

Be Learners in the Adventure of Conquering Fear

Psalms 27

It's good to be back where the streets are 2 or 3 times wider. There are many fewer vehicles and there is hardly any traffic! But my wife Rose conquered her fear and went almost straight down a water slide that went over the side of the ship. She did the slide – twice! Not me!

The "Peanuts" comic strip character Linus, seeking psychiatric help from Lucy, declares, "I'm in sad shape. My life is full of fear and anxiety. The only thing that keeps me going is this blanket. I need help."

Lucy responds, "I think we had better try to pinpoint your fears. If we can find out what it is you're afraid of, we can label it."

She then suggests a daunting list of fears including fear of responsibility, fear of cats, fear of staircases, fear of the ocean, and fear of crossing bridges. Finally she suggests that Linus might be suffering from pantophobia. "What's pantophobia?" he asks. "The fear of everything," she replies. "That's it!" declares Linus.

While we laugh at Linus and Lucy, who among us doesn't fight an ongoing battle with fear? It seems that our lives keep getting more fearful. Sigmund Freud once said, "As I've looked into men's lives, I've never met one who is not thoroughly afraid." Many people have called the last 100 years, "the century of fear."

We are surrounded by internal and external fears, old fears and new fears like the coronavirus. One husband asked his wife, "Shall we watch the six o'clock news and get indigestion or the 10 o'clock news and get insomnia?"

Fear causes us to avoid doing certain things and keeps us enslaved to doing other things. We will do anything or refrain from doing anything that we think will embarrass us, humiliate us and harm us. Fear can have an incredibly controlling effect upon our lives. It is one of the most paralyzing problems in all of life.

Fran Tarkington, former football quarterback said, "Fear causes people to draw back from situations; it brings on mediocrity; it dulls creativity; it sets up one to be a loser in life."

Henry the Sixth said, "Of all the base passions, fear is the most accursed." The bad news is - there is much to be afraid of today and fear itself is often bad news.

However, some fear is good. If a danger is real, then a proper fear is called for. In the novel Moby Dick, Captain Ahab said, "I'll have no one aboard my ship who doesn't fear a whale." Rose and I taught our children to fear vehicles when they cross the street. And after our first dog was hit by a car and died, we tried hard to keep our subsequent pets away from vehicles.

It is proper to have rational fear to keep us from hurting ourselves. We stay on land and don't go fishing in a storm. The Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." (Prov. 1:7) So fear is useful, but at times fear becomes irrational, destructive, a phobia, and keeps us from being full complete persons. There is a fine line between fear that is helpful and fear that is hurtful. One way to decide if fear is harmful to us is to look at how we respond to fear.

Usually in response to our fears we do three things that are both helpful and many times are not helpful. The **flight response** causes us to run. We can run from fear in at least two different ways. When Elijah was faced with the threats of Jezebel, he took his eyes off what he had seen God do, focused on her threats, became overcome by his fear, and he ran away and hid. This increases our illusion of safety because we think that out of sight is out of mind.

We can also run from fear by running to something that will either numb or take our mind off the fear. By immersing ourselves in something, being frantically active, we try to hide from feeling fear. And we hide in alcohol, drugs, work, television, pornography, joining more organizations, working out, to avoid fear. The **fight response** causes us to go on the attack.

The rush of adrenaline causes us to feel powerful and we lash out verbally, physical or in some other way. This common response to fear is often violent and can serve to distance people. This causes us to grow distant from others.

This fight response often involves the emotion of anger. Fear produces a sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Anger gives us the feeling and illusion of control and power.

The third response to fear is to **freeze**. Sometimes our fear can become so overpowering that it immobilizes us. Our problem-solving skills are compromised. Our decision-making becomes impaired. We don't do or say anything.

We are born with, as well as learn these three tendencies. They are often helpful. But sometimes, God has other ways for us to deal with the emotion of fear. In fact these responses too often tend to exacerbate and increase rather than diminish or solve our problems and fears.

