

Facing our Fears #1

To the north of Nova Scotia in Canada lies Cape Breton Island. It was there near the quaint town of Baddack, on a wooded peninsula, that Alex built his summer cottage. It was really more than just a cottage, more like a nice home. Nestled on 50 acres, Alex called his get-away Ben Brea which means beautiful mountain in Gallic. Breathtakingly beautiful by day and lovely beyond description on a full moonlit night, Alex spent many peaceful and productive summers there.

But every night, Alex went through a bizarre ritual that revealed a dreaded fear that he had. Before he tucked himself away in bed, Alex would go to every window and shut all of the windows and curtains to be sure that no moonlight could enter his house. It seemed to be so much of a paradox, to journey all that way north into Canada to live in a picturesque setting and then shutout the breathtaking view. But Alex's bizarre actions revealed a secret fear that he had, a fear that he confessed only to a few of his closest friends. Alex feared that if he slept in the direct light of the moon, he would suffer from lunacy, madness. Alex feared that if the moon's light fell on him throughout the night, he would wake up in the morning having lost his mind. So Alex closed himself in with all the shades and curtains drawn tight and no windows open lest a breeze blow one of the curtains and let in the light of the moon.

There can be no doubt that Alex was a brilliant man. He certainly has had a tremendous impact on all of our lives. Yet Alex lived almost his entire life imprisoned by this fear of sleeping in direct moonlight. The next time you answer your cell phone or pay your phone bill, think of Alexander Graham Bell, the brilliant inventor who revolutionized the world of communication, the man who lived his life with the fear that he would lose his mind if he ever slept in direct moonlight.

There is nothing that can unsettle our wellbeing faster than fear. When we feel personally threatened in any way, our entire world is affected. We become nervous and anxious. We can't think or reason as effectively. Sometimes we can't sleep as soundly. Often we can have paranoid or irrational thoughts. Our entire life is affected.

Fear knows no human boundaries. Brilliant thinkers and young children all know fear. The rich and the poor know fear. People of all races have fears. All of us here in this Sanctuary know personally what fear is.

And especially today, we are hearing a great deal about fear. All the political candidates are trying to use fear to their own advantage and we are uncertain as to what direction our country whoever becomes President. The extreme vacillations on Wall Street have become totally unpredictable threatening the financial stability of not only our nation but the entire world. We continue to live under the threat of an

Islamic terrorist group that has threatened to kill us just because we are Americans. Everywhere we turn, there seems to be something to fear.

During these next 4 weeks, the Lord willing, we are planning to look at the example of a person who triumphed over fear. He was forced to endure the most distressing of circumstances. He had been imprisoned not because he was an evil person or a danger to society, but he had rather been incarcerated because some influential people were jealous of him. But amazingly, while in prison where we might think that he would be filled with fear, this man wrote a letter to a church in Philippi demonstrating that he had complete victory over fear in his life. In this short book of only 104 verses, the Apostle Paul addresses many potential fears and his secret to living free from their bondage. We are planning to look at 4 of these major fears that we all face and see how Paul gained victory over them.

In the first chapter, Paul addresses his fear of death. After all, we would all consider this to be a legitimate anxiety sitting in a prison cell with one's future quality of life outside of his control. But even in this most dire situation, Paul was not paralyzed by a fear of dying.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain, Paul wrote. Many today in our nation are obsessed with a fear of dying. This fear has altered their entire lifestyle. They are avoiding crowded places, their minds are consumed with morbid thoughts, they are spending vast amounts of money trying to find some illusive fountain of youth. Paul can help us gain victory over the fear of death. We plan to look at his insights in this area from Philippians 1 next week, the Lord willing.

In the second chapter, Paul gives some helpful principles in addressing the fear of what others think about us. After all, Paul was in a very precarious situation not only physically but also with regards to his career. It is not generally a good thing for a preacher to have extended prison terms as part of his resume. I just went through over 50 resumes with the search committee as we looked for candidates to fill our youth and music positions. Not one of those resumes had a prison term listed on them. Now there are church leaders who have served time in jail. Chuck Colson is the executive director of a major Christian organization and has written several best selling books. God's grace can overcome any obstacles. But, generally speaking, I think we would agree that we don't usually associate prison time with our church leadership. Paul's circumstances in the Roman prison put his reputation in jeopardy, and many were using his situation against him spreading rumors. It is only natural to want people to like us and think well of us. How do we handle the fear of what others might think about us? Paul will help us address this very real anxiety.

