

Faith over Fear!

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I am afraid of SNAKES. Actually, I am petrified of them! It could be that they gross me out more than they make me afraid, but either way, I'm so repulsed by them that I cannot distinguish the nuances between the two! I have always had this hatred and fear since I can remember. Even as a small boy, I would shake with fright and cry at the mere sight of rubber snakes in a toy store! I couldn't be even within sight of them! I have no idea what built this fear in me but it was there as long as I can remember. And yet, when I was in the 5th grade, at 10 years of age, for one brief second, I overcame my fear. We had a school assembly at which a man who had a lot of snakes brought them to our school. Well, as a 10-year-old boy sitting in a large circle in the lunch room with many of the other boys who thought snakes were fabulous, I couldn't possibly reveal the abject horror that experienced by even being in the same room as real snakes! I actually think this is when I first learned to be a performer! I HAD to act cool. To this day, after 20 years of conducting choirs and playing concerts all over the world, that school assembly may have been my greatest performance ever! He took the snakes out of the cages. He held them up for us all to see. He let a few brave ones hold them. I was ok still because only a very few of the boys would go up to hold them. You see, I didn't have to be the bravest of the lot, just not the most scared. And then, he walked around the circle with a king snake and said anyone who wanted could touch it or pet it. I wouldn't have even minded this because I was so good at playing it cool, until I saw that even the girls were all touching the snake! In fact, EVERY SINGLE CHILD IN THE CIRCLE WAS TOUCHING THE SNAKE... AND IT WAS GETTING CLOSER AND CLOSER TO MY TURN!!!!!!!!!!

I instantly developed a prayer life to match the saints and apostles of old: “O GOD help me!” And then, when it came to me...with every eye in the fifth grade fixed on my quivering forearm, I pointed my index finger out and ever so quickly touched...the...snake! I had done it! Folks, I tell you, I believed this was very probably the greatest miracle since the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself! I touched the snake...and then I ran to the bathroom and washed my hands for about 10 minutes!

Have you ever been really afraid? Maybe you've had a childhood fear like mine.... But very possibly, if you think about it, you probably have grown up fears even today. I have had many different kinds of fears myself since that dreaded day in the fifth grade. Some I cope with better than others and some seem to be constant lifelong back and forth battles of victory and defeat. It has actually been in those battles of fear through the years that I have learned what I want to share with you today. The most important of the truths that I have learned, which will shape all I want to share, is this: FEAR IS THE OPPOSITE OF FAITH. We all have many different compartments of fear in our lives, and as we grow and mature as people and particularly as Christians, we trade or exchange the fear with faith in one little compartment of life at a time. Before I go on with this, though, I should confess now that my ability to touch the snake wasn't because I was filled with faith, but because I was filled with another kind of fear... being made fun of! Besides peer pressure though, faith is usually what helps us to overcome our fears in healthy and right ways. Some examples of the compartments of fear we may encounter are as follows:

1. A fear of death can be overcome by faith that through Christ we will have eternal life

2. A fear of failure can be overcome with the faith that God loves us not based on our performance
 3. A fear of lack can be overcome by faith that God will provide for our needs
- ...And on and on we could go.

To overcome the fears of life, I find it helpful to see the organizational process that takes place every time fear is replaced by faith. It is a three step process. **Step one** is the situation itself. **Step two** is the voice of instruction that helps us replace fear with faith and **step three** leads us to the results of being faithful. I would like to show you this pattern in the story of the children of Israel at the Red Sea and also in a particular area of my life recently. My intent is that the combination of this ancient biblical story and that of my own, will help you to see and understand the process in your own particular story and in so doing, give you the courage to forge ahead to the marvelous exchange of fear and faith. Let's get started.

1. **STEP 1: The situation.** The first step in overcoming fear is to be aware of the situation. Fear usually isn't an emotion that comes on for no reason. It is almost always attached to a circumstance or situation. In the case of today's Bible story, the situation was justifiably fearful. The children of Israel had finally been released out of Egypt but Pharaoh changed his mind and wanted them back as his slaves. Or perhaps he just wanted to go and slaughter them in the desert. Either way, he sent his armies after them. They were stranded in the desert at the edge of the enormous Red Sea. They had an insurmountable obstacle in front of them and fierce enemies coming up quickly behind them! If that isn't a situation for fear, I don't know what is! We all have moments or areas in life that are the equivalent of having the Red Sea in front of us and the chariots of soldiers coming up behind us. The Red Sea was a natural barrier. Natural barriers in front of us can include any

