

Just a few weeks ago most had never heard the term “pandemic.” Things have changed so quickly this past week that it’s hard to keep up. Crisis and change have a way of unsettling us, causing us to be afraid. One thing has not changed and will never change. God is still on His throne.

I love King David’s words in Psalm 11:1, *“In the Lord I take refuge...”* The word *refuge* means safety or sheltered from danger or trouble.

No one knows what will happen tomorrow or next week. While we don’t want to over-react to this virus – our economy, our educational system, our worship, our entertainment and sports worlds have been majorly impacted.

People fear all kinds of things. Many of the things we fear aren’t even real. Zig Ziglar (**picture**) said FEAR stands for *False Evidence Appearing Real*. Our perspective often leads us to be afraid.

Fear is a problem for countless people. There are things that cause all of us to be afraid. As I was out shopping the other day, I kept running into people who were terrified. God doesn’t want us to live in fear. Our Heavenly Father wants us to live in faith.

One of the reasons I love the Psalms is that you can find a Psalm for nearly every emotion, including fear. In Psalm 55, King David first gives a description of his fears, and then he offers a prescription for them. Please turn to Psalm 55:1-8 (p. 475). That’s the description of the fear problem.

We find the cure in verse 16: *“But I call to God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and He hears my voice.”* His prescription continues in verse 22: *“Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved.”*

Even when you’re trembling with fear, there’s hope. Just as a coin has two sides, we’re going to look at both sides of fear today. First, we’ll talk about understanding fear and then we’ll discuss overcoming fear.

**We need to understand fear.** What is fear? If you looked it up in the dictionary you’d find that fear is, *“a feeling of agitation and anxiety caused by the presence of imminence of danger.”* Agitation causes you to be twisted out of shape. Anxiety causes you to be tied up in an emotional knot. The word *phobos* in the New Testament means a strangling, debilitating fear.

There are some people who deal with anxiety more intensely and more often than others. Researchers say that there’s a certain percentage of our population who seem to be genetically-predisposed to be much more anxious than is typical. To illustrate this research data, we could draw a bell-shaped curve and it would show there are some people on the right side of the curve who almost never get anxious. These people seem to be

genetically-disposed to be risk-takers. For some reason, their brains and nervous systems are not very sensitive to adrenaline or to other sources of stress. In fact, it takes a large amount of risk just to keep these folks from feeling bored. These are the individuals who are drawn to parachuting, bungee jumping, tightrope walking, alligator wrestling, karaoke nights, and prison ministry. They get bored easily.

Those in the middle of the bell curve are what we’d consider “normal” experiences of anxiety. People on the left hand are those who seem to be genetically-predisposed to have difficulty with anxiety. They’re extremely sensitive to the effects of adrenaline. This group is likely to feel more anxiety if they have to go to a party where they’ll have to make small talk with strangers as somebody in the other group might feel about jumping out of an airplane. We don’t know for sure but it’s probably a physiological thing, something related to the raw material they were born with. It’s part of the Fall, where everyone is broken in some way.

Just because you spend a lot of time on the right side of the bell curve doesn’t mean you’re more spiritually mature or have more faith than somebody on the far left. And just because you frequent the far left doesn’t mean you’re spiritually inferior to somebody on the thrill-seeking far right. In fact, sometimes people on the left—those who fight fear the most—sometimes they’re the ones who are further along on the journey toward Christlikeness. Because in dealing with anxiety they’ve learned that they can trust God to help them, a lesson risk takers may not feel the need to learn. In any case, we must be careful not to judge. Our response to those who suffer from anxiety should be compassion and understanding.

All of us deal with fear and anxiety to some extent. All of us worry. All of us have times in life when we feel like David did when he wrote this psalm. All of us are fearful for various reasons. I’m not talking about little everyday fears. I’m talking about big things. As Charles Swindoll (**picture**) says, *“...the ulcer-causing, big-time, mental monsters that crawl into your head, then go with you to bed and steal your sleep...the concerns you can’t shake off.”*

Here’s something else. If we were to compare bell-shaped curves in our day to those bell curves that were made, say 75 years ago, we’d see a big difference. We’d see more people on the anxious left today than any other time in history because these days we have more things to cause us fear.

