

FEAR - A BEAST OR A BOOST

Dr. John Allan Lavender

1 John 4:18; Isaiah 40:31

I have never read Basil King's book, Conquest Of Fear. Actually, it was written in 1921, two years before I was born. Apparently it was an important book, for I have seen it quoted a number of times. One of the professional magazines to which I subscribe recently carried this paragraph from its preface. I suppose it might be called Basil King's Confession:

“When I say that during most of my conscious life I have been a prey of fears, I take it for granted that I am expressing the case of the majority of people. I cannot remember the time when dread of one kind or another was not in the air. In childhood it was the fear of going to bed. Later it was the fear of school, the first contact of a tender little soul with life's crudeness. Later still there was the experience which all of us know of waking in the morning with the feeling of dismay at what we have to do on getting up. Fear haunts all of us in one way, and another in another, but everyone in some way. A mother is afraid for her children. A father is afraid for his business. The clerk is afraid for his job. There is not a home, or an office, or a factory, or a school, or a church in which some hang-dog apprehension is not eating at the hearts of men, women and children who go in and out.”

His confession has a familiar ring, doesn't it? It expresses our own feelings so well it almost seems as if he were putting words in our mouth. For we, too, are full of fears. Someone has called this the “Century of Fear”. Another has said it is the “Age of Anxiety”.

Certainly fear is a common affliction of our day. In the past ten years I have counseled with literally scores of people. One problem has cropped up more often than any other: the problem of fear. It is amazing how many people are almost frightened to death. The things they are afraid of run the whole gamut of human experiences, for fear wages war on a far-flung battle front.

Today people are afraid of life. Death. The present. The future. They are as much afraid of wealth as they are of poverty, and of peace as they are of war. They fear success as well as failure and power as well as weakness. They are afraid of what people will think of them, but they are also afraid people won't think of them at all! A vast uneasiness has settled upon our world...and we are afraid.

The result of this hysteria can be devastating, for fear is the most paralyzing of all emotions. It can literally stiffen the muscles, as anyone knows who has been really scared. It can stupefy the mind and cause one to play all kinds of mental tricks upon himself.

I think the most frightened individual I ever saw was a young Army sergeant who stood about 6' 4" and hit the scale at over 200 lbs. I was performing his marriage ceremony. It was one of my first weddings after graduating from Seminary and I was pretty scared myself. But compared to him, I must have looked like a four star, battle-scarred hero. I don't know what he was frightened about. I looked at his dainty little bride, about five foot two with eyes of blue, and she looked as harmless as a fawn. But good reason or no, he was scared.

I pronounced them man and wife, I looked at him and said,

“Sergeant, you may salute your bride.”

I meant he could kiss her. But he was so befuddled he didn't know what he was doing. He snapped to attention, did a perfect quarter turn to the left, clicked his heels and gave her the snappiest salute I have ever seen.

I don't know who was more surprised. The bride or me. But she rose to the occasion. She reached up on the tips of her toes, pulled that big lummoX down and gave him a great big kiss. Then they both began to giggle, the audience began to laugh, and the wedding ended on the most hilarious note you can imagine!

Yes, fear makes us do strange things and its power to intimidate knows no boundaries.

The young share fear with the old.

The rich with the poor.

The employer with the employee.

The vigor of youth will not frighten it away.

The dollar sign has no power against it.

Fame and fortune are no insurance it will not plague you.

It is a universal malady which causes even conquerors to cower.

Napoleon and Wellington, two master warriors who appeared on the surface to be fearless, would rush from a room at the sight of a cat. Great conquerors—masters of men and war—both of them were pitiful, pathetic captives of inner fear.

Now basically, our fear is a result of ignorance. We are afraid of things we do not understand.

That's precisely why we should --

Make Fear Our Friend.

Affirmative fear can be a real spur to discovery. The discovery that so many of our fears are imaginary foes, creatures of our own inventions. But we will never make that discovery as long as we consider fear a beast—an enemy—a thing to be shunned.

