

When Fear Seems Overwhelming

Finding Courage And Hope

by Tim Jackson

“**L**et me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror, which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

These powerful words were spoken on March 3, 1933, to a nation in the throes of the Great Depression. While the harbingers of war with Germany and Japan were barely on the horizon, newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt identified a powerful enemy lurking within—an enemy that can strip away a people’s vitality and vision, and replace them with the chill of self-doubt that leads to withdrawal and demoralizing defeat. How the people of the United States would respond to this enemy from *within* would determine if they would have the strength of heart required to rally Allied forces to defeat the threats to freedom from *without*.

What's the internal enemy? Fear, which can come in many forms—both global and personal.

Global fears permeate almost every corner of the world. W. H. Auden's 1947 poem *The Age Of Anxiety*¹ accurately anticipated that fear would stalk society in the last half of the 20th century. Since the invention of the atomic bomb, the world has lived under the threat of global destruction. "The century of fear" was Albert Camus' description of that era.² What he identified then is even more true today.

The end of the cold war diminished the threat of nuclear holocaust, but it hasn't calmed our fears. At the dawn of the 21st century, the threat isn't so much annihilation as it is worldwide intimidation.

Now we live under the menace of global terrorism—car bombs, suicide bombers, and

airplanes slamming into skyscrapers. We fear letters laced with anthrax, subways filled with sickening gasses, and snipers outside of shopping malls.

Most people were shocked when terrorism hit the United States homeland on September 11, 2001. But other parts of the world have felt smothered under a blanket of terror for years. Rival drug cartels have intimidated the Colombian people with violence for decades. Spaniards have faced almost daily bombings for the last 20 years. Palestinians and Israelis co-exist under a constant barrage of attacks and reprisals from one another. More Christians were martyred for their faith worldwide in the 20th century than in all the previous centuries of Christendom combined.

No place is safe anymore. And while fear

has global impact, it's also intensely personal.

Many people struggle with debilitating fears. Anxiety disorders—from generalized anxiety to panic attacks and full-blown phobias—are the number one mental-health problem in the United States, affecting as many as 1 in 10 people and costing tens of billions of dollars in treatment and lost productivity.³

Not all fears are so severe. Everyone experiences fear in one form or another throughout life. One can hardly read or watch anything in the media without hearing about fear or something that triggers fear. Everything from escalating crime to economic downturn can conjure up fear. The sad news of an auto accident that claims the life of a teenager the age of your son or daughter incites sadness, and then

fear. That fear then makes you reluctant to let your teenager have the keys to the family car.

Fear wears many faces—being worried about what others may think of you, or being anxious about getting accepted at the college you've dreamed of attending, or being nervous while performing at a music recital, or refusing to speak in front of a crowd. Fear is the knot in the pit of your stomach that makes you wish you could just disappear.

In a world filled with danger and uncertainty, one thing is certain—we cannot escape fear. So how are we to respond when we feel afraid?

Let's take a look at what the Bible teaches about the source of our fears, why we fear, how fear helps or harms us, and how we can overcome debilitating fears that hinder healthy living.

The Terminology Of Fear

A variety of terms are used to describe fear. The Bible uses words like *fear*, *afraid*, *terror*, *dread*, *anxious*, *tremble*, *shake*, and *quake* over 850 times to portray this core human emotion. Healthcare professionals use terms like *fear*, *anxiety*, *panic attack*, and *phobia* to illuminate the spectrum of our fears. For our purposes, we will use *fear* and *anxiety* somewhat interchangeably but with the following distinctions.

Fear is an immediate and intense internal alarm system that alerts us to the presence of danger. It revs up our whole being—body, mind, and emotions—and rivets our focus on one primary goal: protection. It prepares us either to flee from or fight against the perceived danger.

Anxiety is the pervasive feeling of apprehension that lingers long after the danger has subsided. This nagging feeling of dread uses a great deal of emotional energy worrying about future negative events that are both unpredictable and uncontrollable.

We must remember that both short-term fear and long-term anxiety are complex, multi-layered responses to danger—whether immediate or anticipated, real or imagined. Fear can empower us for action, or paralyze us and make us more susceptible to the danger at hand. That's why it's critical that we understand our fears.

To do this, we must unpack the layers of our response. Let's start with our physical response to fear. Just what is the role that biology and genetics play in our fears?

