

Shalom

Several years ago I was listening to an interview on the radio with a veterinary scientist who had written a book about the emotional motivation of intelligent animals.

The scientist said that research had shown that their behavior seemed to be driven by one of four emotions: fear, anger, separation anxiety and discontent.

What was interesting was that those same four emotions seen to drive human behavior as well.

Animals who are natural prey—like rabbits or chipmunks—are driven by fear and seek safety in running away and hiding.

In humans we call this shyness or reclusiveness or, in extreme cases, social phobia.

Some animals—and some people—are driven by anger: anger at the world, anger at other people, anger at God.

Both animals and humans experience something called separation anxiety: a sense that they were once connected with a source of love and security that they have lost, along with a nagging fear that something may come along to separate them from their current source of security.

And finally, some animals like wolves are driven by discontent: they are nomadic, always seeking new territories.

In humans we call this wanderlust, pursuit of the “greener grass” that always lies beyond the fence.

After listening to this interview, it struck me that these four negative emotions pretty much describe how all of God’s creatures—animal and human—react to life in a fallen world.

That fear, anger, separation anxiety and discontent are the emotional consequences of being separated from our Creator.

Fear, for example, as one of our past presidents famously said, is in and of itself something to be feared, because it grows by feeding on itself.

I know something about fear because I was raised in a house full of practical jokers and I had an older brother who frequently amused himself by figuring out ways to scare me to death.

He would tell me scary stories about monsters that were looking for me. His favorite was that there was a green monster that lived in our attic where the floor was covered with blood.

It's a wonder I didn't end up in the booby hatch.

Some people probably think I should have.

Fear feeds on the suspicion that there is something terrible "out there" that we can't see.

There's a story told about a meeting that took place in Hollywood back in the 1930's of the chief executives of Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

Scary movies had become extremely popular, and they were brainstorming to decide what scared people the most in movies: Vampires? Werewolves? Creatures from outer space? Giant spiders?

At some point in the meeting, Samuel Goldwyn stood up and said, "*You want to know what scares people the most?*"

Then he walked to the wall and turned off the lights.

"That's what scares people," he said *"The dark."*

And, of course, he was right.

What scares us more than anything else is the dark, the unknown, accompanied by the fear that there is something lurking out there which means us harm.

It's the part of a horror movie when someone is walking down a dark hallway with scary music playing and you are just waiting for someone—or something—to jump out and go 'Boo!'

But fear of the unknown is actually a realistic fear to have, because we do have a vicious, powerful enemy out there in the darkness who is continually looking for ways to have us for dinner.

According to the Scriptures, he prowls the earth like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

He is the ultimate predator and we are his prey.

So fear is a natural and reasonable response to a fallen world, because in a fallen world, there is much to be feared.

When Adam and Eve opened the floodgates of evil and let sin pour into the world, harmony between human beings turned into competition and the desire that God gave us to serve one another in love was replaced by the desire to compete with each other and win.

We fear one another because down deep we know that we are a threat to one another.

And animals, who were the victims of our sin, instinctively know this as well.

Then there is anger.

Anger is chiefly what drives our enemy, Satan.

In the *Book of Revelation* we are told that when Jesus atoned for our sins on the cross Satan was cast out of heaven, and that now he is “...filled with rage because he knows that his time is short.”

Being filled with rage himself, he looks for ways to fill us with rage so that we will advance his agenda, which is to divide us from one another and conquer us, one by one.

Have you ever had a violent argument with someone and then wondered afterwards what in the world made you say the things you said?

That led you to lash out at them?

Did you ever feel as if you had been “taken over” by blind anger?

Rage can blind people.

It can burst the bonds of self-control and propel people headlong into a mindless pursuit of destruction and chaos.

It can fill people with the conviction that they are righteous victims of an enemy who is seeking to destroy them, and that they are entitled to say and do anything to shut him down.

“I’m OK and you’re OK” is a nice slogan, but in the heat of domestic conflict, “I win and you lose” can have considerable charm of its own.

It’s another way Satan enlists us to do his work for him.

