

Message: Fear and Faith

Kids teach us when they say funny things.

Michelle Cox shares a story about an old family friend and his six year old son, Jeremy. “Jeremy recently learned about coyotes. He’s afraid of them and is always looking to make sure there are no coyotes around.

The other night, the wind was blowing hard. Jeremy came and got his Dad and said he heard a coyote in the gutter outside his window. The window is 25 feet off the ground. Dad spent about 10 minutes trying to explain that coyotes can’t climb up the side of a house and they wouldn’t do so just to play in the gutter.

It didn’t help.

Jeremy was still very upset. He came back to his Dad several times saying, ‘I know there’s a coyote in the gutter!’ When it was time for bed, Jeremy prayed and asked God to protect them from coyotes and to not let them get into the gutters. He prayed God would keep them from climbing up the gutter and jumping through the window.

Jeremy then stopped praying and said he wanted to make sure the doors were locked so the coyotes couldn’t get in because ‘he thought he heard one turning the handle!’

That’s when Dad lost it. He laughed out loud.

Telling the story later, he and Michelle both laughed together. But, at the same time, as they thought about it, they realized that a young child was teaching them a powerful lesson.

Even little children know where to go when they’re afraid.

Jeremy knows his Dad loves him and protects him, but he also knows to take his fears to God. And, in the case of the coyotes, Jeremy didn’t make a generic prayer. He prayed specifically and with purpose.

David says it best in Psalm 56:3, “O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” David prayed that when he was captured by enemies who wanted to kill him. It’s a good prayer for all of us to know, because there will be times when things are out of control and we’ll be afraid.

What are your fears? We all have them. “In a 2008 Gallup poll in the U.S., the top 10 fears were flying, heights, clowns, intimacy, death, rejection, people, snakes, failure and driving. In 2005, a similar poll was done with youth between the ages of 13-17. Their fears, in order, were terrorist attacks, spiders, death, failure, war, criminal or gang violence, being alone, the future and nuclear war. There are many other fears, including fear of demons or ghosts and the existence of evil powers.”¹ It’s interesting to note public speaking isn’t on the list. Maybe it’s #11?

What is fear? Fear is typically experienced as an unpleasant emotion. It’s our response to perceived threats or danger. Fear can affect our metabolism – our heart races, respiration gets faster and palms sweat. Fear can affect our organ function and behavior. The most common fear reactions to threats are the classic fight-or-flight response. In extreme cases, we may freeze or experience paralysis. The way we perceive and learn about our fears plays a role. We can have rational, appropriate fear and irrational, inappropriate fear. An irrational fear is called a phobia. Fear and anxiety are related, but different.

What’s the cause of fear? It’s been suggested that we develop fears based on what we experience or observe. For example, I had a bad experience with a confining space as a young man, so I suffer from a mild form of claustrophobia, a fear of tightly enclosed spaces. If a child observes fear in others, that child may learn to fear, even though they have never suffered the trauma.

Fear is affected by culture. For example, in the early 20th century, many people were afraid of polio, a disease that can lead to paralysis. Fear of terrorism is similar today. Few of us have experienced it directly, yet many of us are afraid.

Fear is part of human nature. We fear what we don’t understand and what we can’t control.

Fear impacts our personal lives and our relationships. You’ve heard the expression “opposites attract”? That may mean our fears aren’t the same as our partner’s. For example, if one person has a fear of failure

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear>

and the other a fear of being alone, those fears can react negatively. When an argument happens (& they do), the person who is afraid of being alone may feel like they’re being singled out (isolated), heightening their fear. Their response may be to flee (to go into a cave). This affects the other person: they see the withdrawal as failure. They aren’t able to fix things, to connect with their partner. Their fear response is to try to seek more attention from a partner who is withdrawn, causing them to withdraw even more. This, in turn, lends to a greater sense of failure. This cycle can continue until harsh words, hurt feelings, loneliness and depression set in.

What can we do?

Let’s start by looking at what God says about fear.

There are two types of fear mentioned in Scripture. The first is helpful and the second is detrimental. Psalm 111:10 tells us about the first, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.”* This fear shows a reverent awe of God, an expression of our wonder at God’s majesty and glory. This fear also expresses respect for God’s power and nature. The fear of the Lord has benefits: it leads to wisdom, good practices (Proverbs 1:7), security and safety (Proverbs 14:26). Life, rest, peace and contentment are the fruits of a healthy respect for God (Proverbs 19:23).

The second kind of fear is the “spirit of fear” Paul refers to in 2 Timothy 1:7, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity (fear), but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” The reality is that our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs may overcome us at times. Our experiences, the suffering and pain we’ve seen, the messages of our culture, and the emptiness inside us can make us feel unloved, rejected and unworthy. That’s the “spirit of fear” Paul was warning Timothy to watch out for. Paul says the answer is found in relying on God’s power and love. That’s the practice we need to develop – reliance on God. It takes courage, but having courage means we know what to fear – not our emotions or physical circumstances, but we should fear the loss of our spiritual life and we should fear when we lose our desire for God’s help. Paul’s advice is as powerful today as it was then.