The Biology Of Fear

The psalmist wrote: “You created my inmost being I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:13-14). Those are the words of a shepherd turned king, not a scientist doing medical research. But even 1,000 years before Christ, King David recognized God’s creative design of our *inmost being*, the “reins” or control center of our emotions and affections.⁴ And that design includes how our brains and bodies are synchronized to respond when we are afraid.

Fear is often accompanied by such involuntary physical symptoms as muscle tension, rapid breathing, tremors, heart palpitations, and increased pulse rate. We don’t choose these reactions. They automatically kick in

when we sense that danger is close by.

So, is fear merely an inherited biochemical, stimulus-response process, or is it acquired through our upbringing and personal experiences? The answer is, “Yes. It’s both.”

Modern medical research is unlocking the mysteries of the brain. We now understand that brain cells communicate by shooting electrical impulses between the cells via brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Scientists have discovered a small almond-shaped cluster of cells called the amygdala that functions as a control center for our fear response. When alerted to danger, the amygdala instantaneously activates almost every needed system within the body to deal with the danger at hand. But sometimes the system misfires and medical intervention is needed to restore balance in the brain.

Physicians know that diminished levels of serotonin and other neurotransmitters can lead to undue levels of fear, anxiety, panic, and depression. That's why the prescribed use of medications can be effective in diminishing the crippling symptoms of some fears.⁵

So when is it wise to consult a medical doctor to explore the potential of a biological component to our fears? When our fears are disproportionately resistant to our consistent efforts to take responsible actions to quell them—such as prayer, personal reflection, Bible meditation, journaling, and accountability.

For some individuals, medication is a short-term solution following a major loss or traumatic event (Prov. 31:6). For others who are just born more anxious, worrisome, or nervous, medication may be required

on a long-term basis to maintain a healthy balance.

Sadly, there can be a stigma attached to taking medications, even when there's a valid medical reason for doing so. What we must recognize, however, is that medications can be a valid tool to manage the biological component of fear, freeing us to work through the other factors involved in our fears.

In spite of the amazing discoveries of how our brains function and the usefulness of medications, we must guard against thinking that fear or any other emotional response is simply a function of biology. Biology is undeniably involved, but there is always more going on.

So what are the other factors contributing to our fears? Let's look at where fear comes from.

The Source Of Fear

Fear has been with us from the beginning, not as an infrequent visitor but as a constant companion. H. P. Lovecraft, a writer of horror stories, called fear “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind.”

Fear is the first human emotion referred to after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. After they disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, God came looking for the first couple to take their customary evening walk together. Adam’s response to God’s inquiry about their whereabouts was: “I heard You in the garden, and *I was afraid* because I was naked; so I hid” (v.10).

For the first time in their lives, fear gripped the hearts of Adam and Eve because of what they had

lost and the One they had to face. The source of their fear arose from disobedience that brought about danger, disconnection, and desperation.

Danger. Safety was lost outside of Eden. Once evicted from the friendly confines of paradise, the man and woman were forced to face a world fraught with danger and increasing hostility (Gen. 3:14-19; 9:2-6).

The apostle Paul described an internal struggle with fear that was provoked by external dangers threatening him: “We were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within” (2 Cor. 7:5).

The two primary sources of external threat that we face are a dangerous world and an evil adversary. Both threaten to cripple us with fear.

A Dangerous World can

overwhelm us with fear. On His last evening on earth, Jesus warned His followers about living in a dangerous world: “I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

The word for *trouble* is a word denoting “tribulation, affliction, anguish, and burden.” This trouble creates an intense amount of pressure. So much pressure, in fact, that a significant part of Jesus’ mission on earth was to “overcome the world.” He knew that the amount and extent of troubles that life in a fallen world can throw at us can be so overwhelming that we have a tendency to lose heart by succumbing to fear and discouragement.

The whole world has been severely distorted by the

impact of sin and the curse (Gen. 3:17-18). It groans under the weight of sin (Rom. 8:19-22). The troubles we face or fear to face—whether a debilitating disease, a financial reversal, a natural disaster, a human atrocity, a vicious crime, an unavoidable accident, a seductive temptation, a devastating betrayal, the loss of a job, the death of a child, the struggle to survive—can all be traced back to that one pivotal moment when one man made a foolish choice that plunged the world into turmoil and overwhelming trouble.