In his book, *Fearless*, Max Lucado (**picture**), reminds us of some of these things—these fears we face—with a very scary list. Here it is. The things that give US anxiety include: *“layoffs at work, slowdowns in the economy, flare-ups in the Middle East, turnovers at headquarters, downturns in the housing market, upswings in global warming, breakouts of al Qaeda cells, some demented dictator who is collecting nuclear [or chemical] warheads*

*the way others collect fine wines. A strain of swine flu is crossing the border, [brain-eating amoeba are in the water]...We fear being sued, finishing last, [being shot at work by some mentally ill individual,]. We fear going broke; we fear the mole on the back, the new kid on the block, and the sound of the clock as it ticks us closer to the grave. We sophisticate investment plans, create elaborate security systems and legislate a stronger military, yet we depend on mood-altering drugs more than any other generation in history.”*

All of us have found ourselves on the left side of the bell from a few of these. This is a scary time in which to live. Studies show that children today are more fearful than psychiatric patients were in the 1950’s.

Whatever its cause, when anxiety comes our way it can do incredible damage. If we’re not careful, it will corrode our confidence in God’s goodness and suck the life out of our souls. It can curl us into an embryonic state and drain us dry of contentment.

Fear—*anxiety—worry—whatever you call it—when it attacks can rob us of joy. It can make us more self-preoccupied and less attentive or loving to other people. It can poison relationships. When we’re anxious our focus is of course on me. It makes temptations look attractive because we will do anything to help us escape this inner pain. Anxiety erodes our ability to feel grateful. It increases our irritability. Maybe worst of all it has the potential for keeping us from trusting God.*

Anxiety keeps us from saying YES to the fearful things God calls us to do—things that require us to trust Him...things—that if we do them—bring us incredible fulfillment and joy. When fear contaminates our lives, safety becomes our god. When safety becomes our god, we worship a risk-free life. When we don’t have enough faith to risk for God, our spiritual growth comes to a halt. It’s what Jesus refers to in the parable of the soils when He said, *“The ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns are the ones who have heard the Word, but the worries of the world...enter in and choke the Word and it becomes unfruitful”* (Mark 7:18-19).

When you think of all the potential damage that anxiety or worry can cause, it’s not surprising that **“fear not”** is the most common command in the Bible. The second most common command, to love God, and neighbor, appears only on eight occasions, whereas the Gospels alone list some 125 times that Jesus said things like, *“do not be afraid”* or *“fear not”* or *“have courage”* or *“take heart”* or *“be of good cheer.”* Jesus said this because as God in the flesh, He knows how toxic fear is for us.

How can we overcome the fears that we all struggle with? How can we be delivered from them? In an attempt to answer these questions I want to point us toward truths in Psalm 55.

**2. God wants us to overcome fear.** While there’s a place for healthy fear like a fear of tornadoes or disease, as people of faith it must be our goal to overcome any paralyzing fear.

There are thousands who struggle with irrational panic attacks and unreasonable bouts of fear that cause them to live in misery. God wants you to overcome your fears.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones (**picture**) wrote: *“I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath—but in faith and hope, I breathe freely.”* Fear can strangle your soul and gum up your spirit. In this psalm David mentions three things that make us afraid, and gives us ways to overcome these fears.

***Are you afraid of bad people? Seek God’s strength!*** In verse 3 David wrote one of the things causing him to shake with fear was *“the voice of the enemy...the stares of the wicked.”* Three thousand years later, there are still mean, wicked people out there who may do us harm.

I love our community. This is a great place to live. We’re blessed with friendly people and a low crime rate. Our community is like an oasis of peace in the midst of a sea of insanity. But as our area grows or criminals from urban areas come here, this feeling of security is threatened.

The truth is that there are mean, evil people everywhere—even in rural Wisconsin. But God doesn’t want us to live in constant fear. Remember, it was David who wrote this. He knew what it was to be afraid of bad people.

When he was a teenager, he faced a nine-foot giant named Goliath. David learned at an early age, that when it comes to fear, *“the bigger they are, the harder they fall.”*

Before David went out to meet Goliath, King Saul tried to suit him up in his armor. The armor was much too large and heavy for David, so he rejected it. Instead he went out to face Goliath dressed in better armor. He was depending on God’s strength. David told Goliath, *“You come against me with a sword, and a spear, and a javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty.”* (1 Samuel 17:45)

Like Goliath, you’re going to face giant fears all of your life. Don’t be afraid. You can come against your fears in the name of the Lord God Almighty. David gives us the antidote for poisonous fear in verse 17. He wrote, *“Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress, and He hears my voice.”* David had the kind of relationship with God where he talked to God on a regular basis. So when trouble came, God didn’t have to say, *“Now who are you again?”* If you have a regular time of prayer in your life, you’ll find that your giant fears will fall before you like a Goliath.

