

OVERCOMING THE FEARS IN YOUR LIFE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Let me say from the outset, that there is one means of overcoming the fears in your life—and it is not self-talk or therapy—it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And let me add that there are two ways in which the Gospel accomplishes this: (1) through the love of God, and (2) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, let me explain.

Fear of Death

The fear of death is the father of all fears. That is, behind every fear you sense—of spiders or frogs, of lack or of loss, of failure or defeat—is an innate fear of death, the uncertainty of what lies beyond this life. Jesus faced this fear.

Alone, He prayed His way through it in the Garden of Gethsemane, while his closest friends slept nearby. Yet, He came out victorious, and marched right into the face of death—a cruel and horrible death, a disgraceful death, the death of a criminal on a cross. How could He do this?

The Bible says, *“Because of the joy awaiting Him, [Jesus] endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne”* (Hebrews 12:2). A clear vision of the loving end God had prepared for Him gave Jesus the motivation to go through with it. And through it He went! Through the humiliation, through the pain, through the death... to the resurrection and beyond!

The “joy awaiting Him” lay beyond His death. Jesus looked beyond the means of His death to the ultimate result and reward that His dying would produce. That joy included at least the return to the Father’s side and to the glory that He had shared with the Father, as well as the salvation of the human race and the establishment of the Church, the Bride of Christ, with whom He would share the new heavens and the new earth.

In fact, the means of His death—its humiliation and pain—He wholly disregarded—it did not concern Him. His focus was on the ultimate result that His death would achieve. He knew His life would not end in His death; there was more to come.

What would cause a soldier to throw himself on a live grenade? Only this: he is so certain of the positive result for someone else (their life would be saved) that he is willing to sacrifice himself. Of course, if he is a Christian, he may also be certain of the ultimate result for himself—resurrection to everlasting life. It is the vision and faith of continuing life that renders death innocuous.

Because the fear of death is the capstone of the arch of all fears, when Christ defeated this fear by His own death and resurrection, all the rest collapsed in a heap. And He did this for us!

*“Because God’s children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For **only** as a human being could he die, and **only** by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying”* (Hebrews 2:14-15; NLT).

Jesus defeated the devil, who had the power of death (notice: past tense); today, the end result of death is once again in the hands of God. The devil or his servants may choose the means of death, but they have no say about what lies beyond. Therefore, the person whose life is also in God’s hands has *nothing* (ultimately) to fear!

There was a plan (there was *always* a plan), that extended beyond this life, because of the love God has for humankind. *“We love because He (God) loved us first”* (1 John 4:20; NET). He has loved you *“with an everlasting love”* (Jeremiah 31:3), that cannot be fulfilled in a lifetime of 60 or 100 years.

Fear of People

Fear of people is the second most common fear we experience. It is sin, the opposite of the fear of God.

Fear of people means that you elevate their importance, to hold them in awe, to crave their approval and to fear their disapproval. This amounts to adoration and worship of humans.

King Saul of Israel did the same, caving to public opinion and disobeying God’s express will (1 Samuel 15). Here’s the story...

When Israel left Egypt (their bondage as slaves) under the mighty hand of God, they made their way toward the Land God had promised to them, passing through the territories of other nations. But the people of Amalek resisted their passage and ambushed the encampment of the Israelites. Israel defeated their attackers, but God instructed Moses to write on a scroll as a permanent reminder for succeeding generations, that He would avenge the Amalekites’ deed: *“I will erase the memory of Amalek from under Heaven”* (Exodus 17:14).

About 300 years later, God told Samuel, His prophet, to tell King Saul of Israel, *“I have decided to settle accounts with the nation of Amalek for opposing Israel when they came from Egypt. Now go and completely destroy the entire Amalekite nation—men,*

women, children, babies, cattle, sheep, goats, camels, and donkeys” (1 Samuel 15:2-3). God’s word was at stake here—the word He had given Moses to record and preserve. Now, it was to be fulfilled completely, by Saul’s hand.

However, Saul, like many of us, had a “better idea” of how to handle God’s business. He adjusted the battle plan. *“Saul slaughtered the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, east of Egypt. He captured Agag, the Amalekite king, but completely destroyed everyone else. Saul and his men spared Agag’s life and kept the best of the sheep and goats, the cattle, the fat calves, and the lambs—everything, in fact, that appealed to them. They destroyed only what was worthless or of poor quality”* (1 Samuel 15:7-9).

“Then the LORD said to Samuel, ‘I am sorry that I ever made Saul king, for he has not been loyal to me and has refused to obey my command’” (1 Samuel 15:10). Samuel was so disturbed by this news that he spent all night in prayer. The next day, when he finally found Saul, *“Saul greeted him cheerfully. ‘May the LORD bless you,’ he said. ‘I have carried out the LORD’s command!’”*

“Then what is all the bleating of sheep and goats and the lowing of cattle I hear?” Samuel demanded.

*“It’s true that **the army** spared the best of the sheep, goats, and cattle,’ Saul admitted. ‘But they are going to sacrifice them to the LORD **your** God. We have destroyed everything else.’”* (1 Samuel 15:13-15).

