

Healing in the Midst of Fear

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Hi there, I'm Megan Hjelmstad, and as we continue to respond to God's invitation for greater healing, we're going to be talking today about healing in the midst of fear. So, let's get started

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Lord Jesus, healer. Come heavenly Father, creator. Lord, thank you for being our strength and our courage in the midst of fear. Thank you for your presence that is always with us in every circumstance that goes before and behind us, you who are all around us with your protection. We ask for the grace of receptivity to receive that protection. We ask for an increase of the gift of fortitude of the Holy Spirit that we may look to you in every circumstance to begin to unbind and heal all of those areas of fear that keep us bound and hold us back from love and service to you and to our neighbor. We thank you, we praise you, we adore you, and we pray all of these things in the most holy precious name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and through the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God Reassures Us

So, when my son was younger, he suffered from some pretty bad night terrors. He would wake up in the middle of the night, screaming and crying, and not have any idea where he was. And my husband and I would run into his room and try to comfort him, but it was almost like a sleepwalking state where he couldn't understand who we were or where he was. He would just be completely consumed by this terror that was in his mind.

And, praise God, he eventually grew out of it, but my husband and I learned in the process that there was nothing we could do other than just sit there and be with him and hold him and just continually and calmly reassure him that it's okay, Mommy's here, I'm right here. You're safe. You're in my arms. You're in your home. It's okay. And eventually after, you know, maybe 5, 10 minutes, the night terror would pass, and he would be able to fall back asleep and sleep the rest of the night as if nothing had happened.

Isn't it interesting that when we read Scripture, we hear God, our Father, telling us the same sorts of things over and over and over again? It's said that the phrase "Do not fear" or "Be not afraid" is in Scripture 365 times. In fact, the concept of fear is mentioned more than 500 times throughout all of Scripture. Some people joke that this command or this assurance to be not afraid is actually for us to look to every single day of the year and then some, because it's in Scripture at least 365 times.

And it's so interesting that God doesn't respond in this very real experience that we have a fear by condemning our fear. He's not giving us these commands to be not afraid, or do not be anxious, or do not worry, He's not giving us these commands to condemn our fear. He's giving us these words as assurance in the midst of our fear. He is never going to reprimand us for being

afraid, but He knows very much our human condition, and so He responds by reminding us over and over and over again. Just like my husband and I would remind our son, "I am here, I'm right here with you." In the midst of your circumstances, in the midst of your fear, God responds not with condemnation, but with His help and with His presence. With His presence.

So, God never gets tired of assuring us that he's right here with us in our fear. And in fact, we have several places in Scripture where He says almost these exact words to the letter over and over again. Some examples that we hear are from Isaiah 43. He says, "When you pass through raging waters, I will be with you." He also says in Isaiah 41, "Fear not, for I am with you." In Luke chapter 12, He says, "Fear not, little flock." How tender. In Psalm 27, the Psalmist proclaims, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom should, I fear? The Lord is my life's refuge. Of whom should I be afraid? The war be waged against me; even then do I trust." And then we hear in Psalm 115, again, "The Lord is my help and my shield." We hear do not be afraid, so what should we be instead? That's a very good question, isn't it? If we shouldn't be afraid, if the Lord is reminding us that He's here, then what should we be instead?

Looking at the Spectrum of Fear

Well, if we look at the spectrum of fear, we see that on one side is kind of this experience of cowardice and trembling, right? And reservation. But if you go all the way to the other end of the spectrum, we have kind of recklessness and foolhardiness, and that's not very prudent either. So, what is the prudent or the virtuous opposite of fear? Well, as Aristotle likes to tell us, it's the mean between two extremes. Virtue is the mean between two extremes. And so in the middle of that spectrum of fear, we have courage. We have courage.

So, when we look at courage itself, a lot of times we feel that we are the ones who have to manufacture this virtue of courage. We have to come up with it on our own power. How do we develop courage? Well, we can look to the Israelites, who were being led out of slavery, out of the land of Egypt, to teach us. So as God leads the Israelites out of slavery, and they come to the Red Sea with the Egyptian army pursuing them, behind them, and this great body of water in front of them, and they're essentially stuck. What do they have to do? They have to trust in the Lord. They have to invite him into their presence. And what does the Lord do in response? He parts the waters so that the Israelites can pass dry-shod through the Red Sea, on dry lands, and make it to the other end, thousands and thousands of them, until they are safe. And then when the Egyptian army tries to pursue them, God brings the waters back down upon them and the entire Egyptian army is lost.

