

## “When Fear Appears”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Matthew 10:26-33

January 31, 2021

In George Orwell’s novel 1984, there’s a room which terrified residents of the totalitarian state known as Oceania. The room is called simply, Room 101 and people feared it for good reason. In room 101, the state exposed you to something terrible, your greatest fear. In the course of the novel, the lead character is subjected to Room 101. His encounters his greatest fear in life.

The man breaks under the torture. In so doing, he ends up betraying the love of his life. The government agents come and get her thanks to the man’s confession and then she’s given the same treatment. Room 101. Where your fears destroy you.

And although it’s a fictional book, Orwell was right on the money about one thing. Our fears can undo us.

Our fears can betray us. Unhealthy fears can ultimately break us in two like desiccated twigs.

We all have fears. The sad fact of the matter is that most of our fears are unwarranted. The Bible tells us that the only thing we need fear is God himself, that, as Proverbs will tell us, is the beginning of wisdom. Thus most, if not all, of our other fears are baseless. Unwarranted. Unhealthy.

Worst of all, our fears keep us from living the life God intends for us. Think about it like this. If we spend more of our time worrying about things than we do actually enjoying the life God shares with us, then we’re really missing out. Christian author Max Lucado puts it this way – *“Fear doesn’t want you to journey to the mountain. If fear can rattle you enough, it will persuade you to take your eyes off the peaks and settle for a dull, lifeless existence in the flatlands.”*

Making matters worse, many outside companies and institutions these days prey on our fears. Take for example the news media. They manufacture and stoke up fears in us. Just watch an hour worth of news coverage and if you don’t come away with 10 new things to worry about, then I’d be surprised.

They do so, of course, for a reason. Networks and papers and websites all employ what scares us as the means to insure ongoing viewership and readership. My father kept an old political cartoon from the Charlotte Observer on his desk. On it is the caricatured face of a long time local TV news anchor saying the following words “Iraqi SCUD missiles screaming towards a North Carolina city... Tune in for the 11pm news to find out which one” he says.

It was a funny cartoon because it captured the clear goal many news agencies exploit – people that are afraid will do just about anything you tell them to do.

Just think of all the time you’ve spent worrying about things that never came to pass. For those of you who’re old enough, I’ll bet you remember the fears surrounding the year 2000. The Millennium bug was going to shut down the banking system, the power grid and all forms of communication. Within hours of the new millennium, chaos would reign and it would be every man (and woman) for themselves. They made such a big deal about this, that some people cashed in their savings and bought generators, water, guns and other supplies to survive the impending disintegration of Law and Order. Of course, those fears were exposed as completely bogus.

Most of our fears are just like that. We needlessly worry about things that simply will not come to pass.

Fear can contort our wills into doing some inane things. You see, when we’re scared, we go into fight-or-flight mode in which we artificially limit our options. That is to say that when we’re frightened, we may not be as capable of thinking our way through something.

I remember one time when I was a kid spending several uncomfortable nights in my walk-in closet at my parent’s house because I was scared of the boogeyman. I don’t quite remember why, but somehow, I figured that while the boogeyman COULD get into my room, he COULDN’T get into the closet.

Thankfully, my mom found me asleep in the closet one morning and she and I had a talk. That talk quelled my fear and I rather thankfully slept much better, in my own bed, after that conversation. All my mom really told me that day was that there was nothing to be afraid of and, because I trusted her, I was able to sleep in my own bed that very night.

The Bible does a remarkably good job of reinforcing the idea that we need not fear. I once heard it said that there was an occurrence of “Don’t be afraid” or “take courage” for every single day of the year recorded in the Scriptures. Y’all, I believed that until this past week when I did some research into the matter. And while there aren’t 365 occasions where the Bible teaches us not to be afraid, there are well over 200 occurrences of it. It’s said to all sorts of Biblical figures undergoing all sorts of trials, tribulations and difficulties. And yet, no matter what they’re facing, the Word of God comes to them telling them “Do not be afraid.”