Samuel replied, *“The LORD sent you on a mission and told you, ‘Go and completely destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, until they are all dead.’ Why haven’t you obeyed the LORD? Why did you rush for the plunder and do what was evil in the LORD’s sight?”*

*“But I did obey the LORD,’ Saul insisted. ‘I carried out the mission he gave me. I brought back King Agag, but I destroyed everyone else. Then **my troops** brought in the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and plunder to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.’*

“But Samuel replied, ‘What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to His voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams. Rebellion is as sinful as witchcraft, and stubbornness as bad as worshiping idols. So because you have rejected the command of the LORD, He has rejected you as king’” (1 Samuel 15:18-23).

Finally, Saul admitted his sin, *“Yes, I have sinned. I have disobeyed your instructions and the LORD’s command, for I was **afraid of the people** and did what they demanded”* (1 Samuel 15:24).

Initially, Saul simply *lied* to Samuel, covering up his misdeeds by declaring, “I have carried out the Lord’s command!”

Then, he shifted the blame to *his army*, suggesting that it was the troops’ idea to keep the best animals. He even suggested that this violation was done for *Samuel’s* sake, as a sacrifice to his God.

As Saul continued to spin the story he suggested that killing everyone *but* Agag was equivalent to killing everyone, as God had commanded. Actually, bringing back the enemy’s king in humiliation and captivity would only serve to glorify *Saul* in the eyes of his people.

Finally, when Samuel would not let him off the hook, Saul abandoned his fabrication and admitted his fault and disobedience. Why did he do it? For fear of the people, he gave in to their demand.

Is that any way for a king to lead? Is that any way for *any leader* to lead?

Samson, as we saw last week, did the same to retain Delilah’s sexual attention (Judges 16).

Some parents attempt to gain a child’s obedience by instilling fear of punishment (or anger or humiliation) in their child. If you are such a parent, watch out! You are taking (the fear) what belongs to God alone! Besides that, *such* fear gains only temporary compliance, while building long-lasting resentment.

Some bosses attempt to manipulate their employees in a similar manner. It is futile, exhausting, unhealthy, and eventually yields negative repercussions. God does not treat us that way!

“Don’t you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can’t you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?” (Romans 2:4).

God’s undeserved kindness leads you to repent (and by extension, to obey). So, if you want long term pleasure and obedience from your children or employees, focus on building up their love-assurance, and lengthen your expectations of their behavior.

Another form of the fear of man is what we may call eye-service: to do a job only to the degree that you get approval of, or reward from, those over you (Ephesians 6:6-7; Colossians 3:22-23). Such motivation results in shoddy, and half-hearted work. You’ll never create anything for the excellence and sheer joy of creation and a job well done. You’ll simply be a trader in short-lived commendations.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ frees us to “*seek the approval... of God*” (Galatians 1:10). How?

Fear of God

The Old Testament introduces the concept of the fear of God—not as being terrified of God, but as being filled with awe and wonder and attraction at His greatness, with a corresponding desire to please Him and not to displease Him.

Trusting in Christ brings God’s full and complete favor and approval. When He sees the believer, He sees Jesus (Galatians 3:25-27)—and so He says to us, as He said of Him: “*With you I am well pleased*” (Mark 1:11). God is pleased with us, because we have trusted His plan and put our faith in Jesus.

Paul urges Christians to sacrificially obey God because this is “pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1).

Imagine a father who loves his young son deeply and shares that love often with his boy. As the team’s coach, he sits in the dugout, watching his son play baseball. As he sits there, he loves his son fully and completely. If his son forgets his father’s instructions and strikes out, it will not change his love for him or approval of him one bit. The son is assured of his father’s love regardless of his performance.

But the son will long to hit a home run. Not for himself—to gain his father’s love—but for his father, because he is already loved. If he doesn’t know his father loves him, or is uncertain of his love, his efforts will be for himself—to win that love. When he knows his father already loves him, his efforts are for his father—to please him.

Here were the boy’s options: to try to win the love he had not yet gained, or to please his dad because he was already loved.

Here are your options: to try to win the love you have not yet gained, or to please God because you are already loved.

Christians are assured of God’s love and approval. God is pleased with us in Christ. So the Christian longs to obey God, not for himself, so that God will save him, but out of gratitude to God, who he knows has already saved him.

This is what it means to serve Christ. This is what it means to trust Christ.

Pastor Tim Keller sums it up: “God’s approval liberates us to live in a way which God approves of. The gospel is both a powerful assurance, and a powerful motivation to live in radical obedience.”

We do not live God's way in order to become His children, but out of gratitude that we are already God's children.

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears punishment has not been perfected in love. We love because He loved us first" (1 John 4:18-19; NET).

God loved us first, so that we would obey Him second.

There is only one means of overcoming the fears in your life—and it is not self-talk or therapy—it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there are two ways in which the Gospel accomplishes this for us: (1) through the abiding and everlasting love of God, and (2) through the mighty resurrection of Jesus Christ, to whom be glory in the church throughout endless ages.