

## **"HOW TO CONQUER FEAR"**

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Num. 14:9; Mk. 4:40

### **The Israelites**

There are two scripture stories from which I want to hang our thoughts this morning. The first is taken from the book of Numbers, chapters 13 and 14. It's the story of the Israelites and their tragic failure to claim the Promised Land. Although they had been led from captivity into freedom and were on the verge of realizing a life-long dream of inhabiting the land which God had promised them, because of a paralyzing fear, they turned away into the wilderness.

The men whom they had sent to spy out the land had returned with an evil report. The terrain was treacherous. There were innumerable obstacles to overcome. The opposition was formidable. The cities were surrounded by walls. Their armies were large and well-equipped. And worst of all, there were giants there!

For one fatal moment the children of Israel forgot about the promises of God and gave heed to their fears. They believed the spies' report which undoubtedly was true, for there were many obstacles to overcome. The opposition *was* formidable. Giants *did* live in the land. But they were so choked by fear they failed to link God's power to their problem. As a result, instead of marching forward to victory, they mumbled something about returning to a life of slavery.

"Let us make a captain and return into Egypt," they said.

Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, were not impressed by the obstacles confronting them. They pleaded with the Israelites to change their minds.

"Fear not...the Lord is with us," they argued (Num.14:19).

But the people would not listen. In fact they were so gripped by fear they murmured against Joshua and Caleb, and threatened to pelt them with stones.

Fear is a devastating thing. It numbs the will. It paralyzes the reason. It makes constructive action impossible. Because of fear -- blind, unreasoned, neurotic fear -- the Israelites were denied the joy of the Promised Land.

### **The Disciples**

The second story is from the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark, chapter four. Here we are told how, at the end of a crowded, busy, hectic day, Jesus and his disciples started across the Sea of Galilee in a fragile fishing craft. They had hardly launched their boat when a terrible storm arose.

The Sea of Galilee is not very big. In fact, you can see across it from east to west most any day. On a clear day you can see across it from north to south. Nor is it very deep. This combined with the surrounding terrain, makes it a treacherous body of water. Within minutes the howling winds which blow down from the mountains can whip the Sea of Galilee into a white tempest.

That's what happened on this particular occasion. In a very short while waves were unusually unruly and the sea was a seething cauldron. Even the hearty fisherman on board were scared out of their wits. They were almost hysterical when someone remembered Jesus was asleep in the hold. In spite of the ferocity of the sea, he hadn't even stirred until the disciples came yelling,

"Master, don't you care that we perish?"

Jesus sat up and yawned his way into activity, and gave his disciples a knowing nod of disappointment. Would they never learn? And then, striding majestically to the rail of the pitching craft Jesus stretched forth that great pair of hands.

Hands that had pushed a plane and swung a hammer.

Hands that had healed the sick and raised the dead.

Hands that had caressed the silken softness of a little child's hair, as he held her in his arms.

Hands which one day would be ripped by nails on a cross.

Jesus lifted that great pair of hands and said, "Peace be still!" In an instant the sea was smooth as a newly mown field. Cool and green and quiet. And then, as the disciples jammed around him, excitement and disbelief filling every feature of their faces, he said,

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

Two verses! Numbers 14:9 -- "Fear not, the Lord is with us." And, Mark 4: 40 -- "Why are you afraid, have you no faith?"

Two verses, separated by two millennia of history.

Two verses, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

Two verses, one concerned with the inability of the Israelites to claim the promised land, and the other describing the inability of Christ's disciples to cope with the storms of life.

Two verses, demonstrating the indivisible unity of the Bible, as in each, the spiritual and emotional blocks of fear are emphasized.

Does that sound familiar? It should! Fear is the major problem confronting mankind today.

Everyone seems to be touched by it.

Poor people are afraid because they have no economic security.

Rich people are afraid lest they lose the economic security they have.

Unlearned people are afraid because they don't understand the inner workings of life and are full of dark superstitions.

Learned people are afraid because they *do* understand the inner workings of life and are cognizant of the awful implications of man's new-found powers.

Old people are afraid because their time is running out and they wonder what tomorrow will bring.

Young people are afraid lest there be no tomorrow at all, and if there is, that they will be incapable of meeting it.

### **Normal Fear**

F-E-A-R! How large it looms in the lives of us all. Little wonder, then, that ours has been called

"a generation of scared and frightened people."

Of course, all fears are not bad. There are creative fears, and they have made some tremendous contributions to life.

It was fear of disease that led to the discovery of the Salk Vaccine and the other miraculous medications available today.

It is fear of the consequences of immorality that keeps us from uncleanness, and gives us the satisfaction of living an upright life.

It is fear of getting burned that keeps our children from putting their hands in the fire.

It is fear of getting cut that causes us to exercise caution in the use of a knife.

Without normal fear as an intricate part of our personalities, we could not survive. We could not carry on the most insignificant of tasks. Healthy fear is part of the fee we pay for citizenship in this universe, and we would be foolish to fear nothing. In fact, someone has said,

"Education is learning to be afraid of the right things at the right time."