After spurning the request of the King of Sodom, Abraham has good reason to be afraid. But then the word of the Lord comes to him in Genesis 15:1 - *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."*

As King Og of Bashon stood before the Israelites in the wilderness, the people of God were greatly outnumbered by a hostile force. Good cause for fear? Not so much. The Word of the Lord comes to Moses saying in Numbers 21:34 “, *"Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you, with his whole army and his land..."*

As his daughter lies dying, Jairus comes to Jesus and begs for him to save her. Jesus says in Luke 8:50 – *"Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed."*

Acts 18:9 While Paul is evangelizing in hostile territory so to speak – *"One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent."*

Revelation 1:17 – John the Revelator stands face to face with the Son of Man. But then the Son of Man says, *"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last."*

From the beginning to the very end of the Bible, in minor trials and impossible crises, God tells his people, “Don’t be afraid.”

So, I wonder – Is that asking too much from us? Are human beings able to live apart from needless fears?

If we listen to the Word of God, we are. We can lose the unhealthy fears that move us to do things we ought not do. We can sleep at night. We can brave terrible storms and do so without cowering. But we need to figure out how.

So, the first step is in figuring out where these unwarranted fears come from more often than not.

Way back in the Garden of Eden, God had created a perfect place for humans to dwell. Adam and Eve were able to spend their days in this lush, perfect garden. Better still, they could walk and talk and enjoy a perfect relationship with their creator. They were given but one rule – do not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

Ah, but then that serpent gets involved. He tells Adam and Eve that they won’t die just from eating the apple (a lie, I might add) but instead they’ll be like God themselves.

Sounds like a good deal so both Adam and Eve partake. Afterwards, they sew some clothes together and figure it’ll all work out great. Then God comes into the area.

What do Adam and Eve do? They hide. They want to stay away from God. Never mind that this is their creator, this God is the one that they have to thank for this perfect dwelling space. All of that flies out of the window. It’s fight or flight time so Adam and Eve, the fly into hiding places. And just think about that for a moment. Trying to HIDE from God? Not the smartest thing to do in the world for if God is God, then, guess what, he KNOWS where you’re hiding.

But listen to Adam - "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Adam and Eve believed the lies of the serpent and they paid the price for it. Many of our fears, the ones that keep us awake at night or in some constant state of anxiety arise from falsehoods as well. When we listen to the lies of the world over and against the Word of God then fear is going to eat our collective lunches.

I ran across an acronym for fear this week that I thought was especially fitting. This acronym is that fear stands for “False Education Appearing Real.” The acronym captures that fear largely stems from us believing lies that contradict God’s Word. When we choose to listen to the wisdom of other people over the wisdom God has shared with us in His Holy Word, then the one thing you can count on is an abundance of fear and in so doing display a lack of faith.

The cause of Adam's fear lies manifest to us. First of all, Adam fears because he's trusted the word of the serpent over the Word of the Lord. But I think there's another cause as well. Pride. That need we have to puff ourselves up to seem bigger to the world. Adam and Eve wanted to be like god. Why? Pride.

And we shouldn't think ourselves alone in experiencing fear. Our reading from the Gospel of Mark, we see the apostles scared out of their wits. A storm has overtaken their boat. Jesus, their leader, lays asleep on the deck. They come to him, scared out of their minds and wake him up – "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing."

Jesus, the Son of God, speaks but a few words and the wind and the rains cease. The seas calm and suddenly all is still again.

It's then when Jesus asks the apostles a question – "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith.

*Jesus teaches them, and us, that many fears are the result of a lack of faith.*

So there lies our answer. If we want to be free of unhealthy fears, then faith is the ONLY solution contra the myriad websites that I ran into this week each pitching a secular way to be rid of it. Faith is the only solution really when you think about it. Placing our trust in an Almighty God.