Actually, fear is a God-given gift. An elemental emotion which is meant to be our friend.

Because it *is* God-given, like any of the rest of our natural equipment, it has potent possibilities of a positive nature. It can be the force that boosts us along the way of real achievement.

In his book Mastering Fear, Preston Bradley declares:

“We can never rightly understand fear unless we see both faces of it. One, like a grave and wise teacher who schools us to shun those things which are bad for us. The other, a mocking demon, frightens us with imaginary specters of harm or mischief.”

True freedom comes from banishing negative fear...the evil face of the beast that can destroy us and cleaving to affirmative fear... the compassionate face of the friend which can give us a boost toward abundant living. In other words, the real problem is not getting rid of fear, but learning how to use it constructively.

As a matter of fact, there are many things we ought to fear. As a parent, I certainly do not aim to teach our Jody and Jeff they have “nothing to fear but fear itself.” It’s true, of course, that most of the things they must learn to fear are valuable assets to life, but it is equally true that they can create great havoc.

The same fire that brings warmth in winter and comfort to the inner man in the form of properly cooked food, can also burn a tiny infant hand or scar the silken skin of a little girl.

The same bottle of dark liquid that can rid the house of rodents and insects and vermin which bring disease and discomfort can also sear the mouth and stomach of an innocent baby, and even bring death.

The same automobile that can increase our productiveness and make possible the joy of travel and, in general, add to the zest of living can also crush out the life of a little child and, in a moment, shatter the hopes and dreams, the secret longings and ambitions of a mother and father. Not all of our fears are baseless. And it would be sad self-deception to drive them out, for fear of some things is the beginning of wisdom.

It was fear of the consequences of ignorance which caused our forefathers to build schools and institutions of higher education.

It was fear of the consequences of lawlessness which causes them to make laws and then authorize courts to enforce them.

It was fear of disease and its consequences which caused them to build great hospitals, medical colleges and research centers where scientists could plumb the mysteries of sickness and give men health.

In our own day, it is fear of injury which makes us drive our automobiles carefully.

It is fear of the crippling effects of polio which makes us see that our children receive inoculations.

It is fear of what other people will think which stimulates us to exemplary living.

It is fear of receiving a \$3.00 citation which makes us put a penny in the parking meter, when we wish like the very dickens we could sneak by unnoticed.

And, unless I underestimate you, and you just love to give your hard-earned cash to Uncle Sam, it is the fear of being stuck with a penalty which makes you pay your income tax.

Every day we do things which are motivated by fear and, for the most part, we are better people, living in a better world as a result.

Yes, fear can be a wonderful servant as well as a terrible master. In the right place and at the right time, it can be a potent force for good to individuals and to society as well. So to be afraid is not necessarily a disgrace if it is affirmative fear...fear directed in the proper channels.

But what are we to do about negative fear? That ferocious monster which
fills our minds with apprehension,
dulls our vision to the possibilities of the future,
and enervates our bodies so we are powerless to act?

Well, religion and psychology are in agreement that the cause of negative fear among good people lies largely within themselves. For the most part, fear is the product of your own thought.

Therefore, to get rid of foolish, groundless, negative fear, you must check up on your thought habits to see if they are in need of alteration and correction. First, you should

Examine Your Thoughts About God.

As I said in the first sermon of this series, what you believe about God is of primary importance for it colors everything else you say and think and do. It is perfectly possible that one reason you are filled with fear is that you have a false idea of God. Or as J. B. Phillips puts it,

“Your God is too small.”

Perhaps, as Phillips suggests, you have thought of God as a fierce policeman supplied with rubber hose and billy club, ready to bludgeon and bruise the moment you step from the path of virtue. Perhaps you have thought of God as a vague, impersonal force, far removed from any concern about this life and its very real problems.

