

Remember Dennis the Menace (**picture**)? I have no idea where I got it from, but during my growing up years...I was a bit of a Dennis the Menace. And for some reason, I've always enjoyed scaring people.

One situation that I vividly remember was when I was probably in Jr Hi. My sister, Suellen, and I were often home alone. One night she'd gone over to visit our next door neighbor. Since it was dark and our neighborhood was a bit marginal, she called and asked me to come outside to watch her come home. Big mistake! It was probably 200' from their back door to ours and at the end of our house were some tall bushes. So, instead of watching her, I hid behind those bushes. When she walked by, I jumped out, screamed at her and chased her home.

What is it that makes us so afraid of **Things That Go Bump in the Night**? Maybe Stephen King (**picture**) was right, *"I like to scare people and people like to be scared."* Who hasn't voluntarily entered a spook house or ridden a scary amusement ride? As long as we know there's really nothing to be scared of, we like to be scared. A good scare beats a can of *Monster*.

One of the wonderful gifts of childhood is a vivid imagination. Yet, that same God-given gift in a sin contaminated culture can become our enemy.

The movie, *Monsters, Inc* (**picture**) isn't too far from the truth as it pokes fun at our childish tendency to be terrorized by our imaginations. Christian musician, Don Wyrzten (**picture**) confesses, *"The illusive monster of fear lurks in the shadows, waiting to claw my soul to shreds...I see its face often."*

A large percentage of our fears are born in our own imaginations. Think about this. Fear is almost always based on the future. Sometimes we're afraid because we know what's coming. More commonly, we're afraid of what we don't know about the future, afraid of what might happen. Most of our fears are merely "maybes." Whether the future is five minutes from now when you're waiting for the doctor's diagnosis, five years from now when you worry about still having a job, or twenty years from now when you worry about having enough money for retirement. Fear's home office is the future.

What's the future to our Heavenly Father? To God the future is now! You and I live inside of time while God, who created it, lives outside of it. While we know little about tomorrow or next century, God knows everything about it. He's already there. Our Heavenly Father only has one frame of reference: the eternal now. It's why He's the answer to all of our fears and commands us to trust Him and sanctify our imaginations. 1 Corinthians 10:5, *"We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ."*

Today we want to talk about trusting His power to control our imagination. We all have pictures in our minds. God created us as thinking, visual beings. Like a movie screen, different images come up. Sometimes we're not even thinking about it and negative scenes pop up. We see our business going down, our child going off the rails, us losing our health. Evil imaginations will keep you awake at night and dwelling on them cause you to live in fear.

*Monsters* keep us from experiencing, enjoying and expecting God's best. But you can control your imagination and what "movies" play in your mind. Scripture tells us to shine God's light on the "monsters." That's because...

**1. Imaginary monsters have frightening results.** In her book, *Fear: A Cultural History*, Joanna Bourke (**pictures**) share a tragic story:

*At 8:17 on the evening of March 3, 1943, bomb-raid sirens bansheed through the air above London, England. Workers and shoppers stopped on sidewalks and boulevards and searched the skies. Buses came to a halt and emptied their passengers. Drivers screeched their brakes and stepped out of their cars. Gunfire could be heard in the distance. Nearby anti-aircraft artillery forces launched a salvo of rockets. Throngs on the streets began to scream. Some people threw themselves on the ground. Others covered their heads and shouted, "They are starting to drop them!" Everyone looked above for enemy planes. The fact that they saw none did nothing to dampen their hysteria. People raced toward the Bethnal Green Underground Station, where more than five hundred citizens had already taken refuge. In the next ten minutes, fifteen hundred more would join them.*

*Trouble began when a rush of safety seekers reached the stairwell entrance at the same time. A woman carrying a baby lost her footing on one of the nineteen uneven steps leading down from the street. Her stumble interrupted the oncoming flow, causing a domino of others to tumble on top of her. Within seconds, hundreds of horrified people were thrown together, piling up like laundry in a basket. Matters worsened when the late arrivers thought they were being deliberately blocked from entering (they weren't). So they began to push. The chaos lasted for less than a quarter of an hour. The disentangling of bodies took until midnight. In the end 173 men, women, and children died (**pictures**).*

But no bombs had been dropped. Fusillades didn't kill the people. *Fear did*. Fear loves a good stampede. Fear's payday is blind panic, unfounded disquiet, and sleepless nights. And fear has been making a good living lately.

Charles Spurgeon (**pictures**) was correct, “*Such strange creatures are we that we probably smart more under blows which never fall upon us that we do under those which do actually come.*” Much of our fear, driven by our own imaginations is only *potential*. God’s Word is filled with case histories of those who paid high prices for imaginary fear.

