no light to help them. So modern man, has busily destroyed religious values, failing to see their importance, until the darkness of a chaotic world opened their eyes. Now we feel a lack in our civilization and know that something is wrong; we are forced to look for values we have destroyed. It will be hard to do this in the darkness; but we have always the light of God in our hearts if we do not shut it out to help us. With that light may we know that the fear of the Lord is wisdom to depart from evil, understanding, and so qualify to take our places under the sun as the children of God.