

DEALING WITH FEAR

by Vada Lee Barkley and Erwin Lutzer

Focus

To Shakespeare, fear was “of all bare passions . . . most accursed.” For most of us, fear is often an unwelcome, even a shameful burden. Indeed, fear and anxiety have been called “the official emotions of our age,” the basis of all neuroses, and the “most pervasive psychological phenomenon of our time.” Whether our fear be the terror of death (“the worm at the core” of human pretensions to happiness according to William James), or whether our fear be the phobia of the number 13, most of us are hyper-anxious creatures constantly inventing reasons for anxiety even where there are none.

But what of those adventurers who seem to have conquered fear or perhaps never had any to begin with? Do such people exist?

Tom Wolfe’s book, *The Right Stuff*, records the fearless exploits of America’s original astronauts who had the stuff of courage. They had the ability to walk balanced on the brink of the abyss, to fly to the edge of the unknown, to push the envelope. In the face of booming, screaming stress, they were fearless. But were they really?

And what about those of us who are daily plagued by the petty phobias of life on terra firma, those of us, who like Mark Twain, “don’t believe in ghosts” but are “afraid of them”?

Is there any right stuff about fear? Or is fear, by its very nature, sinful? And how does one explain the apparently contradictory announcements from the Bible to both “fear” and “fear not”?



BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Matthew 14:22-31; 2 Timothy 1:7; Hebrews 13:5-6; 1 John 4:18



COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

This lesson will look at the topic of fear from a point of view that emphasizes what each of us can do to overcome the fears that unsettle us, realizing the strength that is available through Jesus Christ. This lesson does not directly address those persons who may be dealing with more serious fears which may be interrupting the normal processes of life. Such debilitating fears are recognized to exist in many individuals. For these people this lesson may come across as frustrating or discouraging. It should be noted that while reliance on spiritual resources should be the first step in conquering fear, it may not always be the only step. For some who find that fear dominates their lives, professional counseling, physical examination, and prescribed medication all can be investigated. Today’s session assumes that fear has not

become such a dominant force in the individual’s life.

However, be aware that there may be some in your group for whom fear has become uncontrollable. As you work through this lesson, be sensitive to those who may be sending out subtle, perhaps even desperate, cries for help.

When Fear Envelops You

Have you ever heard someone make one of the following statements?

“I’ll never drive a car in Chicago. Never! That kind of traffic scares me to death.”

“Don’t ever ask me to say something in public. I’d be so scared that I would forget everything I wanted to say.”

Or consider what one woman said: “Because of a past

relationship with a man, I've lived in fear for five years, afraid he'll come to the door or kill me when I go outside. So I lock myself upstairs when I'm home alone."

Fear—it can paralyze you, prevent you from enjoying life, and lock up deep inside the gifts that God has given you, never to be used.

Some fears are normal and actually for our benefit. An example may be the fear that motivates you to go into the basement of your house when you hear that a tornado may be coming. Good fear also causes parents to warn their children about the danger of playing with matches and the danger of stopping to talk to strangers.

Other fears are more like the respect of power. We fear electricity because we know what it can do. In this way, we also fear God.

But there is another kind of fear, a fear for which there is no logical reason. Irrational fear makes no sense to the onlooker—and usually doesn't make sense to the one afraid either. Some people, for example, are afraid of crowds. They are fine one-on-one, but as soon as a group gathers in their area, they start to feel uncomfortable. When you ask them why they are afraid of a crowd, they cannot explain it. Some people are afraid of marriage. Others are afraid they will lose their jobs and live with their fear year in and year out. You may be one of those afraid to go home because you keep wondering what might have happened in your absence.

Whatever our fears, the first thing we need to remember is that God created us with the capacity to fear. He built that emotional response within us just as surely as He gave us the ability to love and respond warmly to other

people. Fear is part of His loving provision for us. Properly controlled, fear can protect us from harm and motivate us to positive action. Uncontrolled fear, however, can put us into a personal prison and stunt our personal and spiritual growth.

