

DR. STEPHEN OLFORD

# FEAR

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ENCOUNTER WITH TRUTH

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“You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day...You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down.” | Psalm 91:5, 13



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# *Fear: Encounter with Truth*

We live in a fear-ridden world. There is hardly an event in life, which had not the potential to frighten us. We are afraid of the dark, we are afraid of disease, we are afraid of death.

If we were honest with ourselves we would have to confess that we are afraid not only for our enemies and our friends, but of ourselves. Fear seems to be the climate in which we live, the atmosphere we breath, and the very language that we speak.

Some years ago, a leading New York newspaper published a number of articles on the mental fitness of New Yorkers. In one of the most penetrating and alarming of the series, the writer pointed out that after an eight-year study by a five-man team based at New York Hospital- Cornell Medical Center it was established that only one of five is mentally well; one out of four is so psychologically disturbed as to be impaired in his social relations. The rest have some symptoms of psychological illness but they do not interfere with their lives. And in case this analysis might be thought to relate to New York City alone, the researchers were quick to add that the frequency of symptoms does not appear to differ much from other parts of the United States.

Reading these reports made it evident that the basic problem in most instances was that of fear, fear of not achieving the desired social status, fear of advancing age, and significantly enough with children, fear of an atomic or nuclear war.

Is it not true that we live in a fear-ridden age?

How comforting it is, then turn to the Bible and read unqualified words like, "You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or the arrow that flies by day...You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down."<sup>1</sup>

Moses, who wrote these words, knew from experience how to face, fight and forget his fears. He was a friend of God, lived in His presence, and could face his generation and his tasks without fear. With the Scriptures before us, we must learn the same secret, so consider with me:

## **HOW TO FACE YOUR FEARS**

"You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down." Half the battle in fighting an enemy is recognizing him for what he is.

Our text describes the instigator of human fears as a lion, a cobra and a serpent (literally sea monster or dragon). Ultimately, this description is of the *one supreme enemy of all mankind*: the one who brought sin and suffering into the world, and therefore, spread the

unwholesome fears that we are thinking of right now. His name is Satan and his strategy is to attack us in one of three ways:

1. *The Undisguised Fear.* "You will tread upon the lion." The lion is an animal that can never disguise itself. Its form, its roar and its destructive power can never be mistaken. Peter warns us that our "adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."<sup>2</sup> In his vivid and figurative language, we have the picture of the undisguised fear that terrifies people like you and me. Anything that spells death frightens young and old. The Bible calls death "the king of terrors."<sup>3</sup> It may be the threat of war, the discovery of some foul disease, the news of an accident, or a hundred and one other things. These are all undisguised fears. We know them to be real. We can hear their roar, see their form, sense their danger. In this last analysis, however, what we really fear is not death, so much as what happens after death. Unless we have made our peace with God, the Bible tells us, and our hearts confirms it, that judgement awaits us. The divine record says, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgement."<sup>4</sup>
2. *The Unexpected Fear.* "You will tread upon the...cobra." In the Scriptures and in natural life, the serpent illustrates the unexpected attack. The snake rarely gives warning and usually strikes from the place of hiding. The Bible says, "Whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him."<sup>5</sup> So the cobra speaks to us of the unexpected fear which confronts us as we journey through life. We start the day with optimism and cheerfulness, only to find that some serpent, with its poisonous sting, has attacked us in the most unexpected manner, inflaming our minds with doubts, paralyzing our spirits with despair.
3. *The Unfounded Fear.* "You will tread upon...the serpent (dragon)." From a study of the other biblical mentions of the dragon, it would appear that this creature is an intended figment of the imagination. No one has ever seen a dragon, and many people, perhaps you are one of them, are more afraid of the unfounded and unknown than they are of the roaring lion or the subtle snake. Many people have come to me again and again to share their fears of what has never happened, or is unlikely to happen. Their language is: "I am so bewildered I cannot hear, so terrified I cannot see. My mind reels horror overwhelms me; the twilight I longed for has...turned...me into trembling."<sup>6</sup>

It is, therefore, a good thing at times to ask ourselves; Of what are we really afraid? Do our fears actually exist, or is it that we have allowed our imagination to run riot?