Perhaps you have thought of God as a stern, unrelenting Judge who mercilessly metes out punishment for the least infraction of the rules.

Or perhaps you have thought of Him in a directly opposite way. Maybe you have envisioned Him as “sugar and spice and all things nice”. A benevolent, old Santa Claus, meek and mild, who cheerfully doles out salvation to the good, the bad and the indifferent. Believe it or not, belief in that kind of willy-nilly God can create a great sense of uncertainty and fear for we are so constructed as to expect justice and we actually want and need punishment when we sin. We literally long for some authoritative voice which will clearly spell out for us what is right and wrong.

Lucille and I have found that to be true in the raising of our two children. Our kids, like yours, need the direction of authority. They want to be told what they can do and what they can't do, and they are miserable when left to their own devices.

This past week or two Jeff has been as “feisty” as an old coot. Lucille and I talked about it and

decided it was probably due to the fact that we have been letting him get away with murder. So the next time he started acting up, I laid him across my knee and warmed the seat of his breeches. He threw himself prostrate upon the floor, buried his face in his hands and cried like his heart was broken. For about 15 seconds! Then he looked up at me out of the corner of his eye, gave a sheepish little grin, got up, went back to his playing. He's been a little angel ever since. An angel with a tarnished halo, that is!

What he wanted was the security which comes from knowing he was under the guiding hand of authority. Believe it or not, that's what we want and need from God. If you think of Him as a "droll little fellow" complete with white whiskers, ruddy cheeks and all who doesn't really care what you believe or how you act, then you deprive yourself of one of the elemental needs of humankind, the need of real authority.

Now, any one of these distorted views of God which Phillips mentions in his book and I have recited this morning—and scores of other unreal gods which men have conjured up within their minds—can lead to a sense of uncertainty and frustration and fear.

But if you know the God of Christ, the Heavenly Father He described as loving us, caring for us, and watching over us, then most of your unfounded fear will be dispelled.

No longer will you need to fear death, for instance, because you will be able to say with Jesus,

"I go to my Father's house."

Here on earth you are never afraid of going home to your father's house, unless you have done something wrong. Why, then, should you fear going to your Heavenly Father's house?

"Well," you say, "Pastor, I have done something wrong and that's why I am uneasy about meeting God." Well, if you think of Him as a Heavenly Father, One who loved you so much He gave His Son to die for you, can you not also believe if you ask Him, He will give you forgiveness? His Word promises that He will. The Bible says,

"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our

sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

There is nothing to fear about death if it’s only going home and you know your Heavenly Father is waiting to meet you on the other side.

Neither is there anything to fear in this life. In Christ you have “a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” One who promised His continual presence. Notice my choice of words. It is “continual,” not “continuous.” “Continuous” describes a stop and start relationship, like a dotted line. “Continual” is unending, and is what Jesus promised! His continual presence, saying, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

Nor do you need fear the future. You can approach it with faith and courage, knowing the God in whom you trust has something better for you than you can plan for yourself. So, will you stop right now and straighten up your thoughts about God? Square them away with the God of Christ revealed to us in the New Testament. Then make Him your Heavenly Father by taking His Son as your Lord and Savior. For that God has promised:

“As many as received Him, to them gave He the right to be called sons of God” (John 1:12).

Mentally take a broom and sweep out all of the unreal gods which have cluttered up your mind. Take a duster and brush away the cobwebs which the spiders of doubt have woven around your faith. Clean up the windows of your soul so the light of God’s love can shine in. Square your thoughts of Him with what is revealed in this Book and you will find your foolish fears will have melted and vanished away. And then may I suggest that you --

Examine Your Thoughts About Yourself.

There is a little column in the newspaper called Mirror of Your Mind. I think its author is Dr. Albert Edward Wiggam. Sometime ago it carried the observation that one fear held by many people is the fear of failure. Seventy-five per cent of the people interviewed confessed it was their

strongest fear. Interestingly enough, it was not confined to any one economic or age group. The rich, the poor, the young, the old, the learned, and the unlearned all had one thing in common. Fear of failure.

