

A Primer on Overcoming Fear

By Eddie Spencer

One of the most terrifying experiences of my life occurred when I began my work as a church planter in Lakeland. We did not have many people, but we had a building. Each night when I went home, I would see our church sign without a light shining on it, because the light that was perched 40 to 50 feet on the corner of our building was out. Being one of the few able bodied people in a group of 15, I decided to climb a ladder, make my way up the steep roof, move to the edge of it, and change the light bulb.

The problem I had failed to consider my fear of heights. As I climbed the roof, far steeper up-close than from ground level, I was struck with an overwhelming sense of fear – shortness of breath, rapid pulse rate, light-headedness, physical paralysis, and a desire to shout a four letter word – “Mama!” Only by God’s grace am I still not on top of that roof. No, the light bulb did not get changed that day.

It raises the question, “How do we overcome or at least keep fear from paralyzing us?” We should note that not all fear is destructive. There is a constructive fear. It keeps us from doing stupid things like getting onto a 40-foot roof to change a light bulb. Blaise Pascal says, “Virtuous fear leads us to dependence; viscous fear leads us to despair.” Therefore, how do we battle the viscous fear that leads to despair?

First, we must seek to understand the origin of fear. My mother has a lingering fear of water. The reason was because her mother instilled that fear in her. The battle with fear begins as we seek to think rationally about it. We must seek to understand why we are afraid of something or someone.

Secondly, we must expose the lies behind the fear. Viscous fears have their origin in the native language of the founder of lies and deception, the devil (Jn. 8:44). Destructive fear is one of the strategies of the evil one that seeks to paralyze Christians, which keeps them from living life that is truly life. For example, our teenager is 30 minutes late. We are concerned. We will have a chat with him about it tomorrow, but we choose not to panic. Teenagers are occasionally irresponsible. This is a rational thought.

Destructive fear, on the other hand, takes a concerning reality, panics, and spins out nightmares. “Oh no, my son has probably been in a car accident, was thrown from the car, is lying on the side of the road, and as his life is ebbing away, he’s calling my name!” Psychologists refer to such thinking as catastrophizing. Such catastrophizing may make for good soap operas and country songs, but it is not good for a healthy mental life. The Bible reminds us that behind such thought patterns is the father of lies, who desires to steal life and destroy the human personality.

Thirdly, we must confront fear with truth and trust. Expose the lies that drive fear with the exhortation of truth. Truthful words come in two forms. One form of truth that diffuses the strength of lies is simply right and reasonable thinking. “My son was simply being irresponsible and probably forgot his cell phone. He has not been in a wreck.” The second form of truth, which is the conqueror of all destructive fears, is God’s truth. Memorize and meditate on God’s thinking about His people (Rom. 8:35-39; Ps. 27:1-5; Jn. 10:28-29; Is. 43:1-3).

Lastly, and most importantly, we must cultivate a constructive fear, the fear of God. Destructive fear makes us the center of the universe, shrinking God and dooming us to the tyranny of people’s opinions, and tosses us here and there by the circumstances of life. Constructive fear focuses not only on the greatness of God, but also on His loving adoption of us as His family. We belong to God, who is holy in character and awesome in power. As the second stanza of Amazing Grace says, “It was God that taught my heart to fear. It was God my fears relieved.”