This session is designed to help young adults understand and control fear. The walls of the prison that fear has built can be pushed back so that the individual can go free.

At this point some may be saying, "I don't know if I really want to do that. I've lived with my fear so long that it has become comfortable in a way." The apostle John has a message for these people. He reminds us that *perfect love drives out fear* (1 John 4:18). We can be free from the bondage of fear. Fear need not control our actions.

Fear in Perspective

The power of fear is illustrated by one of the incidents in Jesus' life, related in Matthew 14:22-31. Jesus had just fed more than 5,000 men, women, and children. The crowd was thinning out when He asked the disciples to get into a boat and head for the other side of the lake, where He would meet them. He then went up into the mountain to pray.

When the boat was about four miles from shore, a storm sprang up. The wind buffeted the little boat, and the waves began pounding against the side of it. Because many of the disciples were fishermen, this was no new experience, even though it was very dangerous. However, what they saw coming across the water was definitely not normal. Walking toward them on the water was the figure of a man. *When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear* (v. 26).

The experience of these disciples points to the first step in overcoming our fear—we must see our fears in perspective. Matthew reported that Jesus came to those disciples, and they thought that He was a ghost. They had a fear of the storm based on experience, but their greater fear came from perceiving Jesus' figure as a ghost. They could not relate this experience to anything that had ever happened to them before. They had never seen anyone walk on water. Only after the initial outcry caused by fear did anyone even dream that it was Jesus who was the object of their fear.

What can we learn from this about our perspective on fear? We must see that we have a limited perspective. We need to admit that we do not have all the answers and that fear has a way of distorting our perception. If we recognize this, we are less likely to make our decisions based on our fears, and more likely to turn to the one who does have a proper perspective.

This brings us to our next step. Once we have acknowledged our own limitations, we are free to turn to Jesus for help with our fear. We can do this in full confidence because we know that Jesus cares for us and is truly concerned about our fear.

Notable Quotes

Norman Vincent Peale says that "abnormal fear is the poisonous well out of which dismal unhappiness is drawn. It makes life literally a hell."

"The cure for a troubled mind is not to be found so much in changing our environment as in changing ourselves," John Homer Miller insists. "Steady nerves and a quiet mind are not things we go out and find; they are things we create."

"The fearful person is so completely absorbed with his fears that his mind is able to grasp only a small portion of what is spoken to him. This means that the greater portion of his thinking is bound up with self," Dr. Gilbert Little says. "Prayer and fellowship with God through His Word are essential for the Christian if he is to overcome his fear."

1. Decide what is the worst thing that can happen.
2. Make up your mind that you can accept it.
3. Set about doing everything in your power to keep it from happening. —Dale Carnegie

When Jesus came to the disciples during the fourth watch at night, He recognized that His disciples were afraid. The first thing He did, then, was to take steps to alleviate their fear. His first words to them were, “*Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid*” (v. 27). The line in the first part of that verse is important: *But Jesus immediately said to them . . .* He recognized their fear and immediately set about allaying it.

We can be sure that Jesus is just as concerned with the fears that plague His disciples of today as He was with the fears of His first disciples. We need not be ashamed of our fear. God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, knows that we deal with fear and seeks to free us from it. The command “Fear not” appears more than 100 times in the Bible. You ask, “Why 100 times? Wouldn’t once be enough?” Maybe, but God knows that when we are paralyzed by fear we don’t hear very well.

Fear in Focus

Once we realize that God is concerned with our fear and wants to alleviate it, we move on to the second step in overcoming our fears. We must maintain the proper focus.

Let’s examine Peter’s experience with Christ. Jesus said as He approached the boat, “*It is I.*” To this Peter quickly responded, “*Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water*” (v. 28). The NIV, however, makes it sound as if Peter is still unsure. A better translation of Peter’s response would be “*Lord, **since** it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.*” Right after Peter was afraid, he was assured by Jesus and immediately wanted to step out in faith to Him.