It is important to recognize that fear is faith in reverse. Faith operates in the realm of the positive, blesses and makes us a blessing whereas fear operates in the realm of the negative and disturbs, depresses and ultimately destroys.

Strange fears possess the souls of many. Even some great ones of the earth have not been free from them:

The famous Dr. Samuel Johnson was very careful not to enter a room with his left foot forward. If by chance he did so he would immediately step back and re-enter with his right foot first. He was terribly afraid of death, too, and would not allow it to be mentioned in his presence.

Julius Caesar, to whom the shouts of thousands of the enemy were but sweet music, was mortally afraid of the sound of thunder, and always wanted to get underground to escape the dreadful noise.

Maurice de Saxe, famed French marshal of the eighteenth century, who loved to look upon the ranks of opposing armies, fled in terror at the sight of a cat.

Peter the Great, czar of Russia, could scarcely be persuaded to cross a bridge, and whenever he placed his foot on one he would cry out with fear.

The number 13 is considered by some an unlucky number. The breaking of crockery, and particularly glassware, is a harbinger of misfortune. Some fishermen on their way to their boats refuse to sail if they met a woman or a cat. These are superstitious fears, with no rational foundation whatsoever.

So we must be careful that what is initially unfounded does not become actual and real through the process of worry and anxiety. To sum up then, we must face each fear for what it is. We must ask ourselves: Is it a lion, a cobra, or a serpent?

## HOW TO FIGHT YOUR FEARS

“You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down.” The “You” in this verse is the second person of the Trinity, the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the New. We cannot cope with these beasts and reptiles, *but He can!* He met them once and forever in the person of Satan when he died on Calvary’s tree and then rose again to demonstrate His victory over all the powers of darkness.

So we read, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this you can *now* trust the Lord Jesus Christ as your Conqueror over the lion, cobra and serpent.

*You must trust Him in all his renewing LIFE to conquer the undisguised fears.* He says, “Do not be afraid; ... I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”<sup>8</sup> The truth of the gospel is that when Christ died at Calvary He overcame “him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” in order that he might “deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”<sup>9</sup>

The person who really trusts Christ in his renewing life has nothing to fear when he comes face to face with death. His language is that of the Psalmist, who could affirm: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil."<sup>10</sup>

*You must trust Him in all His redeeming LOVE to conquer the unexpected fears.* The Bible teaches us that "there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear."<sup>11</sup> As long as sins are forgiven and fellowship with God is established, there is nothing to fear.

A tenderhearted surgeon was passing through a ward of a hospital when he saw a little child with bandaged eyes waving her hand in distress. He went up to her and took hold of the outstretched hand. Instantly there was a change; the little one was comforted and became restful and contented. This illustration is a picture of the comforting ministry of our loving Lord and when we are in distress and darkness. In love, He takes hold of our hand and our fears vanish. His word to us is, "For I am the Lord your God, who (holds) your right hand, ... 'Do not fear'."<sup>12</sup>

*You must trust Him in all His revealing LIGHT to conquer the unfounded fears.* With David we must shout triumphantly, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread?"<sup>13</sup> And we must remember that the Lord Jesus declared "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness but shall have the light of life."<sup>14</sup> So his presence guarantees daylight, even after a long night.

Walking through a conservatory one day an observer asked the attendant why a small plant was completely covered by a flower pot. "We want this plant to strike a deeper root," replied the man, and then he added, "Evidently darkness is necessary to fulfill this purpose."

Sometimes the lord permits us to remain in darkness in order to teach us to trust Him more; but we have nothing to fear, for we shall see light again as soon as the testing period is over.<sup>15</sup>

So the secret of victory over fear is *just trusting Jesus*. One of the most frequent expressions on His lips throughout His earthly ministry was "Fear not."<sup>16</sup>

## HOW TO FORGET YOUR FEARS

"You will tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent *you will trample down*." In Old Testament times one of the evidences of conquest was to stand on the neck of the enemy and then turn away with confidence and courage and not look back.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar way, *you must never look back*. The Scriptures speak of "forgetting what lies behind."<sup>18</sup> If the enemy (fear) has been faced and fought you must forget him. This must be the deliberate act of the mind, heart and will. You deserve to suffer the hangover of the defeated fears if you keep returning to the place of battle and recalling the events which should have been buried and forgotten.