At times, it almost feels as though we’re living in a war zone—and for good reason. There is a war going on. There’s an enemy on another front that must be recognized and understood.

An Evil Adversary uses fear to intimidate and threaten. From the very beginning, Satan has been

the archenemy of God and all who serve Him. He was the seductive serpent who enticed the first woman into eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1-6). God's curse on him for this sinister deed drew the battle lines between the Messiah (seed of the woman) and His followers, and Satan and his minions (Gen. 3:14-15).

The apostle Peter warned us to be alert to Satan's intimidating tactic of prowling around like a roaring lion, terrifying us by his threats to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). How does he do that?

As the scheming father of lies (Jn. 8:44; Eph. 6:11) and the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), Satan attacks believers with all kinds of false accusations (Job 1:9-11; Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10). These "flaming arrows" are designed to wound our hearts and maim our faith. His goal is to undermine

our confidence in God's goodness and in His ability to help us when we are struggling with our share of troubles (Heb. 11:6).

It's in our relationships that we tend to struggle the most with doubts and fears. So Satan takes every opportunity to ruin our relationships by inciting fear, doubt, and insecurity between us. He exploits our tendency to depend on others more than God for our sense of security and significance. And by preying on our natural fear of getting hurt, he devours our joy of loving and serving others, keeping us from entering into deep and meaningful relationships.

The assaults from these two external enemies, the world and the devil, can inflame a firestorm of fear within us. Why? Because all fear involves not only the peril of danger but also the pain of loss. In fact, danger

often translates into loss. We fear losing anything that we believe is vital to our survival. Losses intensify our fears because we know that it is only a matter of time before we lose everything and everyone we love. And that leads to disconnection.

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Disconnection. Adam felt vulnerable because he became separated from his Provider God. The death that he experienced immediately after he sinned was the loss of his vital connection with God. He knew he was at risk. He was naked, but it was much deeper than that. He was emotionally, relationally,

and spiritually cut off from his life-giving God.

Whenever our sense of well-being is threatened, we experience the same shudder of fear that Adam felt. We feel alone and vulnerable. Our disconnection from God fuels our fearful struggle with insecurity, inadequacy, and self-doubt.

Desperation. Adam lost control of his world. He was banished from the Garden, estranged from his wife, alienated from his God, and desperate to figure out how to survive in a hostile environment.

We all hate to feel out of control. Dan Allender wrote, “Different people fear different things with different levels of intensity, but all of us fear what we cannot control. . . . Fear is provoked when the threat of danger exposes our inability to preserve what we most deeply cherish.”⁶

Fear invades our most cherished relationships because we have no real control over another person. People are free to make their own choices. And where there is freedom, there is fear. Some spouses fear betrayal; others fear being ignored or unloved. Parents fear that their children won't turn out okay. Employees fear that the company will downsize.

But all is not lost. Fear can play a healthy role in our lives. So, what is the function of fear? When is it helpful? When is it harmful? Let's take a closer look at what fear does for us.

The Function Of Fear

Because life is full of dangerous situations, fear is not only unavoidable but often necessary. In the realm of emotions, fear is like

friction. Too much friction heats things up, wears them out prematurely, and hinders movement. With too little friction, things can quickly get out of control and dangerous. That's true about fear as well. We need fear to keep things from spinning dangerously out of control. But too much fear can suffocate creativity and reduce life to mere survival.

As A Friend, a certain amount of fear and anxiety is good for us. Healthy fear can serve us well by:

Warning us of danger. I grew up with a fear of snakes. It began when I was 6 years old. I foolishly disobeyed my father and ventured along the rocks of a creek that he had warned me to stay away from. Like many kids, I thought I knew better. I didn't want to be left out of helping him and my older brother catch minnows to take on our afternoon fishing trip.

Unfortunately, the bite of a copperhead ended the day with a trip to the doctor's office and the scare of a lifetime. I still remember how frightened I was as I tore off my shoe and sock to discover those two tiny puncture wounds on my ankle. I've had a healthy fear of snakes ever since.

The primary function of healthy fear is to warn us of danger. It alerts us to our vulnerability and urges us to take precautions. It's foolish not to be afraid when your car careens across the highway on black ice, or when the shrillness of a blaring smoke alarm pierces the stillness of a restful night's sleep. You would be ignoring a warning signal that danger lurks nearby and you are at risk.

