

A Christian View of Fear

2 Timothy 1:7

Some years ago the movie *Ground Hog Day* was rated the best comedy of our generation. The best on-screen kiss was from Spiderman. The best horror movie was *Silence of the Lambs*. When I saw that list my immediate response was the response I always have about horror movies: Why would anybody pay money to be scared when fear is free on an every day basis?

Fear is free and fears are many. So consider some fears. There is zoophobia—the fear of animals; homophobia—fear of blood; microphobia—fear of germs; hedonophobia—fear of pleasure; lyssophobia—fear of insanity; thanophobia—fear of death; ereuthophobia—fear of blushing; scopophobia—fear of being looked at; neophobia—fear of anything that’s new; and phobophobia—the fear of fear. Some psychologists tell us that the two most common fears are the fear of failure and the fear of rejection.

Fears in our lives can steal joy right out of our lives. We become so afraid of what might threaten us or what might go wrong that we miss the happiness that would otherwise be ours. Those who fear failure may never attempt things they would really succeed at and be good at because they have such fear of failure. Those who fear rejection may protect themselves by building walls between themselves and others and as a result never have productive and positive relationships because they’re afraid they’ll be rejected. Fear can take over our lives until every day is sacrificed on the altar of tomorrow, constantly wondering about what might go wrong.

We usually think of fear as something that assaults us from the outside but the truth is that fear is never external at all. Fear is always internal. Fear is not what happens to us but how we respond to what happens to us. It is our response and reaction to whatever happens on the outside. Fear is always about us. It is in our heads. Some people are paralyzed by fear when looking down from ten feet up.

Other people can walk along the edge of a 500 foot canyon and enjoy the journey. The difference is not the height on the outside but the attitude on the inside toward the height on the outside.

Fear is like cholesterol. There is a good kind and a bad kind. Good fear keeps us from foolishly risking the disasters of life. Bad fear withholds from us the pleasures of life.

One of the top teachings of the Bible is that we are to fear God. At least as far as the Bible is concerned, this is in the category of good fear. It’s repeated many times in the Bible including in Psalm 111:10, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.”*

So it’s a good thing to fear God. The fear of God is a combination of respect, faith, love, awe and submission. It is the recognition that God is overwhelmingly greater than we are. God is holy and we are sinners. God is strong and we are weak. God knows everything and we don’t know much. God is God and we are not.

It’s difficult to come up with an analogy for fear from everyday life that will help us to understand what it means to fear God. Fear of God is not like the fear of getting caught or the fear of nuclear war or the fear of losing a job. Not at all! Maybe the closest we can

come is the fear that a boy has of his father. This is the young boy who totally admires and even idolizes his dad. His dad is the smartest, strongest, nicest, tallest, best-looking dad in the whole world. He wants to be just like his dad when he grows up. Is that love? Yes. Is it admiration? It is. Is it awe? Yes. Is it fear? Yes, this is fear in the very best sense of the word.

To not fear God is to lack wisdom and understanding. It is to go out totally on our own. It is to say that we can do life all by ourselves. It is a sad and dangerous way to live.

When we realize there are others with needs and fears and take action to help them our own fears are tamed by God.

In the science fiction movie *Signs* Mel Gibson plays the role of a pastor who loses his faith and loses his fear of God. His wife is killed by a car driven by a neighbor who fell asleep behind the wheel. The pastor is so upset that he not only leaves the ministry but he abandons his faith in God and gives up any fear of God. At one particularly low point he even shouts out that he hates God. He concludes that there are only two ways to live life, either believing in God or going it on his own. He tries to go it on his own but ends up turning back to God. He concludes that in the worst fears of his life (the death of his wife and the end of the world because of alien invasion) he must fear God. It's good fear.

God has blessed us with other good fears. These come when real danger threatens us. A healthy fear of fire or falling or foolishness can make our lives safer and a lot happier. All of which is to say that the right kind of fear is a good thing.

Fear of God gives meaning to all of life. But the wrong kind of fear steals happiness, joy and purpose. It is the fear that immobilizes us, causes us to behave badly, deprives us of good and interferes with the good God intends our lives to have.

Dysfunctional fears do not come from God. These are the result of our thinking, our choices and our sin. Sometimes our fears come from illness. Our minds are just as capable of getting sick as our bodies are capable of getting sick. When our fears come from mental and emotional illness we often need doctors and medicines just as we need doctors and medicines for broken bones and infected organs. When our fears are long-term it may be time for a mental health check-up just like a physical health check-up.

Whatever the origination of our fears, God gives us gifts to deal with them. There's a prescription is written in the New Testament by St. Paul who was kind of a fearless character himself. He wasn't afraid to argue with philosophers, take on powerful politicians or sail into dangerous storms. He did all kinds of courageous things. But he had a young friend named Timothy who was much more timid than Paul. So Paul wrote to him in 2 Timothy 1:7, "*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*"

The Holy Spirit of God gives us power. Fear is often accompanied by feelings of powerlessness. We fear that the situation will go completely be-

yond our control. Paul loved to quote from Jesus who said, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" St. Paul discovered that when he hit his weakest point God came through with his strength. It is a supernatural provision of power that can only be experienced when we are weak. Paul went on to describe his own experience with this in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

God's Holy Spirit also gives us love. Love is for others. Love for others chases away many of our fears because so many of our fears are selfish. We fear our failure, our rejections, our sickness and our death. Even when we fear for others like our children, family and friends it can be self-centered. When we realize there are others with needs and fears and take action to help them our own fears are tamed by God. When we become engaged in the lives and the needs of other people we are, in turn, transformed and our fears are chased away. It's a prescription as clear as the physician's Rx. When fears start taking over your heart and hands, do something loving for someone else. Get started. God will give you the love as you go. The worst thing any of us can do when we are frightened is to stop loving others, start hating others or fail to serve others. That will grow our fears almost every time.