number of what appear to be human limitations to whatever it is we wish we could accomplish but are afraid of; A physical disability, a lack of funds, a lack of education, a geographical location, even a pandemic! The enemy behind the Children of Israel was an army coming to destroy or enslave them. The enemy behind us can very often be people. People who say “you can’t,” or “we won’t let you,” or “you aren’t good enough”... People who laugh at you. People who threaten you. Even people who abuse you. These situations create the stage at which faith and fear speak to us. Faith says: “Look, God brought you up out of Egypt with marvelous miracles to convince Pharaoh to let you go... why would He do that to let you die here? Of course he will save you! Even if you don’t know how He will do it, or when, you will be OK!” Faith says: “ My God can heal any disease, he can help me study in a way that will enable me to pass my test in school, he will help me find a job to take care of my family’s needs. He will protect my child that is going down a dangerous path in life. He will help me learn how to improve my marriage, he will heal the hurts from my childhood. He will give me the courage to accomplish my dreams... Then, fear stands up and says, “well maybe THIS time He won’t save us. Maybe this time you won’t pass the class, graduate, get the interview, make the team, succeed in the business, or get another job. No one will hire you. They will never forgive you for messing up this big. It really will be the end. Your child has gone too far. There’s no way to help them in the mess they are in. You won’t get over this illness. You’ll have chronic misery for the rest of your life.” That is the voice of fear, and THAT my friends, is the situation!

2. **STEP 2: The Voice of Instruction.** This is the voice that gives you an instruction that will help you trade fear for faith. In the Bible story today, it is the voice of Moses to the fear-filled children of Israel: “FEAR NOT.

STAND FIRM AND SEE THE SALVATION OF THE LORD WHICH HE WILL WORK FOR YOU TODAY.” Their voice of instruction was to stand firm. Don’t run, don’t panic, don’t cover your eyes to avoid seeing the enemy come at you, instead STAND FIRM...an act of courage despite the fear. “SEE the salvation of the Lord;” —look bravely at the situation with open eyes. Be filled with faith, knowing that when you yourself are powerless, God is able and ready to step in and save you. And this isn’t just a Bible story. It’s an instruction for us today! God still sends people in our lives to speak FAITH into us when we are weak and full of fear.... And it’s our job to listen to those voices of challenge... when we listen to such voices, we are really listening to God because it is God’s message to us to trade fear into faith. The entire Bible could well be reduced to a detailed message that says “TRADE IN YOUR FEARS for FAITH!” The cross is the exchange booth! The swap meet! Jesus himself paid for the cost of faith so that our fear, which is so worthless, can be evenly exchanged for faith, which is so priceless. Before the Bible was compiled, God sent individuals to speak into people. Now, we have the very word of God to speak to us. O how wonderful that is! Its full of stories like Moses helping the people of Israel, David, a young shepherd who stood face to face with goliath... like Jesus himself, who went to the cross with all the courage any man ever had. Yet, even though we have so many biblical examples, God knows we need lots of support through our seasons of fear, so he still very often sends people to speak to us too!

3. **STEP THREE: THE RESULTS.** After we hear and heed the voice of instruction comes the final step of the process: The RESULTS. God shows up in his perfect timing and alters even the most difficult circumstances. He totally stops our enemies from having any power to overtake us. The story

even tells us that God was the one who changed the mind of Pharaoh and made him want to pursue the Israelites! He was flexing His muscles to show that He can deliver them from ANYTHING and EVERYTHING WHEREVER AND WHENEVER THEY NEED IT! God opened the sea and allowed the children to walk through the insurmountable obstacle ahead of them! And He didn't allow a single chariot to reach them or harm a single person. Their enemies were destroyed, and all the glory goes to God. God getting the glory is pretty much the point of the whole fear-to-faith transformation! Our liberation from the bondage of fear is a testimony to God's marvelous work in us, so that we enjoy the freedom and He gets the glory. A hallmark of the Reformation and thus of reformed churches like the Presbyterian church, is its commitment to the five SOLAS... latin terms that sum up our faith. **Sola Scriptura**- we base our beliefs on scripture alone... **Sola Gratia**, grace alone. We are saved only and wholly by the free gift of God, totally undeserved. **Sola Fide**—by faith alone. Rather than works, we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. **Sola Christus**, Christ alone is the basis of our salvation. And last, **Soli Deo Gloria**... To God Alone Be the Glory. This last sola is the sum of all of the five solas and the sum of everything from the creation of the world to its redemption. God is holy and will glorify Himself in all He does in and through and for His people and His world. Everything is for His Glory. And the musician in me can't help but be reminded that the great Johann Sebastian Bach always wrote three words at the bottom of all of his hand written compositions... "Soli Deo Gloria"... to God alone be the Glory. God loves seeing our fear traded in for faith.