Now basically, fear of failure is a result of a sense of inferiority, and an inferiority complex is the result of having a false view of yourself. Do you know that self-love is a basic Christian idea?

Well, it is! Jesus said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” He was saying was,

“Know yourself. Have a good healthy respect for your own abilities, qualities and potentialities. Quit thinking of yourself as being a little higher than the ants, for you are made a little lower than the angels. Then when you get a true picture of your own intrinsic worth, get a similar picture of your neighbor. Give him the same kind of love, honor and respect you would like to receive.”

To take an honest look at yourself is just common sense. Knowing your strengths, as well as your weaknesses—your capacities as well as your limitations—will not only keep you from biting off more than you can chew, it will help you make the most of the talents you do possess. If you know what you can do, and do it. You will not feel defeated if you don’t do more.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said something like this,

“One of the greatest reliefs of life is to discover your own mediocrity”.

The quickest way I know to develop a neurotic personality is to try to be something you aren’t. There is no greater strain than attempting to live up to an assumed character. As Preston Bradley points out,

“It is like being on the stage before all the world, all day and every day, with all men waiting to hiss a bad performance.”

“To thine own self be true” is still some of the best advice ever given.

Know yourself and be yourself.

Do away with all pretense.

Pull down the facade of sham.

Look yourself in the face and

recognize that while you have some limitations, you also have some wonderful abilities.

Forget what you aren't and remember what you are. The moment you do, fear of failure will wash down the drain. You will no longer have to be afraid of what people will think if they ever "find you out" for they will already know you for what you really are. And, believe me, they'll like it! And then finally, may I suggest you --

Examine Your Thoughts About The World.

It's pretty hard not to be afraid when one lives in a world which is rife with fear. But, believe me, things are not always as bad as we make them seem. As a matter of fact, the world has often been a whole lot worse off than it is right now.

Roger W. Babson, the famous economist, says,

"When I find myself depressed over world conditions, I can, within one hour, turn myself into a shouting optimist".

How does he do it? He goes into his library, walks to a shelf containing books on history, closes his eyes and picks one out. With his eyes still closed, he opens the book at random and points to a spot with his finger. Then he opens his eyes and begins to read. He says,

"The more I read, the more sharply I realize the world has always been in the throes of agony, that civilization has always been tottering on the brink. The pages of history fairly shriek with tragic tales of war, famine, poverty, pestilence, and man's inhumanity to man. After reading history for an hour, I realize that bad as conditions are now, they are infinitely better than they used to be."

What a terrific exercise in practical psychology. I've tried it myself and it works. I highly

recommend it to you. But whether you try it or not, the important thing is that in some way or other you square your thoughts about this world with the facts of history. You will discover things are not much different than they always were. More important, you will discover that wherever the grace of God has been allowed to operate in the lives of people, the light of hope shines more brightly than it ever did before. My final word is this --

The Basic Cure For Fear Is Love!

Our text makes that clear.

“Perfect love casteth out fear.”

If you love God with all your heart and mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself, you will banish negative fear.

You will begin each day with anticipation of the things that day will bring.

You will pillow your head at night in peace, knowing your Heavenly Father watches over you.

You will face the future unafraid for you will know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that God has something better for you than you can plan for yourself.

Sidney Lanier tells us, in this bit of poetry, how to soar above the fear that often lays siege to our hearts.

“As the marsh hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies
In the freedom that fills all the space ‘twixt the marsh and the skies:
By so many roots as the marsh grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a hold of the greatness of God.”

That’s the answer! Life can take wings when it is built on the greatness of God. Wings which will lift you above the humdrum, the tedious and the trying. How do I know? Because the Bible tells me so!

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they

shall mount up with wings as eagles: they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31).