### **Abnormal Fear**

The problem comes when normal fear is transformed into abnormal anxiety. Then, it becomes destructive and debilitating. I suppose we've all met the man who says,

"I'm a worrier. In fact, I'm the worst worrier you ever saw worry. I worry and worry and worry and worry and worry. And now, its gotten so bad I worry about the fact that I worry. Is that serious?"

Indeed it is.

When fears become infected,  
when the normal becomes abnormal,  
when intelligent caution becomes unreasoned anxiety,  
when we are faced with an explosive situation that destroys peace, undermines faith,

makes prayer ineffective, and prohibits us from experiencing the joys of the abundant life, fear has gotten out of hand. Normal fear has become abnormal, and must be addressed. It's *that* type of fear, abnormal fear, Jesus was concerned about when he said to his disciples, and says to us, "Why are you afraid?"

There are some tremendously important implications to that question and I want you to see them this morning. For one thing, it points out the necessity of taking a long hard stare at our fears.

### **Face Your Fears**

"*Why* do you fear?" Jesus asked. Or to put it another way, "Precisely what do you fear?" Oft times we hear someone say to a friend burdened with anxiety,

"Snap out of it. Forget about your fears. It's all in your mind. It's a figment of your imagination."

Without doubt, the intention of such people is good, *but their advice is bad!*

The trouble with most of us is that we *have* tried to forget our fears. We have pushed them down into the sub-conscious where they begin to manifest themselves in all kinds of symptoms. Stuttering. Abdominal pains. Headaches. High blood pressure. Allergies. A liking for liquor. As someone has suggested,

"Ulcers are not due to what you are eating, but to what is eating you!"

What we urgently need to do is to dredge up our fears, expose them to the light where they can be frankly faced, and thereby overcome them. That's what Jesus was after when he asked,

"*Why* are you afraid? Precisely what is bothering you? What do you fear?"

He wanted his disciples to take a long, hard stare at the things they were fearing, and he wants us to do the same. Jesus wants us to discover, to our great relief, that when we expose our fears to the light, they are stripped of most of their power to harm us.

Some of you will remember the story in one of McGuffey's Readers about a lad who was walking down a road one night and came to a sign post. In the darkness it looked like a forbidding monster, and he was terrified. But, when he held his lantern up to it, he discovered what it really was, and he was ashamed of his foolish fears. So he reached the following conclusion.

"Ah well," thought he,  
"One thing I've learned  
Nor shall I soon forget.  
Whatever frightens me again,  
I'll march right up to it!"

That's the spirit Christ was attempting to instill in his disciples when he said, "*Why* are you afraid?" He wanted them to march right up to their fears and see them for what they really were.

The last thing in the world we should do is try to bottle up our fears, forget them or repress them. Hidden fear is like a boil. It must be lanced. The poison and putrefaction must be let out, or it will spread and bring on new disorders.

### **The Many Faces Of Fear**

Fear wears many faces. If we are to triumph over it, we must have courage enough to march right up to our fear, pull away its mask, and look it in the face. It is then we shall triumph.

Not because we have dodged life's issues.

Not because we have run away from our problems.

But precisely because we have faced them squarely, and have seen them for what they are.

Some folks have the odd idea that the Christian life is a primrose path. Not so. Christ never promised his followers immunity from the troubles that affect mankind. Instead, he said,

"In this world you shall have tribulation."

He didn't say, follow me and God will keep you from losing your money. Or keep you from getting sick. Or keep you from any of the many things which may fill your soul with dread.

Instead he said,

"*Why* are you afraid?" Look your fears in the face. See them in all of their brutality and ugliness, and you will find, *not* that they are unreal, but that they are unable to intimidate you, when you look them in the eye. 'In this world you *will* have tribulations,' he said, 'but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.'"

The wise person is one who examines himself and then honestly admits whatever fears he uncovers. He submits them to the white light of recognition. He discusses them candidly with a doctor or a pastor who can give sympathetic counsel. He accepts the fact that while these fears may seem silly to someone else, they are very real to him. In so doing, he discovers that by exposing his fears he has taken his first step in overcoming them.

A second implication to Christ's question, "Why are you afraid?" is that it reminds us to --

### **Replace Our Fear With Faith**

"Why are you *afraid*?" In confronting his disciples with that question, Christ was expressing his disappointment that they had allowed themselves to be stampeded by fear.

It seemed to him as if they would never learn. As if they would never accept the stupendous truth that what he was trying to do for them was give them a faith which would make it unnecessary for them to ever again be overwhelmed by fear.

"Why are you *afraid*?" He asked, "Don't you have any faith?"

It's as if he was saying,

"Didn't you see what I did over there on the shore when five-thousand people were fed with the lunch of a little lad? Don't you remember this morning when I healed the leper? And how about this afternoon when I cured the centurion's slave without ever seeing him? Don't you remember at all? Why are you *afraid*? As God's children you have all the power and resources you will ever need!"

