

INTRODUCTION

People fear all kinds of things. Jake had begun to develop panic attacks commuting to work with his friends. The fear became so acute he decided to talk to a psychiatrist about it. He said, "Doc, it's terrible. Every day, I'm filled with fear and anxiety as I ride to work with three of my coworkers and the thing that triggers it is a tunnel we drive through. Every day as we approach the tunnel I get so scared I can hardly breathe. What's wrong with me? Am I going crazy?" The doctor said, "No, no, no, my boy. What you have is a very common ailment these days. You have what is known as "car pool tunnel syndrome."

Some of the things we fear aren't even real. Zig Ziglar said FEAR stands for False Evidence Appearing Real. I read about a lady in Arkansas who was sitting in her car in a grocery store parking lot when she heard a loud "Bang!" Then she felt a sharp pain in the back of her head. She was holding both her hands on the back of her head when a man walked by and asked, "Ma'am are you okay?"

The woman answered with a shaky voice, "Call 911, I've been shot in the back of the head and I'm holding my brains in." Upon closer examination, the man discovered she wasn't holding her brains. It was biscuit dough. A canister of biscuit dough in the grocery sack behind her had exploded from the heat, making a loud explosion, and the biscuit dough had covered the back of her head.

Even though our minds can play tricks on us, fear is a real problem for thousands of people. There are things that cause all of us to be afraid. The question I'm addressing in this message is: "Is there any HOPE for me when I'm afraid?"

One of the reasons I love to read the Psalms is that you can find a Psalm reflecting every human emotion—including fear. In Psalm 55, King David first gives a description of his fears, and then he offers a prescription for them. He prayed, "Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. 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."

That's the description, you can read the prescription beginning in verse 16: "But I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." His prescription continues in verse 22: "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall."

Even when you're trembling with fear, there is hope. My acrostic for HOPE is Having Only Positive Expectations. Just as a coin has two sides, we're going to look at both sides of fear in this message. First, we'll talk about understanding fear, and then we'll discuss overcoming fear.

1. UNDERSTANDING FEAR

What is fear? If you looked it up in the dictionary you'd find that fear is, "a feeling of agitation and anxiety caused by the presence of imminence of danger." Agitation causes you be twisted out of shape and anxiety causes you to be tied up in an emotional knot. There are two words in the New Testament for fear. *Eulabeia* means "respect, or reverence." The other word is *phobeo*, which means a strangling, debilitating fear.

There are over 500 fears registered with the American Medical Association as being legitimate phobias: They include such unusual fears as: Cyberphobia: fear of computers; Lunaphobia: fear of the moon; Astraphobia: fear of lightning; Chrometophobia: fear of money; Erytophobia: fear of the color red; Triskaidekaphobia: fear of the number "13;" Peladophobia: fear of baldness; Phobophobia: fear of fear. But the most common fear among Americans is Glossophobia, which is the fear of public speaking. About 20% of Americans report they have an irrational fear at the thought of standing up in front of a crowd and speaking. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld said, "At a funeral, most people would rather in be in the casket than giving the eulogy." If you want to understand fear in order to overcome fear, it will help you to realize there are two different kinds of fear:

(1) Healthy fear protects you

In 1933 America was struggling through a terrible economic depression. It affected the entire nation except here in East Texas where the East Texas Oil Field had created an economic boom. Times were tough. President Franklin D. Roosevelt went on the radio to try to reassure a nation on the verge of panic. On March 3, 1933 he said, "This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly...So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needs efforts to convert retreat into advance." That phrase, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself" became a famous saying. But is it really true? Not completely. There is actually a kind of fear that is good for you.

In some instances, fear is a God-given warning system. It's fear of getting killed that makes you look both ways before you cross a busy street. It's fear of getting bitten that causes you to stay away from a rattlesnake. Healthy fear releases adrenalin, which prepares you to flee or fight. This kind of fear protects you.

(2) Harmful fear paralyzes you

But there is a damaging kind of fear that causes a person to freeze up like a deer caught in headlights. Julius Caesar was a powerful emperor, yet he was so afraid of thunder he hid under his bed during storms. Peter the Great was a feared Russian Czar, yet he was so afraid of bridges he refused to use them. You may have some kind of irrational, harmful fear that keeps you from enjoying life. This kind of fear produces emotional paralysis.

