

Living in a Dangerous World

Moving from Fear to Faith

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We live in a scary world—a world full of dangers. We're not all afraid of the same things in the same way to the same degree, but everyone wrestles with fear.

Some fears are purely individual. Whether you adore spiders or get the heebie-jeebies around them is a matter of your unique personality and life experiences. So is being afraid of flying or dogs or identity theft or getting locked out of your house.

Other fears—death, chronic wasting illnesses, terrorist attacks, and damaging weather—are more universal. These kinds of fears touch us all in one way or another. They are part of the human experience of living in a broken, fallen world.

Sometimes fear is healthy. We come into this world unaware of its dangers, and we need to learn what to avoid. Babies don't know enough to stay away from lead paint or electrical outlets. Children need to understand that you don't get into a stranger's car and that there is good and bad touch. Teens have to be taught that you should not take everything people offer you at a party, not even from your friends. It's important to learn what to avoid in this life.

Sometimes, however, your fears grow so large that they absorb too much of your attention. When fear is too big, it ends up controlling your life, dictating where

you will and won't go and what you can and can't do. God never intended for you to be imprisoned by that kind of unmanageable fear. Instead, he longs for you to experience his love, which frees you from the trap of paralyzing fear and restores fear to its proper dimensions.

Sadly, many of us have tried to deal with our fears in ways that have not worked. It's ironic, but often the things you think will release you from fear are the very things that keep you stuck in it.

A Few Inadequate Ways to Handle Fear

One popular way of dealing with fear is to place a barrier between yourself and danger so that it can't get at you. We hire security agencies. We police our borders. We buy software filters to search incoming files for viruses, worms, or some other bit of programming code that might wreak havoc with our hard drives.

Now, I'm very glad for my software filter and equally glad that we employ border guards, but barriers are never 100 percent effective. Some devious computer genius is always one step ahead of my blocking software. Terrorists plot ways to get around the Transportation Security Administration. In a frightening world where people set out to harm others, merely attempting to insulate yourself from danger will always come up short.

A second inadequate approach to danger realizes that you cannot always prevent bad things from happening, so you try to prepare for as many eventualities as you can foresee.

During the Y2K computer scare, people stockpiled food, water, fuel, camping gear, batteries, weapons, etc. They believed that a computer glitch at the turn of the millennium might disrupt supply and power lines so it would be impossible to carry on our modern way of life. Such concerns were heightened after 9/11 as terrorists demonstrated that they can substantially alter our way of life.

Being prepared sounds reasonable until you realize that there is no objective limit to this strategy. How much stuff should you gather and store in order to be safe? Three days' worth? Three weeks? Three months? One man I know filled half his basement with supplies for Y2K. He later acknowledged that he had gone overboard, but that is so easy to do. When you try guarding yourself against all possible future scenarios, it gets hard to distinguish between what is prudent and what is paranoid.

A third approach to dealing with fear is to rely on information to rescue you. If you develop a spot on your skin, the baby keeps coughing, the wallpaper turns a funny color, or a snowstorm threatens your area, you

can quickly Google your experience to learn how to handle it. But once again you'll face the same challenge: when is enough information enough? We've all experienced a dangerous storm that veered in a direction no one anticipated. We've all had friends who mysteriously contracted cancer shortly after an annual checkup gave them a clean bill of health. The stock market can plunge dramatically in a few short hours and virtually wipe out your retirement account, even though you just checked it that morning.

How do you know when your information is current enough? If your solution to danger is to be informed, you will spend every waking moment wondering if you have enough information.

Inadequate Strategies Affect Your Faith

Even worse than being ineffective, these strategies gradually weaken your relationship with God. Where does God fit in a world where you think you can protect yourself by being diligent or careful? You won't seek him for wisdom—you already have information. You won't pray for his provision in times of uncertainty—you have cases of canned food and bottled water. You won't seek his mercy during droughts or floods—you'll check The Weather Channel to see when things might change.

Only in extreme cases will you turn to him. But at that point you'll have no reason to trust him because

you didn't build any relationship with him over time. You will become a functional and practical atheist, trusting more in your 401(k) than in the God who promises daily bread.

Real Faith Affects Your Strategies

To begin unraveling the hold fear has on you, you need to relearn that God is a greater source of safety than any human strategy. What gives you confidence that he can be? Listen to his heart for frightened people.

From Genesis to Revelation God regularly begins conversations with his people with words like the following: "Do not be afraid" (Genesis 15:1; 2 Kings 19:6; Revelation 1:17); "Do not fear" (Isaiah 35:3-4; Haggai 2:5) or "Be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:6-9). He says those things to encourage and embolden people who are weakened by their fears. Not only does he recognize that frightened people need special care (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 1 Peter 3:14), he makes sure he's first in line to give it to them.

There's a special place in his heart for you when you're scared. He doesn't threaten or intimidate (1 Kings 19:11-13). He moves toward you, longing to lessen your fear (1 John 4:16-18). And he invites you to move toward him for the same purpose. "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10).

When you find your greatest safety in your relationship with the Lord, you are free to live without being controlled by fear. Sometimes that means you will flee danger with a clear mind (Luke 4:28–30; Acts 9:23–25; 12:5–11). At other times you may surprise yourself by moving *toward* danger because you're convinced that is where God wants you. Other people might think you're foolish, but you'll know there is no safer place on earth than where God's call takes you.

Faithful Responses to Real Dangers

And you won't be alone. Scripture introduces you to people who were not reckless or foolhardy but did move toward danger at times, believing it was God's best for them. Consider the apostle Paul's experience as he ended his last missionary journey by returning to Jerusalem. One of his partners, Luke, records the following:

After we had been [at Philip's house in Caesarea] a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 21:10–13)

Paul had something very real to fear: God promised him that he would be bound as a prisoner. Because his friends understood how dangerous this was they tried hard to persuade him not to go.

Their tears and words broke Paul’s heart, yet instead of backing away or trying to minimize the threat, he embraced it. He realized that God had a bigger goal in mind than keeping him safe in this life. So he didn’t give in to the strong and understandable temptation to protect himself.

Does Paul’s decision to trust God make sense to you? If your goal in life is to live as safely as possible, then it won’t. It can’t. It won’t seem reasonable to put yourself in danger for the sake of what God is doing on earth. Instead, you will shrink his kingdom down to the size that your fears find comfortable. Sadly, you will miss seeing the kingdom of God as it moves forward on this earth, reclaiming everything that was lost to the curse (Colossians 1:19–20).

Paul understood that although dangers and threats in this life are real, the ultimate triumph of Christ's kingdom is even more real. As Jesus said earlier, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Jesus knew you can have both peace and courage while facing real threats.

Jesus wasn't an unrealistically optimistic person, nor was he speaking out of ignorance. He understood just how dangerous this planet can be. People secretly plotted against him in back rooms. They tried to seize him (John 7:30, 44; 8:20; 10:39); mobs tried to stone him (John 8:59; 10:31) or throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). Daily he lived in the midst of dangers from enemies seen and unseen. Notice, though, that he wasn't controlled by fear.

He never spent time trying to learn all he could about his enemies. He didn't try to uncover their plots, ferret out their ringleaders, or discover where they held their meetings. He did not rely on information to save him.

He didn't try to out-manuever his enemies. He didn't manipulate his followers with provocative speeches to stir them up against the religious leaders, hoping they would neutralize the threat of the Sanhedrin.