The Holy Spirit also gives us self-discipline. That is an interesting promise from God because it's a gift that calls us to behave in a healthy and wholesome way. If we're afraid we will fail the test God will give us the self-discipline to study. If we don't think we can handle the regimen of insulin or chemotherapy God will give us the self-discipline. If we are frightened by unemployment God will give us the self-discipline to keep looking for a new job. If we are spiritually dry God will give us the self-discipline to pray, study our Bibles and worship him.

Put it together and it's a fabulous prescription. We're told in 2 Timothy 1:7, "*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*" This is a promise from God. We fight our fears with faith that God will fulfill his promises. But, the only way we will ever know if

any of this works is to do it. When we are most frightened he will intervene and will give us what we need.

Jesus once gave his closest friends and followers an experience with fear that was truly transformational. Matthew was there so his is an eyewitness report. He and his buddies had an experience that parallels some of our own. He tells about it in Matthew 14:22-33:

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

They were in a storm because they did the right thing. The story starts out by saying that "*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat*" and cross the Lake of Galilee. They ended up in a storm because they did what Jesus told them to do.

We identify! While sometimes our worst fears are a direct consequence of our worst choices, many

times we are in the storm because we did the right thing. Some storms come out of a marriage, job, friendship or generosity that we entered well. God led us off the dock into smooth sailing that turned dangerous and we became scared.

I was caught in a storm on the Lake of Galilee. It's a frightening place. It's actually a fairly small lake but it's surrounded by mountains and storms can come sweeping down those mountains quickly. I knew we were in trouble when I saw the fear on the captain's face.

The cure for those in that storm that day turned out to be more frightening than the storm itself. Jesus came walking out to them on the water. The storm they could understand from experience, but a ghost-like man walking on top of the waves was far scarier. That's because we all fear the new and unknown. Even when God sends help we may be frightened beyond words if it is a help we have never before seen and don't understand. Even Jesus can be scary at times!

Jesus didn't handle the fear by calming the storm; instead he spoke words: "*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.*" That wasn't what they were looking for! They wanted him to do something. Stop the wind. Settle the boat. Calm the waters. But his three short sentences did not stop the storm nor did

they get Jesus into the boat. In other words, Jesus did not alter anything that was scaring them. All he did was change their perspective on what was happening.

When we're

afraid what we usually want is more than words. But words are what Jesus gives us because words are what we need most. Usually it is not the circumstances that need to change but our understanding of those circumstances. That is why when we are frightened Jesus tells us, "*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.*" He wants to change us first and then change the situation later.

Peter was the biggest risk taker of the bunch. Instead of welcoming Jesus onto the boat he proposed walking on the water himself. Some people are like that. They see an exciting opportunity in the middle of life's most terrifying circumstances.

In the middle of your storm, look up and see Jesus, hear his call to courage and calm, trust him to settle your heart and change your situation.

But most of us are like the other guys on the boat—still scared and wondering what is going to happen next (and thinking Peter is even crazier than we thought him to be). Most of us are still processing Jesus' words and holding on to the side of the boat.

Whether courageous like Peter or frightened like the others the solution was the same: Keep your eyes on Jesus. As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus rather than the waves he was safe even when walking on the water. As long as the men in the boat kept their eyes on Jesus they could actually be courageous and overcome their fears.

The story ends with Peter in the water shouting for Jesus' saving hand and the men in the boat worshipping Jesus as the Son of God. They faced their fears, replaced fear with faith and finally Jesus quieted the storm. The order is significant: 1.) fear; 2.) faith; 3.) situation changed.

I haven't asked you what you're afraid of. What is the storm that is rocking your life right now? It can be anything from the silly to the serious, from career to cancer, from money to mental illness, from pregnancy to pornography, from an attitude problem to an addiction problem, from relationships to religion. In the middle of your storm, look up and see Jesus, hear his call to courage and calm, trust him to settle your heart and change your situation.

I don't pretend to be fearless. Some days the winds of fear blow hot and wild through my mind. Sometimes my fears are so great they are overwhelming. Sometimes I need to talk it out with others. Sometimes I need a good night's sleep. Every time I need to pray and look to Jesus.

There's a lesson I have personally learned that I want to share with you. In every storm of my entire life Jesus always shows up. He always comes to help me. He has never once left me frightened and alone. So, you would think I would never be afraid again because I have so much experience with Jesus always showing up. I wish I could always remember the past times. Like Peter, I often take my eyes off of Jesus and look at the waves and forget that he has always been there for me.

Let's remember that Jesus will always, always come and help us—and remember:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (*Psalms 111:10*)

“God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (*2 Timothy 1:7*)

“Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.” (*Matthew 14:27*)

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