The fear alarm functions as a warning when danger is near, pushing us to back off and keeping us from harm. Its role is to protect

us. In much the same way that pain functions in the body to alert us that we've been injured and are in need of medical assistance, fear grabs our attention and prepares us for dealing with danger by either getting out of harm's way or by confronting the danger head-on.

The Bible illustrates the healthiness of self-preserving fear in the presence of danger. On several occasions, David fled for fear of his life from the presence of a jealously murderous King Saul, who threatened, schemed, and attempted to kill him (1 Sam. 19:10-12; 20:1,42; 21:10). David was "very much afraid" of King Achish of Gath and acted like a madman so he wouldn't be killed (1 Sam. 21:12).

Joseph and Mary, in obedience to an angel that spoke to him in a dream, fled from Bethlehem and

escaped to Egypt because they feared the wicked King Herod would attempt to kill Jesus (Mt. 2:13).

✿ The warning alarm of fear can help us to live wisely and more safely in a dangerous world. ✿

In all these cases, fear was appropriate because the danger was real. It isn't cowardly or wrong to be afraid of life-threatening danger. To be afraid on the battlefield is normal. When recognized and heeded, the warning alarm of fear can help us to live wisely and more safely in a dangerous world.

Motivating us to excel. All of us deal with deadlines

of one sort or another. It may be the final project at the end of the school semester, a production quota on a job, or just paying our taxes on time. And you know why they are called "deadlines," don't you? If you don't meet them, you're dead! Or at least you wish you were. Properly harnessed, the fear of failure can be a powerful motivation to do your best.

There's a special form of fear experienced by those who write for a living. Personally, I feel anxious every time I sit down at my computer to write. (In fact, I feel it now as I write these words.) Speaking in front of a large group has never been a big problem for me. Counseling with a married couple doesn't feel especially threatening after having logged thousands of hours in my office over the past 15 years. But sitting down and putting my thoughts on

paper for all the world to read, to critique, or worse yet, to ignore, has been paralyzing at times. But it's the fear of the deadline that motivates me to get it done in spite of my anxiety.

The apostle Paul spoke of the fear of God's final judgment as a powerful motivation in his ministry to persuade others of the hope of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:11). Not only did he want others to escape the wrath of God as their judge, but he also wanted the approval of God as he stood before Him for his reward.

Entertaining us.

Hollywood knows how to use fear to entertain us. Thriller, horror, and suspense movies are designed to capitalize on spiking the fear and anxiety levels of audiences without exposing them to the reality of the danger they are viewing. This vicarious experience of fear keeps

audiences on the edge of their seats and fills theaters around the world.

The popularity of extreme sports attests to the free spirit of those who taunt fear by attempting dangerous stunts just for the "thrill of it." They bungee jump, cliff dive, ride mountain bikes and skateboards over treacherous terrain, and jump out of airplanes with snowboards attached to their feet. They wear clothing with the "No Fear" label to indicate that they are among the few, the wild, and the crazy.

The longing for adventure is what turns a life-threatening situation that would normally provoke intense anxiety into "the thrill of a lifetime." This thrill of "beating the odds" requires taking risks and facing fear.

But fear is not always a friend. It can go awry—and

often does. When it does, it becomes a foe to be reckoned with.

As A Foe, fear works against us internally to sabotage healthy living.

When we're assailed by threats from the outside, we sometimes disable ourselves with fears from within that can turn obsessive.

This sabotaging fear distorts our perception of ourselves and the reality of the dangers we face. It erodes confidence that we can handle a particular threatening relationship or situation and come out of it intact. This form of anxiety undermines even the best of plans with insecurity, inadequacy, and self-doubt, which leads to a loss of heart that is crippling, and increases our vulnerability to danger.

Insecurity is tied to our core longing for love and acceptance. We were made for perfect, loving

relationships. But because we don't have any flawless relationships, we fear that we'll be abandoned if we're seen for who we really are. We desire to love others, but the frightening reality is that there is no guarantee that anyone will love us in return. We become terrified of giving our heart to anyone who might not treat us tenderly. Ultimately, insecurity leads to a fear of intimacy and results in withdrawal.

Inadequacy taps into our desire to make a significant difference in life—to know that we matter. We want to know that our life has meaning and purpose. We long to make our mark in the world. But past failures in our performance undermine our confidence that we will ever make the kind of difference in life that we dream of.