The good news is we have an antidote to fear that allows us to face down our fears and find courage when anxiety grips the heart. Previous generations and many of us have discovered and appropriated this antidote. Abraham Lincoln found it. A museum in Washington, D.C., displays the Bible Lincoln used while serving as president. Lincoln had a habit of tracing his finger across the verse he was reading. We can tell what passages Lincoln read most often because they appear faded where his finger rubbed over the verses many times.

He virtually wiped one verse off the page because he rubbed his finger over it so many times, tracing it as he read. It is rightly regarded as the verse he turned to more than any other. It is Psalm 34:4, which reads, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." This is a marvelous promise to us. As we seek God, we find help to conquer fear.

So **how do we learn** to manage ourselves well and to help our faith grow? These ideas are not new to us, but it's worth reminding ourselves of

their importance, as we examine Psalm 27.

One. We need regular study of God's Word.

Two. A regular healthy prayer life helps.

Three. We need to worship our Savior regularly. Some things happen in us as we worship, that can take place in no other way. This worship is simply the people of God, individuals or collectively in some form, honoring God together.

A frequent repeated command in the Bible is "Praise the Lord!" This is a command to worship and face God. Psalm 27 is an example. As we do this on a daily basis our fears go away, or at least get under control, because we are seeking God and we are helped and at times delivered. As we praise God our faith increases. As we worship God our fears subside and our faith expands. As we praise God we face the Almighty and turn our backs on fear.

Another repeated command is "Fear not!" It seems to me **these two commands tie together intimately.** "Fear not" is spoken by the mouths of prophets, apostles, martyrs, angels, and by Jesus and God. "Fear not" is a message we find from Genesis to Revelation. In all kinds of situations and circumstances, the word God speaks to his people is "Fear not."

Four. These activities build our confidence in the Creator. This psalm is a declaration of personal faith in Yahweh. David says, my light, my salvation, my stronghold, my refuge. Bible reading, prayer and worship build this faith. These recurring Biblical themes become ingrained, automatic in us. They become part of who we are. They give us hope, trust and confidence in God.

Five. Then in verses 2 and 3, when enemies of all kinds, affect us, when life occurs, we already have a baseline of being able to not fear, or at least are less fearful, and know where to find help. We own a level of certainty in the promises of God. Actions 1, 2, 3 and 4, help us

be prepared.

One of the themes in the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell is the importance of becoming good at things. He uses the example of 10,000 hours of practice and play that gives people an advantage at work and sports. It's the same spiritually. Having been involved in church work, I sometimes reflect on my ideal collection of people to make my ideal congregation. Every one of those people has put in their 10,000 hours of steps 1, 2, & 3 so steps 4 and 5 is evident in them. They stand out, not just because they have grown and matured in the light, salvation and strength Yahweh God offers us. Their lives are examples of, verse 3, "when war breaks out against them, (of any kind), even then, they are confident."

Six, these people, verses 4 and 5, keep desiring to live in the house of the Lord, all the days of their lives. They know the safest place to be is with Almighty God. Notice how many ways David describes being with God. He wants to be in the Lord's house, his temple, God's dwelling, the sacred tent, and high on a rock. This is great poetry, but it's an even better description of living with the Creator and Savior – which protects us and helps us when enemies of all kinds, including health concerns come at us. They know God so well; they have a healthy fear and trust in the Almighty.

The result of being with God is – verse 6. "Then my head will be exalted, lifted up above the enemies who surround me." This results in our sacrifices with shouts of joy, singing, making music to God. Praise and thankfulness is a lifestyle.

But in verses 7 to 10, the tone of the psalm changes a little. It sounds like lament. The word "me" is used in a similar but different way than in verse 1. The writer exclaims, "hear my voice; be merciful to me; answer me; don't hide your face from me; do not turn your servant away in anger; do not reject me or forsake me."