I remember sitting at a test in college practically having a nervous breakdown. I was in a classroom taking a really hard test. The difficulty of it sent me scurrying into a fit of irrational fear like a frightened dog. You see, I had it all figured out. If I flunked that test, I wasn't going to make the Dean's List. If I didn't make the Dean's List, then my future aspirations were entirely lost. I wouldn't get into a good graduate school, wouldn't get a good job. Never stood a chance of getting a wonderful wife like Natalie. I sat there figuring that a prosperous life was going to be lost forever just because I got a bad grade on one collegiate test.

I chose in that moment to believe a lie that Scripture directly contradicts.

If only I had known the Word of God at the time, I might not have been so panic-stricken.

Listen to Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Matthew starting at 6:25 and reading forward... *"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you -- ye of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'"*

Here is Jesus Christ telling us not to worry ourselves with future concerns. And he is able to make that claim because he knows how much God the Father loves us. Again, we've got to listen to the Bible over against the steam of self-help, self-protection, self-reliance schemes the world tries to foist upon us. What the Bible says is this – God is a God of Providence. That means HE PROVIDES.

Now, maybe he doesn't provide you with a mansion or a Lamborghini, but he does provide for your needs. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew: *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you..."*

So, if we want to be free from fear, we need to increase our faith. And time and practice throughout the ages has shown that such an endeavor is doable. But first, we need to change some things around in our lives. Some of the core ingredients we're putting in just might need to change.

Now look, back when I was a chef, I learned how to make some amazing crab cakes. At the restaurant I worked at, we used jumbo lump backfin crabmeat. Other than that, all that was in those things was some mayonnaise, lemon juice, egg whites and breadcrumbs. They were really amazing.

A few years later, I wanted to make those crab cakes for a dinner party we were having. I went to the store to get the ingredients. But then I saw the price on Jumbo lump backfin crabmeat. It was like \$30 a pound and I was going to need several pounds. Well, I didn't want to break the bank and figured a much less expensive product would do just as well. Imagine my surprise when my much, ballyhooed crab cakes tasted, well, not-so-great?

The same is true with us. If we're taking in nothing but inferior ingredients, then things in our life won't go that well either. If we're busy devouring the lies of the evil one, what we'll end up with is fear. Fears over

not getting what we want; fears of losing what we have; fears of the future will eat away at us rotting us from the inside out.

But if we're taking in God's Word then a better outcome is possible. If we're listening harder to what God has to say to us as recorded in scripture more than we are to CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, ABC, NBC, CBS, Yahoo, et al. then we will live without fear ruining our lives or the lives of our loved ones.

When the world around us stokes up fear, just remember Hebrews which tells us that God will never leave us, never forsake us. Or, as Corrie Ten Boom puts it – "Never be afraid to entrust and unknown future to a known God."

Practice humility. Paul in Philippians 2:3-4 writes, "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*"

When we think LESS about ourselves and MORE about others which is the heart and soul of humility, we are far less inclined towards those irrational fears which plague us all from time-to-time.

Prayer is another means by which our fears are quelled. If we pray without ceasing as the Apostle Paul commends, then we'll find our relationship with Jesus Christ growing, flourishing. Wake up in prayer, go to sleep in prayer and throughout the day direct your heart and mind to the Almighty. Bring God your dreams and hopes, fears and worries in prayer and you will find comfort. Better still you will find courage to overcome anything that faces you.

In the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, there's a great quote – "We never apologize to anyone for depending upon our Creator. We can laugh at those who think spirituality the way of weakness. Paradoxically, it is the way of strength. The verdict of the ages is that faith means courage. All men of faith have courage. They trust their God. We never apologize for God. Instead, we let Him demonstrate, through us, what He can do. We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. *At once, we commence to outgrow fear.*"

Spiritual disciplines which increase our faith like knowing your Scripture and prayer are the only defense against unwarranted fears.

When these fears strike, open up your Bible. Read the many promises that God has made to you through His Son Jesus Christ. When fear arises quickly like a storm, turn to the Lord in prayer. Seek his council finding a quiet place to direct your thoughts to Him.

At ONCE, you will commence to outgrow fear.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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