Self-doubt grows

out of our feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Upbringing, especially the impact of parents, goes a long way to shape our self-confidence. Doubters are paralyzed by “what if’s.”

This is especially true in a home where love and approval were based on performance. The demand for perfection is often the result. Often, underneath a perfectionist’s flurry of activity is fear—the fear of failure (“I’ll never be able to measure up and be enough”) and the fear of success (“If I do succeed, I’ll never be able to keep it going”). Doubters fear trying, so they quit.

Author Gary Thomas accurately describes these people:

Many people choose safe lives in which failure (and therefore, real success) is highly unlikely. They never take risks, and they never fail;

but they also die without any real service. They may never make a mistake, but they’ll also never make a difference.⁷

Fear that strips us of vitality and zeal to live well must be dismantled. But we must be careful not to handle fear in a way that aggravates instead of reduces the problem.

Faulty Ways Of Dealing With Fear

Since fear is basic to human existence, we must learn to deal with it. But dealing with fear in the wrong way only makes matters worse. We can mishandle our fears by:

Numbing ourselves to our fears and ignoring them. “One of the things which danger does to you after a time is, well, to kill emotion. I don’t think I shall ever feel anything

again except fear. None of us can hate anymore—or love” (Graham Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, 1982).

Trauma victims are especially vulnerable to this tactic. They often battle with a “loss of heart” because the pain of the trauma creates such an emotional overload that their internal circuit-breakers shut down and the whole system goes dead. Unfortunately, if their emotions are not brought back on line, they will be extremely vulnerable to being victimized by those who would exploit their emotional numbness and failure to set appropriate boundaries.

Masking our fears by covering them up. Anger and aggression are some of the most common masks for fear. An angry bully is not usually mistaken for someone who is afraid that no one will respect him unless he demands it. But

intimidating others so that they would never dare question him is a common tactic of someone haunted by insecurity. Those who fear a loss of control often become the kind of take-charge people who themselves become guilty of being controllers. A chronic fear of failure can be covered by a mask of meticulous perfectionism. The entertainer can use his humor to mask his fear of loneliness.

The problem with wearing masks is that a person loses his true identity and cannot relate sincerely with others.

Minimizing our fears by pretending that they are not important. “It’s no big deal, that’s just the way things were in my family” was the response of a man who had just told me a painful story of being totally ignored by his father when he was 8 years old. When I asked him

how he felt about picking his father up at the airport earlier that week, he replied, “There was no way I was going to be late for that man, even if it meant getting there 5 hours early.” When I asked how his father might respond if he were late, he snapped, “It’s not what he would say. It would be the look in his eyes.”

This man had totally minimized the fear—and rage—he felt toward his father. Not only did his pretending stifle his relationship with his father, but it was robbing him of intimacy with his own family, whose pain he also minimized.

Rationalizing our fears by explaining them away. Some try to justify their fears superficially by excusing them as emotional reactions and nothing more. They fail to see any deeper motivation or beliefs involved in their fears. They

see their fear as nothing more than a primitive defensive response to a neurochemical reaction between specific neurons of the brain.

The result is a mind-over-feelings mentality that closes off any healthy dialog about how our feelings are tied to deeper issues of the heart.

Exaggerating our fears by making dangers bigger than they really are. Phobias, paranoia, and panic attacks are examples of exaggerated and disabling fears. Phobias, for example, are fears focused on specific situations or objects that are somewhat risky but pose no real threat of danger. Common phobias include getting on an elevator or airplane, driving in traffic, crossing a bridge, attending a party, or even shopping. Phobias divert attention from the real issues that a person is

avoiding by clouding them with a larger-than-life distraction.

Sadly, these faulty strategies for dealing with fear will only intensify our fears. A better way is needed.

Overcoming Fear

When destructive fear is entrenched in our lives, we must remember that God is greater than all our fears. He desires to empower us to dismantle and demolish fear's strongholds in our lives (2 Cor. 10:4). Fear must be uprooted and the truth implanted so that we are freed not merely to survive but to thrive in a dangerous world (Jn. 8:32). Life is never risk free. But freedom from overwhelming fear empowers us to enjoy all that God offers us in a fallen world.

