

What Do You Do When Fear Overcomes You?

by Jay E Adams

Of course I'm not talking about the sort of fear that keeps you from falling over the edge of a cliff or that helps you obey that sign at the zoo: "Keep Your Hands Away From The Lions' Cages." No, God gave us the capacity to fear for a good purpose, just as He gave us every emotion for a proper use, helpful to us and honoring to Him. Because of fear we are able to escape injury and dangers that otherwise would destroy most of us before we reached maturity.

It is those irrational fears that come and go, and the fears, rational enough in themselves, that overpower and dominate that we must consider here. Often you cannot shake them and sometimes you may find yourself doing all sorts of things that you do not want to do as a consequence. Indeed fear may get such a tight grip upon you that at times it may seem to be some powerful force from the outside that takes you captive. Because of fear people have changed jobs, moved from one city to another, sealed themselves in houses, killed, and fled to mental institutions. Because of the fear of cats or bridges or elevators or other people, people have developed styles of life that are weird and unfruitful. Fear of this sort, fear out of control (or would it be better said, fear in complete control?), is the fear that you have come to fear!

"Yes," you are saying, "He understands my problem; He knows the kind of torture that I endure whenever I am seized by the icy hand of fear. He knows how terrifying it can be now even when I merely think about it. But can He help me? Fear is such a powerful force; is there any greater that can drive out fear and take control instead? I'll do anything to rid myself of this terrible monster!"

There is hope for you, but it will never be found in attempts to rid yourself of fear. Indeed, when you say "I'll do anything" you give evidence of a spirit that is quite contrary to that which is essential to deal effectively with fear.

Let me explain a few things at the outset. First of all, you may never rightly say "I'll do anything." God will not allow that. He is the One who tells you what to do in any situation in life, and as a result, your attitude must always be "I'll do anything that He wants me to do." There are people who literally will do any thing to get rid of fear; that's why they move, or kill or withdraw from society. But none of these things is acceptable to God because they fail to consider Him and His will in the matter. Indeed, as a result, they soon find that their fears increase, simply because their attitude itself is fear-formed and fear-dominated. A person who acts out of a fear-formed attitude cannot conquer fear. The person who says that he will do anything is giving way to fear as he makes the statement. To speak that way is to think that way. To think that way is to think fearfully, and thus to encourage fear.

But of greater importance is the fact that God wants you to seek to please Him first, and think about the problem of fear secondly. That is why when speaking of worry (a lesser form of fear), in Matthew 6:33 He commands "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." If you put anything else first—even the desire to rid yourself of a terrifying fear—you will discover that you will fail to achieve either goal. God will not take second place, even to a legitimate concern to be free of fear.

Can't you see that all that you have tried thus far is inadequate? Can't you see that the failure to turn to God, the God who made you and who knows you through and through is the greatest failure of all? Isn't it folly to ignore the One who alone can drive out

all illegitimate fear? Yet, don't miss the fact that you may not turn to Him merely to be rid of fear. You must come first seeking a place in His kingdom that is given to those who acquire His righteousness. "How can I have that?" you may ask. Well, let me tell you.

Every man and woman born into this world (except Jesus Christ Himself) was born a sinner, dead to God. No one is born without sin. God's kingdom, however, is for righteous people; those who are perfectly righteous. That means that you do not qualify. You have lived a life in which you have not put God and His will first; instead you have lived for yourself. This is an offense against God. You have ignored and have broken the Ten Commandments, lying, stealing, hating, lusting, etc. That means that you are not only ineligible to become a citizen of the kingdom of God, it means that you are condemned by your sin to punishment in an eternal hell that God provided for those who disregard His kingdom and His righteousness. But, notice, He says "seek." You may seek the forgiveness of your sins and the eternal citizenship of the heavenly kingdom if you will. "How?" you may ask. Through Jesus Christ, and through Him alone. Christ came into the world to die for guilty sinners. Instead of sending them to hell, He took upon Himself the guilt and the punishment for the sins of all of His people everywhere. He died in their place, in effect taking their hell for them. And, God demonstrated His acceptance of Christ's work on the cross by raising Him from the dead and taking Him to heaven where He now rules with power and authority over all men and every force in this universe, including fear. Those who trust in Him as their Savior, that is to say, those who believe that He died and rose from the dead for them, not only have their sins forgiven, but God promises also that their faith is counted for righteousness. The very perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is attributed to them even as the very wickedness of their sin was attributed to Him on the cross. If as you read God is convicting you of your sin and your need of a Savior, forget your fear, seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness and discover the joy of forgiveness in Christ.