**Imaginary fear motivated Abraham to lie.** He’s known as “the Father of the faithful,” yet while in Palestine, a famine came over the land. He decides to go to Egypt, which was known for its abundance of grain. But he feared for his life. His wife, Sarah, is beautiful. Abraham became afraid of what would happen when the Egyptians saw her. The Egyptians would desire Sarah—Egyptian wives were known for their ugliness. They’d know she was his wife and would kill him so they could have her. To avoid that, he asked Sarah to say that she was his sister.

Was it a real threat? Potentially but Abraham’s paranoia is first in his mind. He sacrifices Sarah because he’s afraid of what the truth might cost him. Yet, Abraham knew that God had promised that Sarah was going to be the mother of God’s chosen people. He gave into fearful imaginations, ignored God’s promise and plans, and endangered her and God’s plan.

When we imagine the worst, we often lie for self-preservation. Once our panic response system is activated, it’s difficult to make rational decisions.

Common reasons for lying when we imagine a “monster” are to avoid being punished. It might be to protect ourselves from a blow up with a spouse or a child. How many Moms have responded to their child’s question: *Are there any onions in that?* “No” to avoid a scene. We fear being embarrassed so we tell “little white lies” to enhance a story to create a better persona. We lie to avoid awkward social situations. “My wife has a headache. We can’t come.” We lie for instant relief and forget long-term consequences. If God hadn’t intervened, the promise of a great nation and the Messiah would be thwarted.

**Imaginary fear motivated King Saul to attempt to assassinate his loyal servant.** God gave King Saul everything he needed to succeed. He started out as a great king. But he’s brought down by his own wrong choices. It all began when Saul gave in to his dark imagination.

After David took out Goliath, David became the new national hero. Saul gives him leadership responsibilities and it pleased everyone. Guess who’s not mentioned as being pleased? Saul! Why? He’s jealous. Envy prevents you from taking pleasure in other’s successes. He imagined David would attempt a coup and begins imagining lots of crazy things, and then he gets angry about what he imagined.

Theodore Roosevelt (**picture**) said, “*Comparison is the thief of joy.*” It’s hard to count your own blessings when you’re busy counting someone else’s. God wants us to take joy in what He’s doing in our lives without comparing ourselves to anyone else. And how can we be honestly jealous that someone else is advancing God’s kingdom?

We do the same thing...even at church. Someone gives us what we consider an odd look or don’t speak to us like we think that they should, and our imagination is off to the races. How many times have you been angry with someone or had an argument with them in your mind because of what you imagine they’re thinking about you.

I did that recently with Jane. I imagined she was irritated with me about something. Do you know what should have irritated me? My own silly fear.

Why do we do this? Trillia Newbell (**picture**) in her book, *Fear and Faith* suggests that we do this because “*we believe it’s easier to be in control. But when we realize we don’t reign supreme, that we don’t have sovereign authority, it can be terrifying.*” And like King Saul, we start throwing spears, at least mental ones, at those closest to us.

**Imaginary fear motivated a prayer meeting to doubt that God answers prayer.** If this wasn’t in the Bible, it’d be hilarious. It’s one of the most dramatic New Testament accounts concerning partnership and prayer. King Herod attacks the church and has one of its leaders, James beheaded. The latest polls show that Herod’s approval rating went up after he executed James. Now he has Peter in custody. Word has it that the next day, Herod is going to execute Peter.

There’s an all-night prayer meeting for Peter’s deliverance and God sends his angel and rescues Peter. Here’s where it gets hilarious. Where does Peter go now that he’s free? To the house where they’re having an all-night prayer meeting for his release. Acts 12:12-16: *When Peter realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!” But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.*

They’re praying and asking God to rescue Peter but don’t believe it when God answers their prayers. Sounds like our prayer meetings, doesn’t it?

Nothing is more humorous than this picture of Peter, valiantly pounding away at the door, while the girl is inside, having forgotten to let him in, tries to explain to these praying Christians that God has answered their prayers. And they wouldn’t believe her, thought she was crazy and then tried to explain it on other terms. “It must be his guardian angel.”

But Rhoda won't give up and persuades them to check it out. They find Peter still banging away frustratedly. Then, they're amazed that God answered their prayers.

Though they're praying for his release, I'm sure they'd already imagined Peter's funeral. It's unbelievable how weak our faith can be. We do the same thing. We pray. We try to pray in faith but we imagine God not answering our prayers. Rarely, do we imagine God actually answering our prayers. If we're really honest, we really believe we have a puny God.