Some steps to overcoming crippling fears are:

I. Face Your Fears.

Don't run from your fears. Standing up to them and facing them head-on is half the battle. Feel your fears. Don't try to silence them by getting busy in distracting activities. Give yourself permission to feel the trembling, the anguish, the terror. By doing so, you will be able to begin identifying your fears and what's underneath them. Putting descriptive words to both the feelings and beliefs underlying your fears will equip you to talk more honestly and openly about your fears with someone who cares, whether a professional or a friend.

Keeping a journal will help you focus your thoughts as you face your fears. Once your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are written out in front of you, it will allow you to be more

objective with what is going on inside.

David was a man who honestly wrestled with his fears. He even wrote it down as an example for us to read in Psalm 55:4-8.

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."

When you journal, it is helpful to ask yourself questions that make you write out detailed answers. Don't ask questions that can be answered with one word. Here are some questions to get you started.

- What am I afraid of right now?

- What am I trying to avoid facing?
- If I wasn't afraid right now, what would I do differently?
- What would have to change for me not to be afraid?
- What am I afraid will happen in this situation?
- What do I fear the other person will think of me?
- What am I afraid will happen if my anxious thoughts are true? What's the worst that could happen? And if that happens, then what? And if that happens, then what?

This last example is called chaining—linking questions together like links in a chain so you can begin to track a pattern to the fear that emerges from the things you have written.

As you follow this process of honestly facing

your fears, you will be better prepared to examine your findings and learn from your fears instead of running from them.

2. Learn From Your Fears. Does your fear drive you to rely on God as your Protector or on yourself? The answer to that question is crucial to understanding the passion that drives our fears.

We must be careful, however, not to make the assumption that all fear is a spiritual problem of misplaced dependency. While there are many occasions when a lack of trust is the problem, sometimes our fear is nothing more than physical exhaustion speaking. When we are not taking care of ourselves physically by eating well, exercising, or getting sufficient sleep, our fears can be amplified and blown out of proportion. When we recognize that we are “running on empty,” both

physically and emotionally, we need to slow down and take time to nurture ourselves. Usually, things look much brighter and less fearful after a good night’s sleep, some nutritious food, or a vigorous walk outdoors.

If we have ruled out exhaustion as a factor, then quite often the core issue underneath our fears is not whether we fear but what we fear. Our fears expose our heart and whom we really serve—man or God.

Caleb is a good example of someone who had the right perspective. He was a reconnaissance soldier, a man of valor who understood that cowardice is fueled by a lack of faith in God and His goodness to those who follow Him (Heb. 11:6). He had a different spirit than the other spies in his platoon (Num. 14:24). While they cowered at the thought of going up against the “giants” in a full-scale

invasion of Canaan (13:31-33), he was gung-ho and ready to move (v.30). It wasn't that the Canaanites were not a formidable enemy deserving of a healthy level of fear. But he understood that the Israelites' fear of the Canaanites was not their real problem. It was Caleb who, along with Joshua, identified their problem as rebellion and unbelief. Their fear distorted the danger posed by the enemy and diminished their trust in the power of God to protect and bring victory (14:9-11).

In the final analysis, what we often learn from our fears is that we have a tendency to allow our fear of others and the dangers we face to eclipse our awe of the omnipotent God we serve, who promised to fight for us (Ps. 56:3-4; Rom. 8:31-32).

3. Relinquish Unhealthy Fears.

Larry Crabb wrote, "We live in sheer dread of giving up control and abandoning ourselves to God. Only when we discover a desire for Him that is stronger than our desire for relief from pain will we pay the price necessary to find Him."⁸

As hard as it may be to admit, demoralizing fear that encourages cowardly retreat is rebellion. When the Israelites' fear was unmasked—exposing their rebellion and contempt for God—their hearts were revealed. Their refusal to believe God and to repent of their preoccupation with the danger ahead and their stubborn demand for safety cost them the Promised Land (Num. 14:21-23).

Speaking of the Israelites, the prophet Isaiah observed:

In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you

*would have none of it
(Isa. 30:15).*

What's the first thing on our minds or out of our mouths when facing danger? Is it David's words, "When I am afraid, I will trust in You"? (Ps. 56:3). If not, we need to confess it to the Lord. We need to turn from our tendency to groan and complain and seek help from sources other than God (Isa. 31:1). Fearing people more than God always has disastrous results.