Jesus said, *“I tell you my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more...Fear him who, after the killing of the*

body, has power to throw you into hell...indeed, the very hairs of your head are numbered. Don't be afraid" (Luke 12:4-6).

Oswald Chambers (**picture**) said: *"It is the most natural thing in the world to be scared, and the clearest evidence that God's grace is at work in our hearts is when we do not get into panics...The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."*

***Are you afraid of the future? Cast your cares on Him!*** The second thing most people fear is the future. In verse 2 David complained, *"My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught."*

If you let your mind run away, you begin entertaining all kinds of thoughts about bad things that could happen. As we look at the next few weeks, is there a feeling of fear of what might happen? As you look toward the rest of the year, is there uneasiness in your spirit? That feeling didn't come from God. II Timothy 1:7, *"For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love and a sound mind."* God is not the author of fear. The devil is the sinister minister of fear. He knows that if he can keep you in fear, you'll be ineffective as a Christian.

God loves you so much that He has invited you to cast your cares on Him. David wrote in verse 22, *"Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you;"* Do you have fears about your future? Throw all those cares onto God's shoulders. He can bear your sorrows. You don't have to be afraid because whatever happens God will sustain you.

If you're a child of God, there's hope for your future. Listen to God's promise: *"For I know the plans I have for you' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you HOPE and a future'"* (Jer. 29:11). You've heard it many times before, but that doesn't make it less true. You don't have to be afraid of what your future holds as long as you know WHO holds your future.

Proverbs 31 contains a description of a godly woman. I love one particular aspect of her character. Verse 25, *"She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come."* A child of God, male or female, ought to be able to look at the future and laugh. When the devil starts trying to make you fear, laugh at him and say, "God has a plan for me, a plan to prosper me, not harm me. It's a plan of hope and a future!"

***Are you afraid of dying? Trust God's truth!*** The third thing David mentioned that makes us afraid is death. The idea of dying can be frightening. In verse 4 David wrote, *"the terrors of death assail me."* For many, death is a terrifying, horrifying prospect.

I love the story about the preacher who was talking about being prepared to die. He said, "Every member of this church is going to die!" A kid on the front pew laughed out loud, so the preacher repeated his statement a

little louder. He said, "I said, EVERY MEMBER OF THIS CHURCH IS GOING TO DIE!" At that, the kid laughed even louder. The preacher stopped and said, "Young man, how can you laugh at that?" The kid replied, "Because I'm not a member of this church!" Well whether you're a member of this church or not, you must deal with the prospect of death.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian poet, Dante (**picture**), wrote a book tracing his imaginary journey through hell. It was called *The Inferno*. In it he described hell as seven circles of increasing punishment, based on the seven deadly sins. His descriptions are fictitious, but he does get one detail of hell completely correct: Hell is completely devoid of hope. Dante's inscription above the entrance to hell stated, *"Through me the way into the city of woe, / Through me the way to eternal pain, / Through me the way among the lost... / Abandon all hope, you who enter here."*

Christians don't have to fear death. The Bible says that though we experience sorrow at the death of loved ones, we don't sorrow in the same way as those who have no hope. As a pastor, I've had the difficult assignment of preaching a funeral for those who showed no evidence of being a Christ-follower. The depth of sorrow and hopelessness at funerals like that is very different than the funeral of someone who knew Jesus.

I can't understand how anyone would want to face death without having hope. Bertrand Russell (**picture**) was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but he wasn't a Christian. In 1927 he wrote a book entitled, *Why I am not a Christian*. When he was 81, he was interviewed by the BBC. The interviewer asked him, "What do you have to hang onto when death is obviously so close?" Russell's answer was: *"I have nothing to hang onto but grim, unyielding despair."*

As Christians, we have joyful, vibrant hope. Contrast Bertrand Russell's words with those written by Rick Warren (**picture**): *"Death, for Christians, is a transfer, a promotion. It's on to better things. You're not ready to live until you're ready to die. Only a fool would go all through life, totally unprepared for something that everybody knows is inevitable."*

The Apostle Paul said, *"For, to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."* It's a win-win for a Christian. If we live, it's the spiritual presence of Jesus now. If we die, it's gain because it's the literal presence of Jesus!