**2. Imaginary monsters are always the same.** A passenger in a taxi leaned over to ask the driver a question and gently tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. The driver screamed, lost control of the cab, nearly hit a bus, drove up over the curb, and stopped just inches from a large plate window. For a few moments everything was silent in the cab. Then, the shaking driver said, "Are you OK? I'm so sorry, but you scared the daylights out of me..." The badly shaken passenger apologized to the driver and said "I didn't realize that a mere tap on the shoulder would startle someone so badly."

The driver replied, "No, I'm the one who is sorry. It's all my fault. Today is my very first day driving a cab. I've been driving a hearse for 25 years..."

We all have some familiarity with that deep, gnawing, pit-of-the-stomach anxiety, that stubborn worry that refuses to abate. The cause and effect may be a little different for each one of us, but all of us have some imaginary scene that we play, rewind and play again and again that causes us to be anxious. In his book, *Running Scared*, Ed Welch (**pictures**) has four insightful observations about fearmongers and their brand of vision-casting.

**Worriers live in the future.** We're all people of the past, present and future. Fear has a way of spanning all three time zones. It's often triggered by past events, then reacts to crises in the present, and anticipates consequences in the future. Fear's preference, though, is to point you to the future, and to do this it relies upon the power of our imaginations.

Distorted imagination is the realm of the fearmonger. We have imaginations so we can consider things that do not yet exist. We admire those with expansive imaginations as visionaries, those able to look ahead and anticipate the trajectory of the nation, the church, business, or of an individual. A fearmonger is a visionary, too, in that he sees, or thinks he sees the future, and what it will bring. He lives in the future, creates a vision of the future, transplants himself there in his mind, and feels all of the traumatic emotions associated with it.

**Worriers see the future in minute, gory detail.** Fearmongers are visionaries minus the optimism. Where a visionary has an optimistic view of the future based on the ability to see current patterns and predict a better alternative, fearmongers see the future in great detail, but always in gory detail. When she anticipates tomorrow's medical appointment, she's already living in a future where her child is battling cancer and succumbing to it. When he sees his child pull out of the driveway, he envisions twisted metal and broken bodies. He sees the future, but sees it as bleak and disappointing.

**Worriers are false prophets.** Fearmongers are always looking to the future—a future that's tragic and brutal. He/she takes upon himself a kind of prophetic role and allows his occasional successes in accurately predicting an awful future to establish a reputation as a person who understands what others miss. He believes he knows what the future will bring and he'll be amazed, and perhaps even infuriated, that others don't see what he sees. It becomes his job to worry for those who will not.

Yet as the worrier glimpses this future, he's always wrong, at least in some of what he sees. Even in those few occasions that he's correct in the big picture—if a man spends his whole life worrying about the people he loves befalling medical misfortune, sooner or later that prediction will be right—he is still wrong in many of the details. The success rate is pathetic.

In the Old Testament the people who talked about the future and foretold doom were known as prophets. The only way a prophet could maintain his credibility was to be infallible, to get every prediction correct in its every detail. Perhaps worriers would do well to stop excusing themselves by saying, "I am just a worrier" and instead declare, "I'm a false prophet."

**Worriers are immune to reason.** As worry is added to worry, as anxiety compounds and leads to irrational behavior, loved ones try to help. They explain worry has never accomplished anything or made a situation better. They show and explain that worry is more like astrology than prophecy. When nothing else helps, they may try to fix the problem by securing the environment—buying a dog, installing an alarm, eating healthier. This kind of security can do no more than briefly hold the anxiety at bay. Sooner or later it returns because worry is irrational and resistant to reason. It's impossible to reason a person out of an imaginary irrational position.

How many times have you had Corona? No, I don't mean that you've actually had it. But how many times have you had a tickle in your throat or felt yucky, and you're sure that you've got the virus? Maybe you checked Web MD (**picture**) or Googled the symptoms. Do you know what WebMD ought to say after it lists out the symptoms? "You gonna die!"

**3. We have to choose to take out the monsters.** Max Lucado (**picture**) tells of a friend who was dreading a letter from the IRS. According to their early calculation, he owed them money, money that he didn't have. He was told to expect a letter detailing the amount. When the letter arrived, his courage failed him. He couldn't bear to open it, so the envelope sat on his desk for five days while he writhed in dread. How much could it be? Where would he get the funds? For how long would he be sent to prison? Finally, he summoned the gumption to open the envelope. He found, not a bill to be paid, but a check to be cashed. The IRS, as it turned out, owed him money! He'd wasted five days of his life on needless fear. There are very few monsters who warrant the fear that we have of them.