And as this is happening, the Israelites begin to proclaim this song, this hymn of praise to the Lord. And do you know what they say? They say, "The Lord, the Lord is my courage. My strength and my courage is the Lord." So this courage does not come from us. It does not come from our own abilities, our own will, our own powering through. Courage comes from the Lord's presence itself, the Lord's presence in us, and our willingness to let the Lord be present with us.

So, courage is not an absence of fear. Courage is the presence of God. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the presence of God.

A Tactic to Forget the Lord

So, fear is one of the enemy's favorite tactics to get us to forget the Lord, because he doesn't want us to be with the Lord. He doesn't want us to unite ourselves to the Lord's presence. And when we are not united with the Lord, then fear can really overtake and overcome us in many circumstances. In fear, we tend to do two things. We tend to jump to the worst case scenario, and we also tend to turn to everything and anything except for God in that moment of fear. Have you ever experienced this? I'm sure you have. We either go to the worst case scenario, or we try to do anything and everything to assuage our fear, except turn to God in the moment.

So, some of the places that we tend to turn toward or to seek either answers from or assurance of in place of God are information. When especially we have a relationship issue or a health issue, oftentimes the first thing we do is try and start researching and finding out what can we do to quote/unquote "fix this"? Or what might it be that's going on? And we try to diagnose. And I am sure you have experienced this too, that Dr. Google is not your friend. Dr. Google can only incite more fear. And we can gather all of the information we want, and we can become really well-informed on a particular issue or struggle, but very often it doesn't do much to assuage our fear. In fact, it can increase our fear because now we have all of this information at our disposal to tell us all of the things that could possibly be wrong, right? So that's one thing that we tend to do in fear. Other ways that we try to answer our fears in place of God include taking a particular action to protect ourselves or control the situation.

A Personal Experience with Fear

So, I had an actual phobia of contagious illness for many years of my life, and I spent a long time working with a wonderful counselor to gather tools to be able to overcome these particular fears. But I can tell you that I spent a lot of time that I didn't need to using hand sanitizer and looking toward all of these actions that I could take in cleaning my house or keeping my kids from situations in order to keep us healthy so that we wouldn't get sick because I was so afraid.

And by the grace of God, I actually went through this season of counseling and healing in my life and finished up right before we entered a global pandemic. And it was so interesting because all of the tools that I had really gained and been able to use and start applying, all of a sudden it was like what was going on in my mind was externalized in the rest of the world, and there were so many others dealing with these same fears in new ways.

So, we oftentimes try to take particular actions to protect ourselves or control the situation, but I can tell you from firsthand experience that this also tends to only increase our fear. And we feel like that if only we can take enough steps, if only we can do the right thing, then we can avoid suffering and we don't have to be afraid. But usually, this only reinforces the fear further. It doesn't mean that we're not supposed to be prudent and take some actions.

Remember that mean between two extremes? We're not to be reckless. But at the same time, focusing all of our efforts on our actions and controlling instead of the Lord and his help leads us into a very dark and fearful place. One of the third things that we tend to do in fear is to avoid situations to an unhealthy degree. Avoid situations to an unhealthy degree.

So, in that experience of being afraid of contagious illness, I started not taking my children to certain places. I didn't want to take them to story time at the library because of all the shared toys that were there. I didn't want to take them to certain birthday parties or places where they might get sick. And in fact, it was a disservice to them because their little immune systems needed to develop. They needed to be exposed, and, yes, go through maybe a few seasons of sickness, but in order to become stronger and become more able to be in the world and protected in the world by their own immune systems that God had designed.

The Effect of Rejecting God's Presence

So, in that fear, again, I tried to take control of the situation. I tried to avoid certain situations. And you might see this with different relationships, with different serious fears that you might have. I tried to avoid it at all costs instead of facing the fear that we might all become stronger and healthier as a result. So, we tend to try to fix or control or escape our fear rather than letting God's presence help us face our fear. We try to fix or control or escape rather than letting God's presence, that courage, help us to face our fears.

