

FEAR – UNDERSTANDING AND MASTERING IT

Our Fears And Our Faith

Even to start reading this article on fear is something that many would be afraid to do! So you've made a good beginning!

It is really very strange that society should expect us to cover up our fears, and make us feel so ashamed of them. Everyone is afraid at times, and most of us a lot of the time. Like so much else it helps if we understand really what fear is.

Fear is a God-given item of human life, let me explain.

Parking or Racing?

Just as a car is equipped both with a throttle (sometimes called an 'accelerator') and a brake, for quickening the pace or easing it up, so too the human body has two basic ways of behaving: slowing up or racing ahead. But while a driver has constantly to make decisions about which one is appropriate, the human body does it more or less automatically.

If what it sees and hears prompts it to relax, the eyes and the face muscles relax, the breathing gets slower, the mind 'wanders' happily, and the body will prompt us to look for something to rest on.

That's fine when we're on the beach, or watching telly. It could be fatal however, if driving a car!

For situations which demand (or might demand) all our attention and skill, and in particular when we sense **danger**, the body reacts in the opposite way.

Look out!

The blood rushes to our limbs, so that we can run or fight to protect ourselves. Our stomachs 'knot up' for protection if punched; any unnecessary body weight in urine or waste tries to escape; our eyes 'open wide with fear' (just as the novelists describe) as they adjust to see better and wider. Since our blood rushes to our limbs, our faces go white. Our reactions are speeded-up so that we 'jump' at even the smallest unexpected change. Our muscles start tuning-up, and if they do this in opposing pairs, they cause a trembling – rather like a jet plane with engines going, but being held at the beginning of its runway prior to take-off!

The digestive processes of the stomach are promptly stopped – the situation is one for **fighting** not feasting, and the stomach is 'off' food. Our hands and feet automatically clench to aid us in any fighting or running away that might be necessary; and the shoulder and neck muscles tighten.

Friend or Foe?

Our fear must, on many occasions, have saved us. In an emergency it gives us an enormous surge of energy to leap out of the way of danger.

If we are painfully aware of **suffering** through fear we must first acknowledge that we have been **blessed** by the gift of it.

Fearlessness is no blessing, much as we think it might be.

‘There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots!’

Probably there is no one who is **fearless**, for most boasting on such lines indicates not a lack of fear, but a fear of fear!

Fear and Society

Because everyone experiences fear, society creates ways in which it can be managed and diverted.

On the one hand our society stresses the ‘stiff upper lip’, but on the other hand it provides a great deal of ‘entertainment’ and thrills quite specifically designed to trigger fear, so that we can experience it without guilt.

Social life almost runs on alcohol because in certain doses it numbs our fears and enables us more easily to cope with the fearful demands of mixing with other people.

Crowd activities are popular because the individual can lose him/herself in a crowd, and latch-on to the strength of the **group** rather than have to rely on his/her own weakness as an individual. (That is why individuals in a crowd will do the most alarming things which alone they could never contemplate. Individual fears are over-ridden in crowds, so also is individual conscience. Conscience can and does use fear to ‘steer’ us away from danger and extremes.)

Since differences threaten us, we group together naturally with those most like ourselves. Such groups, whether they are London business-men, manual workers or adolescents, adopt their own styles of dress, speech, and behaviour to reduce the fear of confusion and loss of identity.

Fears are held back in the security of the group. Minority groups usually make a lot of fuss because they look to ‘their’ group for security, but the ‘minority’ element makes them insecure.

A stay in hospital with the loss of one’s group, of special dress and of one’s ‘own’ behaviour-pattern can be more traumatic than the illness! Especially to those who identify with their group and are uncertain of themselves without it.

Roles

Our roles are very important, they provide us with a degree of security and identification.

Many roles in society, especially among the professions, are deliberately clarified by visible identification marks – special headgear, badges, uniforms, white coats, coloured belts, dog-collars, and clear symbols of role and status.

Our choice of what we wear, how we look, and how we behave is governed largely by the sort of group with which we wish to identify. (Hence our excessive fear of wearing the wrong thing!)

Maturity might be described as the ability to move easily from one appropriate role to another. Immaturity often expresses itself in clinging desperately to a role when it is no longer appropriate. The reason for this is that, like crowds, the 'role' can give us a way of coping with our fear.

Refuge in roles

We will know of many examples of this both in our own lives and in others -

- The mother who clings to the mother-with-infant role when it is inappropriate and needs to grow into something more mature and suitable for the child's age.
- The parent who when asked 'But why?' replies 'Because I told you so, that's why!' Fear has driven them to retreat into the authoritarian role to escape questioning.
- The middle-aged man who found a role and supportive culture when a teenager and has feared to step outside of it.
- The professional who takes his/her professional role into his/her marriage or parenting. For example, the clergyman who retains his pulpit role in the home, or the policeman who resorts to policing his children.

