



## FEAR FACTOR

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Is the show Fear Factor still on TV? You know – the one where they have contestants battle to control their panic in some pretty terrible conditions. If you were on that show what would you have the harder time with: eating the live meal worms or riding a bike across a 3” beam 50 feet in the air? They did a great job of picking events on that show that would even make viewers at home feel queasy. I can’t imagine what it was like for contestants.

Hopefully, most of us won’t face any of the situations from that show in real life. But we all still deal with fears on a daily basis. Fear is that sense of dread and anxiety we get when we believe something dangerous is near. This week as I talked to people, I tried to pick up on what are some more everyday fears. My method wasn’t very scientific or thorough. I didn’t even ask anybody to tell me what they were afraid of. But I have to say I was surprised at just how many times fear showed up in the conversation without being prompted. Here are a few fears that I came across this week:

- Fear of snakes
- Fear of conflict
- Fear of trying something new
- Fear of the future
- Fear of hospitals
- Fear of losing someone
- Fear of losing a job
- Fear of failure
- Fear of starting a new school
- Fear of disappointing people
- Fear of scary movies
- Fear of being embarrassed
- Fear of getting hurt
- Fear of children getting hurt
- Fear of having somebody talk about your fears in public

Like I said – this was just in the course of normal conversations, without any prompting from me. I’m sure there were a whole lot more fears I didn’t pick up on. The point is we

all struggle with fears of one kind or another. Even the Apostle Paul had to face down his fears at least once in his career.

We are nearing the end of our time in the book of Acts. Over the past few weeks we have watched Paul's amazing transformation. He went from being a church-bashing fanatic to a hard core follower willing to go to jail for Christ and stand up alone against the world for God. He seems like the Michael Phelps of Christians. He's the champ. We think of him as being in a different league than the rest of us. Always cool under pressure. Never intimidated by anything.

Then we come to chapter 18, and for just a brief moment, we catch a glimpse of a more human side of Paul. Luke let's us see that Paul, too, could get nervous and afraid.

What's encouraging is that the story doesn't focus on Paul's fear, but on God's response to it, and that's what I'd like to spend our time thinking about this morning, because I believe God wants to see us freed up from our fears.

### **Acts 18:1-11**

*After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

*When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."*

*Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.*

*One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.*

Now, you might be thinking, "I must have missed something. I didn't hear Paul talking about his fears there." And you'd be right. Luke doesn't discuss Paul's emotional state one way or another.

But that's not to say the fear isn't there. Sometimes you have to read between the lines. It's like when you see a fire extinguisher with a sign scrawled next to it that says, "to be

used in case of fire only!” It’s a pretty sure bet that the extinguisher had at one time been used for something else. The sign tells a story.

When Jesus came to Paul in a vision in Corinth and said, “Don’t be afraid,” that’s a sign that tells a story. We don’t have to imagine very hard to realize that the reason Jesus said what he did was because Paul WAS feeling afraid.

Actually, we don’t have to imagine at all. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians later, he said this:

### **1 Corinthians 2:3**

*I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.*

What was it that had Paul shaking in his boots? There could have been any number of things. Like Athens, Corinth was full of idolatry. Temples everywhere to all the different Greek gods. It was also an incredibly immoral town. At one time the city had such a bad reputation that to be called a “Corinthian woman” was to basically be called a prostitute. It was a port town for sailors and international commerce and along with it, every kind of vice. Not really a crowd interested in hearing a message about repentance. So that may have felt intimidating. But Paul was no shrinking violet, and he didn’t seem to have trouble facing hostile crowds in previous towns.

His fear could have come from the abuse he got in the synagogue. Or maybe it was the big stand he took afterwards when he said to the Jews, “So be it. If you’re not going to listen, I’m taking my message to the Gentiles.” That was a dramatic exit, and he may have secretly wondered whether or not it had been the right decision. But again – Paul knew by now what to expect from the Jewish community. This wasn’t a new situation for him.

In other words, nothing seems to be radically new in Corinth that it could explain the sudden spike in Paul’s fear. But maybe that’s just it. Because so often, fear isn’t 100% logical. It can be this vague cloud that settles over you for apparently no reason.

Fear can have a legitimate beginning and then become completely irrational. When Addison was about 4 years old, we took him to see his first Mariners game at Safeco Field. It turned out to be a bad idea. He was just starting to come down with an ear infection, and every time the fans stood up to cheer, all the noise felt like it was going to pierce his ear drums. We finally had to get up and leave early because he had had all he could take.

Addison’s comment on the way home was, “I hate baseball!” In his four year old brain, it was the baseball that had caused the pain – not the ear infection. And he couldn’t be convinced otherwise.

Our fears can grow the same way. We become afraid of new experiences because of something that happened in the past, whether or not there really is any connection. Fear

can get us believing a thought that isn't true. It doesn't need to be a valid reason. In fact, the more general and undefined the cause, the more powerful fear becomes.