As you know, I do a lot of research. I know this may be too intellectual for some of you, but I came across a powerful quote about how fear can paralyze a person. Of course, the author has a doctorate—Dr. Seuss, and the academic thesis is called "The Zoad in the Road." He wrote: Did I

ever tell you about the young Zoad / Who came to two signs at a fork in the road? / One said "To place One," and the other "Place Two" / So the Zoad had to make up his mind what to do. / Well, the Zoad scratched his head and his chin and his pants / And he said to himself, "Now I'll be taking a chance." / If I go to Place One. That place may be hot. / How do I know if I'll like it or not. / On the other hand, though, I'll feel such a fool / If I go to Place Two and find it's too cool... / And for thirty-six hours and one-half that Zoad / Made starts and made stops at that fork in the road. / Saying, "don't take a chance, you may not be right." / Then he got an idea that was wonderfully bright. / "Play safe," cried the Zoad "I'll play safe, I'm no dunce / I'll simply start off to both places at once." / And that's how the Zoad who would not take a chance / Got to no place at all with a split in his pants.

So, the first thing to do with your fear is to determine if it is the healthy or unhealthy kind. Once you face your fears and name them, then you are on your way to conquering your fears.

2. OVERCOMING FEAR

Don't worry about the healthy fear you have, but it should be your goal to overcome any paralyzing fear. There are thousands who struggle with irrational panic attacks and unreasonable bouts of fear that cause them to live in misery. God wants you to overcome your fears.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones wrote: "I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath—but in faith and hope, I breathe freely." Fear can strangle your soul and gum up your spirit. In Psalm 55, David mentions three things that make us afraid, and then he gives us give ways to overcome these fears.

(1) Are you afraid of bad people? Seek God's strength!

In verse 3 David wrote one of things causing him to shake with fear was "the voice of the enemy...the stares of the wicked;" Three thousand years later, there are still mean, wicked people out there who may do us harm.

I used to tell people East Texas was the greatest place in America to live, because of the beautiful scenery, the friendly people and the low crime rate. In fact, I have made the statement that East Texas is an oasis of peace in the midst of a sea of insanity. But as you know, over the past few months, this feeling of security has been threatened.

There was the terrible abduction and murder at Wal-Mart, and then the terrifying courthouse shooting. And before we could catch a breath, just this past week, a troubled man entered Canton High School and shot the head football coach. The truth is there are mean, wicked, evil people everywhere—even in East Texas. But God doesn't want us to live in constant fear.

Remember, it was David who wrote this song. He knew what it was to be afraid of bad people. When he was a teenager, he faced a nine-foot giant named Goliath. But David learned at an early age, that when it comes to fear, "the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Before David went out to meet Goliath, Saul tried to dress him in his armor. The armor was much too large and heavy for David, so he rejected it. Instead he went out to face Goliath dressed in better armor. He was depending on God's strength. David told Goliath, "You come against me with a sword, and a spear, and a javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty." (I Samuel 17:45)

The singer/songwriter Carmen had a rap in one of his songs about the battle. He said, "Little David must have just been in his teens when he faced Goliath of the Philistines. He was armed with just a slingshot and some stones. Well, Goliath was a giant and strong as a tank, and when he looked at men their stomachs sank, and there stood little David all alone. But with faith in God he flung that stone and much to their surprise. He nailed that monster with a stone that landed between his eyes. Then he decapitated his fallen foe to make sure that he was dead, and showed everyone there he was someone who really knew how to get a head!"

Like Goliath, you are going to face giant fears all of your life. Don't be afraid. You can come against your fears in the name of the Lord God Almighty. David gives the antidote for poisonous fear in verse 17. He wrote, "Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." David had the kind of relationship with God that he spoke to him on a regular basis. So that when trouble came, God didn't have to say, "Now who are you again?" If you have a regular time of prayer in your life, you'll find that your giant fears will fall before you.

Jesus said, "I tell you my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more...Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell...indeed, the very hairs of your head are numbered. Don't be afraid." (Luke 12:4-6)

The fear of God means we respect Him. An electrician has to maintain a healthy fear of electricity because he knows it can kill him. Yet, his fear of electricity doesn't prevent him from doing his job. In the same way, we can have a reverential fear of God that causes us to respect Him without cringing in terror.

Oswald Chambers said it well: "It is the most natural thing in the world to be scared, and the clearest evidence that God's grace is at work in our hearts is when we do not get into panics...The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."

(2) Are you afraid of the future? Cast your cares on Him!

The second thing most people fear is the future. In verse 2 David complained, "My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught." If you let your mind run away, you can start entertaining all kinds of thoughts about bad things that *could* happen. As you look toward the rest of this year, is there a feeling of fear of what *might* happen? As you look toward the next couple of years, is there uneasiness in your spirit? That feeling didn't come from God. The Bible says in II Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love and a sound mind." God is not the author of fear. The devil is the sinister minister of fear. He knows that if he can keep you in fear, you'll be ineffective as a Christian.

God loves you so much he has invited you to cast your cares on Him. David wrote in verse 22, "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you;" Do you have worries or fears about your future? Throw all those cares onto God's shoulders. He can bear your sorrows. You don't have to be afraid because whatever happens God will sustain you.

If you are a child of God, there's HOPE for your future. Listen to God's promise: "For I know the plans I have for you I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you HOPE and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

You've heard it many times before, but that doesn't make it less true. You don't have to be afraid of what your future holds as long as you know who holds your future.

