

Overcoming Fear

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The pandemic of COVID-19 has disrupted our lives in more ways than we can imagine and caused a wide range of reactions as we have attempted to navigate through this event. One of the most significant impacts has been the development of a second "pandemic" - fear/worry. We, as Christians, may find ourselves caught up in this fear and preoccupied with it, despite knowing logically that the Lord has not given us a spirit of fear (**2 Timothy 1:7**) and does not want us to live in fear. We know that we are not to fear death like those who have no hope (**1 Thessalonians 4:13**). But, it is often difficult to get what we know logically to impact our emotions and calm the fears once they have started. Please let me explain a little bit about fear/anxiety.

Humans, unlike animals, have been blessed with two pathways for fear/anxiety to occur in our minds and bodies.

1. The pathway we share with animals is the one where information comes in from our senses, and it can trigger a fight/flight/freeze response in us even before we really know what the danger is. Or, the information is picked up by our minds and we determine whether it is a danger or not. The impulse reaction is much faster than the part of our brain that evaluates whether the danger is real. For example, we notice something in the grass and we jump back before we have time to determine whether it is really a snake, or just a stick. If it is just a stick, our mind tells our system to calm back down -- there is no danger. But our heart may still beat faster for a moment and our blood pressure will rise. This is because our bodies take a moment to calm down after being frightened. If our mind determines it is really a snake, then it sets off the fight/flight/freeze response to energize us to get to safety. With this response, the potential danger is triggered by something our senses have picked up in the present.

2. The second pathway is one that only people are blessed with. It is the ability to imagine a potentially dangerous situation in the future without any sensory information. This God-given talent is helpful in making plans and avoiding potential problems. This makes it possible for God to warn us of the consequences of an action, and we can see what could happen if we choose that action. It is the ability to discern.

Jesus refers to this ability in **Matthew 16:2-3**, when He tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that,

When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?

He refers to it again in **Luke 14:28-30**:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build, and was not able to finish."

Discernment is what allows us to think ahead and plan. It allows us to see possible problems or dangers so that we can take steps to avoid them. But this ability can be used in a way God did not intend. We can also imagine something so clearly that we react as if it is true even when it is not. I can imagine some terrible thing so clearly that I scare myself and set off the fight/flight/freeze response in my body. I can sit in my living room in my Lay-Z-Boy and watch a scary movie, none of which is real, and scare myself half to death, causing my heart to race and my whole body to be ready to fight like my life depended on it. All because I can imagine it.

Notice **Matthew 6:25-32**, where Jesus is talking about worry: imagining something bad happening in the future to the point of becoming distressed about it. Notice He said *"Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?"* He is talking about things that we have no control over. This is not talking about

looking ahead to make plans. Worry gives us nothing to do but be scared. We often convince ourselves that worrying helps us be prepared for what might happen. Since when did practicing helplessness make anyone more prepared for anything? We are deceiving ourselves and trying to justify our worrying.

The fear reaction in our bodies releases adrenalin into our bloodstream, which causes increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, increased breathing rate, hot or cold flashes, hyper-alertness, hyper-vigilance, etc. These very real symptoms lead us to conclude that what we just imagined is really happening or is going to happen. Because of this reaction in our bodies, it seems like the thought has gained some power over us to make us afraid. We begin to believe that when the worry thought comes up, we can't help but react. It takes us hostage, ties us up, and makes us stay for the whole horror movie. The constant rehearsal of the imagined danger can cripple our ability to live our lives. How many of you have felt that way about worry?

In **Matthew 6**, Jesus says three times to “*take no thought.*” How many times have you read “*take no thought*” (KJV) and felt frustrated because it seems like God is asking you to stop something you can't control?

First of all, we need to identify the lie. Just because I feel out of control doesn't mean I am out of control. Worry starts with a thought, a temptation. Can we avoid temptation? Yes, some of the time. But certainly not all the time because Christ was tempted just like we are. So if He couldn't escape temptation, I'm not going to be able to. The problem isn't that the thought comes to mind; that is unavoidable because our minds are always thinking of options/choices, good and bad. **James 1:14-15** says, “*But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.*” Notice that we are tempted when we are drawn away with a lust and lured by it, but only when it has *conceived* is it sin. The word "conceived" is defined as "to clasp, seize, help." When we take hold of the temptation and go with it, then it is sin. The problem is that we believe we have no control over the thoughts -- they take us hostage. But that is not true.

God shows us how we can control those thoughts that tempt us to worry and despair. Let's see if we can figure out how God says to do it.

Paul says in **2 Corinthians 10:3-5**,

*For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) **Casting down imaginations**, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and **bringing into captivity every thought** to the obedience of Christ.*

Paul says this war is a war of our minds and hearts, and that is where it must be fought. He tells us to **CAST DOWN** imaginations. Worry is imagining bad things happening. **REJECT** those imaginations. **STOP** imagining those worries that lead you away from Christ. **BRING INTO CAPTIVITY** every thought. Notice it doesn't say "don't have the thought." Thoughts come to our minds (all kinds of them) - that is how our minds work. But Paul says to take those thoughts captive — take control of the worry temptation when it presents itself and cast it out of your mind.

