

THE MASTERY OF FEAR

"And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death." Revelation 1:17-18.

Psychologists tell us that we come into the world with only two inborn fears--the fear of loud noises and the fear of falling. They say that all other fears have been acquired. These other fears, which distort life and undermine physical and spiritual strength, are the product of a world which presses on the individual from every side. Parents are obligated to see to it that their children do not receive from them unnecessary and abnormal fears.

Fear is one of man's most common enemies. It touches every one of us in some way. Few of us are entirely free of the common anxieties which put a blight on life. One does not carry on a normal life for any period of time without encountering the reality of fear. And there is no denying the fact that as we grow older our fears multiply.

Doctors, psychiatrists, and ministers are constantly encountering men and women who cannot live with a quiet mind because they are at the mercy of terrors which exist in their imaginations. Perhaps there has never been a generation as frightened as ours. Everywhere there are people who are fretful, irritable, nervous, depressed, sleepless, and physically under par, and the basic reason is that they are the victims of fear.

We should bear in mind that there are natural fears and neurotic fears. The distinction can be a helpful one. Natural fear, like pain, is one of the sentinels of life. When rightly used, it is the father of courage and the mother of safety. The fear that is natural puts us on the alert, whereas the fear that is neurotic robs us of resources and strength. The fear that is natural is a friend; the fear that is neurotic is an enemy, and unless it is mastered we are likely to be wrecked by it. These are days when neurotic fear has grown to such dimensions that it overshadows the lives of multitudes and robs them of both physical and mental health. Continued fear is a poison to body and mind alike. It absorbs so much attention of the mind that it prevents concentration on anything else. It is impossible to think clearly when one is in the grip of fear. It is a well-known fact that fear lies back of the greater proportion of the nervous and mental breakdowns, which are so numerous in modern times.

Fear is a very distracting, disturbing, and confounding passion. From the cradle to the grave it casts its baneful shadow. All along the pathway of human history man has been afraid. Since Adam's experience in the Garden of Eden, fear has betrayed man's spirit, broken down his defense, unfitted him for the work of life, and added terror to the dying bed. Fear disturbs and distresses many people of all classes--the high and the low, the educated and the ignorant, the wise and the simple, the rich and the poor, the old and the young. This great and dreadful adversary moves through the world, pauses at the door of every heart, and knocks imperiously for entrance. If admitted, fear insidiously, mercilessly, and relentlessly burrows its way to the very center of life and demands undisputed control.

Many people are in the thralldom of fear today. Even many of God's people are afraid. Some are afraid of the past, others of the present, and still others of the future. The range of fear is astonishing. Men are afraid of themselves, afraid of each other, afraid of disease, afraid of losing their jobs, afraid of failure, afraid of losses, afraid of poverty, afraid of being laid on the shelf, afraid of old age, afraid of loneliness, afraid of the loss of loved ones, afraid of death, and afraid of what comes after death. Many allow themselves to be made miserable by fear of the consequences

of their past decisions and actions, and by the fear of what the future holds in store for them. And they are afraid in spite of the fact that at least eighty-one times God has said, "Fear not."

In these days of uncertainty, it is very important that we learn how to master our fears. To this end God said, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." Isaiah 41:10. What a privilege to receive such words of encouragement and inspiration spoken by the One Who has never yet been known to fail! These glorious promises should ease the mind and satisfy the heart of every believer who has learned to trust Him fully. It should encourage you to consider those two words, "Fear not," which stand out like mountain peaks in the Bible. With those words God comforted Abraham: "Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield and exceeding great reward." With those same words He comforted Isaac at his lonely task of digging wells in the wilderness. With the same words, He comforted Jacob, when his son, Joseph, was lost somewhere down in Egypt. So comforted He the Israelites at the Red Sea. These two words, "Fear Not," standing out here and there in the Bible, are a part of our great inheritance as Christians.

I. The Causes of Fear.

There are many causes of fear, but I shall mention only three of the most prominent ones.

1. Sin.

It was the consciousness of guilt that made Adam afraid in the Garden of Eden. And every son of Adam has had the sense of fear in his heart because he also had the consciousness of guilt there. "Fear is the tax that conscience pays to guilt."

2. Lack of Faith.

Men fear each other when they have no faith in each other. Those who are fearful are certainly lacking in faith in God.

3. Lack of Love.

Hatred always creates fear in the heart. "There is no fear in love; but perfect casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." I John 4:18.

II. The Curse of Fear.

Fear is a great detriment in the life of a Christian. I shall mention four evils which it produces.

1. It destroys happiness.

Fear of one kind or another often haunts us and casts a shadow over our happiness. Oh, how miserable fear can make you! It is one of the greatest enemies to happiness and peace.

2. It lowers efficiency.

Fear causes one to see things which are not there in reality. It drains one's energies, depletes his resources, and takes the heart out of him. Nobody is at his best or in full control of his powers if he is the victim of fear. One who is afraid cannot fight life's battles as he ought. Fear will keep any man from being his best and living at his best.

3. It prevents progress.
Fear stops all progress and hinders all advance. If men were controlled always by their fears, there would never be any new enterprises, new institutions, or new discoveries. They who take council of their fears never advance in anything.
4. It dishonors God.
Fear is the very opposite of faith. God is honored by faith, and dishonored by fear.

