



## A Difficult Teaching

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# FEAR IS A SIN

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by Michael Taliaferro

A leader of the evangelization of Africa shows us God's attitude toward our fears and offers ways for us to overcome them.

**I**t hit me like a ton of bricks one night in Nairobi, Kenya, as I was reading Ezra 3 in my hotel room. When the captives returned from Zion, the Bible says that "*despite their fear of the peoples around them they began construction of the temple.*" I wrote in my Bible, "We can all do that: act in spite of our fear." But as I read on I saw that their movement to rebuild the temple stopped and failed. The construction did not begin again until 16 years later when Haggai came to Jerusalem. Their fear was their undoing. So I crossed out what I first had written in the margin. Instead, I wrote, "Fear is a sin." This began a study that absolutely changed my life. I believe it will change your life also, if you let it.

It's amazing how defensive we can be about our fear. In many conversations I've had, I was surprised by the resistance to the idea. Some would rush off to the concordance to find some verse which justifies fear. But if you will look at the Scriptures, it becomes clear that God wants you to repent of fear, not just carry on in spite of it. Yes, it is sin to be controlled by fear, and yet the fear itself is also sin.

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*"... Lord, save us,  
We're going to drown!"  
He replied, "You of  
little faith, why are you  
so afraid?" Then he  
got up and rebuked the  
winds and the waves  
and it was completely  
calm.*

MATTHEW 8:25,26

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We're fearful. Instead, we should love those on the bus so much that we'd die for them, much less speak to them. Also, instead of being fearful for *self* (a sin), we should be fearful for *their souls* (Galatians 4:11), a righteous fear.

Fear, rather than shutting us up, should cause us to shout out the gospel. When we stop fearing for self and start loving our neighbor, fearing for his eternal destruction, we become incredibly bold. But we're so pitifully silent and afraid because we have not yet died to self. I've seen men jump into freezing rivers just to save a drowning dog. Yet we can be so timid and fearful that we'll sit by while a city goes to hell. *"Perfect love casts out fear!"*

Our goal as Christians should be the heart of Peter—"We cannot help but speak" (Acts 4:20) and of Jeremiah—"His word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (Jeremiah 20:9).

Are you afraid of public preaching? Go do it. Are you afraid of inviting your boss to church? Go do it. And watch as times of refreshing come into a heart that has repented of fear. I know this is true. I'm a fearful wretch who's been changed by the Word.

Another area where fear grips us is in going abroad for mission work. In planting three churches in Africa this year, we've seen a few difficulties. These include a car accident which sent five Christians to the hospital, a little girl was given stitches without any anesthetic, team members have been robbed and left unconscious. We've had dysentery, malaria, food poisoning and typhoid. We live in a brand new

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culture with a brand new language, and we're far from home. How do we feel? We love it! It's the adventure of a lifetime. As Christians with a mission, how will we ever reach the villages if we can't live in the cities. And as people who love the lost and are filled with conviction, we must have more courage than foreign correspondents or college backpackers who have come to Africa for fun. It is time to repent of our fears of disease and heat and language and culture. We must toughen up. One out of every ten who live on earth live in sub-Saharan Africa. If 550 million people can live here, we can too. It's silly to say you would die for Christ—but only in North America. Fear has stopped too many of us from going abroad.

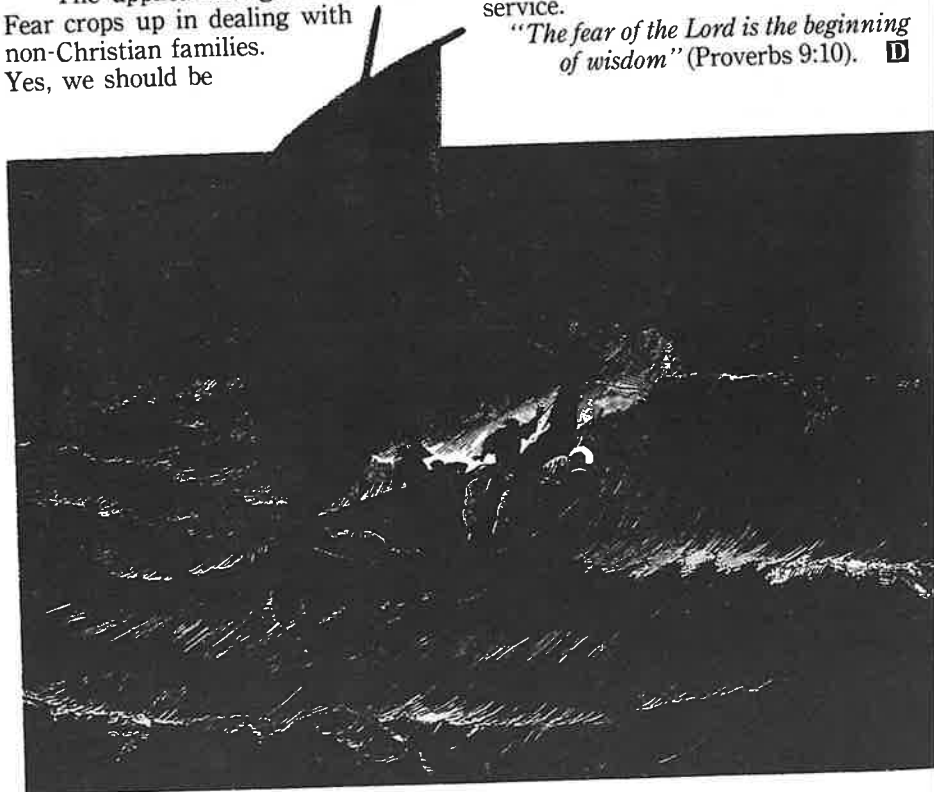
The applications go on and on. Fear crops up in dealing with non-Christian families. Yes, we should be