But more than this, *you must never look up*. Our text opens with the words, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” Then the writer goes on to say, “You will not be afraid.”<sup>19</sup>

To dwell in the secret place of daily prayer, regular Bible study and constant fellowship with God is the most refreshing and releasing experience of life. Since God forgives and forgets, you are more likely to forget your fears by looking up to Him than mulling over the old failures, frustrations and fears!

A striking illustration of overcoming fear is provided for us in Exodus 14. The children of Israel, under their leader Moses, had left their Egyptian hovels and were on their way to the Promised Land. As they neared their first big obstacle they were filled with fear, for as they *looked back they saw Pharaoh and the Egyptians pursuing them*. To the left and right of them were insuperable barriers, and before them the Red Sea, and we read that “they became very frightened.”<sup>20</sup>

But Moses said unto the people, “Do not fear! *Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord* which he will accomplish for you today, you will never see them again forever. The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.”<sup>21</sup> The point of the story is that there was only one direction in which they could look for help, and that was upward!

So if you would know similar victory over the fears that haunt and harass you, keep your eyes ever and only on Jesus as Savior, Lord and Friend. As you focus on Him you will hear Him say to you, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; *Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.*”<sup>22</sup>

## NOW THIS FINAL WORD

The foregoing pages contain the basic answers to all human fear; in a word, it is the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and Friend. Through his redeeming death, triumphant resurrection and living presence, He has overcome the lion, the cobra and the dragon, and therefore every form of fear. But in applying these biblical principles, you may find it helpful to pursue any one of the five following suggestions:

1. If you can trace your fear to *spiritual* cause, then I recommend that you reread this booklet and find the answer in the message of the gospel.
2. If your fear relates to a social disharmony, then see your minister or Christian counselor. It is amazing how social tangles can be unraveled by talking them over with the right person. On the other hand, if the disharmony has to do with your husband, or wife, do not keep your fears to yourself. Share them frankly with your partner and, if necessary,

*go together* to your minister or counselor and talk the matter over with him. The same advice applies to young people with home difficulties or friendship problems.

3. If your fear is a *psychological* one, then it may be wise to consult a Christian psychologist. In this connection it is important for me to say, by way of warning, that anyone, be he a psychologist, a doctor, or even a minister, who succeeds in undermining your faith in God is not going to solve your problem. Be alert to this danger.
4. If your problem is a *physical* fear, then see a good doctor. Many people live in perpetual fear of a failing heart or developing cancer or some other dreadful ailment. If this is true in your case, then have a medical checkup and dispel all unnecessary fears.
5. If your fear originates from a *practical* issue, then consult a Christian lawyer. The very fact of ventilating your difficulty will alleviate your anxiety; but what is even more important, you will be given advice as to how to face the situation and deal with it. Here, then, are five helpful hints to assist you to overcome your fears. Beyond human help, however, remember that God said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," so that (you can) confidently say, 'The Lord is my Helper, I will not be afraid'."<sup>23</sup>

#### **Footnotes:**

1. Psalm 9 1:5,13.
2. 1 Peter 5:8.
3. Job 18:14.
4. Hebrews 9:27.
5. Ecclesiastes 10:8, KJV.
6. Isaiah 21:3-4.
7. 1 John 3:8.
8. Revelation 1:17-18.
9. Hebrews 2:14-15.
10. Psalm 23:4.
11. 1 John 4:18.
12. Isaiah 41:13.
13. Psalm 27:1.
14. John 8:12.
15. See Isaiah 50:10.
16. Mathew 10:31; Luke 8:50, KJV.
17. See Psalm 10:40, KJV.
18. Philippians 3:13.
19. Psalm 91:1,5.
20. Exodus 14:10.

21. Exodus 14:13-14. (emphasis mine).
22. John 14:27 (emphasis mine).
23. Hebrews 13:5-6.