"It isn't all that easy is it?" you may ask? Or "I am already a Christian, but I'm still caught in fear; salvation didn't automatically free me from fear." No, I did not say that it would. Indeed, what I urged was that if you did not yet know Christ as Savior you must begin with that problem. Then I said that even if you did know Christ, you must make pleasing God your prime goal; not the removal of fear. Only when you do this are you ready to consider the one and only true solution to fear.

All right, let us assume not only that you have trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation but that you really want to do whatever He says to please Him. You do not simply wish to rid yourself of fear. What do you do now? The answer is simple and straightforward: **YOU MUST DO THE LOVING THING THAT GOD COMMANDS IN SPITE OF YOUR FEAR.**

Now, I know that needs explanation, so please be patient. First, you must discover what responsibilities toward God and toward your neighbor that you are not fulfilling because of your fear. Write these out in the space provided below.

Responsibilities Neglected Because of Fear

Now consider what you wrote. Perhaps you needed to fill in only one line; possibly five lines were not enough (in that case list your five worst fears). Perhaps you wrote "Can't use car for Christ through fear of driving" or "Don't fulfill sexual responsibilities to husband for fear of sex" or "Afraid of crowds and have not been attending church" or whatever. Fear may take many forms, but whenever fear so debilitates that you cannot serve Christ as you ought, and the development and use of your God-given gifts is tied up by it, that is sin. Any misuse (non-biblical use) of fear is sin. It must be rooted out. Therefore, the first step is to identify the sinful failure(s) to love God and neighbor because of fear.

Next, you must recognize that in that identification of the loving responsibility that you have neglected lies the answer to the fear problem. God assures us that there is one force greater than fear—love. He wrote: "perfect love casts out fear." Love is stronger than fear and capable of tossing it out on its ear. That is the good news that you need to hear. "Fine," you say, "but how does knowing that help me? I don't understand."

Consider this. A woman who is normally afraid of a mouse, stands between her child and a wild animal, out of love. A soldier on the battlefield, who under normal conditions is known for shyness (and even cowardice) risks life and limb crawling out on the battlefield to rescue a wounded comrade, out of love. Love is the force that overpowers fear. If the common grace of God that restrains unsaved men from exercising their sinful natures to the full enables them to perform such feats out of imperfect manifestations of love, do you not think that God, who by the Spirit that He has given to you will more fully enable you to overcome fear? Indeed, the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy (who apparently had some difficulty with fear), "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 Timothy 1:7).

Now, let's contrast love and fear. Love looks for opportunities to give; it asks "What can I do for another?" Fear keeps a wary eye on the possible consequences of involvement and asks: "What will he do to me?" Love "thinks no evil"; fear thinks of little else. Love "believes all things"; fear is highly suspicious. Love is so busy doing today's tasks that it has no time to worry about tomorrow. Because it focuses upon tomorrow, fear fails to undertake responsibilities today. Love leads to greater love—fulfilling obligations brings peace and joy and satisfaction and greater love and devotion to the work. Fear, in turn, occasions greater fear, since failure to assume responsibilities brings additional fear of the consequences of acting irresponsibly.

A wall plaque reads "The fear of God is the one fear that removes all others." Interestingly, in the Bible love for God and the fear of God are nearly synonymous. They form no contrast, but work in tandem. Those who fear Him enough to take His Word seriously, find that this fear develops into mutual love. The enemy of all sinful fear is love, love for God and for one's neighbor. The way to put off fear, then, is to put on love. There is no expulsive power comparable to the force of God's love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. That means that whatever loving things that you wrote in the spaces above must be done, and done in a love-formed attitude, if you are to conquer fear.