Jesus said, “*Come.*”

When Peter began walking on the water, he had a firm faith, and his focus was the Lord. The Bible says he *came toward Jesus*, implying his eyes were on Jesus (v. 29). However, once he got a little way away from the boat, his focus shifted away from Jesus to the waves and the wind. At that moment, fear returned and he began to sink.

Like a lot of us, Peter had within him the alternating spirits of fear and trust. When he looked at the Lord, he trusted. When he looked at the circumstances in which he was with the Lord, he became afraid.

Instead of focusing on the circumstances, our focus must be on God. Jesus had promised Peter that he would be able to walk on the water. Peter should have focused on that promise and kept walking, regardless of the activity of the wind and waves. When he did not do that, he started to sink as fear took hold in his heart.

Focusing on God and His promises means that we are obedient to God’s call. We choose to obey despite the fears that might arise from circumstances.

We find that this idea of not focusing on our fear has a psychological base in addition to a spiritual one. The psychological reason is that when we focus on the very thing we are trying to be rid of, its power over us actually increases. In this case, fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you focus on how afraid you are, you will soon discover that you are very much afraid—indeed, your

fear will grow stronger. But if your focus is on Jesus and your obedience to Him, His power will flow through your whole being and help drive away the fear.

When we focus on Jesus, we also find that there are stronger motivating factors than fear. As we live in relationship to God, His love flows through us. As we mentioned above, the Bible teaches that perfect love casts out fear. Love has the ability to transcend fear and enable us to act even in the midst of it.

Consider a mother who is afraid of dogs. One day she hears a dog snarl and remembers that her one-year-old son is outside playing. Without hesitation she rushes outside, grabs the child, and runs back inside. Her love is stronger than her fear. How much more is loving obedience to God able to overcome paralyzing fear!

Fear and Faith

The experience of Peter and the disciples that night reminds us of another step in overcoming fear. To be truly victorious over fear, we need not only a proper perspective on fear and proper focus in fear, we also need a proper faith.

Notice what Jesus did when Peter cried out in his fear, “*Lord, save me!*” He stretched out His hand and took hold of Peter before he had gone down very far. Then He said, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (v. 31). He pointedly referred to the real reason for Peter’s failure, his lack of faith in Jesus Christ.

At this point we must say something about the difference between having fear and acting on fear. Fear as an emotion is often beyond our control. However, we are responsible for how we act on that fear. Peter’s lack of faith is seen not in the fact that he was afraid, but in the fact that he focused his attention on his fear. He began to sink “*When he saw the wind.*” The construction used here indicates more than just noticing the wind. Peter looked at the wind; he made it the focus of his attention. In doing so, he took his eyes off of Christ. It was this action that reveals the weakness in Peter’s faith. For us, the implication is clear. Faith is not the absence of fear; it is trusting in Christ in spite of it.

As we practice our faith in times of fear, we find that it grows. God often allows us to face fearful circumstances to give us precisely those opportunities for growth. Each storm we weather adds to our faith and makes the next storm easier to face.

Our discussion of fear and faith is a good time to mention one other factor in our dealings with fear—grace. As we work through our fears, we need to remember that God does not expect us to operate on our own power. That is why the first step in conquering fear is realizing our limitations. God works in us to help us overcome our fear. But there is another aspect of grace that is revealed in this passage.

Notice that when Peter did fall short in his faith, he did not immediately plunge to the bottom of the sea. The Word tells us Peter “***began to sink.***” He cried out, “*Lord,*

save me!” not “Lord, blub, blub.” Jesus still sustained him even when he failed in his faith and even reached down to catch him as he sank.

In the same way, we need to remember that when we do fail, if we do allow our fears to get the best of us, we have not automatically lost the battle. God always gives us a second chance. He may ask us, “Why did you doubt?” But the question is meant to encourage growth, not to condemn.