When the Israelites were rescued from the land of Egypt, they wandered in the desert for about a year, and then God led them to the promised land, the land he had promised them that was full of good and glorious things. The land that he wanted to give them for their joy, their delight, their comfort. And do you know what happened? When they went to survey that land, they sent a party to survey the land and to scout it out, a report came back from almost all of the members except one of that scout party, saying, "All of the people in that land are giants and we cannot defeat them. And we should not go into this land that the Lord has promised us." And guess what happened? They didn't go. And as a result, they were stuck wandering in the desert for 40 more years. They were stuck in the desert for 40 more years because when the Israelites lost their courage, they lost the presence of God.

Remember, courage is the presence of God, not the absence of fear. And so when they lost their courage, when they rejected God's presence, they returned to their fear. And it was none other than fear that kept them out of the promised land. Fear kept them from the promised land. Fear keeps us from so much of what God wants to do in our lives through his grace and through his goodness. And yet we find healing, don't we, by being open to God's presence, even in the midst of fear. Think of all of the times you've had to face a fear, things that you've wanted to avoid, things that you haven't wanted to happen in your life. And yet you can look back and see the goodness and the redemption that the Lord has brought out of it, and the ways he has strengthened you through it.

Some other ways that we tend to react to fear on a spiritual level, so we have all of these fears kind of externally on a more psychological and physical and emotional level. But on a spiritual level, we tend to be very afraid of trusting God's plan for us because we think we will not get what we want, our will, and that we are afraid that God's will might leave us more destitute, that it might require detachment from something that we have allowed to become disordered in our lives, just like we talked about in a previous talk.

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And underneath that fear, those fears of letting God be in charge, of letting God's will come before our will, we lack trust that God is who he says he is. And that is the first sin that we were tempted into in the fall of mankind, when Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the garden. He tempted them to reject God's revelation of himself as a good Father who provides, that he wants only the best for us, and the best for us not temporarily, like we want, but the best for us in eternity. And so much of our fear stems from that lie, that lie and that fear, that lack of belief that God is not truly a good Father, that God is not a good Father and the enemy, in fact, is the one who has our best interests in mind and is just hinting at us and encouraging us over and over, and tempting us that we have our own best interests in mind.

When, again, we're focused on the short term and God is looking at our best interests in light of eternity. So when we forget God's true identity as a good Father, we forget our true identity as his children, who he loves, who he cares for, who he provides for in the context of forever. And when we forget our identity, just like the Israelites who rejected God's presence and forgot who they were called to be as children entering the promised land, when we forget God's identity and our true identity, then fear increases. Our fear increases. Our need for control increases. And our ability to welcome God's presence and courage diminishes. So, fear is truly, at its root, the attachment to our own will and our own plans. This is why it limits so much of God's goodness and grace.

How to Respond to Moment of Fear

But there's good news. We can do something about it. What is that? What can we do? Well, first and foremost, we seek intimacy with the Lord so we can be reminded of his true identity as our good and loving father, and our true identity as his child, his child who he does love and does want the best for in the context of eternity. I'm also going to mention three ways that we can respond to particular moments of fear in our lives.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

So, the first way is to recall the gifts of the Holy Spirit, specifically the gift of fortitude. So the gifts of the Spirit, there are seven of them, you might remember, they are not simply gifts that God gives us as like something to put on a shelf or to look nice. They are gifts that we are given to use, to use every single day in our lives. And not only that, to be able to understand that these gifts are not something that we could manufacture ourselves in our human nature. These are supernatural gifts that the Lord gives us that take us beyond our human abilities alone. So when we ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of fortitude, the gift of fortitude, it is allowing us the grace to not only welcome God's presence and his courage, his strength within us, but to allow that fortitude to be manifest in us in a way that we could never obtain on our own.