afraid for them, but not afraid of them. We also fear confession of sin. We fear close relationships. We fear for our personal careers and finances. My first challenge to you is to list your fears and begin to pray and fast to truly eradicate them. Challenge yourself to act in areas where you are afraid. Kick fear in the face as you do what's right, in spite of your fear. But always press on to totally eradicate fear from your life.

My second challenge is to continue this study on fear. I believe fear is the root cause of anxiety, worry, self-consciousness, self-pity and discouragement. When we lack faith, we begin to fear. I believe there is, however, great power and times of refreshing when we stand up and declare: "I will not fear."

This week, if you dare, have a fearless week. Totally remove fear from the picture. Completely die to self. And then watch how God will radically change and use you in his service.

*"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). D*



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## The Words of Jesus

Jesus is very direct about fear and the fact that it comes from a lack of faith. He commands his disciples to not be afraid as can be seen in the following examples:

*"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more"* (Luke 12:4). Jesus' command: Do not be afraid in persecution.

*"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows"* (Luke 12:6-7). Jesus' command: Do not be afraid in general. (You're too valuable to God!)

*"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom"* (Luke 12:32). Jesus' command: Do not be afraid, little flock.

*"So do not be afraid of them"* (Matthew 10:26). *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul"* (Matthew 10:28). *"So do not be afraid"* (Matthew 10:31). Jesus' command: Don't be afraid.

*"After being told his daughter was dead, Jairus is told 'Don't be afraid; just believe'"* (Mark 5:36). Note: Jesus not only knew that being controlled by fear was a sin. He commanded people to simply not be afraid!

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"* (John 14:27). Jesus' command: do not be afraid.

*"But I will show you whom you should fear: fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him"* (Luke 12:5). This is whom we should fear: God.

## In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament God had already been very plain about fear. Since God is with us, he commands us to not be afraid. What an insult to God to be afraid while he stands by our side! Consider these examples:

**To Isaac:** *"That night the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham'"* (Genesis 26:24).

**To all of Israel before entering the Promised Land:** *"See, the Lord your God has given you the land. Go up and take possession of it as the Lord, the God of your fathers, told you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged"* (Deuteronomy 1:21). *"Then I said to you, 'Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes'"* (Deuteronomy 1:29-30).

Deuteronomy 1 is a powerful example of how horrible fear can be. By being afraid, Israel directly disobeyed the command of the prophet "Do not be afraid." God called them an 'evil generation' in Deuteronomy 1:35. Because of their fear (not to mention the resultant actions) they never entered the Promised Land.

**To all the army of Israel before entering battle:** *"When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you. When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. He shall say: 'Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be faint-hearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before*

*them for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory"* (Deuteronomy 20:1-4).

*"Then the officers shall add, 'Is any man afraid or faint-hearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too'"* (Deuteronomy 20:8). Deuteronomy 20 is incredible. God commands them to not be afraid, terrified, panic-stricken or faint-hearted. Even in war! He tells each man to go home if he's afraid!

**David in the Psalms:** In Psalm 27 David brings us a challenging passage about fear. If a man has faith in God then he will not fear. Read carefully.

