

The Paralyzing Power of Fear

The most common emotion in the lives of human beings is fear. Fear, by definition, is a response which seeks to avoid threatening danger. Fear is our reaction when danger threatens. Irrational fears (fears that go beyond the scope of common sense) are sometimes called “phobias.”

Two basic fears are already present at the time of birth. One is the fear of loud noises; the other is a fear of falling. Even a very small child has those fears built into the bodily constitution. And then as we grow older, we begin to collect many additional fears. Phobias are common to all persons. Psychologists name more than 200 of them—each with a technical name. There is one called “acrophobia”—fear of high places; another called “claustrophobia”—fear of closed places; another called “nyctophobia”—fear of dark places; etc. There are those who fear crowds. Some fear dirt, and disease, and the number 13, and black cats, etc. Many fears are really superstitions, but all phobias are very real to those who fear.

1. The Far Reaching Effects of Fear

Wrong kinds of fear can produce harmful effects. Scientists do experiments with animals. For example, they feed a cat some barium sulfate and then watch the muscle waves in the stomach as the food is mixed and the process of digestion takes place. The muscle waves are even and smooth. But if a dog is brought into the room, immediately something happens. All the smooth even muscle waves in the cat’s stomach become pulsating ripples, and the digestive processes are upset. Fear can produce paleness of skin, rapid heartbeat, an upset stomach, and nervousness. It can cause high blood pressure and arthritis, and intense fear can even lead to blindness. This does not mean that everyone suffering from these physical problems is a victim of fear (and lacks true faith), but fear can be the springboard (the starting point) for many physical ailments.

The physical effects of fear can be serious and devastating, but it is far more serious to realize what fear can do to our spiritual condition. Fear can lead to instability, unhappiness, and a lack of contentment. It is the enemy of faith. It saps spiritual vitality and it can paralyze the soul.

In **Pilgrim’s Progress**, John Bunyan at one point has two lions blocking the path to the heavenly City. The lions are ready to tear to shreds anyone who passes by. “Christian” (who is traveling on that path toward the City) grows increasingly fearful, but slowly presses on. As he gets closer to the lions, he discovers that only their growls can reach him. God has the lions chained, and “Christian” passes between them unharmed! Faith has many enemies, but one of the greatest enemies of faith, is fear.

2. The Principal Kinds of Fear

A careful study of the Scriptures indicates that there are several kinds of fear. There are several Hebrew words (in the Old Testament) that are translated “fear.” And in the New Testament, there

are several Greek words which are sometimes translated “fear.” In summary, there are three basic kinds of fear.

a) Reverential Fear

This is a holy fear. It is really an awe and respect for the majesty and holiness of God. It is a godly reverence. Reverential fear is an awe for the heavenly Father. It is a fear of displeasing God.

Reverential fear is a good kind of fear. It is always right. David speaks of this fear as being clean and pure (Psalm 19:9). The writer of Proverbs says that godly fear is the beginning of all true wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). It is this kind of fear that enables human beings to respect God’s authority and to obey His commands. Psalm 2:11 says, “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.” Proverbs 16:6 says that “by the fear of the Lord, men depart from evil.”

In Hebrews 5:7 we read that Jesus feared. The Scripture says, “Who in the days of his flesh, when he offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears . . . was heard, in that he feared.” The Bible says that Jesus Christ prayed fervently because He feared. But this is the word that means “reverence.” Jesus was heard because He had reverence for God. We too (in Hebrews 12:28) are admonished to “serve God with reverence and godly fear.” This is not the fear of the cringing coward, but the fear of reverence.

b) Constitutional Fear

This is a fear that is necessary for the preservation of the human race. Constitutional fear is a normal God-given emotion. God has built into each of us an instinctive alarm system which is designed to protect us from harm—from drunken drivers, rattlesnakes, hardened criminals, and fierce storms. These are normal fears which are necessary for our protection, and for the preservation of life. There is nothing wrong with holding these fears.

A preacher was ten minutes late for a preaching appointment. He apologized to the audience and explained that he got into traffic that was heavier than usual. He said, “I simply decided after a long period of frustration, that it would be better to be ten minutes late in this world than to be several years early in the next world—and so I drove carefully.” That was a constitutional fear. The preacher’s fear of an accident helped him to exercise proper caution. This is a normal God-given emotion and there is nothing wrong about it.