We don't know what was on the writer's mind –

but something happened or came to mind to cause fear. This begging, pleading is a different tone than we see in the first 6 verses. Verse 12 gives us one idea of what was going on – false witnesses. But the psalmist expresses his faith and reminds the Creator who he is. "Even if my father and mother reject me, the Lord will receive me."

In the middle of this lament, we find our **Seventh** key to handling fear. It's simply being real and honest with the Almighty and ourselves and telling it like it is. It's expressing our fears. The writer is asking for help. But it's capped off with the declaration and commitment of verse 8. "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, Lord, I will seek." The writer depends on the ideas of keys 1 to 6, and attitudes of verses 1-6. It's evident the psalmist has lived through times of fear and has learned the value of taking these steps to build confidence, trust and commitment.

Then we see in verse 11, an **Eighth** key, or step or action or attitude we are to take to help us become less fearful people and even conquer fear. The writer asks, "Teach me your way, Lord; lead me in a straight path – the right way of holy living." This is where I come up with the title of this sermon – be learners in the adventure of conquering fear.

Life with Jesus is not a passive, closed in journey of avoiding difficulty, and focusing on comfort. Instead it's learning how to engage like Jesus did when he walked this earth. It's learning to risk and live in faith as this psalm talks about. Walking with Jesus is an act of courage because we don't know where we will be led or what we will be called to do or what opportunities we will face. We are invited to boldly trust our Savior.

I invite us to picture faith like this illustration. Eric Valli, a professional photographer, is dangling by a nylon rope from a 395 foot cliff in Nepal. Nearby on a rope ladder is another man, Mani Lal, doing what he has done for decades: hunting honey. Here in the Himalayan foothills, the cliffs shelter honeycombs of the world's largest honeybee. At the moment, thousands of

them are buzzing around both men. Lal, a veteran of hundreds of such attacks, is calm.

Not so Mr. Valli. Describing that moment in National Geographic, he says, "There were so many bees I was afraid I might freak out. But I knew if I did, I would be dead. So I took a deep breath and relaxed. Getting stung would be better than finding myself at the bottom of the cliff." He overcame his fears and won a photo competition for his efforts.

Defying fear with Jesus' leading is an outrageously courageous act and adventure. In other words do something that you fear doing. The Bible is full of risk takers. Church history is full of stories of followers of Jesus living this psalm – despite what was going on around them and in them. Fear can send a person plummeting to destruction. But scripture is full of testimonies like, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." (Psalm 34:4)

There are phrases in Psalm 27 that beg us to take time for reflection. "Now my head is lifted up." (vs 6) So we do not hang our heads any longer, but look forward, with dignity, because of God's salvation.

"Your face, Lord, do I seek." (verse 8) We do not seek some vague, ephemeral deity, but a God with a human face, the compassionate, strong face of Jesus, God become like us.

In his description of Eden, the reformer Martin Luther emphasized that it was a place where there was no fear - no fear of dying, no fear of other living beings, no fear of God, no fear of nature, and so on.

It is a wonderful vision, because we live in a world apprehensive with fear. Our faith is not merely about the pledge of eternal life in another world. But it is in this world, not merely some spiritual realm, but the real, physical world, in my body, in my neighborhood, in politics, in economics, and with others.

We are called to be learners in the adventure of conquering fear. There is a bold word to throw in its fear's face again and again - and toward God's face. It's "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!" Then we learn and wait and fear not and learn some more! And this becomes a testimony!

Some Examples of Fears.

Inflation, work, crime, AIDS, taxes.

We fear lay-offs, illness, aging, cancer, death, our children's future, and our own future.

It is common to fear financial failure, earthquakes, floods, and family conflicts. The fear of failure, insecurity, flying, rejection, and being found out are some of our fears.

Some individuals fear the dark, being alone, change, success, being out of control, being vulnerable, and so on. We do have much to be afraid of today.

Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."