

Responding to fear with faith

A message given in response to the COVID-19 in 2020

March 14th, 2020

1. Introduction

I'd love to run a poll tomorrow asking pastors across the country if they changed the direction of their message this Sunday due to the coronavirus.

I began working on my sermon Yesterday and was planning to continue in 1 John 4, but felt God leading me to address this question specifically: How do we respond to fear with faith?

We see all around us a nation in the state of crisis. Some are responding to it out of genuine concern and caution. Others are panicking and causing a hysteria due to fear and anxiety about the pandemic. As Christians, we have the opportunity either to live out our faith in a very real way or succumb to the fear that is gripping the hearts of many around us.

If you look up the word fear, in the NASB this word is used 77 times throughout the NT. If you alternately look up the word faith in the NASB, you will find it is used 246 times in the NT. Faith appears 3 times more than the word fear.

Definition of Faith

Faith as generally used in each of these cases can be defined as subjectively meaning firm persuasion, conviction, belief in the truth, veracity.

Spiros Zodeates says this about faith: [It is used] as a technical term indicative of the means of appropriating (or taking possession of) what God in Christ has for man, resulting in the transformation of man's character and way of life. Such can be termed gospel or Christian faith.

Definition of Fear

Fear, as represented by two different greek words, means fear, terror, in addition to terrify and frighten or to put in fear.

Why is it important to make this distinction between faith and fear?

It's important to make the distinction between faith and fear because fear is a feeling and faith is a choice. One is a response to our circumstances, the other is a decision regardless of our circumstance.

You've probably heard the quote "Fear and faith cannot exist in the heart at the same time" but this isn't in the Bible. In fact, I would argue that faith can exist in a heart that is fearful. When we have faith in Christ, that is we take possession of what God has for us in Christ (His promises, etc), then we are making a conscious choice to believe what God has said even in the midst of our circumstances good or bad. We might be fearful (which is a feeling) but we choose to believe what God says (faith).

Q: Has anyone here been skydiving before? Raise your hand.

Q: Did you afraid at any point?

Q: Even though you felt fear, did you still jump out of the plane? Why?

I have been skydiving before too and even though I was fearful, I was strapped to my jump leader who I was skydiving tandem with and I trusted not only in what he said but in his physical person. I relied on him and trusted in him to keep me safe even though I was terrified of what I was fixing to do.

Over and over again in the Gospels, we see Jesus recognizing the courageous faith of these individuals.

The paralytic being let down through the roof.

And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." - Mar 2:5

Blind Bartimaeus encountering Jesus.

Then they came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar [named] Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road. When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him [here.]" So they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you." Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And the blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, [I want] to regain my sight!" And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and [began] following Him on the road. - Mar 10:46-52

The Roman Centurion who simply asked Jesus to speak the healing of his servant.

Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." - Luke 7:9

These are just a few of the instances we are given in scripture. Remember, faith is taking possession of what God has in Christ for us which results in a transformation of life and character. It's taking Christ at His word. This is why Jesus marveled at the faith that he saw. These people had either heard Jesus' teaching, heard of the miracles He performed, or witnessed them first hand. They believed that He was able to do these same things for them and they acted upon that faith.

2. Why do we fear? Addressing intimidation and lack of faith.

So now the question is, why do we fear? Let's look at a pivotal passage of scripture to understand this. Luke 8:22-25

Now on one of [those] days Jesus and His disciples got into a boat, and He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they launched out. But as they were sailing along He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended on the lake, and they [began] to be swamped and to be in danger. They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm. And He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were fearful and amazed, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?" - Luke 8:22-25 NASB

What do we observe about this passage?

1. The disciples were going about their normal day and getting in a boat was routine. They were masters of the sea and masters of the nets. This was easy. They could handle this, or so they thought.
2. When the storm came up, they encountered enough turbulence that it endangered their lives. They were going to sink and likely die. They were intimidated, fearful, and understandably so. They didn't fully understand who Jesus was and that he could save them.
3. Jesus rose up and rebuked that which intimidated them and caused them to lose faith.
4. Then Jesus questions their faith.
5. The disciples marvel and fear at what Jesus does.

The disciples became fearful because they were intimidated by the storm. They were looking at their external circumstance (which is only natural) and reacting to what was happening around them. Jesus wanted them to recognize who He was and his ability to aid in this situation

Note: Pastor Phillip has noted before that this storm was likely demonic in nature due to the circumstances, what had happened with the people and the fact that they would encounter the demoniac.