Once we are released from the enslaving fear of worrying how others may or may not respond to us, which is often the controlling factor in our relationships, we will then be free to serve God and others in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

4. Cultivate Healthy Fears. There are some situations and some people we must simply learn to avoid because they are

dangerous. To allow abusive, violent, or deeply addicted people unrestricted access to our lives and relationships is foolish. Prudence, not paranoia, requires that we establish strong and clear boundaries with people who refuse to recognize or take responsibility for the damage they have caused others.

The military trains men and women to deal with life-threatening situations they may encounter in battle. In essence, they are trained not only to survive but to advance in the face of what they fear (the loss of their lives) so they can neutralize the enemy and accomplish their objectives. One veteran of the Gulf War stated, "When I got into my first nighttime fire-fight, I felt fear riddle my whole body. Then the training kicked in." Because of his thorough training, he was able to do his job and carry

out his mission even while he was under fire.

In much the same way, God calls us to obey and follow Him into battle against the forces of evil in the midst of our fears. As we strap on our spiritual armor and prepare for war (Eph. 6:10-18), we must not pretend that fear of the enemy doesn't exist. But we must move forward with conviction and resolve in spite of the genuine threat posed by the flaming arrows of the evil one or the opposition we face from the adversaries in this world. What must preoccupy our thoughts are the reassuring words of Paul: "The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it" (1 Th. 5:24). And "The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Th. 3:3).

David's words must become the expression of our hearts when cultivating

healthy fear: "When I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Ps. 56:3-4).

5. Move In Spite Of Your Fears. "Remember, there's nothing vital at stake tomorrow." Those were the words I shared with a woman prior to one of the most important business meetings of her life. She was half a continent away in San Francisco and had called for reassurance. She asked me to repeat the phrase several times.

The fact was, important things were at stake. Major upheaval was tearing the company apart. New management was squeezing her out. Her job, her financial future, and her self-esteem as a single woman in her late forties were all at stake. *But nothing vital was at stake!*

What is vital? What is the one thing we cannot possibly live without? It's knowing that the security we long for and the significance we crave are found only in a personal relationship with Christ (Ps. 73:25; Jn. 6:35,68-69). It's our Father's tender words reassuring us that nothing can divert His attention from us nor dilute His undying love for us (Rom. 8:31-39). The Lord reminds us that when all else fails and others desert us, He forever remains faithful and true to His children, whom He loves (Mt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 4:16-18). That's vital!

When we really do believe that nothing vital is at stake, we will be able to live courageously and take risks—not foolish but faithful and reasonable risks—that are based on the knowledge that “the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid” (Num. 14:9).

King David repeatedly rebuked his fear and reinforced his resolve to move courageously because of his uncompromising confidence in God as his faithful fortress: “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” (Ps. 27:1). And “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Ps. 118:6).

Living courageously in the midst of hostility and discouragement requires an unflinching trust in God's sustaining love (1 Jn. 4:18). His “perfect love drives out fear,” freeing us to willingly risk losing our lives so we can live in the freedom of resurrection life (Mt. 16:25; Acts 20:24; Phil. 3:10-12). That has been God's call to His people throughout history.

God called the prophet

Ezekiel to fearlessly face people and situations that are much like those we face in our daily battle against evil. God said to him, “Do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. You must speak My words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious” (Ezek. 2:6-7).

Everyone wants to be liked. No one wants to fail. But God encouraged Ezekiel to resist being derailed by fierce opposition to the truth. Instead, he was to serve God faithfully with Job-like resolve, “Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

We sometimes forget that serving God is risky. Failure is a real possibility.

Gary Thomas gives us a sober reminder that “there are no guarantees we will not fail—but the unwillingness to risk may be our greatest failure of all.”⁹

Jesus’ command to “take heart” (Jn. 16:33) is a call to be courageous when facing danger that threatens to overwhelm us with fear. He knows that our tendency is to cower and flee rather than to courageously stand and fight. Our confidence must not be in our own ability to shoulder the load and figure it all out. Rather, it must be rooted in our Commander and Chief, who has overcome the world with an overpowering love that neutralizes paralyzing fear.

Courageous living requires courageous loving. And this is only possible when we’re not motivated by fear but by God’s love—the love that conquers all.

Wise People Still Fear God

Much has been written about the love of God. Yet the fear of God is a concept that cannot be ignored by anyone who reads the Bible seriously. Some see the fear of God as an Old Testament concept that has outlived its usefulness. But Jesus didn't think so. In fact, He considered it important enough to teach it to His disciples in two unique settings.