A sad number of professionals find behaving in their professional role so much easier than their parent-role, that they opt out of the latter whenever possible. (A sad reflection on a society that does virtually no training for parenthood.)

Since many people attempt to find their identity not in relation to God but in relation to society, so their social role becomes the centre of their spiritual pilgrimage. Its change or removal causes, therefore, the most **fearful** reactions. Miners frightened of losing their jobs, or women who have not found satisfaction in traditional women's roles, and hope that they will fare better with men's!

Enough is enough

Fear is only a problem when there is too much, just as eating is not a problem but gluttony is.

Right doses of fear are, as we have seen, necessary for our protection and survival; they equip us with ‘extra’-ordinary powers, i.e. powers which ordinarily the body does not have.

I have linked fear with conscience, and a degree of fear which makes us afraid, for example, of failing an exam, or letting the family down, or letting ourselves down, often prompts that extra effort from us from which success is born.

Much of our behaviour pattern is the result of a complexity of encouragements and fears – carrots and sticks!

It may not be a very high morality which prompts us not to steal for fear of getting caught, but at least such fear is better than stealing!

Fear is only a problem when we have **more than enough**.

How do we judge whether we have or not?

Our assessment of the fear of others is rarely accurate because of the widespread conspiracy of silence concerning fear. We are likely to base our estimate by comparing what we **know** of ourselves with what we **assume** to be true of others!

Just as we do everything possible to hide our fears from others, so we may rest assured others are doing everything possible to hide their fears from us! We can accurately assume therefore that –

EVERYONE ELSE IS FAR, FAR MORE FEARFUL THAN WE EVER IMAGINED!

Fear is not ab-normality but a ‘normality’!

Coping with fear

It helps us to know the two basic ways of coping with fear, for it will enable us to understand ourselves and others better.

1. Retreat

This is the first and most obvious way. We retreat; become mouse-like; we avoid having demands made of us; we become quiet; we keep ourselves to ourselves; we nurse our anger in silence. Almost every decision is made under the influence of fear. New experiences and widening of horizons seem fearful, so we opt for the security of what we know – like a dog that keeps to his kennel.

People tend to like us, because we keep calm and never lose our tempers, and because we are so ‘nice’!

2. Attack

Because fear puts the body into the fighting mode, the other way to cope with fear is to attack. There is a military dictum: ‘the best means of defence is attack’, and one way to stop people attacking one is to attack them first! The bully is not stronger than the coward or less fearful, the bully has a fear-problem which he copes with by attacking rather than retreating. So often the angry, unreasonable over-reaction is an expression of fear.

The person who deals with their fear in this way is more extrovert than the ‘mouse’ who keeps silent. They talk loud and long, they are the ‘life and soul of the party’; pushing, ‘touchy’, and liable to angry ‘explosions’ without warning!

‘Gripped by fear’

The financial success of the media depends on their ability to ‘grip’ us. This means that so-called ‘news’ is rarely a balanced account of ‘new’ events, but a careful selection of the most disturbing and fearful things that are happening. As a comedian has put it: ‘A newscaster is someone who says “Good evening”, and then tells you why it isn’t!’

The media feed our fears, and fears, like babies, grow when fed but die if starved. We must avoid feeding them.

Disaster movies feed our fears of high-rise flats, flying, voyages at sea, and off-shore swimming. Playwrights and novelists thrive on nuclear horror, and ‘space’ seems to spawn only horror in men’s fantasy; the popularity of *E.T.* was perhaps due to the sigh of relief that we could be entertained by love rather than fear.

It is part of our mental protection-system that if we experience constant horror or violence we become immune to it. This means that to keep our attention (i.e. our money!), the media has always to increase the horrific and violent.

Because of this, the bloodiest aspects of war and violence intrude into our lives via the ‘box’ merely because we wish to be aware of the news.

Dealing with the symptoms

In the ‘Look out!’ section at the beginning of this article we outlined what fear does to the body; tight chest, pounding heart, clenched fists, taut muscles, etc.

Just as a car cannot at the same time be breaking **and** accelerating, so the body cannot at one and the same time experience rest and fear. A short-term way of coping with a body in its ‘fear’ mode is to take steps to put it into its ‘rest’ mode.

Changing gear bodywise

This can be quite easily done, and is the basis of all relaxation techniques. We simply make our body do that which, because of its fear, it is **not** doing, i.e. – we breathe slowly and deeply, become conscious of the areas of ‘tight’ muscles in neck, shoulders, wrists, knees, ankles, stomach, etc., and ‘flop’ them one by one.