Fear and the Presence of God

Finally, in the Scriptures there is a direct connection between God’s presence and the absence of fear. Hebrews

13:5-6 says plainly, “*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.*” So we say with confidence, “*The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*” We can be content and free from the fear because God will never abandon us.

We can see that the Christian has a solid foundation upon which to stand when faced with fear. If we recognize our limited perspective, and turn to God in faith in the midst of our fear, we can know the assurance of His presence and the victory over fear that assurance can bring.

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Images of God

Certain familiar images of God give specific details of how He helps us deal with our fears. We will look briefly at five of those images.

The Shepherd Image (Psalm 23; Luke 15:1-7; John 10:1-18)

No one knew better than David how to be a good shepherd. Experience in tending his father’s sheep had taught him what a good shepherd must do to provide for and protect his sheep. David knew that like a shepherd who watches tenderly over his flock, so the Lord takes care of His children.

God reaches out to us in love, yearning to bring us back to His fold, yearning to hold us in His arms. Knowing that we have a Good Shepherd who leads us brings us peace in the midst of overwhelming fears.

The Father Image (Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus was thinking of benevolent fathers—those who loved their children unconditionally—when He used the father image. The story of the prodigal son portrays this image of a caring father, grieving over his son’s choices, yet eagerly awaiting his son’s return. Running to greet his wayward son, the father forgave instantly, restoring the prodigal to sonship and celebrating his return. God is like that.

Not only does our Father forgive but also He provides. Jesus says we need not worry about food, clothing, or any other material need. Why? Because our Father knows what we need and He will supply it. God’s children down through the ages have found that to be true. Our fears are known by the Father.

The Fortress Image (Psalm 91)

Within 5 miles of a missile-launching site, a church scheduled a revival. The evangelist went to the pulpit that first night and read, *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust”* (Psalm 91:1-2). Those words made a terrific impact on that congregation. Those words continue to have a terrific impact on fear-ridden Christians. When we need a refuge we know where to go.

The Vine and the Branch Image (John 15:1-8)

Jesus is the vine; we are the branches; the Father is the caretaker. Naturally, as long as we abide in Christ we receive sustenance from Him, while the Father tenderly cares for us—even prunes or corrects us—and we produce abundantly. Since our Father desires fruit, He takes care of the branches as long as we are connected to the vine.

The Husband and Wife Image (Ephesians 5:22-33)

The Holy Spirit reminds us of the love Christ has for His Church. He gave His life for the Church to sanctify it and prepare it for himself.

The Bible teaches that Christ has entered into a love relationship with us. We partake of His tender love and care, share in His victories, enjoy His fellowship, and rely on His promises.

1-N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

1. What Is Your Fear Quotient?

Begin the class session by having each class member complete the "Fear Quotient" questionnaire in *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*. Allow each person enough time to complete the questionnaire, but don't spend too much time on this activity. This should be an interesting way to personalize the topic of the lesson at the outset and will show how fear affects each of us differently.

After students have completed the questionnaire, call for a show of hands for each pair of fears listed.

2. What Are You Most Afraid Of?

Ask your class to think about the question, **Of what are you most afraid?** That same question was asked by a team of market researchers of 3,000 people. Give your class the following responses in random order. Then have them guess at what the correct order is according to the results of the survey. The list below is ordered from most frightening to least. After your group has finished working with this survey list, ask how each of them would have ranked this list of items. What items would they have added?

1. Speaking before a group
2. Heights
3. Insects and bugs
4. Financial problems
5. Deep water
6. Sickness
7. Death
8. Flying
9. Loneliness
10. Dogs
11. Driving/Riding in a car
12. Darkness
13. Elevators

3. Childhood Fear Experiences

Ask volunteers to recall their most frightening experience as a child. Ask, **What happened? How did you react? How did your parents react? Did their reaction influence your future ability to handle fear? If so, was it a positive or negative influence? How would you deal with the same fear today?**



PRESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today's topic.