What is intimidation?

Intimidation: To make timid, to make fearful.

Something that seeks to overwhelm us to the point of doing three things:

1. Losing our focus on Christ
2. Not believing or having faith in Christ
3. Giving our attention to the object that intimidates us, which causes us to fear.

Why do we fear? The feeling of fear is a result of us being intimidated by something. When something bigger than or unknown to us seems to threaten us in some way, we are intimidated. It could be:

1. Death (as it was for the disciples in this situation)
2. Uncertain situations
3. Not feeling like we have control
4. Talking with strangers
5. Sicknesses
6. The future
7. Another person (friend, relative, sibling, spouse, leadership, etc)

Jesus was questioning their faith, recognizing that they had become intimidated by the storm that came upon them. Why was this important to Jesus?

- The disciples had seen many miracles that Jesus did, yet they still did not recognize his ability to work miraculously in their situation.
- They called Jesus “teacher” and “lord” but they did not take Jesus at His word and believe on Him.
- Small as it seems to us, He was revealing to them that in this case, they allowed themselves to be overcome or intimidated by fear.

Not being intimidated by what brings us fear.

When we are fearful, we can choose one of two options:

1. We can respond in faith by believing what Christ has told and promised us and overcome that which intimidates us, having faith through our fear.

OR

2. We can allow the object of intimidation to overcome us through fear, not exercising faith in any way.

In other words, we will overcome intimidation through faith or intimidation will overcome us through fear.

Examples of people overcoming fear through faith.

Asa’s test of faith when the Ethiopian’s come against him - 2 Chronicles 14:9-13:

Now Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and 300 chariots, and he came to Mareshah. So Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up in battle formation in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah. Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, "LORD, there is no one besides You to help [in the battle] between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O LORD our God, for we trust in You, and in Your name have come against this multitude. O LORD, You are our God; let not man prevail against You." So the LORD routed the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled. Asa and the people who [were] with him pursued them as far as Gerar; and so many Ethiopians fell that they could not recover, for they were shattered before the LORD and before His army. And they carried away very much plunder. - 2 Chronicles 14:9-13

Hezekiah’s test of faith when Rabshakeh (servant of Sennacherib King of Assyria) sends a challenging letter - Isaiah 37:14-20:

Then Hezekiah took the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it, and he went up to the house of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. Hezekiah prayed to the LORD saying, "O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned [above] the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. "Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of

Sennacherib, who sent [them] to reproach the living God. "Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have devastated all the countries and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. So they have destroyed them. "Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, LORD, are God." - Isaiah 37:14-20

The faith hall of fame in Hebrews 11:32-40

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed [acts of] righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received [back] their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ([men] of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. - Hebrews 11:32-40

Q: Why did these men and women overcome in their time of great distress and fear?

A: Because of their faith in God that He would see them through their situation no matter the outcome.

It's important to recognize the last part of that statement because not everyone who exercised great faith in the face of difficulty saw a positive outcome. Some of them endured much physical suffering and others were even rewarded with death. Yet, they still remained faithful and consistent in their faith in God. They overcame intimidation through faith.

3. How does faith in God respond during a time of great fear?

There are many things that come as a result of faith such as justification and righteousness, but let's look at some of the results of pressing into faith during a time of fear.

a. Faith trusts

"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." - John 16:33 NASB

When we enter into a loving relationship with Christ because of what He has done for us and we believe him, putting our faith in who He is and what He says, we trust Jesus.

As Jesus says in the above verse of scripture, when we are trusting in Christ we have peace because He has overcome the world. Nothing that comes our way can knock us off track when we are trusting by faith in Christ. It might be COVID-19, Ebola, Christian persecution, cancer, disability, hostility, tribulation, etc. My trust in Christ is built upon the foundation of my faith in Him and Christ has overcome all things.

“To have Faith in Christ means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you.” - C.S. Lewis | Mere Christianity

b. Faith cultivates courage

Faith overcomes intimidation which is boldness or courage. When we have faith in what God has said, promised, or decreed it gives us the courage or boldness to trust in Him despite what intimidates us.