III. The Conquest of Fear.

Our business is not to get rid of fear, but to master it. Like fire, fear is a marvelous servant, but a terrible master. How can one conquer fear? Christianity has an answer to this pressing human problem and question. Freedom from fear is not a program which has been developed in a school of learning or been arranged by a human agency, but it is a gift from God. "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." II Timothy 1:7. A sound mind, the practice of love, and the acceptance of God's power are the means by which you can conquer fear.

One helpful consideration for those who are the victims of fear is the obvious fact that the majority of the things which we dread never happen. Another helpful consideration is that even the worst troubles will pass away. That was what Lincoln used to say to himself so often in the midst of his many distresses, "This, too, shall pass away."

In Isaiah 41:10 there are two glorious promises which should help us immensely in the conquest of our fears.

1. The Promise of God's Presence.

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee." This promise derives its value from the One Who made it. If these were only the words of a mere man, they would not be so encouraging. Regardless of how sincere, well-meaning, and faithful the man might be, it is quite possible that he would be powerless to give the help that we might need. But these are the words of an Infinite Being, the Mighty God, the powerful Defender of His own, and that makes a tremendous difference.

When Napoleon was with his soldiers they were not afraid, but they exclaimed: "Long live the Emperor! Lead us and we go to victory at the death." In view of the fact that the Christian has a far greater Leader than Napoleon, the believer should dismiss his fears when he hears the Eternal God say, "I am with thee." The promise of His presence is a wonderful encouragement because He does not make a promise that He will not fulfill.

God is fully able to cope with the situation, regardless of how serious it may be. He is equal to any possible emergency. His caution, counsel, and comfort for us are as follows: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee." His presence cheers and inspires us with fearlessness. He has promised to be with us in our temptations, and "with every temptation make a way of escape." Circumstances and surroundings may seem dark and discouraging, but we are always safe when He is near. None of life's perplexing problems will be too hard to solve when He is with us, but instead they will dissolve into nothingness. The promise of His presence applies to life's struggles, afflictions, and trials. Certainly no one was ever tried as was Job. He lost his children. He lost his property. He lost his health. He lost his position. Even his wife turned against him.

Yet in all his trials God was with him, and the last of his life was more prosperous than the first.

"When we cannot see our way,
Let us trust, and still obey;
He who bids us forward go,
Cannot fail the way to show.

Though enwrapped in gloomy night,
We perceive no ray of light;
Since the Lord Himself is here,
'tis not meet that we should fear.

Night with Him is never night,
Where He is, there all is light!
When He calls us, why delay?
They are happy who obey."

"Be not dismayed; for I am thy God." On our part these words imply reverence, submission, and obedience. On God's part they imply guardianship and blessing. He takes special care of His own, and they are always safe because God is with them.

2. The Promise of God's Power.

(1) "I will strengthen thee."

Regardless of what our circumstances may be, as believers in Christ we can rest implicitly upon the Word of God. We will never be in a position where God cannot strengthen us. He is sufficient for all circumstances and all emergencies. He will be with His own in sustaining power. He knows just how to infuse strength into our sinking hearts and to invigorate our spirits.

When He says, "I will strengthen thee," He means that He will fortify the heart against suffering and trial. Near the end of an illness, when the strength is returning and the weakness is departing, there is genuine gladness and gratitude, as those can testify who have been afflicted. It is likewise a great joy to learn that God is able to change our weakness into strength. When we are confronted with some gigantic task, or with some duty that seems to appall us, it is strengthening to know that there is not anything that is too difficult for God. No matter how seemingly impossible the task, nor how heavy the load, His resources will be sufficient. He is able to cope with any and every situation. We need the strength which He promises and which He alone can give.

(2) "I will help thee."

Here He goes a step further and says, "I will help thee," which means I will render thee personal assistance. This promise implies that as we go through this world we have burdens to carry, and some of them are too heavy for us. How sorely we need help when we are taxed beyond our ability--physically, mentally, and spiritually. But, thank God, there is One Who is near to help us. His tender eyes are constantly over us. He knows every step we take, and watches every move we make.

God can give us all the help we need, just when and where we need it. Not only is He able to help us, but He is always willing to help us. He may not always help us just at the time or in the way we desire, because that way may not be best; but in His own time and way He is ever willing to help us.

(3) "I will uphold thee."

God says, "I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." The grasp of the hand is significant of present and close friendship. The right hand is an emblem of power—here, of omnipotent power. There is no left-hand work with God; no sinister work; it is all right-hand work with Him. His faithful and victorious right hand can be relied upon to support us. If we will only place our complete trust in Him, He will shelter us beneath His wings, protect us by His omnipotence, and provide for us by His immeasurable and unfailing love. He will never fail us, for His strength will be equal to every emergency, for He is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever." The sense of His presence is the source of a courage which no danger can dispel, no suffering exhaust, and no death destroy. I know of no encouragement to surpass that given in these glorious promises of God if we will only appropriate and apply them.

"How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?"

In ev'ry condition, in sickness, in health,
In poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth;
At home and abroad, on the land, on the sea,
As your days may demand, shall your strength ever be.

Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, I will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.

When thro' fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flames shall not hurt thee; --- I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

The sould that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, tho' all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"