Now we should recognize that fear isn't always negative. It can be a God-given reaction to protect us from danger or making foolish choices. Being afraid to put your hand on a hot stove is a good thing. Being afraid of stepping out in the middle of a busy street is a good thing. Sometimes the hesitation we feel in our hearts is a warning that enables us to avoid trouble.

But fear quickly outgrows its usefulness. It's like the weed Morning Glory. Some home owners have unwittingly included this plant in their landscaping to climb a trellis or form a ground cover. But Morning Glory isn't content to stay where it's planted. It's real name is bindweed, and it will take over in a heartbeat. Listen to this description of it from a gardening web site:

*This grasping parasite is a much hated weed due to its overbearing, gripping, smothering ruthlessness. Gardeners forced to rip it out of their cherished plants find the job slimy, fetid, messy; and are madly driven to profane exclamations and dreams of herbicides...To ignore fighting it, means the garden will grow ever more "in a bind."*

Fear has to be managed, because when we ignore it, our hearts grow ever more in a bind. So how do we know when fear has gone from being a healthy warning to being a bindweed?

Before we answer that question, let me say this. I know that there is a good chunk of this congregation who will readily identify with this message. If I asked for a show of hands of who was struggling with fear, you'd shoot up your hands right away, because you feel like you're drowning in it.

But there are others of you who may be thinking, "Sweet. I can get a little nap this morning. I'm not really afraid of anything. I can't really relate to this." And that may be true. But let me ask you this. Are you a driven person? I once heard a radio host talk about how his fear of poverty from going up had turned into this constant drive, even though he's well past that being a concern. If not ambition, are you dealing at all with anger? Anger and fear and hurt are all tightly linked, and I would challenge you to look for the connection your anger has with fear. Maybe it's a fear of becoming your parents. Maybe it's a fear of exposure. Maybe it's a fear of failure. Those are all fears that can mask as anger when they make their way to the surface.

So again I will ask, how do we know when fear has crossed a line and outgrown its usefulness? If we unpack Paul's vision of Jesus a bit more, we can find some helpful direction. We're working backwards, using Jesus' words to reconstruct what Paul's fears may have looked like. Here is what the Lord said:

*Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."*

Paul had been preaching non-stop since Timothy and Silas had arrived, but apparently he needed encouragement to keep going. I would say the first indicator of when fear that has crossed a line is when **Fear shuts us down**.

When we're afraid, we become paralyzed. There are actually some physical ways fear does that, but it also happens on an emotional and spiritual level as well. We quit what we're doing and pull back in our shell. Paul apparently was in danger of quitting his preaching. This is in spite of the fact that people like the synagogue leader and many others were responding to his message.

It makes me think of Elijah. Remember his big confrontation with the priests of Baal, when the fire came down from heaven and burned up his sacrifice, water and all? He gave them a spectacular demonstration of God's power. Then what happened next? The queen said she was going to kill him and Elijah ran away and hid because he was so afraid. In spite of his success, his fear shut him down.

What shuts you down? If you've been through some kind of trauma, anything that echoes where you've come from can cause you to wall off emotionally. Fear of conflict can stop you in your tracks. Fear of failure makes some people not even want to try. Even a fear of how much work something will take, and you're so overwhelmed by the prospect that you can't even get started.

God doesn't want you to be shut down. When those waves of panic pin us to the ground and we feel like we can't function, fear has crossed a line.

Jesus also told Paul to not be silent, or to not hold back on what he needed to say. I think that's important, because fear doesn't just shut us down, **fear also shuts us up**.

I can relate to this fear. I like to be diplomatic and not offend people, and at times I've been diplomatic to a fault. Fear of what other people think has sometimes been a bigger factor for me than speaking truth into a situation. I hold my tongue with the excuse that it's for the best.

The denomination we're affiliated with put on a conference this past spring, and one of the speakers talked about women who have come through abuse. She said one of the effects of abuse is to take away their voice. They are silenced by fear, and part of being healed up is having God restore that voice.

Fear restricts our freedom to say what needs to be said. Paul felt that keenly, and he asked other people to pray for him about that.

### **Ephesians 6:19-20**

*Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*

What have you been afraid to say? It doesn't have to be about sharing the gospel – it can be speaking any kind of truth. When you have to tell somebody, “This isn't right,” or when you need to come to someone's defense or when you've got a solution that may be unpopular – any of those moments can be silenced by fear.

Fear shuts us down, it shuts us up and **fear makes us want to escape**. Luke tells us that after the vision, Paul decided to stay in Corinth. That would suggest that without the vision, Paul was wanting to go somewhere else.