***Imaginary fear must be met with faith and courage.*** One of the bravest statements in all of the Bible is found in the book of Esther, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, **and if I perish, I perish**" (Esther 4:16). Esther is the beautiful Jewish wife of the Persian king Ahasuerus, but the king doesn't know she's Jewish. One of the king's most wicked advisors, Haman, passed a decree that all Jews are to be annihilated on a certain day. Her uncle, Mordecai, who raised her because she was an orphan said the reason God placed her in the palace was to save the Jews. He urged her to go to the King, yet without being summoned by the King, she risked death. In courage she went, saying, "*if I perish, I perish*"

Queen Esther chose to trust God and walk in the path that He chose for her. Instead of succumbing to fear, she chose prayer. She and her maids fasted and prayed as well as Mordecai and all the Jewish people. She knew she could never do this on her own. Then she faced her fear and chose to follow God and do what He wanted. She went to the king and made an appeal for her people. God used her courageous step of faith to save an entire nation. Esther overcame imagined fear, trusted God, and He came through for her.

***We're in a spiritual battle against mental monsters.*** As 2 Corinthians 10:5 says, we must take every thought captive. The talk of battles and wars when concerning a Christian life refers to our inner battle that arises when a sinful thought tempts you. To win, we must use spiritual weapons – the Word of God and the power of His Holy Spirit.

***We must prepare for spiritual battles.*** We must prepare beforehand by following Jesus' example when He was tempted by the devil to turn the stones into bread: "*But It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'*" (Mt. 4:4). Jesus armed Himself by reading, memorizing and meditating on God's Word. Many face temptation unarmed. When we notice vulnerable areas of our thought life, we need to find specific Scriptures that help us have victory.

We make every thought captive to Christ as we fill our mind with the right things. The Bible is always the first place to start. Where will we find anything more true and noble than words given by God Himself? We can conquer the monsters of our imagination. God has given us all that we need. It's time to take some dragons out! You're not alone even in your own mind. Use God's Word to take out your monsters.

**Conclusion:** In national parks, there are signs, "Please Don't Feed the Bears." When people feed the bears, bears gain confidence and lose their fear of humans. They become dangerous as they become more aggressive.

We need to cross out the "B" in that sign and place an "F" there. The sign we need is "*Please Don't Feed the **Fears.***" As we feed our fears with a fear-filled imagination, they eat us alive. Let's end with some "Monster Killers."

***Go on a media and social media diet.*** Stop feeding the monster. The majority of what's on there doesn't help you trust God more or live by faith.

***Become more aware of your thoughts.*** Have you ever caught yourself just eating mindlessly? We do the same mentally. As the refrigerator has a light that goes on when we open it, we need a light to go off when we begin to head down dead end mental streets.

***Fight imaginary fears with the truth of praise.*** In the middle of fearful circumstances, the psalmist continually praises God. Count your blessings and count them again and again. There's power in praise! By choosing to praise God for what you know to be true of God's character, you're overwhelming your fears with truth. Rather than following your heart, lead it.

***Remember what God has done, not what could happen.*** Remember God's goodness in the past in your life. The conscious act of remembering His past faithfulness deepens our trust in His present goodness. Spurgeon (**picture**) writes, "*It is well to mark our mercies with well-carved memorials.*" God commands his people to remember His works. Why? He knows we're so forgetful and He knows remembering strengthens our faith and fights fear.

***Fight imaginary fears with an eternal perspective.*** Fixing our thoughts on eternal things keeps our perspective of this life balanced. It gives us clarity to why we're here and that all of this life, even at its worst, is temporary. A focus on eternity inspires us to live a life of true meaning and significance.

Yet, it's impossible to live for eternity if you're uncertain where you'll spend eternity. The reason many are terrified is because this life is all that they're certain of. Jesus died so that we could have life now and for eternity. Salvation is a

free gift but you must personally accept it. Romans 10:13, “*For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” Have you committed your life to Christ? Have you trusted Him as your Savior?

As our trust in God’s goodness deepens, we experience the power of Christ’s resurrection. The Lord Jesus overcame death so that we might have victory over death and dwell in His saving love and eternal life.

Jesus is real. Let’s fill our minds with Him. Our monsters aren’t real and the fight is temporary. Eternity is never-ending.

Imagine if we could empty the largest body of water in the world, the Pacific Ocean, and fill it with sand as tall as the highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest. Now imagine that a bird flies by and takes one grain of sand off that sand pile once every 100 billion years. How long will it take for that sand pile to disappear? But that’s only one second in eternity. Do you want to be fear free? Do you want to ignore the **Things That Go Bump in the Night?** Trust the Father. Learn to focus on what’s real and eternal!