And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven." - Mat 9:2 NASB

And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I will get well." But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." At once the woman was made well. - Mat 9:20-22 NASB

But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." - Mar 6:49-50 NASB

These are just a few passages where faith cultivates courage. These men and women had faith despite their intimidating circumstance.

c. Faith loves

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." - John 13:34-35 NASB

"But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ... "If you love those who love you, what credit is [that] to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ... "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil [men.] - Luk 6:27-28, 32, 35 NASB

This was one of the revolutionary aspects of the early church. People from all different backgrounds, nationalities, religions, cultural identities, and political ideologies came to faith in Christ and genuinely loved one another. This took place even though some would have considered the other an enemy. We are called by God to love one another and it is in faith that God gives us the ability to love others.

d. Faith does

And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. - Hebrews 13:16 NASB

"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me [something] to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me [something] to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' ... "The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, [even] the least [of them,] you did it to Me.' - Matthew 25:34-36, 40 NASB

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; ... For just as the body without [the] spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. - Jas 2:21-22, 26 NASB

When we have faith in Christ in the midst of our fear and intimidation, the Holy Spirit enables us live supernaturally and do those works we could not otherwise do. Here is a vibrant example of this:

Dionysius, an early church father, wrote about the practical love being shown between christian brothers. This was during a time when a plague broke out in Rome after a time of intense Christian persecution. He notes the selflessness of the christians as they cared for one another, selflessly giving of themselves to serve those were sick knowing they were likely to die themselves. He contrasted the christians with their non-believing counterparts who left their loved ones and closest friends to die in their attempt to save their life from the plague. He notes even these attempts were rarely successful.

4. Where do we go from here?

So we've looked at how faith trusts, cultivates courage, loves and does. Where do we go from here? The whole point of this sermon is to address the state of our hearts as we see the world around us reeling from fear over the coronavirus and to thwart this giant of intimidation with faith in Jesus in spite of our own fear.

- **Continue to strengthen our hearts in Christ:** So faith [comes] from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. - Rom 10:17 We have need to continually devote ourselves to the Word of God during this time. Reminding ourselves of His promises to us is essential in strengthening our faith in Him.
 - For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of [the] divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. - 2Pe 1:4 NASB
 - 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. - Jer 29:11 NASB
 - "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. - Mat 11:28-29 NASB
 - "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. - Mat 11:28-29 NASB
 - And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. - Phl 4:19 NASB
 - But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. - Rom 8:37-39 NASB

- **Caring for others:** Ultimately, as followers of Christ, we are called to love our neighbor as we would ourself. This includes our brothers and sisters in Christ and our literal neighbors. Thankfully, this situation of the COVID-19 is not very serious in our immediate area and our communities are taking an abundance of caution. Nevertheless, we must still view this as an opportunity to minister to others as the hands and feet of Christ. "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." - 1John 3:16-18 NASB

- **Having Peace:** Though we may be fearful, when we take possession of Christ's promises for us, God gives us the ability to overcome fear by His peace as we have faith: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. - John 14:27 NASB

- **Proclaiming truth:** We have an unprecedented opportunity to share the love of Christ to those around us during this time. People's lives are slowing down, our neighbors are home more, and kids are out playing for greater amounts of time. This is an opportunity to share conversations and share Christ. Ask about another person's fears regarding this

pandemic and use that as a springboard to share Christ.

5. Conclusion

In closing, I encourage all of us to remember that Christ has called us to be people of faith and of action. We should not be fearful, anxious or worried even during difficult times because Jesus has given to us His precious promises and His word.

I'm not saying that we won't experience fear, but what I am encouraging us to do is to overcome the intimidation this virus presents and have faith despite our fear. It is then in faith, that fear can be dispelled as we trust in God.

Faith as Paul saw it, was a living, flaming thing leading to surrender and obedience to the commandments of Christ. - A. W. Tozer

6. Time of corporate prayer

President Trump has declared that today is a National Day of Prayer which I believe to be only fitting and I am thankful for his leadership in this way. In observance of this, I believe we should take some time of corporate prayer together to close out our services this morning.

- **Small groups of mindful of distance**
- **Pastor Doug will lead us in our closing song**
- **Then we are free to leave**

Things to consider praying for as we join together in corporate prayer for our world in crisis:

1. Those currently affected by the coronavirus and for their recovery.
2. For Christians already ministering to sick individuals across the world.
3. For the church to be united and minister effectively to others in meeting needs while sharing the love of Christ.
4. That the spread of this virus would be eliminated.
5. For our government to make wise and unbiased decisions during this crisis.
6. That we would see ways to bless, help and share the light of Christ, to our neighbors.