But that sounds much easier than it is. Have you ever tried to just make yourself stop thinking about something? It is an exercise in futility because the more you try to not think of it, the more you do think of it.

But what does **Matthew 6:33-34** say?

***But seek ye first the kingdom of God**, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*

This passage gives us two pieces of instruction:

1. Seek the kingdom of God; focus your mind and attention on Godly thoughts
2. Stop thinking about tomorrow's possible evils.

Peter tells us, “Wherefore **gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:13)**. Gird up the loins of your mind means to intensely and repetitively take control of your creative thoughts, imaginations, and understanding (Strong’s: ”gird” and “loins”). It takes intentional, repetitive rejection of those thoughts to get yourself to stop imagining bad things. You aren't likely to succeed after just resisting them one time.

Philippians 4:6-9 says,

*Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by **prayer and supplication with thanksgiving** let your **requests be made known unto God**. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall **keep your hearts and minds** through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are **true**, whatsoever things are **honest**, whatsoever things are **just**, whatsoever things are **pure**, whatsoever things are **lovely**, whatsoever things are of **good report**; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, **think on these things**. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.*

That is God's recipe for replacing worry thoughts with good thoughts. The thought is a temptation, and God has given us the ability to decide whether we are going to take that thought and form it into worry and fear, or if we are going to reject that thought and think about what is true, what is honest, what is just, what is pure, etc. Whenever you catch that temptation to worry coming to your mind, reject that thought, lock it up, don't imagine more details of it, don't scare your body into a fear reaction. Instead, identify something that is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or well spoken of. Plan ahead and identify a specific thought you are going to focus your attention on when the temptation to worry comes. With practice, you can refuse the temptation to worry and divert your thoughts to the replacement thoughts, and you will stop being frightened by them.

For example, remind yourself of what you have to be thankful for and thank God for it. If you need something, pray and ask God for it. Then focus on the replacement thought and His peace will **keep your hearts and minds**. **Romans 12:2** tells us to be transformed by renewing our minds — we can control and change the course of our thoughts towards the good, acceptable, perfect will of God because He has given us His Spirit. **2 Timothy 1:7** says, “*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.*” Psychology calls this “thought stopping” and “replacement thinking,” but God designed it when He created us.

My concern is that the temptation to worry is hitting all of us as a whole more than any other time we can remember. This pandemic and the fear of it has been in our face day after day, tempting us to imagine the worst. Tempting us to worry. The fear of it has been portrayed in detail to us over and over as we see pictures of stacked bodies of the dead and hear stories of people just like us who have died from it. We have seen the fear in other people's eyes that we interact with. We are encouraged to isolate from everyone, keep away from our support, for fear of getting it and dying or killing them by exposing them. Can COVID-19 cause people to die? Yes, it is true that the virus does pose some level of danger to us, but it is difficult to determine how much to each of us individually. It is not the death sentence that it has been portrayed as, with only a 1.8% mortality rate in the US (Johns Hopkins University) . We tolerate many things that have about the same mortality rate, but we don't let them control our lives. We can do some things to try to reduce the danger, but not eliminate it. However, watching the daily count of the number of people who have died and hearing the emotionally charged stories of specific people's experiences of loved ones dying from the virus has given us lots of worry material. With every detail, we are tempted to imagine how that could be our experience in the future. This tends to take a situation that has some level of danger and shoves it into a near phobic reaction of worry and frequent fight/flight/freeze responses. It promotes a sense of panic, helplessness, and hopelessness that can cripple us and interfere with our ability to deal with everyday life. I'm afraid it can even cause us to hide Christ's light of hope from the world.

Whether it is the virus, politics, or something else, the temptation to worry is always present. If we can no longer function effectively because we are imagining all kinds of terrible things happening, then we need to take the advice of our heavenly Father. If your thinking is causing you to feel hopelessness and despair, **who** do you suppose is encouraging those thoughts? Not God. God is the God of hope (**Romans 15:13**). If your thinking is causing you to be afraid of interacting with others and separating you from the

support of your brothers and sisters, **who** do you suppose is happy about that? If your thinking is creating feelings of anger, who do you think is pleased by that? Not God. God is love (**1 John 4:16**).

The answer to all of these is Satan. Satan is lying to us and telling us that we can't control those thoughts. Satan is lying to us about the thought taking us captive against our will. Satan is lying to us to convince us that it is hopeless. Why would he do that? Because he wants us to be where he is: hopeless.

But our creator gave us control over what we do with those thoughts when they come. He has given us the power to choose what we think about. He won't take that away from us and He won't allow Satan to take it from us. Which thoughts are we going to feed and nurture? Will we stop imagining bad things in more detail and choose to entertain the thoughts God wants us to think about? Will we take our requests to God with thanksgiving? Will we choose to think about what is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and good? If we do, then, with God's help, we can stop worrying and we will be filled with peace from God.

We can TRAIN OUR MINDS and TAKE THE CONTROL that God has given every one of us and be at peace. Jesus says, *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls”* (**Matthew 11:28-29**).