Now that we have seen this process and examined how it has played out in the Bible lesson today, I would like to encourage all of us to apply the process to our lives. What situation do you have? What fills you with fear? severe health problems... the loss of a job, crippling debt, marriage problems, problems with your children, young or adult... ?? the Corona virus of course has been a HUGE source of fear this year... the fear of getting sick, fear of death, fear of not being able to pay your bills or provide for your family. It has certainly been the single largest fear inducing event of my lifetime... and in one way or another that fear has struck most parts of the entire world!

When you have identified your situation, ask yourself who your voice of instruction is. Maybe in your prayers God whispers something in your heart that you should do. Maybe He shows you something in the Bible. Maybe a friend or family member, a counselor or a pastor, or a book you've read has been a voice of instruction to give you that key word to unlock your situation. Maybe you heard something that resonated in your soul when they let the church organist preach a sermon!

If you are in the middle of a situation, you may not have gotten the results yet. They are on the way though. I recommend looking back over other parts of your life that you have been able to conquer fear. Remind yourself how faith brought you out of the situation. It ALWAYS does and it ALWAYS will. Because faith is a gift from God to unlock His power into your life.

I want to close today by sharing my recent story of fear and faith. You see, besides my horror of snakes I have dealt with many fears over the years. Maybe compared to some others, they don't seem so bad, but they all feel very real and terrible when you are going through them yourself. I have recently been afraid too. My **Situation** has been related to corona virus. Now for some reason, I

don't tend to ever have fear of getting sick with it. But, I have other fears because of it. My biggest fear is posed in the question: "What does this do for my life's calling to minister to people with choral and organ music?" That hit me very hard when the church first closed. It was the one thing I'd never dreamed would happen. I've certainly heard of churches closing because of a gradually declining membership or financial lack or leadership problems, but because our church is the furthest thing from those reasons, it never entered my mind that we would have to shut down for anything ever. When I heard about cruise ships and corona virus, it seemed so far away and removed from my life that the seriousness of it all never occurred to me until the day the church leaders decided to not have church that first Sunday. I was so shocked. Then as it wore on more than a few weeks, and as we heard things get worse, I really began to wonder if this was the end of the world! I was afraid somehow the church might never open. Now even if it was the end of the world, I should have joyfully anticipated heaven, but instead I allowed fear to replace faith and joy.

Then came my voices of instruction. My voices came in multiple forms: scriptures, an encouraging conversation with Pastor Tom, and much encouragement from many faithful people who told me everything will work out and one day return to normal. I just needed to "Stand Firm and see the Salvation of the Lord, Or, in my case, sit at home and wait for it! But even after knowing and hearing all of that, I wasn't totally ok. Then, one day, when I was really distressed about it all, my biggest voice of instruction came to me through a hymn text. The Lord brought to my mind the words of the hymn "Lead on, O King Eternal." The text says "through days of preparation your grace has made us strong, and now, O King eternal, we lift our battle song."

This was an instruction loud and clear in my heart that I needed to use this time as a season of MAJOR preparation for ministry to come...that as the sanctuary is going to be renovated to sound more glorious, I needed to renovate myself with intensive organ study so that my music also would sound more glorious. My "Pre-Covid" life was such a constantly busy juggling act of teaching and conducting and administering the music program, that I always had to fight to practice a bit here and there. I decided that this time would become a season of serious musical growth. I would learn some of the great monuments of the organ literature that I've always loved but never had time to tackle. I would develop my piano technique, and I would become the very finest musician possible *because of* and *during* these "days of preparation," so that when one day I am able to play for people again in the glorious resonance of the renovated sanctuary, I will really be able to help God's people to "lift our battle song" in a greater way than ever before. And by the way... lest you misunderstand the term "battle song," it is not a battle in the natural sense, but a spiritual battle of faith over fear. You see, my prayer is that, the more skillfully I play the organ, the more those listening will be inspired by its majestic and thrilling sounds and that such inspiration will give them the courage to choose faith over fear. Perhaps the voice of the organ will even be the very voice of instruction that someone needs to hear! And in all this time following that instruction, I have worked hard and made a lot of headway. So, for all the progress I've had, and for any lives that will be challenged or inspired by the work I've done in my "days of preparation," I simply respond with the greatest three words of the reformation: Soli Deo Gloria! To God Alone be the Glory. My prayer is that you will be able to echo that same statement as your faith replaces your fears. Amen.