Fear is like a tangled mess of string. Pull quickly to try to unravel it and it gets worse. The knots get tighter. But if we work with patience and gentleness, we can unravel even the worst tangles. The more we struggle with and focus on our fears, the tighter the knots become. “We have to stop, present the knotted mess to God and let God untangle our lives. With enough time and God’s help, we can learn how to relax our hold on terror and rest in the hope and peace only Jesus can provide.”²

There’s an antidote to fear.

Peter tells us a story about how Jesus responds to fear. “While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. ‘Your daughter is dead,’ they said. ‘Why bother the teacher anymore?’ Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, ‘Don’t be afraid; just believe’” Mark 5:35–36 (NIV).

“The command most often repeated by God is simple and yet incredibly challenging: don’t be afraid. Jesus says it at trying times: in the middle of a storm threatening to swamp a boat, when he’s telling his disciples he’s leaving, when a child dies. Jairus, the father of the young girl, looks at Jesus when he hears this awful news, and the look on his face must have prompted Jesus to tell him not to be scared, that everything would be okay.

Our fears are often focused not on what is actually happening, but what could possibly happen. When a child or spouse is late coming home, we’re afraid they’ve been in an accident. When we’re given a tough project at work, we’re afraid we won’t be able to do it. We don’t confront, because we’re afraid of conflict. Yet, in Jesus’ simple statement - ‘Don’t be afraid; just believe’ - we learn that the antidote for fear is faith.

Where do we find faith like that?

Pastor John Ortberg writes about his experience on a high ropes course at camp with his daughter. He thought he believed the ropes would hold them and they would be safe. And yet when he actually got up on the course, he said, ‘I found out my body did not believe I was

² <https://www.guideposts.org/blog/untangling-the-knot-of-fear>

safe.” Ortberg concludes: ‘Faith is coming to believe with my whole body what I say I believe with my mind.’

When we’re willing to take risks, step out and believe God’s love will hold us up, we begin to really believe, and our faith pushes our fear aside.”³ That’s how we find the courage to continue in the face of overwhelming odds (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Being afraid doesn’t mean our faith is weak. It means we’re human. Having faith means that truth is a powerful tool to help us overcome our fears. When we admit the truth of our fear to ourself, that enables us to admit the truth of our fear to God and then to admit the truth of our fear to others. When we admit we’re afraid, we’re in good company - so is everyone else! When we realize fear will always be part of us as we develop and grow, that’s a healthy wisdom. When we do something to address our fear – by ourselves, with a friend or with professional help, we’re on the path to rid ourselves of the fears that paralyze us. When we practice new patterns of living centered on Jesus, we’re on the way to feeling better. The good news: God is with us every step of the way.

Think back to the earlier example of a couple in an argument.

Practical faith applies in this way: don’t let another person’s fear become yours and remain emotionally present and available. It helps if you offer a quick prayer to God (“Help me, Lord”). When you follow this pattern, you break the cycle of fear and you can find peace.

We have many fears that can consume us. What’s important is how we respond. Instead of worrying until we have ulcers, we can do what fearful children do: get on our knees and go to the One who can soothe our hearts, give wisdom, fix our problems and, yes, even keep coyotes away from the door.”⁴

³ <https://www.guideposts.org/faith-and-prayer/daily-devotions/devotions-for-women/faith-pushes-fear-aside>

⁴ <https://www.guideposts.org/faith-and-prayer/prayer-stories/power-of-prayer/how-to-keep-fear-at-bay>

Let us pray:

O God, Hear us, we pray.

Hear us when we hear bad news and we're afraid

Hear us when we're afraid for our life & health

*Hear us when we're afraid for our children, parents, brothers, sisters,
family and friends*

Hear us when we fear about our jobs, home and daily lives

Hear us when we fear about the troubles and turmoil in the world

Hear us when we fear for our way of living and the world we live in

Hear us when we fear for the future of our church

Fill us with your Spirit, the spirit of love and power.

Show us how to pray and how to live by faith.

We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Genesis 21:8-21 (CEB)

The boy grew and stopped nursing. On the day he stopped nursing, Abraham prepared a huge banquet. Sarah saw Hagar’s son laughing, the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. So she said to Abraham, “Send this servant away with her son! This servant’s son won’t share the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

This upset Abraham terribly because the boy was his son. God said to Abraham, “Don’t be upset about the boy and your servant. Do everything Sarah tells you to do because your descendants will be traced through Isaac. But I will make of your servant’s son a great nation too, because he is also your descendant.” Abraham got up early in the morning, took some bread and a flask of water, and gave it to Hagar. He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away.

She left and wandered through the desert near Beer-sheba. Finally the water in the flask ran out, and she put the boy down under one of the desert shrubs. She walked away from him about as far as a bow shot and sat down, telling herself, I can’t bear to see the boy die. She sat at a distance, cried out in grief, and wept.

God heard the boy’s cries, and God’s messenger called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “Hagar! What’s wrong? Don’t be afraid. God has heard the boy’s cries over there. Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well. She went over, filled the water flask, and gave the boy a drink. God remained with the boy; he grew up, lived in the desert, and became an expert archer. He lived in the Paran desert, and his mother found him an Egyptian wife.

Romans 6:1b-11 (CEB)

Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? Or don’t you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a

resurrection like his. This is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him. We know that Christ has been raised from the dead and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him. He died to sin once and for all with his death, but he lives for God with his life. In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.