The other day I ran into a friend at Walmart who in fear shared that he'd heard that there was a case of the virus in Racine. I told him, "I'm not afraid. I've got a life insurance policy that's out of this world." And if you know Jesus, you do too!

In verse 22, David said, *"God will never let the righteous fall."* David was the same one who wrote these hope-filled words found in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, *"Even though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me"* (Psalm 23:4).

**Conclusion:** Remember that reality television show, “*Fear Factor*” (picture) I guess there’s a new version of it. But you don’t need a television show, there’s plenty of scary things around us. After the terrorist attacks and the anthrax scare, *Time Magazine* published an article with the title: “Fear Factor.” The article said Americans are more afraid than ever before. But there’s an answer for the Fear Factor, it’s the Faith Factor. Faith and fear can’t exist together. Feed your faith, and your fears will starve to death! Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there! Hope is simply faith in the future tense!

David said fear so consumed him that he wished he could have the wings of a dove to fly far way to a place of rest. Fear makes cowards of us all.

One reason I liked the movie *Forrest Gump* (picture) is because I grew up listening to that kind of southern accent. You may recall in the movie that Forrest had a friend he called, “My Jenny.” There’s a powerful scene in which Forrest goes over to little Jenny’s house. Jenny’s dad had been abusing her, so Jenny grabs Forrest’s hand and they run into the cornfield to hide. Jenny drags Forrest to his knees and says, “*Pray with me Forrest. Dear, God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far, far away from here.*”

Have you ever felt that way? David did. He wrote that he was so consumed with fear he wished he had the wings of a dove to fly far way to a place of rest. But David goes on to say that the answer isn’t found in running from your fears. It’s found in running into the arms of our Heavenly Father. Fear triggers a fight or flight response. It’s easier to flee than to fight. But because of God’s love and grace, there’s another response beyond fight or flee – FAITH. And faith produces HOPE.

Let’s tie this up this morning with **TAKE HOME TRUTHS:** Though we are tempted to hide from this crisis, we must rest in the Lord. Yes, today we’re in a crisis. Schools are closed. Churches have closed. Sports areas are empty. The Stock Market is in trouble. People are sick. People have died. What’s the believer to do? Stock-pile toilet paper? Live in fear?

No, we’re to trust in the Lord. What does that mean? Trusting God means we believe His promises when our emotions scream the opposite. We must believe His Word. We choose to not fear. We will not flee to the mountain. Instead, we will flee to God’s throne of grace. We won’t run away but run to Him. No one is suggesting a passivity. Resting isn’t inactive.

As Jerry Bridges (picture) said: “*We must depend on God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We must, to the same degree, depend on Him to enable us to do what we must do for ourselves.*”

Oliver Cromwell, 17th century English statesman and general, is known for his advice to the British soldiers during one of their wars. “*Trust God and keep your powder dry,*” referring to their gunpowder.

We can paraphrase that today with, “*Trust God and wash your hands.*” Do what you need to do. If you’re sick – stay home. Take precautions. Use sanctified common sense – but trust God. “*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the almighty. I will say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust*” (Psalms 91:1-2).

Let’s conclude with **two questions:**

First, **Where is God? Answer:** He’s reigning in heaven. He’s in control. He is ruling and He’s loving us through this crisis. He will never leave or forsake us. Nothing will separate us from His love. Regardless of what happens – life, sickness, death, God is our refuge – He’s our anchor.

Second, **What’s God up to?** I don’t pretend to exactly know, but I do know He’s involved. He wants to use this crisis to spread the gospel. Let’s not quarantine the gospel. He wants to use this and us for His glory!

People are sensitive. They’re afraid. This our time...the time for the Church to be the church. To minister, to reach out, to share Christ, to give hope. I love the old hymn that says this all so well.

*Oft times the day seems long,  
our trials hard to bear.  
We’re tempted to complain,  
to murmur and despair;  
But Christ will soon appear  
to catch his bride away.*

*All tears forever over in God’s eternal day.*

*It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.  
Life’s trials will seem so small  
when we see Christ.  
One glimpse of his dear face  
All sorrow will erase,  
So bravely run the race  
Till we see Christ.*