In the third chapter, Paul addresses his fear of failure. How many times he must have felt a sense of failure sitting all alone in that solitary prison. After all, Paul was a goal oriented person. He was a missionary, a church-planter. Now he was isolated away from people and restricted from doing what he felt God had

called him to do. There are many people in life who never reach their potential because they are too afraid of failing. Some have such a high fear of failure that they won't even attempt anything outside of their comfort zone. So they live the entirety of their life restricted in the prison cell of their comfort zone because of their fears. The Apostle will give some life-changing principles to us that will free us from this self-imposed prison.

Finally, in chapter four we will address the fear of losing our material possessions. This was a very real potential anxiety for the Apostle Paul. After all, Roman prisons were not like our penal institutions today. You were expected to provide your own food and clothing back in the first century. The Roman soldiers really didn't care very much if you starved or froze to death. Today, some choose prison because they have more in prison than they would have on the outside. When they are released, they immediately break the law again so that they might return to the security that they find in prison. That wasn't the way it was back in Paul's day. So here Paul was in prison expected to provide for himself but not in a position where he could conduct his trade as a tent-maker. How was he going to meet his needs? Paul wrote that he had learned the great secret of being content in whatever state he was in. We need to learn that lesson from him as well. In a day when there is so much uncertainty in our financial institutions, when so many have watched helplessly as their 401k's have dwindled down threatening their financial security, we all need to learn the secret of true contentment. Paul can teach that to us.

So this is where we are going. But before we begin our journey, we need to clearly see one major point. And this is what I want to emphasize with you this morning. Fear should not be an option for the Christian. It is never God's will for one of His children to be imprisoned in the penitentiary of fear. Perhaps the most repeated command in all of the Bible is *Fear Not*. 65 times the command *Do Not Be Afraid* is found in the NIV. If there is one thing that God makes crystal clear to His children, it is the fact that it is not His will for them to live controlled by anxiety and fear. Fear should not be an option for the Christian because it is opposed to the life of faith. When we fear, we are not trusting in the Lord as we should. Fear should not be an option for the Christian because it can have a paralyzing affect on us. A person who is frozen with fear can't respond in constructive ways. Fear should not be an option for the Christian because uncontrolled anxiety enslaves us. Whereas Jesus Christ by His own admission came to give us divine truth that would set us free, fear restricts and imprisons us.

Fear is enslaving, imprisoning.

*A person who is claustrophobic cannot go into small, confined spaces. Her world has been limited to just large, open areas.

*A person who is anthropophobic won't go out into crowded places because of his fear of society. His world has been limited to peopleless places.

*A person who has nyctophobia won't go out after the sun sets because of her fear of the dark. Her world has been limited to daytime activities.

*A person who has microphobia often won't leave the house at all because of his fear of germs. His world has been limited to his own sanitized household.

*Howard Hughes near the end of his life was one of the richest people in the whole world, but he was a self-imposed prisoner in a few rooms of his house because of all these fears.

*The more fears we have in life, the more imprisoned our lives become. God has not designed for His children to live that way. God is the author of freedom. He is totally free Himself. He is free from fear and, therefore, totally free in His being. And God has given His truth to us so that we might be set free. God desires that we be set free from the bondage of our sin through His gift of forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ, and He desires that we be set free from the imprisoning nature of earthly fears and anxieties as well.

As the Apostle Paul was beginning his 2nd letter to Timothy, he wrote these words: *For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. (2 Tim. 1:7 KJV)*

If we are filled with fear, we can rest assured that this spirit is not coming from God because God does not give us the spirit of fear.

What does God give us?

*He gives us the strength of His power so that we might have courage to face adversarial situations. Obviously the reason why we have a problem with anxieties in the first place is because this life continuously presents us with contrary situations, circumstances that appear harmful to us that are totally beyond our control. But God's answer is not to be filled with fear, but rather to tap into the power of the One who ultimately is in total control of all circumstances – the omnipotent God who created and sustains the universe.