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation  
Whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life  
Of whom shall I be afraid?  
When evil men advance against me  
To devour my flesh,  
When my enemies and foes attack me,  
They will stumble and fall.  
Though an army besiege me,  
My heart will not fear;  
Though war break out against me,  
Even then will I be confident."*

Psalm 27:1-3

The point is simple. God is with us. That is the absolute reality. There is no reason for fear.

*"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me"* (Psalm 23:4). What should we decide today? I will fear no evil.

## The Clear Message

The Biblical attitude toward fear is summed up in these statements from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs and the New Testament Book of Hebrews: "Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the run that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared" (Proverbs 3:25-26). "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). "So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not afraid. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:6).

Over and over again God tells his people to be strong and courageous because he is with us. "Do not be afraid." To Isaac, to all Israel, to Joshua (Joshua 1:6-9), to David, to Isaiah (on five occasions), to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:8), to Paul (Acts 27:24, 18:9) and to all of us (Luke 12). By definition, to disobey a command of God is to sin. We have been commanded to not fear. Let us then repent of fear and carry on. The Bible commands us to not be afraid more times than it commands us to be baptized or to have the Lord's Supper. Fear is taught against more than lust. As tough a teaching as it may seem, fear is sin.

## The Main Point

I have no desire for this article to inspire extended debate about whether fear is or isn't a sin. My main point is that we should change our mindset about fear.

There are things I face in my life which are unavoidable. I happen to be tall. English is my native tongue. I have no experience playing soccer. None of these things are sin. They are simply unavoidable factors in my life. It is not a sin to be tall. I can't repent. Nor will I. It's not a sin. I speak English. I may need to learn some other languages but speaking English is not a sin. Some people will never play soccer. That is not wrong. But, we must see that fear does not fit into these categories. People say from time to time that fear is okay as long as it doesn't control you. I disagree. I believe fear should be placed in the same category with pride, lust and selfishness.

We would never say selfishness is okay as long as it doesn't control you. We see that selfishness itself is evil. We would never say lust is okay as long as it doesn't control you. We see that lust itself is evil. Because God



commanded us to not lust, we recognize it as sin. God also commands us to not fear, therefore, let's repent of fear, as well.

## Some Questions

**1. Is any fear righteous?** Yes! Obviously, fear of God is commanded (dozens of times). But also we should approach with fear questions about sin and eternal life. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12. See also Jude 23, Romans 11:20, etc.)

**2. Didn't Paul say he came to Corinth in "weakness and fear"?** Yes—I Corinthians 2:3. But while Paul was in Corinth, the Lord appeared to him and commanded him to not be afraid (Acts 18:9). His fear wasn't right. Paul was also told to not be afraid in Acts 27:24. (Remember, Jesus was perfect. Paul was not.)

**3. Wasn't Jesus afraid before his death in the Garden?** No. He was in anguish, but he was not afraid. Indeed it would have been hypocritical for Jesus to have feared his death because he commanded us not to fear our own death (Luke 12:4). Jesus felt anguish over his separation from God. Yet never is Jesus described as fearful. Note this: Jesus was never afraid.

**4. But fear doesn't appear on any "lists of sins" right?** Yes, but that doesn't make it right. We recognize worry as a sin even though it doesn't appear on any list. Like worry, fear is commanded against by God. To fear is to disobey God.

**5. Isn't fear an emotion?** Fear, like anxiety or worry, is a lack of faith. We fall (or walk) into fear, worry and anxiety when we lack faith. All three are sins.

We must also clear up the question of semantics: "I'm afraid I'm late," or "I'm afraid he's right." We use the word 'afraid' or 'fear' when we really don't mean it. What we are talking about here is real fear.

Let's remember, as well, that fearlessness isn't foolishness. Just because I repent of fear doesn't mean I can jump off buildings or stand in front of fast-approaching trains. That's foolishness, not fearlessness. Remember what Jesus said when Satan tempted him to jump off the temple: "'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

## Dealing with Your Fear

To begin with, fear cannot be dealt with all at once. God shows us fear on a gradual basis. Just as walking around a mountain shows you gradually the entire mountain, God also shows you the fear in your heart as your life unfolds.

This is very similar to pride or selfishness. You can't deal with *all* your pride or *all* your selfishness in one day. We continually find new facets of our pride and selfishness which we immediately repent of.

And yet so many of us live with our fears week after week without ever realizing we can repent of them! We can change—we can win the victory. But we must attack the fear in order to eradicate it. We must push back the edge of the envelope every time fear crops up in our lives.

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How much would your week change if fear were not a factor? How many more people would you invite? Would you start preaching on buses? On street corners? On subways? Now that sounds like the first century! So many of us—when we get on a bus or a subway car, for instance, become afraid.