Then there is separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety is a longing for something we once had but feel we no longer have: something that once made us feel happy and safe that we have lost.

Maybe this is why when we think about the past, we tend to endow it with a kind of golden glow.

We call this “nostalgia,” and it frequently comes into play when we recall our childhood.

It is said that even hardened criminals love the memories they have of their mothers.

We know that things back then weren’t really as pleasant as we would like to imagine they were.

They probably weren’t any rosier than they are right now.

But our nostalgia for the past is a manifestation of something that is very real—and that is our innate knowledge that there was a time when we *were* connected with a source of love and safety.

The place was called Eden and our source of love and safety was God.

In Eden there was peace and harmony—harmony between man and God; harmony between man and woman; harmony between man and creation; and harmony within man himself.

Once we lived in a world of peace but now we live in a world of conflict.

It makes us afraid, it makes us angry, it makes us anxious and it robs us of peace.

And that brings us to our final negative emotion: discontent—the restlessness that fuels our continual search for something we think we lack, something that we’re sure will make us happy, something that always seems to lie just over the next hill.

Discontent drives us to be continually on the hunt for something more and better than what we have: a better job, more money, a bigger house, a nicer car.

Discontent makes us dissatisfied with where we are and promises us that we’ll be more comfortable somewhere else.

That the pasture is greener on the other side.

Discontent makes us want more of what the world has to offer, even though the things the world has dished up to us in the past haven't ever kept us satisfied for very long.

It makes us wanderers in our hearts, however stationary we may be in our lives.

Discontent is the lot of all who live east of Eden.

These four basic negative emotions of humans and animals are simply realistic reactions to a fallen world: we fear because there is much to fear from the world, the flesh and the devil; we rage because there is much to be angry about; we are anxious because we have separated ourselves from God with our sins and we know deep down in our bones that he is our only source of love and of safety; we are discontent because we are always looking for something in this world which only God can give us.

We're like the people God describes through the prophet Jeremiah: *"My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own wells, dry wells that cannot hold water."*

We are afraid, angry, alone and discontent. So what do we do about it?

The answer lies in a single Hebrew word: "Shalom!"

"Shalom," the word Jews use to greet and say goodbye to one another, means "peace."

But it is a far richer peace than we humans know how to make.

To us, "peace" means the absence of conflict.

When one nation is not at war with another we say that there is peace between them.

That's about as far as we humans can go in making peace.

But there is a peace that God alone can give, and which He wants to give us, which is called "Shalom."

Shalom means not only the absence of conflict, but the presence of harmony—harmony with God, with our fellow man and within ourselves.

"Shalom" comes from faith in Jesus Christ which casts out fear, turns anger into love, banishes anxiety by giving us confidence that God causes all things to work together for good in our lives, and replaces discontent with the feeling that, *"For me, the boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places."*

When Jesus said “Peace, be still!” to the wind and the waves and calmed the storm which was about to capsize the boat that held Him and His disciples, he was showing them that He alone is the source of Shalom.

He alone can cast out fear, anger, anxiety and discontent by replacing them with faith, love, fellowship with God and contentment with where we are and what we have.

Granted, we’ll never have perfect shalom in this life, because we, like His disciples in the boat, are of little faith.

But we can have a lot more than we do if we continually seek it in word, worship and prayer.

If you’ve ever visited or volunteered in a vacation Bible school, you have heard the loud sounds of children’s voices—talking and singing and shouting.

The word “peace” would probably not have come to mind.

But here again, God’s ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts.

In spite of all the noise, these children have peace.

They have no fear: they know that their parents and teachers will take care of them and protect them.

They’re not angry: they’re too busy having fun.

They don’t have separation anxiety: they know God’s in charge where they are and their parents will be coming to take them home.

And they certainly don’t have discontent: they are delighted to be where they are doing what they are doing.

They may be raising the roof, but you can be sure that they have “Shalom.”

Paul said it best in *Philippians 4:4-7*: “Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I will say, “Rejoice!” Let your forbearing spirit be evident to all: the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all of our understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Amen.