In Luke 12:4-5, Jesus directly addressed the issue of fear with His disciples:

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.

This opportunity to teach followed on the heels of the fierce opposition He experienced after He had insulted the Pharisees and experts in the law with His pronouncement of six woes against them (Lk. 11:37-53). Jesus must have recognized that the hostility being directed against Him was frightening His disciples. It was in this setting that He taught them about the fear of God in the way the Old Testament spoke of it. The bottom line was that they should fear God more than other men—even powerful men—because God has the ultimate power of final judgment.

A previous opportunity Jesus had to teach His disciples about the fear of God occurred during an evening boat excursion on the Sea of Galilee (Mk. 4:35-36). It was at the end of a marathon day of ministry and Jesus was exhausted.

As they climbed into the boat for the ride to the other side, Jesus collapsed onto a cushion in the stern and fell into a deep sleep.

The disciples became dreadfully afraid when a furious squall began swamping their boat, and drowning was a real possibility (vv.37-40). In their fear, they shook Jesus awake and screamed, “Don’t You care if we drown?” After He had hushed the wind and the waves with two words, He addressed the disciples’ fears.

“Why are you so afraid?” He asked. “Do you still have no faith?” At that moment, the disciples’ fear was elevated to terror as they began to catch a glimpse of who was in the boat with them. Their new awareness that the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth was with them in the boat totally eclipsed their fear of the wind, the

waves, and the possibility of drowning. Because they realized that God Himself was in the boat, their whole perspective changed.

The question each of us must ask ourselves is this: “Who is in my boat?” Whenever we fear anything or anyone more than we fear God, we are on dangerously thin ice. Only the warm breath of God—the God who says, “Do not fear, for I am with you” (Isa. 41:10)—can thaw our fear of what man can do to us (Ps. 56:11; 118:6; Heb. 13:6).

The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is full of commands to fear the Lord. Below are a few key verses that will help you in times of overwhelming fear to answer the question: “Who is in my boat?”

- *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and*

discipline (Prov. 1:7).

- *The Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love (Ps. 147:11).*
- *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Prov. 9:10).*
- *The fear of the Lord leads to life: then one rests content, untouched by trouble (Prov. 19:23).*
- *Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe (Prov. 29:25).*
- *The man who fears God will avoid all extremes (Eccl. 7:18).*

The wise writer of Ecclesiastes summed it up best when he wrote:
Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and

keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man (Eccl. 12:13).

In one form or another, all fears point to that one ultimate fear—the fear of death.

The Sum Of All Fears

Sir Francis Bacon concluded, “Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark.” William Shakespeare wrote, “Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste death but once.” And according to the writer of Hebrews, “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (9:27).

We all fear death—not only the loss of life itself, but the loss of anything or anyone so precious to us that losing it would feel like death.

The sum of all fears is

the fear of death—the final loss of control. While we may be able to avoid some of the lesser losses in life, in the end we must all come to grips with the fact that no one cheats death—even though it will one day be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 21:4).

When Adam died that day in the Garden of Eden, he didn't die physically. But something within him died, and he struggled with that loss until the day he physically died. Death involves more than the cessation of physical life. Death is separation. It is an inner emptiness, isolation, and loneliness that results from the severed bond between Creator and creature. It was the coming separation from the Father that Jesus Himself dreaded as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:38).

One of the great realities

of the gospel is the freedom from the paralyzing fear of death that Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf provided:

He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15).

Throughout life the impact of death can take many forms. Lesser deaths—like the loss of our health, our dreams, our livelihood, our profession, our reputation, or our financial security—are all harbingers of the last death. Some of the more painful losses come in our relationships—losing those who are precious to us, like parents, spouse, children, and friends.

David described these

scrapes with death when he wrote of “the valley of the shadow of death” in Psalm 23:4. He didn’t seem to be speaking primarily of physical death. Instead, he was referring more to those treacherous chasms in our lives that are so dark and lonely that they frighten us. It is during those times that we need the reassurance of the only good and trustworthy Shepherd who is qualified to lead us through the valley.

Isaiah spoke of this faithful Shepherd when he wrote:

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of His servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God (Isa. 50:10).

Our future hope resides in these wonderful words of celebration:

Where, O death, is your

victory? Where, O death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:55,57).

Do you have this confidence? If not, trust Christ today as your personal Savior to free you from the power of sin and the fear of death.

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