We've all been there before – wishing desperately we could find a way out of a mess. People leave jobs to escape. People leave marriages to escape. People leave churches to escape. And sometimes such escapes are the right choice. There are occasions when walking away is all that can be done. But many times, we are really leaving behind a bad situation out of fear. And the problem with that is that the fear goes with us. Until we deal with the fear, it will drive our choices every time we hit a rough patch.

It is incredibly difficult when you are in the middle of a desperate situation to have the presence of mind to recognize when you're being motivated by fear.

### **1. Do I have a sense of God's leading somewhere else?**

If we're not running to something, we may just be running away. Do I feel like God has placed something new on my heart, or is this just my own plan for getting out of Dodge?

### **2. What emotional baggage will I carry with me?**

I can go, but at what cost? Will I have a hard time with future commitments? Will I be bitter? Will my perspective on the world be skewed? Basically, can I walk away from this right now and be healthy?

We have friends who we've watched go from church to church, leaving as soon as they run into a conflict. The cumulative effect has been to load them down with a distorted and jaded view of church. They are easily offended and take things personally that were never about them. And they've stunted their own spiritual growth, because they've never stayed long enough to work through problems. Escaping to get out of mess is rarely clean. The fear sticks with you.

Through shutting us down, shutting us up and making us want to escape, fear manages to completely cripple us. We lose our confidence. We lose our influence. We lose our ability to grow and love well.

If you were to look at the list of fears we talked about in the beginning, I think we can essentially divide them into two basic clusters. One cluster I would describe as the fear of being abandoned. It's at the root of many other fears. For example, take a fear of public speaking. That's supposed to be the number one fear people have. But if you push it back a little further and ask people why that's such a terrifying experience, what

you'd find is that really people are afraid of being rejected. All our fears of conflict and disappointing people have the same root. When God said, "it's not good for man to be alone," he was right. Being lonely, the outsider, the unloved is often our worst nightmare.

The second cluster of fears centers around the fear of pain. We don't like discomfort of any kind – physical, mental or emotional. A fear of dogs doesn't come from a fear of abandonment – it comes from a fear of getting hurt by a bite. The same is true for a fear of doctors or the dark. We don't know what might be out there to cause us pain. Even fears like the fear of commitment can be attributed to the fear that you'll be disappointed with your choice and be stuck in misery the rest of your life.

Now there are no doubt exceptions to my groupings, but you can see just how many fears fall into those categories. Which is why I think it is so remarkable how God responds to Paul's fears. Look one more time at Jesus' words. We'll break them down a bit as we go. First off he says,

*Do not be afraid.*

Advertisers will tell you that having a consistent message is key for building a brand. That's why Nike ads always say "Just do it." Lowe's says, "Let's build something together." Fred Meyer asks, "What's on your list today?" Kleenex says "Bless you." If God had a catch phrase, "Do not be afraid," might very well be it. This is the phrase used so often by God to his people. If you read through the Old Testament, you'll hear him say that over and over, with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Isaiah. Do not be afraid.

When Jesus says it to Paul, he doesn't mention WHAT Paul might be afraid of. Don't be afraid ...of those angry men who are chasing you with the big sticks. Don't be afraid ...of the prison you're going to be thrown in. It's just don't BE afraid. Don't let fear shape you. Don't let your anxiety determine who you are and how you live. You don't need to live in that place of nervousness. Paul later wrote to Timothy and said

## **2 Timothy 1:7**

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*

I said earlier, some fears can be a good thing. It's when they leave you with a "spirit of fear" that we can know they've turned bad. When I have a constant anxiousness in my heart, when I base my choices on what I'm afraid of, when I feel trapped and unable to move, then I'm dealing with a spirit of fear.

There was a time in my life when there was this one person who made me anxious every time I saw them. I had had a few run ins with them and I hate conflict. But our circles crossed often, so it was hard to avoid contact. So I started changing up my routines to avoid bumping into them. It was silly and irrational, and it didn't really make me feel any better – it just made things more complicated. That's an example of giving in to a spirit of fear.

Jesus tells Paul. Don't live your life in fear. Then he follows that up with something solid Paul can grab on to in his climb out of fear:

*For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.*

What did we say our most basic fears are? Abandonment and pain. Jesus addresses both for Paul. To the fear of abandonment, Jesus says I am with you. To the fear of pain, Jesus says no one is going to attack and harm you.

What's so comforting about God being with us? I don't know about Paul, but I might have been thinking, "It's great to know that you're here and all, but how about getting me away from here instead? That sounds more comforting. You know what would really take away my fear would be if you would strike all these guys with leprosy or at least hives or something."

Instead, the message he gets is, "I am with you." What difference does that make? To begin with, knowing God is with me means **I am loved.**

Saying you're with someone is more than stating your location. It's an affirmation that you're in their court. God is in my court. He has my back. Knowing that he loves and cares for me goes a long way toward giving me courage.