Proverbs 31 contains a description of a noble, godly woman. The woman described in Proverbs 31 should be a role model for every female. I love one aspect of her character. I says Proverbs 31:25, "She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come." (Proverbs 31:25) A child of God, male or female, ought to be able to look at the future and laugh. When the devil starts trying to make you fear, just laugh in his face and say, "Ha! God has a plan for me, and it a plan to prosper me, not to harm me. It is a plan of hope and a future!"

(3) Are you afraid of dying? Trust God's truth!

The third thing David mentioned that makes us afraid is death. The idea of dying can be pretty scary. In verse 4 David wrote, "the terrors of death assail me." For many people, death is a terrifying, horrifying prospect.

One of my favorite stories is about the preacher who was talking about being prepared to die. He said, "Every member of this church is going to die!" A kid on the front pew laughed out loud, so the preacher repeated his statement a little louder. He said, "I said, EVERY MEMBER OF THIS CHURCH IS GOING TO DIE!" At that, the kid laughed even louder. The preacher stopped and said, "Young man, how can you laugh at that?" The kid replied, "Because I'm not a member of this church!" Well whether you're a member of this church or not, you have to deal with the prospect of death.

In the 14th century, the Italian poet, Dante Alighieri, wrote a trilogy of books tracing his imaginary journey through hell, purgatory, and then heaven. His first book in the trilogy was called *The Inferno*. In it, he described hell as seven circles of increasing punishment, based on the seven deadly sins. His descriptions are fictitious, but he does get one detail of hell completely correct: Hell is a completely devoid of hope. Dante's inscription above the entrance to hell stated, "Through me the way into the city of woe, / Through me the way to eternal pain, / Through me the way among the lost... / Abandon all hope, you who enter here."

But as Christians we don't have to be afraid of death. Paul wrote that we experience sorrow at the death of loved ones, but we don't sorrow in the same way as those who have no hope. As a pastor, I've had the difficult assignment of preaching a funeral of someone who showed no evidence of being a follower of Jesus. The depth of sorrow and hopelessness at funerals like that is totally different than the funeral of someone who is a devoted follower of Jesus.

I cannot understand how anyone can face the prospect of dying without having hope. Bertrand Russell was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. He is generally recognized as the founder of what is called analytic philosophy (the marriage of mathematical logic and philosophy). But Russell wasn't a Christian. In 1927 he wrote a book entitled *Why I am not a Christian*. When he was 81, he was interviewed by the BBC. The interviewer asked him, "What do you have to hang onto when death is obviously so close?" Russell's answer was: "I have nothing to hang onto but grim, unyielding despair."

As Christians, we have joyful, vibrant hope instead of grim, unyielding despair. Contrast Bertrand Russell's words with those written by Rick Warren: "Death, for Christians, is a transfer, a promotion. It's on to better things. You're not ready to live until you're ready to die. Only a fool would go all through life, totally unprepared for something that everybody knows is inevitable." The Bible says, "For, to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) It's a win-win situation for a Christian. If we live, it's the spiritual presence of Jesus now. If we die, it's *gain* because it's the literal presence of Jesus!

In verse 22, David said, "God will never let the righteous fall." And David was the same one who wrote these hope-filled words found in the 23rd Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;" (Psalm 23:4)

CONCLUSION

There's a reality television show called "Fear Factor"—but you don't need a television show—there's plenty of scary things around us. After the terrorist attacks and the anthrax scare, *Time Magazine* published an article with the same title: "Fear Factor." The article said Americans are more afraid than ever before. But there is an answer for the Fear Factor—it's the Faith Factor. Faith and fear cannot exist together. Feed your faith, and your fears will starve to death! Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there! Hope is simply faith in the future tense!

David said fear had so consumed him he wished he could have the wings of a dove to fly far way to a place of rest. Fear makes cowards of us all. One reason I liked the movie "Forrest Gump" is because I grew up listening to that kind of Alabama accent. You may recall in the movie that Forrest had a friend he called, "My Jenny." There's a poignant scene in which Forrest goes over to little Jenny's house. Jenny's dad has been abusing her, so Jenny grabs Forrest's hand and they run into the cornfield to hide. Jenny drags Forrest to his knees and says, "Pray with me Forrest. Dear, God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far, far away from here."

Have you ever felt that way? David did. He wrote that he was so consumed with fear he wished he could have the wings of a dove to fly far way to place of rest. Fear makes cowards of us all. But David goes on to say the answer isn't found in running from your fears—it's found in running *to* God.

Fear triggers a fight or flight response, and we've discovered it's easier to flee than to fight. But because of God's love and grace, there's another response beyond fight or flee—there's FAITH. And faith produces HOPE.

OUTLINE

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Expectations

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes