

## **Overcoming the Crippling Fear of Man – 3**

**By David de Bruyn**

The fear of man – it is a crippling, pervasive sin. Man, since his rebellion to God, looks for the reactions of the living beings he can see with his physical eyes to affirm him. Instead of seeking the pleasure of God – the one he cannot see with physical eyes, but with eyes of faith, he seeks the pleasure of those he can see. He walks by sight, not by faith, so his eyes are on man, not on God. Because of looking to other men, man ends up in bondage to the opinions of others, shackled by fear that others will reject us, despise us, harm us, ridicule us – this is the sinful fear of man that dominates our lives. We have been looking at the fear of man for two weeks now. We saw that the fear of man is actually rooted in selfishness. Selfishness rejects the fear of God and seeks to please ourselves by using, or idolatrously needing, others. We look to others to affirm us, help us, protect us, praise us – and in so doing we place them in a position of great power and influence. In short, people become idols to us – we need them, instead of being able to love them.

We have seen that the solution to the fear of man is the fear of the Lord. We must repent of the selfishness and the God-neglect we are guilty of in looking to man for things that we are to seek in God. We must learn to revere God in a way which displaces the fear of man. We must then seek to reflect Christ in our actions toward men.

So far we have seen this principle at work in the two types of man-fearing we have looked at so far – fear of humiliation, and fear of rejection or ridicule. There is a third kind of fear of man, which we have not dealt with yet – fear of man attacking, threatening or harming us.

Living in the dangerous areas we do, it is not uncommon to have this fear on our minds pretty frequently. The fear of being shot, stabbed, raped or assaulted is by no means an unfounded fear as far as South Africa goes. How are we to overcome this fear in such a dangerous country?

The first thing we need to point out is that there is a difference between what we might call caution arising from real threat and sinful fear arising from unbelief. God has built it into humans to have a desire for self-preservation. God has given us a sense of the value of our own lives, and we shrink back or fight to prevent our lives from being taken from us. If we did not have a sense of danger, a sense of threat, a sense of alarm at being attacked, then we would not be able to function. Life has real threats, real dangers. It can be a sense of danger as you stand at the edge of a high mountain, or during a dangerous storm where your vulnerability is exposed. If you had no sense of danger, you might harm yourself. It can be the sense of danger as you feel your car's brakes failing, and the need to react. In order to continue to live, and to know the value of life, we must have a real sense of danger, of caution, even of alarm and emergency. Anytime you are aware of possible harm to yourself, a normal reaction is to understand this danger, and to exercise consequent caution.

But there is a difference between this sense of danger, and fear. A sense of danger is most often a real understanding of possible threats. Certainly, godly people were aware of the threats. Paul writes at length that he was well aware of all the dangers:

*“Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;*  
(2Co 11:25-26)

Knowing the various threats to himself was Paul’s normal, healthy sense of reality. Paul, like any of us, did not want to suffer unnecessarily. But does this mean that Paul feared these things? No, that is another matter entirely. Paul knew the dangers, but nowhere do we find him saying he feared them. Instead, we find him saying to Timothy:

*... “for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” (2Ti 1:7)*

Fear on the other hand, is unbelief. Fear is not simply being aware of danger; **it is concluding that you are at the mercy of those dangers.** Fear is taking the real or potential threats and concluding that God is not in control, therefore, you ought to dread the circumstances or the people that might harm you. As we have seen before, fear is transferring your trust to people, where it does not belong, until you are in bondage to them. No one can fault you for being completely aware of the kind of threats that are out there. But when that causes you to shrink back from what you know God wants you to do, that is unbelief. That is a statement not only about how big you think the danger is, it is a statement about how big you think God is.

If we see some examples from Scripture, we will again see the process of selfishness, substitution and slavery being the pattern in the fear of man. We see Abraham being someone who was sometimes in the grip of the fear of man. In Genesis 12:

*“Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, ‘I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.” (Gen 12:10-13)*

Here we see the fear of man at work in even a godly man like Abram. It begins with selfishness. Abram’s sense of self-preservation becomes idolatrous. His life means more to Him than obeying the commands of God, than pleasing the LORD who gave Him life in the first place. Not trusting God’s providential care, he believes that the men of Egypt will kill him to get Sarai his wife. He is no longer trusting God to preserve His life. He has substituted man in the place of God as far as who has control over his life on this earth. From there, he is in the grip of fear. He is in bondage to them. He is enslaved to his fear of man, and it drives him to lie instead of honour God with the truth. Selfishness leads to substitution which leads to slavery.

We see it at work again in 10 of the spies who were sent by Moses to look at the land of Canaan. They go in and begin to see giants and fortified cities. Their eyes wander off from the promises, purposes and power of God to themselves. Thoughts of self-preservation now take on idolatrous proportions, evicting the fear of God. Here the faithless, self-centred words:

*'And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan." (Num 13:27-29)*

*'Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are." (Num 13:31)*

Notice, there was no mention of God. No mention of God being stronger than man. Their eyes are on self, and then on man. They have substituted man for God. The power and strength of their human opponents is now foremost in their eyes, in a place where the power and strength of God ought to have been. And having done that, they are in bondage to them. They are in cold fear of these people. They are too timid to go up to the land. And we read further:

*'And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt." (Num 14:2-4)*

For this fear of man, God punished Israel with wanderings in the desert for 40 years.

The same is true of us. Anytime we perceive a threat, real or imagined, we must guard what happens next, that possibility of harm or danger to us must be seen in context. Who is in control of life? Who gave us life in the first place? Who controls the day I die? Who allows everything that happens to me? If the dangers of life, if the threats to my person are not seen in context of God; if they are not looked at with eyes of faith that bring God's sovereign care into the picture, our eyes will move to ourselves. In the absence of a Strong Defender and Protector, we start to think that our lives, our safety is in our own hands. Our problem is now not the potential threat, but our own love of self. We have excluded God from the picture. Now we start to measure up our resources versus the potential threat. We start to work out if our reflexes, our plans, our money, our security systems, our defence techniques, our decisions will be enough to outwit, thwart, avoid, escape or defeat the danger. The focus is now on man - another man's strength or resources versus my own. And since it is impossible to know with absolute certainty if we will be attacked, and what the outcome will be from a human point of view, we are in bondage to fearing what man can do to us.

Throughout Scripture, you see the command, “Fear not”. God commanded Moses, and Moses often commanded the people – “Fear not”. Joshua took up this call to courage as Israel went into the land, “Fear not”. They were not saying, “Pretend things are better than they are” They were not saying, “Be optimistic that no harm will come your way”. They were saying “Face the dangers head on with the Lord your God as your shield”.

All along, the call was not to bury your head in the sand and pretend there were no dangers. Nor was it to take no precautions. Israel had to defend herself. Trusting in the Lord does not mean being lazy or passive. The call was, “Trust in the Sovereign, Omnipotent God who is working for you and in you.”

Hear David, the man who faced danger most of his life – from Saul, from Israel’s enemies, and eventually from his own son and other conspirators:

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple. (Psa 27:1-4)*

Again, he says: *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Psa 56:3-4)*

So once again, the biblical solution is going to be repentance, reverence and reflection.

Firstly we must repent of the selfishness and substitution that grips our heart when we are in fear of harm from men. God is not displeased with a healthy sense of self-preservation. He is displeased with selfishness that leads to unbelief. He is displeased with a love of self, so intense that it excludes God from the picture and regards its own life and comfort and health as the single most important thing in the universe, above even the glory of God.

We are to see that our lives, and our times and our health are in God’s hands. Rev 4:11 says its well: *“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created. (Rev 4:11)*

We were made because God wanted us to be here. We exist for His glory and pleasure, not for our own. Thus, there is something more important than my self-preservation, it is God’s will. God’s will for my life; His pleasure, His desire to create and sustain me is the reality that overshadows perceived and real dangers. As believers, we are invulnerable until God wills us to leave this life. We must repent of a focus on ourselves that magnifies us and shrinks God.

Notice God’s rebuke of his people in Isaiah:

*“I, I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy? And where is the wrath of the oppressor? (Isa 51:12-13)*

Notice something – God does not accuse His people of weakness – He accuses them of arrogance! “Who are **you**, He says, that you are afraid of mortal man, and have dismissed the Creator of the universe? You have a god-complex if you think that man is so strong as to be worthy of more fear than your Creator”. This is selfishness and substitution and it needs to be repented of. We need to see that our lives are not in our own hands and any attitudes of the heart that act that way are unbelief.

The next thing that we need to have then is Reverence – that is the fear of the Lord. Again, we are to meditate on things regarding the nature of God that causes an awesome reverence which floods our souls and drives out the fear of man. The Lord Jesus gave this principle when He said,

*"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" (Luk 12:4-5)*

The idea there is have greater reverence for the power that God has over your being than the power a human appears to have over your being. After all, a human can only take your human life. God is able to send your very soul for all eternity into the lake of fire. Thus, who ought we to fear more? There are three things about God we need to meditate on so that our fear, reverence and trust in Him displaces our fear of man:

**1) God is Sovereign.** Nothing happens, including the evil acts of men, which is outside His control. God is the Supreme, All-Powerful Ruler of the universe. Nothing happens which God does not permit. It is not simply that God rules over good and good people. He rules over evil and evil people. God does not create or author sin, but He has permitted it and can control it.

*“The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.” (Pro 16:4)*

Because evil doers and those who seek us harm are in rebellion to God, it does not mean that they are uncontrollable. They refuse to obey His laws, but that does not mean they are outside of His power. Asaph said of God’s work with evildoers:

*“...until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.” (Psa 73:17-20)*

God is not reacting, or trying to keep up. He is running the universe, and the evil acts of men, done of their own will are permitted by the sovereign plan of God. He can and does restrain the large majority of man’s sin. What He allows is for His great purposes to glorify Himself and bless His people.

**2) God is just.** God is not sweeping sins under the carpet. His pure holiness means that if one sin goes unpunished, He ceases to be God. Every sin is a sin against God, and God will not allow the smallest sin to go unpunished. When it looks like ‘people are getting away with it’ we must see that we are seeing a very small view of the big picture. Every sin will be punished, either in hell, or on the Cross. Those who reject Christ will be punished in hell for all eternity. Those who receive Christ have their sins paid for by Him. But no sin goes unpunished. God’s justice is perfect, and the final situation will have the scales of justice perfectly balanced.

*“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Rom 12:19)*

*“And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.” (Luk 18:7-8)*

**3) God is a Good Shepherd.** A shepherd does not unnecessarily allow harm to come to his sheep. Jesus said,

*“I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. (Joh 10:11-12)*

If you are a child of God, then God protects you. He not only protects you from evildoers, but from sin, Satan, the world and many other unknown, unseen spiritual and physical dangers. Harm that comes our way is not an oversight on God’s part, but a carefully chosen and controlled event in our lives which will turn out for our good, either now or in eternity.

*“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Heb 13:5-6)*

Thirdly, we overcome the fear of man by Reflecting. We reflect Jesus Christ back to God and man. Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law, which He Himself summed up as love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself. In other words, a crucial way that we are to cast out the fear of harm is not simply to repent of selfishness that neglects God and worship self, not only to reverence God as sovereign, just and a Good Shepherd, but to reflect Jesus Christ by loving God and others. Love is marked out by God as something that overcomes fear.

*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. (1Jo 4:18)*

Loving God and others casts out fear, because the two cannot co-exist. Fear is asking, what will be done to me? Love is asking what I can do for others. Fear is essentially self-protecting, love is self-sacrificing. Fear shrinks away from others, love propels us toward others. Basically, the more fear, the less love, the more love, the less fear. This is why Paul wrote to Timothy...

*“for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” (2Ti 1:7)*

Love casts out fear because instead of being self-protective and self-focused, it overcomes those by seeking to meet the needs of others. A mother, usually frightened of driving, will get in a car and drive to pick up her child if she hears he has been hurt.

Love conquers fear because it gets our eyes off self. The verse also tells us God has given us power. This power is divine enablement to accomplish God-given tasks. We have power over sin and self, power over worldliness, indeed, even power over Satan, in the sense that he is a defeated foe. Fear arises from a sense of weakness and vulnerability. God comforts us by reminding us that He has given us all we need to face life. And then thirdly, we are given a spirit of self-control. Fear so often paralyses the mind, choking us, causing cycles of panic and withdrawal.

God has given us the ability to have a disciplined, sound mind – the ability to bring our mind and body under control to do God’s will. That’s courage. Courage is not when we are oblivious to the dangers or the threats. Courage is when we are well aware of them, and sense the great threat to ourselves, but face these dangers because we believe God wants us to do so in His power and strength.

In this way, we reflect Christ. He loved God and He loved others. It was this focus that caused Him not to fear even His death on the cross – but to embrace it as His Father’s will. It’s this kind of life filled with love, power and a sound mind that allowed the martyrs to face death on a burning stake or otherwise, because they loved God, and loved others. Love casts out fear.

The fear of man brings a snare. Whether it is fearing humiliation, rejection or harm, it enslaves us. It’s rooted in unbelief – having our eyes on self, not God. When we thus walk by sight we look to man to affirm us and praise us and accept us and protect us. But this substitution brings us into slavery to man, where we thought we could simply use man, we end up needing him in an idolatrous way.

God calls us to repentance – to realise His pleasure over us ought to be our primary concern. He calls us to reverence – to have the fear of the Lord purge out the fear of man. He calls us to reflect His Son, who lived a life of love, not fearing man, but loving them, not needing man, but serving him, while pleasing God.

May we increasingly make the pleasure of God our primary focus and seek to please God and love man.

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