A knowledge of this if acted on, can in literally a minute, very greatly decrease the strain of reading in public or make the difference between being flustered by an interview or being at ease in it. It can counter the fear we all feel at the dentist’s or the doctor’s.

Dealing with the causes

One way to judge whether our experience of fear is imbalanced is to ‘read’ what our bodies say to us. Do they swing as appropriate between resting and fighting, between parking and racing? Or are the bodily aspects of fear almost always with us? Always off our food, always knotted-up inside, always finding sleep difficult, always ‘jumpy’, always ‘wound-up’?

Inner Healing

Some of our tenseness results from an inner battle with the deeply-lodged pains and traumas of the past. Our phobias are often based on past experiences of pain, at birth or later.

For example, one businessman experienced a quite uncontrollable fear whenever the telephone bell rang. It emerged that as a small boy he experienced the collapse of his mother on the pavement one day and her being taken off to hospital. At that moment of his utter bewilderment and fear the ambulance bell was ringing. The phone bell caused an action-replay of his original feelings. Such phobias usually diminish when we know the cause.

The common fears of crowds or open spaces seem to be related to experiences of inordinate crushing at birth, or prolonged isolation after it.

Rats!

This section is not about our fear of small animals, but about the rat race!

If we are to be aware of the causes of our fears, then we have to face certain areas. A great number of people are living lives of stress because of the mistaken belief that God created them a rat and designed them to race! They find themselves on the materialistic treadmill relying on the unreliable items of health, possessions, wealth and social status.

If one relies on what every newspaper demonstrates is unreliable, then one is going to live a life in constant fear of being let-down.

In such cases the fear is probably the healthiest thing in the situation, and the instrument by which a change toward a more truly human living is sought.

I do not think God will ease the fears of those who wish to be successful rats, for he designed none of us for that role!

“In God we trust”

So states every American dollar-bill – it ought perhaps to have a question mark after it. Much of our fear comes from putting our trust in what cannot be trusted.

We need, therefore, to ask ourselves, ‘In what do I trust?’ and then question its reliability, and our wisdom or foolishness in so trusting it. Peace comes from trusting in what **can** be trusted, that which cannot be removed, or changed – namely God.

Pride of place?

There is a great deal of fear which is linked directly to our pride.

We fear to fall below the living standard of the Joneses, we are too proud to be seen wearing outdated fashions, or driving with a too-dated numberplate. Advertising makes us afraid not to give our children the latest (and highly expensive) thing because our neighbours have done so and our pride would be hurt if we were not seen to be doing the same for our children.

Our financial fears are often made considerably heavier than they need be by commitments of pride to the wrong things.

The ‘inner Jones’

As well as the Joneses outside, most of us experience an ‘inner’ Jones who seems to dictate our style of living, making it difficult to relax, always driving us to become the best wife, or the best husband, or the best homemaker, or most successful seller of vacuum cleaners. Such people become ‘workaholics’ in an attempt to guarantee acceptance by merit. Such people are always ‘under pressure’ – until such time, that is, that they learn to live under grace.

Love and fear

Perfect love casts out fear [1.John 4:18], and fortunately even imperfect love helps it a great deal! The reason is clear, fear is always concerned with **self**; love always with **others**.

Mothers engage in fearless acts when their children are in danger because they are love-motivated. Afterwards, if asked, they will say ‘I didn’t think of myself!’ – and that is true.

Our fears decrease, therefore, the more we are open to the love of God, *because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

[Romans 5:5]

Condemnation or adoption?

The condemnation which we feel from others and from within is something from which the Gospel sets us free. God meets us with undeserved love, ‘grace’. Our acceptance cannot be earned or merited. Our excellence does not draw us nearer him, or place us in some favoured position. We are in the realm of grace not law.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [Romans 8:1]

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.
For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,
but you have received a spirit of adoption.
When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’
it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit
that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs,
heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ...* [Romans 8.14ff]

Fear not!

In the Genesis story man’s first words to God were, significantly, ...*I was afraid*. [Genesis 3:10]. ‘**Fear not!**’ has been God’s repeated message to us ever since. In the New Testament this is God’s word to Joseph, to Mary, to Zechariah, to the shepherds, to Simon Peter, to the disciples, to Jairus and to Paul!

The burden of the past and the future

We live, most of us, crushed between the burden of the past and the future. As we grow in our Christian lives, so **Christ** increasingly deals with the guilt and failures of the past so that they release their fearful domination over us. As we progressively learn to entrust the future to the **Father**, so we find that the future in his hands is far less fearsome than the future held in our own.

St. Paul wrote –

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him [Christ] who loved us.*
[Romans 8:35,37]