Fear is one of the greatest teachers in the world. Fear of sickness often causes people to practice good health habits. Fear sometimes causes students to prepare well for final exams. Fear causes drivers to drive cautiously on a snow-covered highway. We teach children to fear some things. We warn them about hazardous traffic, hot stoves, and high places. These are proper kinds of fear. There is a limit, of course. Some parents go beyond the boundaries of a reasonable limit, and as a result, there are children who are horrified at the sight of a spider, and may become almost hysterical, because one or both of their parents have reacted that way.

Constitutional fears are God-given emotions designed to help protect us from harm. A young boy got a job in the zoo, and the keeper told him one day to go into the lion's cage and clean it out. The young man said, "No sir, boss, I ain't goin' into no lion's cage." The keeper told him that he would **have** to go in and do the job, and then he added, "After all, that lion is a tame lion and he won't hurt you." The boy thought a moment, and said, "That may be so—he might not hurt me—but he could make me hurt myself." The keeper said, "Come on—go right on in; this lion was raised on milk." The young man thought a moment again, and then said, "I was raised on milk too, but I eat meat now!"

The young man described above was a good thinker. You see—fear is a wonderful protection from harm.

c) Carnal Fear

Carnal fear is a senseless dread and a nagging anxiety. This is a fear that is always evil. It is a craven and base kind of fear. The Greek word carries with it the idea of an unhealthy, destructive kind of dread. Many examples of carnal fear are found in the Bible:

It is the fear expressed by Adam when he had sinned. Adam ran and hid himself, and when he was asked why he was hiding, he said, "Because I was afraid" (Genesis 3:10).

It is the kind of fear expressed by the Children of Israel when Joshua and Caleb tried to convince the rebellious people to leave Kadesh-barnea and go on up into Canaan. In Numbers 14:9 the Israelites were told not to "fear the people of the land" because their protection was gone. The Lord promised to be with Israel.

It is the kind of fear expressed by Felix after he had heard the Apostle Paul preach about righteousness and temperance, and judgment to come (Acts 24:25). The Bible says that Felix was afraid, and said, "When I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."

Carnal fear is the kind of slavish dread which causes one to be unduly afraid of death. One French movie personality said, "At times I wake up in the middle of the night, and my hair stands on end when I think that I am going to die some day." The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who "through the fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:15).

Down through the ages, death has been a source of fear. One of the reasons people fear death is because of the fear of loneliness. God has created us with a built-in need for love and companionship. Most normal persons don't desire to be hermits. Solitary confinement can drive a human being insane. We all cry out for the comfort of another person's voice and the bracing grip of another person's hand. We like fellowship with others. Even people who are shy and backward by nature, are glad for friends. But what could be more lonely than death? A preacher was talking with his little son who lay dying of a dreaded disease. The little fellow looked up into his father's face and said, "Daddy—am I going to die?" With a broken heart and with trembling lips, the father

said, “Yes, son—the doctor says so; are you afraid?” The child said, “No, I’m not afraid, but I wish somebody could go along with me.”

Part of the fear of death lies right here. When we breathe our last breath, and when we close our eyes for the last time on the scenes of earth—we slip out into the future—seemingly alone. Loved ones may stand by our bedsides. They can stay there until the very end, but they cannot go with us beyond the veil of death. However, for the Christian, the loneliness of death is not what it seems! We are alone—yet not alone! Jesus Christ is with us in the hour of death! He promised not to forsake us. The Psalmist says, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, **for thou art with me**” (Psalm 23:4). When we come to the valley of death, we will find that our Good Shepherd is with us still.

These then have been the kinds of fear: the reverential awe which inclines us to obey God’s commands; the constitutional fear which causes us to be careful about doing potentially dangerous things; and those carnal fears which rob our peace of mind and cripple our usefulness and spoil normal, healthy living. Carnal fears include fears that we might become ill with cancer, or that one of our children might become crippled for life, or that an enemy nation’s missiles might destroy our country. These unwholesome kinds of fear cause people to live in a constant state of anxiety and misery. These fears are really the result of unbelief in the fatherly care of our Creator. And so there are right kinds of fear and there are wrong kinds of fear. Fear can be good, but it can also be evil.

The word “fear” can be used either way in the Bible. Whether it is a good fear or a bad kind of fear is often determined by the setting in which the word is used. In 1 Peter 2:17, we read, “Honor all men; love the brotherhood; fear God.” Fear in that verse is used in the good sense. It is the godly, reverential fear. In 1 John 4:18, we read, “Perfect love casteth out fear.” Fear, in that verse, is used in the bad sense. Perfect love does not cast out all fear—not constitutional fears, nor reverential fear—but the unwholesome and carnal kinds of fear are dispelled by true love for the Lord.