"Why are you *afraid*? Don't you have any faith?" What a penetrating question. Like the Israelites of old, the disciples had seen God's power in action. They had witnessed miraculous things. And yet, in the face of the first high wind that blew their way, they forgot the resources which were available to them in Christ, and they fed their fear when they should have fed their faith.

Josh Liebman says,

"Peace of mind is the conscious possession of adequate resources."

He points out that if you have enough resources to handle your experiences you never worry. And of course, that is true! But the tragedy is that, like the disciples and the Israelites, we have resources we have never tapped! We haven't even *begun* to scratch the surface of abundant living. We stumble along blindly, our vision dimmed by fear, when we should stride through life, our head held high, victorious through resurrection power. Replace your fear with faith, Christ said. And, dear friend, *you* can do that, if you remember,

*"The problem before you is never as great as the power behind you."*

Which suggests this final thought. As Christians we have every reason to be free from fear because --



### **Our Faith Is Structured On The Greatness Of God**

"Why are *you* afraid?" Jesus said to his disciples. It's as if he were saying, *you* of all people, why are *you* afraid?

If you were a bunch of heathen,  
if you had never witnessed my power,  
if you were like the Pharisees all bound up in dead tradition,  
if you were like those poor people over on the shore who are still seeking, who  
have never yet believed, who are still outside the society of the saints,  
if you were one of them, *then* I could understand your fear!

But, "Why are *you* afraid?" *You* are my disciples. *You* are children of God. *You* are co-heirs with me of all the goodness my Father has planned for his children. "Why are *you* be afraid?"

What a penetrating question! How it bites into our hearts this morning. For if anyone should be able to conquer his fear, it is us Christians. We who name the name of Jesus. As that thought gripped my own soul this week, a single verse kept coming back into my mind again and again,

"Greater is he that is in (*me*) than he that is in the world."

As I matched that up with the words of Jesus,

"Why are *you* afraid? Don't you have any faith?"

my soul began to soar. I began to realize the little fears which have often eroded my faith can be conquered in Christ.

Then my mind took a turn toward the Psalms, and I remembered the assurance of David,

"Whither shall I flee from thy presence. If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there.

If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand shall hold me" (Psm. 139:3-10).

And I said to myself,

"Self! He's got the whole world in his hand. There isn't any place I can go where he isn't! There isn't any part of life to which he is not related! And the peace of God settled on my soul."

Think of it, dear friend, God's got the whole world in his hands. The little bitty baby. You and me, brother. You and me, sister. He's got all of us in his hands! Why then should *we* fear? *We* have our faith!

Do I make it sound easy? It isn't. I wish with all my heart I could close this sermon with a few neat paragraphs of simple instructions. But it can't be done. There are people here who have struggled for years to overcome some small fear. God forbid that I should ever mock their struggle, for I've been there, too! No, it isn't easy. But it can be done.

I don't know all the answers. In fact, I'm not sure I know all the questions. But this one thing I *do* know. *The problem before you is never as great as the power behind you.*

"Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world."

You *can* conquer your fear, if you structure your faith on the greatness of God.

I have a friend out in Kansas who has made several visits to the Carlsbad Caverns. I've never been there, so quite naturally was interested in his description of the place. He told me how the first time he was there, he was deeply impressed by his experience around what is called "The Rock of Ages."

Those of you who *have* been there, will remember how they turn off the lights and you stand by "The Rock of Ages" in complete silence and utter darkness. Then, through the oppressive blackness comes the sweet strains of the lovely old hymn,

"Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee."

My friend described his experience to his small children, and the next time they were in New Mexico the kids wanted to see it. They went down into the great caverns and finally came to "The Rock of Ages." As they passed it, the guide said simply, "This is the rock of ages." Then, with hardly a pause, he moved on. After awhile my friend caught up with him and said, "You sure didn't make much out of the rock of ages. The guide said, "That's right. We used to, but we don't anymore." "Why?" "Well, we have so much traffic, we're so busy, people rush through here so fast and in such great numbers, we just don't have the time to stop at the rock of ages."

I wonder if that is the key to your problem this morning. Is it possible you're just too busy, going here and there, doing this and that, you don't have time to spend with Jesus, the *real* rock of ages?

If that *is* your problem, there's something you can do about it. You can *make* time.

The next time fear lays its icy fingers on your life, you can *make* time to listen to Christ's question,

"Why are *you* afraid? Don't you have any faith?"

You can *make* time to fasten your mind on this wonderful promise,

"Greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world."

As you do, you will sense the winds and waves becoming still. And, in calm that follows, you'll begin to understand the deeper meaning of Christ's words,.

"Why are *you* afraid? Don't you have any faith?"

### **Spiritual prescription**

Minimize your fear by maximizing your faith.

Do this a minimum of three times daily.

Begin your brief prayer at each meal with

this wonderful promise from God's word,

"*Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.*"

(1 Jn. 4:4)

Remember!

The problem ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you!