"But that is just the problem; every time that I try to do the thing that I know I should do, fear keeps me from doing it." Well, now wait a minute; it is time to examine more closely exactly what does happen. To begin with— and let us be clear about this—fear does not take hold of you as some monster from the outside over whom you have no control. It is apparent that this is so since **YOU ARE THE ONE WHO PRODUCES FEAR**. No one else, no outside force, can cause you to fear. Therefore, you are always responsible for fearing, just

as you are responsible for loving. Both love and the prohibition of fear are commanded by God ("love the Lord your God, love your neighbor, love your enemies; do not fear their fear"). Since God does not command us to turn on and turn off emotions as such, He must be referring to doing those things that prohibit fear from arising. And we know what those things are—responsible attitudes and actions toward God and toward one's neighbor. In short, this means engaging in the activity or activities that you listed earlier.

"I've tried everything; nothing works. I don't care whether I produce the fear or not, I know one thing—I can't do what I wrote in the lines above because of fear. Now unscramble that one for me if you will."

All right, I'll try to do so. The problem is not that you can't do the loving thing but that you really are afraid that you can't. Sometimes people put it this way "I am afraid that I can't... or I fear that I can't...." Those last words state the literal truth: You so fear that you can't. In other words, you produce the fear that keeps you from doing the loving thing. But notice how those words can be changed. In their place you could write "I love that I can... " or "Because I shall love I shall...." In just the same way that you can change the words you can change the corresponding facts. If you substitute love for fear in your life as well as in your language, you can do what love impels you to do.

Now, let's zero in on the heart of the matter. You say that you've tried all sorts of things to stop the fear, correct?

"Exactly. I've spent untold hours trying to do so."

Well, that is precisely why you are having a problem overcoming fear. You have been trying to stop; you've put fear—that is, stopping fear—first on your agenda. Instead, you must stop trying to stop. It is just like the person who worries all the time about worrying.

"What? Do you mean that all that I have to do is to quit trying and I shall stop fearing?"

No, you are getting ahead of me. True enough, you must quit. That comes first, but that is impossible to do by itself. You must turn all of your concern away from the fear and the situation(s) about which you have learned to produce fear. Instead, you must learn to focus that concern entirely upon doing the loving thing that you know that God requires of you. Just as you were taken up by thinking about the fear experience, instead you must be taken up in planning, longing and working toward the love experience. As you have learned to anticipate (fearfully) what might happen to embarrass or to endanger you, so you must learn to anticipate (eagerly) what you can do to please God and others.

"But that is when I get fearful — whenever I begin to think about doing a fear-filled activity."

No, even your language must change (remember you think in the language that you express); you must no longer speak or think of it as a fearful experience. Instead, you must learn to focus on the loving side of it; focus your thoughts and words on the benefit that you can bring to someone else. Love never looks to one's self, or to the consequences of an act upon one's self; it always has the welfare of another in view. Therefore, it is willing to run risks.

Let's take an example or two. In and of itself you know abstractly that having sexual relations with one's husband does not cause fear, as many wives will testify. Indeed, you know that God intended sexual relations to be pleasurable. Rather, if you fear relations, you can see that it is you, and your focus upon the fear experience that you had, that causes

fear. Somehow (rationally or otherwise) fear became attached to sexual relations, but it was not causally attached. Even if the original occasion for fear vanished long ago, the fear may not. That is because you had a fear experience that occurred during or prior to sexual relations that became attached to the experience. But if you learn to detach it (and since the association of fear with sexual relations is not causal, the two are detachable) from sex (or crossing bridges, or going outside of the house, etc.), and reattach loving words and thoughts to sex, you can overcome fear. You must learn to think, anticipate, and plan in ways that no longer center upon yourself, your fears and your concerns. Instead you must anticipate, and plan and concern yourself with the pleasure of your mate whenever you contemplate having sexual relations. There is no other way to overcome fear. You must learn to love rather than to fear from start to finish. Love alone turns one from the introspection that produces fear, to the concern for another that brings joy and satisfaction.

"For the first time, I'm beginning to see some daylight. But, surely that must not be all that there is to it."