3. The Remedy For Conquering Fear

We sometimes fall victim to fear either because we lack knowledge about God’s promises in the Bible, or because we lack faith to believe that those promises are true.

a) We Can Conquer Fear By Learning the Power of Love.

One remedy for overcoming wrong kinds of fear, is true love for God. A fearful child loses his fear when he nestles in his mother’s arms. We are not afraid to fall asleep if we are surrounded by those who love us. Just so, when a person loves God, and has faith in Him as the Controller of the universe, he does not need to be a slave to superstition and fear.

There are all kinds of abnormal fears that can grip us. There is fear of a nuclear war; fear of being attacked by a criminal; fear of losing a job—but once we get hold of the fact that God is our

concerned Father—One who sincerely cares for us and loves us—our lives can be swept clean from harmful fears.

b) We Can Conquer Fear By Looking To the Face of the Lord.

Note what the Psalmist says in Psalm 34:4. “I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears” (that is, from all my abnormal fears). Fear departs in the presence of the Lord! As long as the Apostle Peter kept looking to Jesus (when he was walking on the water), he was able to stay above the water. As long as he was more conscious of the presence of the Lord than he was of the storm and the waves around him, he stayed on top. But when he stopped looking to the Lord, he began to sink.

Time and time again, Jesus introduced himself with the words, “It is I, be not afraid.” In Old Testament times, the Lord repeated words of assurance over and over again:

When Abraham feared his enemies, God said, “Fear not Abraham; for I am thy shield” (Genesis 15:1).

When Hagar feared famine, God said to her, “Fear not . . . and God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (Genesis 21:17-19).

When Jacob was stunned because of disbelief, God spoke to him and said, “Fear not to go down into Egypt, for . . . I will go down with thee into Egypt, and I will also surely bring thee up again” (Genesis 46:3-4).

When Moses faced the natural forces of the Red Sea, God said, “Fear not; stand still and see the salvation of the Lord which he will show to you today” (Exodus 14:13).

When Israel feared the future, God said to the people through Isaiah, “Fear not, for I have redeemed thee and have called thee . . . thou art mine; when thou passest through the waters I will be with thee” (Isaiah 43:1-2).

Jesus never wasted words. Yet repeatedly He said, “Fear not;” “Be not afraid;” “Do not be anxious.” Many persons who were tossed with inner storms of fear, have found calmness by looking to the face of the Lord. The conquest of harmful fears can be accomplished by taking seriously the words of the Psalmist, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea . . . The Lord of hosts is with us” (Psalm 46:1-2,11).

Our times are in God’s hands, and nothing can overtake us apart from His permission. We must exercise a moment-by-moment trust in a moment-by-moment Lord. We must maintain an unshakable faith and belief that God has everything under control, and that nothing can harm us beyond God’s plan—because we are constantly moving under the shadow of the Almighty.

We need to learn to exchange our fears for a simple childlike trust. Many years ago, a mother and her four-year-old daughter were preparing to retire for the night. The child was afraid of the dark. When the candle was blown out for the night, the little girl caught a glimpse of the moon outside the window—and she said, “Mother, is the moon God’s light?” “Yes,” replied the mother, “God’s light is always shining.” The little girl said, “Will God blow out his light and go to sleep too?” The mother responded, “No, my child, God never goes to sleep.” Then, out of the simplicity of a child’s heart, the little girl said, “Mommy, as long as God is awake, I’m not afraid.”

The admonition, “Fear not,” is found 365 times in the Bible. There is one “Fear not” for each day of the year! There is much in this world to make us afraid, but there is much more in our Biblical faith to make us unafraid. Jesus didn’t promise that He would be with us **some** of the days (Matthew 28:20). He promised to be with us always, even unto the end of the age.

If you have never turned your life over to Jesus Christ, and if you have been saying, “I want to run my own life; I want to paddle my own canoe; I want to be king of my own castle”—then you have every reason to be afraid. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God if one is unprepared to meet Him. But you **can** find peace with God. He pleads with every human being, asking us to commit our eternal destiny to Him. If you will let Him—Jesus Christ will dispel your fears and fill your heart with hope and security and peace. Look for the tract entitled “The Divine Plan of Salvation.” You can find peace and satisfaction and salvation in Jesus Christ, who promises to be your Refuge and Strength.

-Harold S. Martin

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America