

FEAR NOT: Five Questions for Fighting Anxiety

What Is Fear?

Joshua 1:1-9

Mark Vroegop

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:1–9).

About a week ago, my wife was in the basement of our home and I was on the main floor when she called my name with a shriek. All she said was my name. Nothing else. But how she said it caused me to leap off the couch, skip multiple steps on the stairs, and sprint to find her. I nearly ran her over as I came around the corner. Her eyes were bugged out. She was short of breath. I said, "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

I was worried she had injured herself. Or maybe the basement was flooding. Or maybe she saw a crack in the basement wall. "What's going on?" Then she said, "There is a huge spider in the bathroom. I tried to kill it, but it scurried under the baseboards. Mark, it's huge. The biggest one I've ever seen!"

Now, a lot of emotions ran through my heart at this moment. I was immediately relieved that she hadn't lost a limb or something. But I was also a bit annoyed that this five-alarm fire was over a larger-than-normal, not-very-dangerous spider. And, at the same time, my fear was subsiding. Knowing that it was a spider didn't immediately solve all the internal angst that I felt.

Plus, it created a moment of tension in our marriage. Sarah sensed my internal eye-rolling. As I went to get bug spray, she reminded me, “Mark, it was really big. *Really* big.”

Now, it’s one thing when you feel afraid about something like a spider. But it’s another thing when fear relates to difficult circumstances, to some traumatic event in your past, or even to something that you are experiencing physically, and you don’t know why.

Fear is a strong and complicated emotion. It can cause us to do things, say things, and feel things quickly and powerfully. Fear doesn’t go away quickly and sometimes for good reason. Fear is complicated because we are not all afraid of the same things. Sometimes we are not even sure why we are afraid of something. At other times, our bodies and minds respond with fear for a variety of reasons. Sometimes fear is sinful. Sometimes not being fearful is sinful.

Fear is incredibly common. Alasdair Groves and Winston Smith, in their book *Untangling Emotions*, explain that it’s telling how many different English words we have for fear.

*Words like uneasy, worried, nervous, anxious, tense, uptight, spooked, haunted, scared, afraid, panicked, terrified, and petrified occupy slightly different points on the spectrum, but all express some version of the same core experience... Fear is everywhere. Everyone deals with it.*¹

There’s not a single person who doesn’t deal with fear in some fashion. And we also have to compassionately acknowledge that fear is complex. I’m certainly not an expert on fear, and it’s important to recognize that the strategies for dealing with fear are just as complex. One message or one sermon series might be life-changing for some of you. For others, this series is just going to be one piece of a really big puzzle that you are putting together. Regardless, I hope it’s helpful.

Fear Not

We are studying what the Bible says about fear and anxiety by looking at five key questions:

- Who’s in control?
- What is fear?
- What must I believe?
- How do I pray?
- What should I think?

Last week we started our journey by talking about the issue of control and how it relates to challenging circumstances and God’s promises. I challenged us to memorize Isaiah 41:10 as our anchor passage.

¹ Alasdair J. Groves and Winston Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 142-143 Kindle Edition.

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isa. 41:10).

This week we are looking at the issue of fear and what one passage in one moment of biblical history says about it. We are in the book of Joshua, chapter 1.

Moses Is Dead

Like last week, there are circumstances behind today's passage. Moses was the divinely appointed leader in the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. He led Israel through the Red Sea and in their wilderness travels. His leadership was marked by meekness (Num. 12:3) and intimacy with God (Ex. 33:11). The Israelites were ready to travel into the Promised Land. But when they sent spies to gather intelligence, the report from ten of them created fear, panic, and a revolt against Moses (Num. 13-14). They were ready to kill Moses and Aaron until God intervened with a sudden display of his glory in the tabernacle. The consequence of this rebellion was that no person alive—except for the two good spies, Joshua and Caleb—was permitted to travel into the Promised Land.

In another dark moment, the people threatened Moses because of their thirst. Moses reacted. His fear of the people and frustration got the best of him. He struck the rock instead of speaking to it (Num. 20). And the consequence was that Moses wouldn't be able to enter the Promised Land either.