No, there is more. Let me put it this way—I shall come at the question from a different angle—fear is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. You remember a fearful event in the past; let us say that you hallucinated in a crowd (or were physically injured in sexual relations, or whatever). The experience was terribly frightening and very embarrassing. Even now as you remember it, you begin to become slightly afraid. You think: "I don't ever want that to happen again." As you think about the possibility, you recognize that it could and you begin to become afraid that it will. What is happening? You are becoming afraid by becoming afraid that you will become afraid. You feel the fear coming over you and this makes you afraid that you are going to have another fear experience, which triggers a higher level of fear that you now sense and that makes you even more afraid, and so on, and on, and on... Do you see how it cycles? You did not know at that time that your hallucination was due to significant sleep loss (you had been studying for final exams in college) so when the hallucination occurred in a crowd you associated it with crowds—the association was possible particularly because of the great fear and embarrassment that it aroused. Now you take every precaution to stay away from crowds for fear of bringing about another fear experience (i.e., to say this precaution is fear-motivated). Indeed, the more precautions that you take, the more concern that you show, the more fearful such a situation becomes. And the more that you avoid crowds, the more fearful they become to you. The more you concern yourself with such things, the more you produce fear. It is not the crowds that produce fear—crowds do not have that power. You fear; but you fear the crowd because you have had fear experiences in relationship to crowds (those since the original one have been brought on in crowds as you feared that you would fear when in a crowd). The crowds do not cause fear; it is your fear of fear that causes it. Crowds remind you of your past fear experiences in crowds, and you fear having any more.

"O.K., I can see that. But, precisely how do I stop fearing fear and how do I start loving God and others instead? Tell me exactly what to do."

I shall. By determining to love others as the Scriptures direct, and doing so, you will make the transition from a life dominated by fear to one dominated by love. There is no other way. It was the way of the martyrs and it must become your way too. You see that trying not to fear only produces fear; the attempt is entirely counterproductive. When you try not to fear, you have already by that time become fearful that you will fear or you would not feel a compulsion to make such efforts. Instead, you must learn to commit yourself

prayerfully to doing what God requires of you whether or not you will have a fear experience by doing so. That is the key that will unlock your prison.

Let me go over it once again in other words. Stop trying to stop fearing. Say to God in your own words (and mean it) something like this: "Lord, if I have another fear experience, I'll just have to have it. I am going to leave that in your hands." That is something of what Peter meant when he wrote: "Casting all of your care upon Him for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Then, make your plans and go ahead and do whatever God holds you responsible for doing. Fill your mind with concern for the other persons toward whom you are expressing love and how you will do so, in whatever you are doing. ("I am going to praise God with joy and participate to my full in Church and Church School Sunday. Let's see, now, the Sunday School lesson for this week will require study from the Book of Joshua in preparation. I want any contribution I make to be a blessing to the others. Hmm. I don't believe that I have a commentary on Joshua. I guess it would be well to find out which one would be best for me to purchase, then after I do so I'll need to set aside at least 45 minutes each day to study the next week's lesson, and then. . .") And as you set out in obedience to God, filled with the task at hand, thank the Lord for whatever progress you have made. Focus on the loving activities that you are going there to do, not upon the fear experience that you are trying to avoid. Don't allow yourself the all-too-expensive luxury of thinking about the fear experience. Don't think about trying to stop it. Think about serving God and about using your gifts to help others.

Whenever you catch your mind wandering back into the forbidden territory (and you can be sure that it will—more frequently at first, until you retrain and discipline it to love) change the direction of your thought. Do not allow yourself one conscious moment of such thought. Instead, crisply ask God to help you to refocus upon those things that fit into Paul's list recorded in Philippians 4:8, 9. The attitude must grow within you that says: "So if I have a fear experience, so what? It's unpleasant, it's disturbing, but I'll live through it—at least I always have before." When you honestly can think this way without becoming anxious, you will know that the change has been made.

When you follow biblical directives to do loving duties rather than follow feelings of fear that lead to the shirking of duties, you will discover that the old patterns die quickly. There will probably be failures, but I have told you what to do in such cases. If your problem persists, it would be wise to turn to a Christian counselor for help in the case of a serious fear or phobia. He can help you to structure any particular features of your problem that could not be anticipated in this pamphlet. See your pastor, chaplain or Christian worker who may have handed you this pamphlet.

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