1. Lecture/Discussion

You may wish to use a lecture/discussion format as a way of introducing some or all of the material in the Commentary above. You should try to keep the lecture to a maximum of 15-20 minutes and be sure to leave sufficient time for group discussion.

Below are listed several questions to help facilitate discussion. You may use them in a minilecture or split the class into groups after a minilecture and have each group discuss some or all of the questions listed.

Use the Commentary to supplement your discussion of those questions.

Key Questions

1. Is fear sinful?
2. How does one explain the apparent paradox of the biblical direction to both "fear" and "fear not"?
3. Is fear ever healthy?
4. Why do you think such a private matter like whom or what one fears in life is so important theologically? (i.e., what it says to our relationship between us and God and one another)

5. Is fear usually or seldom a self-centered reaction?
6. What are some examples of fear that paralyzes?
7. Can you think of any examples in Jesus' life where He dealt with fear?
8. What things tend to make you fearful?
9. Have you ever overcome a fear? If so, how?
10. Are there different types of fear? (How is terror different from a phobia?)

2. Images of God

This sidebar in the Commentary lists several ways that the Bible describes God. Divide your class into five groups and assign one of these images, along with the related scripture. Have each group examine how their assigned image of God can help us with our fear problems.

The images of God, with related scripture, are:

Shepherd (Psalm 23; Luke 15:1-7; John 10:1-18)

Father (Luke 15:11-32)

Fortress (Psalm 91)

Vine and the Branch (John 15:1-8)

Husband and Wife (Ephesians 5:22-33)

SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Coping with Fear

Distribute copies of the *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1B*. It contains eight suggestions for coping with the causes of anxiety related to fear. Emphasize that coping with the causes of anxiety when and before they arise can prevent the development of fear.

2. Time-out for Worry

Worry is closely related to fear. Because one can worry at nearly any time and place, it becomes associated with many situations. So to reduce its frequency, a person ought to limit the conditions when it occurs.

Researchers in Psychology at Pennsylvania State University have developed a self-control strategy involving five rules for doing this. They are listed on the *INTERSECT* sheet for this week.

Give each class member a copy of *INTERSECT*, and have them follow the rules for a set period of time, say, two or three weeks, while keeping track of how much time they spent worrying each day.

Interestingly, the researchers reported that of those who used their worry-reduction technique, average worry time over a four-week period was reduced by 35 percent, and remained at that level six months later.

3. What Do You Think?

Bruce Larson in *Living on the Growing Edge* says, "Praying to have our fear removed usually avails little. As Christians we should pray instead for courage to launch into action, in spite of our fears."

Use this quote as a way to bring the lesson to a close. Is this observation by Larson correct? Why do you agree or disagree with the statement?

4. Strategies

Ask your class to think about practical ways to reduce fear in their lives. Divide your class into three groups. To each group, assign one of the following areas of strategy

against fear: Physical, Mental, Spiritual. Ask each group to create a list of suggestions in their assigned area to help reduce and eliminate fear from the lives of young adults.

Here are some suggested responses:

PHYSICAL

1. Have regular medical checkups.
2. Get enough sleep.
3. Eat right.
4. Exercise.
5. Relax.
6. Take restful vacations.

MENTAL

1. Determine whether your fear is real or imaginary.
2. Face reality.
3. Talk through your problems with a trusted friend.
4. Develop special interests, such as hobbies.
5. Don't let the future and its possible problems dominate the important present.
6. Clear the screen of your mind every half hour.
7. Within reason, do the thing you fear to do.
8. Take occasional breaks.
9. Remember, this, too, shall pass.
10. Practice Paul's prescription for your thought life (Philippians 4:8).

SPIRITUAL

1. Refuse to listen to or talk to Satan.
2. Attend church regularly.
3. Read the Bible.
4. Confide in a Christian friend—a counselor if necessary.
5. Listen to and sing faith-building hymns.
6. Pray.
7. Memorize Scripture.
8. Turn your fears over to God.
9. Exercise faith.
10. Trust God to deliver you.

Use *INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters* to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

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