*God also gives us the security of His love. God's love is unconditional for His children. This quality of love gives us complete confidence in our relationship with Him and actually is an antidote to fear. The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:18: *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.*

*And God also gives us the wisdom of a sound mind. God gives us the common sense that we need to make good judgments, to not act foolishly or presumptuously. God through the Apostle James invites anyone who lacks wisdom to just ask Him for it with the promise that He will give it liberally to him.

⁵ *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him (James 1:5)*

So God offers His power and His love and a sound mind to His children. But He never gives them a spirit of fear. Whereas power and love and wisdom are consistent with God's nature, fear is opposed to God's nature. So when we are filled with anxiety of fear, we can be sure that God is not the source of it. We need to

learn how to deal with our natural fears constructively. Now sometimes we need some help with our fears. Sometimes a fear can become such a psychological issue that we need some help from a counselor systematically break down those imprisoning walls. But we need to realize that the spirit of fear does not come from God. It is God's desire that we be free from debilitating fears in our lives.

Paul had to learn these lessons. When facing the natural anxiety of being destitute of all material possessions, Paul wrote *I have **learned** the secret of being content in any and every situation, (Phil. 4:12)*. Contentment did not just come naturally for the Apostle Paul. Greed is natural to our fallen human natures. Covetousness is natural to our fallen human natures. Dissatisfaction is natural to our fallen human natures. But these are not productive in our lives; these do not bring true contentment to us. So Paul wrote that as he grew in his relationship with the Lord, he learned the secret of being content. And this knowledge freed him from fear and anxiety in this area of his life. We need to learn these same lessons – and we will seek to do so during these next weeks.

When French explorers found the New Caledonia Islands in the Pacific Ocean, they observed the indigenous people using a very simple, but effective method of catching lobsters. Fishing is very important to these people for they live on a relatively small island of 6,500 square miles isolated some thousand miles northeast from Australia. They can't farm much, so must rely upon their expertise in fishing. And catching lobsters can be a tricky business. Lobsters can be difficult to find, living on the ocean floor hiding in the sand or under rocks. So these native divers had to hold their breath for some time swimming into the lobster's natural habitat in order to locate them. But finding the lobster was just the first problem. For a lobster in its natural environment with its powerful fore claws is not easy to grab, especially when the diver is running short on his air supply. American fishermen today catch lobsters in enclosed traps called pots that are baited with fish and set on the ocean floor. That way they don't have to deal with the lobsters themselves until they are already caught. Then they put a band around their powerful claws so that they are not in danger. But these native New Caledonians didn't use traps. They just sent divers down without any external air supply to grab the lobsters by hand. But the method that they had devised was very effective because the divers had learned to use the lobster's fear against them. You see, a lobster has a natural fear of an octopus. If a lobster sees an octopus, it just freezes up and becomes paralyzed by its own fear. So these clever New Caledonian fishermen had learned to fasten a dead octopus to a pole with a long line and dangle the octopus from a boat on the water's surface down near the bottom of the ocean floor. When the divers came upon a lobster, they found it literally paralyzed with fear. The diver could grab it without any concern of losing a finger to the lobster's claws. The lobster really wasn't in danger – the octopus was dead. But the lobster's own fear so debilitated it that it couldn't defend itself and became easy prey for the fisherman.

There are many people today in our country who are becoming more and more obsessed by their fears. Their fears are paralyzing them, causing them to think and act irrationally. A Christian need not live with a spirit of fear – in fact, we can say with confidence that it is not God’s will that we have a spirit of fear. There is nothing that can pass into a Christian’s life that does not first flow through the loving hands of his Heavenly Father. Now this doesn’t mean that Christians are not exposed to difficult circumstances – in fact, Jesus promised trials and tribulation to His followers. The Apostle Paul wrote this book that we plan to study from a prison cell. We would all agree that he was in a difficult situation. But God has promised that He will work all things together for good in the lives of His children.

Now an unbeliever has good reason to fear – not only in this life but in the life to come as well. But the one who has become a member of God’s family through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ knows a God who will give power and love and a sound mind, but will never give a spirit of fear.

Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior this morning? Do you have the peace of God that passes all understanding ruling in your heart today?