So, then we come to certain situations where we face our fears, or a circumstance that is extremely difficult and fear-provoking, and instead of looking that fear in the face and turning and running away or trying to control it, we ask for the gift of fortitude. We say, "Lord, increase your gift of fortitude in me. Come, Holy Spirit." And he gives us his supernatural help that takes us above and beyond our own abilities in order to face that fear head on. We can't do it ourselves. We are far too human to do it on our own. But we absolutely, positively can do it with the Lord's

help and with that gift of fortitude. And that's what the enemy doesn't want us to think that we can do, that we can face our fears. But with God's help, with the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude, yes, we can, you can. So, the first thing is to ask often for the gift of fortitude. Maybe even work it into your morning prayer, your morning offering. Lord, allow me to accept and use the gift of fortitude today in any circumstance you may send me.

Call Them By Name

The second thing that I will mention that we can do, a tool that we can use in the midst of fear, is simply calling on the Holy Spirit or Jesus by name, by calling the Lord's name. We can simply say, "Come, Holy Spirit," or "Come Lord Jesus." We hear in Scripture that at the name of Jesus, every knee must bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. So, the powers of evil that are trying to get us to cave to our fears, to tempt us to turn away from God in fear and to not face fear, those are the same powers that have to bow and to become docile when they hear that name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, when we say the name of Jesus, or when we call on the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who is our advocate, advocate meaning help, the Lord comes to our aid, the Holy Spirit rushes to our aid. So, in moments of temptation, in moments of fear, you can remember that the Lord's name is available to you. And under his name, so many graces are available as well.

Sometimes even when I don't want to do something, because even if it's not extremely fear provoking, but it's just uncomfortable, I'll simply tell the Lord about it. I'll say, "Lord, I don't want to do," fill in the blank, "right now." And simply by telling him that, by inviting him into it, I'm able to then have that little push of encouragement from the Lord to just keep going and follow through.

Give God Permission

The last thing I'll mention as a way to face our particular moments of fear with God's help and God's courage is to give God permission to be in control. Give God permission to be in control. Now, this can be really difficult because oftentimes we might start out with the great intention of telling the Lord, "Lord, I give control to you. I surrender control to you." But very often it happens that it rushes into our heads, all of these exceptions or buts. So, "Lord, I give you control, but please keep my family safe," or, "Please don't let this bad thing happen," or, "I give you control, except that I really want this outcome. I really want to go to this school," or, "I really want this particular job," or the list goes on.

So even in those moments where you feel the exceptions rushing in, those qualifications of, "Lord, I give you control, but," something you can do, even in that moment, is say, "Lord, I give you control, but," and then take that exception to him as well. Offer that particular fear to Him and say, "I give you control, but I'm afraid that if I do, this will happen and I don't want it to. And I offer that fear to you, Lord." Offer even that fear to Him. He is so delighted when we offer Him our poverty so that even in those moments, He can flood us with grace and peace and assurance. Because let me tell you that fear of except or but, those little attachments or big

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attachments, they're not coming from the Lord. They're coming from the enemy, who wants you to remain in fear. So, offer even those moments to the Lord.

When we choose to remain in fear, when we choose to try and control situations, we can sometimes maximize our worldly comfort, at least for a time, and we might be superficially contented for a time, but we become internally numb and spiritually dead. When, on the other hand, we choose God's presence in the midst of fear, when we offer our fears to Him so that He may come in and be our courage and our help and our strength, even if it means for us surrendering that potential outcome that we want so badly, instead of going deeper into fear and losing more of the Lord's presence, we gain a far deeper internal peace with the Lord's presence and we gain spiritual life, life that becomes vibrant with love.

Perfect love casts out fear. The Lord tells us that in Scripture, too. Perfect love casts out fear. And He can transform even our selfishness and our attachments into selfless love. And do you know what the fruit of selfless love is? It's joy. Great, abiding joy and peace. So regardless of our circumstances, we can gain that peace, have access to that freedom, no matter our circumstances. You know, suffering and difficulty, they're going to find us either way, so when I say that we might find comfort for a time, it really is temporary. We will have trouble in this world, as the Lord tells us, either way. But by inviting God's powerful, loving, life-giving presence into every circumstance as our courage, we can go from being paralyzed by fear to being alive, truly alive, free, and thriving in joyful hope.

Closing Prayer

Let's pray. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. All glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.