

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“FAITH AND FEAR”
(Psalm 112)

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When she was growing up, our middle child, Carolyn, was a very fearful little girl.

When she was a baby, she would cry non-stop when she was left with anybody but Becky. Not her grandmother, not her aunt – not even me – but only her mother made her feel safe.

Carolyn was deathly afraid of dogs. Whenever she saw a dog coming towards her – anything from a Great Dane to a beagle – she would climb right up the nearest adult and sit on their head. Now, her younger sister, Emily, would rush right up and give the dog a bit, wet kiss right on the lips, while her older brother, Brian, would drop on all fours and start barking. But Carolyn was terrified of dogs. When we decided to get a family dog, we figured it would either cure Carolyn of her fear or provide her with material for years of therapy: “But they *knew* I was terrified of dogs!”

Carolyn was afraid of all loud noises – thunder, fireworks, a door slamming, the vacuum cleaner.

Once, when we were living in England, when Carolyn was 6 years old, we visited a quaint little avian zoo. There were cages filled with all kinds of beautiful birds. Carolyn was anxious, holding on tightly to my hand, ready to climb onto my head in case a killer bird got loose. And then it happened. We were leaning up against a fence looking at some peacocks, when all of a sudden one of the peacocks got spooked, and – in an instantaneous maneuver that’s hard to describe – he reared back and then propelled himself forward by his wings with his claws up, slamming against the fence right next to us. Carolyn almost had a heart attack and was immediately wailing on top of my head. Emily – who was only three at the time, was so ticked off that this bird had scared her beloved sister that Emily – in an instantaneous maneuver that’s hard to describe – charged the peacock with *her* claws up. Meanwhile Brian was on all fours, barking.

And then, at some point in early high school, Carolyn grew out of it. She was no longer our fragile little girl. And that was great. Because it’s no fun going through life being afraid.

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Listen to God's Word from Psalm 112:

*Praise the Lord!
How joyful are those who fear the Lord
and delight in obeying his commands.
Their children will be successful everywhere;
an entire generation of godly people will be blessed. ...
Light shines in the darkness for the godly.
They are generous, compassionate, and righteous. ...
Such people will not be overcome by evil.
Those who are righteous will be long remembered.
They do not fear bad news;
they confidently trust the Lord to care for them.
They are confident and fearless
and can face their foes triumphantly. ...
Their good deeds will be remembered forever.
They will have influence and honor.
The wicked will see this and be infuriated.
They will grind their teeth in anger;
they will slink away, their hopes thwarted.*

When I read Psalm 112, the thing that stands out to me is that it uses the same, small, powerful word to talk about two very different realities. And that small, powerful word is the word “fear”.

On the one hand, Psalm 112 talks about the negative kind of fear and how to resist it:

*Godly people don't fear bad news;
they confidently trust the Lord to care for them.
They are confident and fearless
and can face their foes triumphantly.*

And, at the same time, Psalm 112 teaches that there's a good kind of fear. It begins, “Happy are those who fear the Lord” (v. 1), which echoes the last verse of the psalm right before this one: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (111:10).

The reason this good kind of fear is good is because it's not really fear. “The fear of the Lord” – this doesn't mean being scared of God, like the Cowardly Lion in front of the Great and Terrible Oz. No. In fact, most Bibles these days do a better job of translating “the fear of the Lord”, using phrases like “reverence for the Lord” or “respect for the Lord.” Because when the Bible talks about “the fear of the Lord”, it's talking about that sense of awe and reverence of God, the recognition that *God* is God and we are not, that God is in charge and we are not, that God is endlessly faithful and good.

This sense of the word “fear” – trusting in our awesome God – is the main point of Psalm 112: if we live in the fear of the Lord, then we can walk through the circumstances of life without fear.

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If we live in the fear of the Lord, then we can walk through the circumstances of life without fear.

There's a very real sense that all of us know that this is true. That one of the best benefits of believing in God is that our faith gives us security, the sense that we have solid ground under our feet, the confidence that we live our lives in the care of the God who's got the whole world in His hands.

But there's also a very real sense that all of us struggle with this idea, that trusting in God overcomes our fears. Because there are a lot of fearful things in the world – we've had to face up close fearful things in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. Things like death and illness and relationships breaking apart and children making bad choices and being unemployed. It's not that these fearful things cause us to give up our faith in God. But it's not always clear that our faith is up to the challenge of these more-than-legitimate fears.

Because there *are* legitimate things to fear out there. John Calvin, the great Reformer, demonstrates his remarkable common sense in his interpretation of verse 7 – “Godly people don't fear bad news”:

"The children of God may [show] symptoms of fear at the prospect of impending danger. For were they altogether heedless of calamities, such indifference would be the result, not of faith in God, but of senselessness."¹

Calvin's right – there are things that legitimately make us anxious, unsettled, afraid. Experiencing fear doesn't mean that our faith is useless. So, what does Psalm 112 mean when it says if we live in the fear of the Lord we can walk through the circumstances of life without fear?

I think it means this: the bad kind of fear rises up in us because bad circumstances make us feel insecure, the scary feeling that this could go either way and we don't have much control over it, and we're unsure of our ability to handle it. We've all felt this kind of fear grab us from time to time and immobilize us. But the *good* kind of fear – the fear of the Lord, our trust in God's power and grace – means that when bad circumstances make us feel insecure, when we have that scary feeling that this could go either way and we don't have much control over it, and we're unsure of our ability to handle it – nonetheless our faith keeps us secure in God. That even though we don't know how this scary circumstance is going to play out, our faith enables us to get past the fear. Because we

¹ *Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, translated by James Anderson, volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprinted 1989), p. 326.

believe – we know – that God is *God*, He’s in charge and He’s good – and that’s enough to see us through.

You see, believing in God doesn’t mean denying the scary things that happen to us. Biblical faith has little to do with cheesy Broadway song lyrics:

Whenever I feel afraid... I whistle a happy tune
And ev’ry single time, The happiness in the tune
Convinces me that I’m not afraid. (“The King and I”)

When the dog bites, When the bee stings,
When I’m feeling sad.
I simply remember my favorite things,
And then I don’t feel so bad. (“The Sound of Music”)

No. The power of biblical faith is that when we encounter fearful things in our lives, when we are facing a scary reality, our faith assures us that there is another reality, a deeper reality, a truer reality – that our security in God is the more real reality. That God’s hold on us is stronger than anything in life that might pull us down.

* * *

I’m embarrassed to admit that the Hart household is one of those families who believes that almost every incident in life can be illustrated from the TV show, “Friends”. In an early “Friends” episode, Rachel is frustrated with her low-paying, dead-end job as a coffeehouse waitress. But when she complains to Joey and Chandler about her inability to find a better job, Joey replies:

Joey: If you ask me, as long as you got this job, you've got nothing pushing you to get another one. You need "the fear".

Rachel: "The fear"?

Chandler: He's right, if you quit this job, you then have motivation to go after a job you really want.

Rachel: Well then how come *you're* still at a job that *you* hate? I mean why don't *you* quit and get "the fear"?

[Chandler and Joey both laugh]

Chandler: Because, I'm *too* afraid.

Here’s the thing – some of us get “the fear” when we face scary situations – a spreading virus, a tanking stock market. And that’s more than fair. But listen again to Gods’ work in Psalm 112:

Godly people don’t fear bad news;

they confidently trust the Lord to care for them.
They are confident and fearless
and can face their foes [“face their fears”] triumphantly

Friends, in good times, in scary times – may we learn, day by day, more and more, to live in the fear of the Lord, so that we can walk among all the circumstances of life without fear. AMEN

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