Joshua was Moses's right-hand assistant. And the book of Joshua records the entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land. The people involved in the previous rebellion are dead. The greatest leader in Israel's history is also gone. Joshua is called by God to cross the Jordan River and to begin conquering the land.

Joshua is leading a group of difficult people with a proven track record of complaining and insurrection. He's crossing into a land with fortified cities and unknown terrain. He's taking over for the leader who confronted Pharaoh, received the Ten Commandments, and met personally with God.

So, it's no wonder that God speaks into the reality of fear and anxiety in this text.

Defining Fear

Let's start our examination of this text by defining what we mean by "fear." The emotion is so common that it can be hard to understand what we are talking about.

First, we can start with the opposite of fear. And the first chapter of Joshua tells us what it is. Three times in this chapter we see these words:

- *Be strong and courageous* (v. 6)
- *only be strong and courageous* (v. 7)
- *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous* (v. 9)

The Hebrew word for "strong" here in the text has the sense of fortification or to become hardened. "The verb has a wide range of meanings depending on the context. It is used in several Hebrew stems to

convey a state of being strong or the act of strengthening.”² “Strong” requires a comparison to something else. So, there’s something unusual going on here. We find the same thing with the word “courageous.” It means responding to something fearful in an unusual way.

Why is this important? Two reasons:

First, it’s important to realize that “strong and courageous” are unusual. Dealing with fear, at various levels and in various ways, is normal. Some of you need to work on your fear, true. But you need to stop berating yourself because you struggle with fear. I think there’s a reason why God says three times to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous.” I think God knows that the baseline reality for human beings is dealing with fear.

Secondly, we also have to acknowledge that not all fear is bad. This is where it gets complicated. Sometimes people are told, “Fear not.” At other times, they are told to fear. Let me give you a few examples:

- *Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people **feared** the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. (Ex. 14:31)*
- *For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, a God **greatly to be feared** in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? (Ps. 89:6-7)*
- *The **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:7)*
- *You shall walk after the LORD your God and **fear** him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. (Deut. 13:4)*
- *And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:28)*
- *Therefore, knowing the **fear** of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. (2 Cor. 5:11)*

So, you can probably see why this is complicated. There are good kinds of fear. In fact, there are times when not being afraid is actually sinful.

As a father of three boys, I can tell you that, from ages five to 17, I repeatedly offered words of caution because there wasn’t enough fear in my boys. I can’t tell you how many trips to the ER started with the famous words, “Hey, guys, watch this!” A parent who isn’t worried about their kids playing in a busy street, a plant manager who isn’t worried about employee safety, or a financial advisor who never fears a recession is negligent. They should be concerned and a bit fearful.

² Ingrid Spellnes Faro, [“Strength,”](#) ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

So, what does the word “fear” mean? The Hebrew word means to shake, tremble, or cause terror. It’s a word that includes emotions but also a response. Something is observed, known, and felt. And it creates a powerful response.

Therefore, I would conclude that there is a kind of fear that controls you too much. Please understand, I’m not speaking about every form of fear or anxiety. There are some fears and anxieties that have biological causes. You still have to respond in a Christ-like, faith-filled manner to those moments. But it’s more complex. I’m talking about something (and you’ll have to figure out the line) that is starting to violate God’s role in your life.

Joshua was given a very specific calling in this text (v. 2). He’s given particular promises and assurances (v. 3-5). Therefore, this command to be “strong and courageous” is rooted in what has been revealed to him.

Sinful fear or dismay would be allowing what Joshua saw or felt to have greater authority in his life than what God had told him.

That’s part of the reason why the text mentions the importance of not allowing the Book of the Law to depart from his mouth and why he was to meditate on it. By doing so, it’s a reminder of what is true, what should control his thinking, and what should create action on his part.

Sinful fear and anxiety, therefore, are allowing something too much control. It’s not the presence of fear that’s the issue, it’s the excess of it. The problem isn’t the reality of fear; it’s the authority we give to fear.

Unique Expressions of Fear

According to Groves and Smith, “...fear motivates us to seek safety, control, and certainty. All three are good and right things to seek in the face of danger. All three, however, can go bad in a hurry.”³ That’s the problem with fear and anxiety—something good goes bad.