### **1 John 4:18**

*There is no room in love for fear.*

Again, this gets back to our fear of being alone and abandoned. When we grasp the truth of God's promise to be right with us through everything, it makes a huge difference.

Secondly, knowing God is with me means **I am never powerless.**

Fear always wants to rob us of our confidence and make us feel like we can't begin to beat it. Satan whispers lies in our ear to convince us we should just give up because it's hopeless. But what was it Paul told Timothy? God hasn't given us a spirit of fear but of power. POWER! When God is with us, we have his strength at our disposal.

### **Psalm 29:11**

*GOD makes his people strong. GOD gives his people peace.*

Knowing God is with me also means that **I am always protected.**

Paul would continue to face persecution and opposition. There were still beatings and hardships to come. But God had said straight out that he was with Paul and nothing would harm him.

One of my favorite images from the Psalms is in Psalm 91.

**Psalm 91:3-6**

*Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare  
and from the deadly pestilence.  
He will cover you with his feathers,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.  
You will not fear the terror of night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,  
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,  
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

You can picture the birdcatcher out there in the field, setting his traps, waiting to snag the first unsuspecting little sparrow. You and I fly straight into them, then realize there's no way out. God says in that Psalm he will save us from those traps. But the way he chooses to do it isn't by smashing the trap. It says he covers us under HIS feathers. He hides us under his WINGS. In other words, God saves us by becoming a bird and climbing into the trap with us.

When I was a kid, I loved the book, *The Cay*. It's the story of a blind boy named Philip and an old Jamaican man named Timothy. The two of them get shipwrecked on a deserted island. The book details everything they did to survive. The story's peak comes when a huge hurricane hits the island. It completely destroys their only shelter. So the old man Timothy leads the blind boy to a palm tree and ties him to it. Then he wraps himself around him, holding him fast, exposing his own back to the storm, giving up his own life to save Philip's.

As a kid, I just thought it was a great story. But now I see what made it great was how well it pictured God for us. He is a God who rescues us from the inside. God protects us with his own self. Did you get that? He will enter into the very circumstance of your suffering and stay there with you. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.

We are cared for. We have power. We have protection. That's the comfort of God's presence in the face of our fear.

When we hear Christ say "Do not be afraid," we can hear it as a command. One more instruction we have to knuckle down and work on. Or we can hear it as a gift. We don't have to be afraid. We can let go of fear, because there's no longer a need for it.

Back during World War II, a Japanese soldier named Hiroo Onoda was sent to Lubang Island, 75 miles off the coast of the Philippines. His orders were to carry out guerilla and intelligence duties, even if his unit was destroyed. And that's just what Lieutenant Onoda did for 30 years.

When the war ended in 1945, leaflets were dropped announcing Japan's surrender, but he dismissed them as American propaganda. All his comrades either surrendered or died. But Onoda would not quit.

The world moved on around him, but he was still stuck. He was totally isolated, changing his hideouts all the time. He lived in a constant state of hunger, surrounded by imaginary enemies. He had to battle all the creatures of a tropical jungle, trying to keep warm. He would snipe at the villagers and steal their food.

Finally, in 1974, a Japanese student stumbled upon him. Onoda was about ready to kill him. Fortunately, the student had heard about him and said, "Onoda-san, the emperor and the people of Japan are worried about you."

Onoda said he would only surrender if he had direct orders from his commanding officer, Major Yoshimi Taniguchi. By this time Taniguchi was out of the military and in a different line of work, but he flew to Lubang to meet a still suspicious Onoda. As soon as the tattered figure recognized Taniguchi, he snapped to attention and shouted: 'Lieutenant Onoda reporting for duty, sir!'

So at 3 p.m. on March 10th 1974, lieutenant Onoda at last stopped fighting World War 2. It was his 52nd Birthday.

Many of us have been fighting an ongoing battle with our fears. We have been suffering, cold and hungry, alone and miserable.

God is saying "My dear child. I've already won this war. It's time to come in. Put down your fears. You don't have to do this anymore. I'm with you. I'm your shield. Rest in me."

When Jesus says, "Do not be afraid," he is saying it to lift the fear, not add a new burden. God is fiercely protective of you and doesn't want anything else sneaking in to overpower you and rob you of your freedom and your voice.

What's shaping you this morning – your fears or God's promises? Maybe you haven't even called it fear, but you realize you've been living with a low level anxiety for a long time. Are you being shut down? Are you wishing you could just escape?

As you think about your own fears, say these words to yourself: I am loved. I am never powerless. I am always protected. Those are God's sure, unfailing promises.

**Psalm 118:6**

*GOD's now at my side and I'm not afraid;  
who would dare lay a hand on me?*

He's with you, at your side. He is bigger than your fears. He is greater than your enemies. And he will hide you under his wing and give you the strength to endure.