One of the keys to winning the battle is knowing what your “go-to” response is when you are worried or afraid. In my experience, it is usually related to whatever is unique to you—usually what you are good at and enjoy doing. Fear takes over, and you over-apply your strengths because you want to control your circumstances.

In one of our Facebook Live events, I named five expressions of fear and anxiety:

- **Over-thinking:** Sometimes fear looks like kicking our mental energies into high gear. We evaluate options, weigh risks, develop charts, work spreadsheets, read articles, etc. We’re attempting to protect ourselves from what we don’t know.

³ Alasdair J. Groves and Winston Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 146 - Kindle Edition.

- **Over-talking:** Sometimes fear looks like talking to too many people. Perhaps you value people's opinions, you need to express yourself, or you genuinely need counsel. But you may be attempting to protect yourself with the opinions of others.
- **Over-working:** Sometimes fear expresses itself by becoming a workaholic. You respond to fear by working hard to either fill in the gaps, add value so you are on the essential list, or try to figure out how to protect yourself.
- **Over-emoting:** Sometimes fear expresses itself with strong emotions in opposite directions. It can create a "fight or flight" posture where you are either angry or you become downcast. Both can be unhelpful ways to emotionally respond.
- **Over-protecting:** Sometimes fear can look like being stingy, defensive, or hoarding. We can try to manage the uncertainty around us by protecting ourselves or others. Fear can lead us to the idolatry of self-protection.

Now, these are surely not exhaustive. But I trust that you get the point. Fear is complex and often is the over-application of what is good in another setting.

Potential Steps

What can we do? What steps can we take in trying to win the battle with fear? Let me suggest four questions in light of this passage:

1) What's happening?

It's interesting to me that Joshua's charge from God is clear and candid. Moses is dead—that's true. And in front of him is the Promised Land. Fear involves circumstances. And we need to start by thinking clearly and being honest that the results of our circumstances are not going to be easy.

2) What does God say?

We need to ask ourselves about what God has promised us. We need to fight fear with the promises that God provides. That's one reason why I want you to memorize Isaiah 41:10. Maybe you can develop a promise list and share it with your friends or on social media.

Maybe this makes no sense to you because you are not yet a Christian. Perhaps you don't even understand how the promises of God in Christ are applied amid fearful situations. Maybe you don't even know why the promise "I will be with you" is not only comforting but fulfilled in Christ. We'd love to talk with you about that further.

3) What action should I take?

If you look in the text, you'll notice a focus on obedience. The commands related to Joshua's strength and courage were designed to lead him to take action. And here's where faith comes in. While fear is

still in the air or raging through your soul, we have to take small and big steps of faith. Sometimes it could be as simple as getting out of bed or going to bed. It can mean not replying immediately to an email or turning off your phone for a few hours. It can be as practical as realizing the need to get some help, maybe even call a doctor. It can be taking steps of generosity and giving.

You'll need to evaluate what action you should take based on your circumstances and what is causing your fear.

But here's what I want you to know: the promise that God is going to be with you means that you don't need to be held hostage by fear.

4) **How is this forming me?**

Finally, it would be good to celebrate the ways in which this fear-battle is part of God's plan to accomplish something even greater in your life. Walking by faith while you deal with fear is not easy. It can be a brutal fight. But as Joshua stood before the Jordan River there was a city on the other side named Jericho. And what a story it was going to be.

God has promised that the hard circumstances of life and the brokenness of the world (in us and around us) are all part of his plan for our lives. We may not see it now. We may not understand it. We may not like it. And it may be quite scary.

But believers are given this promise and confirmed in the person of Christ: the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Every fear brought to the Lord, every anxiety or terror weathered under the shelter of his wings reinforces our choice to trust. This means that even the smallest acts of faith, in God's mercy, are self-perpetuating. As Psalms demonstrates over and over, every little taste of God's help and closeness in the face of our fears sparks greater love for God, which he in turn lovingly cultivates into deeper faith and changed lives.⁴

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⁴ Alasdair J. Groves and Winston Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 156 - Kindle Edition.