

The Fear Question

PSALM 23: 1-4 (NRSV)

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;*

³ *he restores my soul.*

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*

I fear no evil; for you are with me;

II TIMOTHY 1: 7 (NRSV) *...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

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1 JOHN 4:18 (NRSV) *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*

L: The Word of God for the People of God!

P: Thanks Be to God!

“*God did not give us a spirit of cowardice...*” Easy to say; right? English translations vary, offering some combination of fear, timidity, and cowardice. “Be not afraid” or “fear not” is the most frequent exhortation in the Bible: 365 times! Enough to guide a meditation every day of the year!

I expect most of us think of fear as an occasional response to specific situations; but, in this text Paul speaks of a “spirit of fear” and describes alternatives: fear versus the power of love, panic versus a sound mind and self-control.

Fear itself is not sin, but it can lead us into sin if we lose control and allow fear to lead us in ways that hurt others, which is why we seek God and depend on God to be with us. Jim Wallis writes, “...when fear is in control, it pushes us away from God.”¹ That’s living in fear. That’s the “spirit of fear.”

But fear also can be fabricated and used manipulatively. The history of the church includes an anthology of ways fear has been used to manipulate and control: fear of the devil (the “boogie man”), fear of hell, fear of the Inquisition (being burned at the stake, and on and on.)

Being afraid of people who are different from us is one of the most common human fears. It’s the basis of racism; therefore, it also is one of the most frequently denied fears. Nobody wants to be known as a racist. Nevertheless, fear often is used—brutally and inexcusably—to justify discrimination and violence against those who are different from “us.” Political leaders commonly manipulate fear to turn people against their opponents and for their own political advantage.²

Fear leads to hate, which leads to violence. In 2016, a Washington, D. C. pizza place called Comet Ping Pong, was portrayed as the center of a child sex-trafficking ring run by top Democrats including presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Social media picked it up and ran with it, prompting a man with a high-powered rifle to travel from North Carolina to Washington, DC, on a misguided rescue mission. He entered the establishment and fired his weapon before being apprehended

¹ Wallis, Jim. Christ in Crisis (p. 145). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid., p. 146.

by the police. The event has been called, "Pizzagate," and its motivating narrative has been thoroughly debunked.

But that's the nature of fear apart from "...a *spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*" And the fractured, polarized nature of information and entertainment today—including social media—creates fertile soil in which conspiracy theories take root and bear poisonous fruit.³ In Washington, DC, the swamp was never drained; it just attracted a different breed of alligators.

When fear can be used with no accountability to fact, it increases the "spirit of fear" of which Paul warns, because fear leads to hate, which motivates violence. We see where the spirit of fear leads.⁴

I remember Myrtle Gragg in Claremore, Oklahoma: an aging, retired Army Sgt. I could hear each of eleven deadbolts click before she opened the door. She met me wearing an army helmet and flak jacket and around her neck was a necklace of padlocks strung on a rope. She had packed all her belongings into boxes and stacked them to create a system of trenches throughout her house. These boxes surrounded her bed, her cook stove, and her toilet. In her fear she had fortified her house as if against military attack.

Myrtle was clinically paranoid. It's terrible, going through life always looking over your shoulder—a thermometer in one pocket—a can of mace in the other.

More than 88 years ago FDR addressed this nation and said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear, itself." It's always fear that does a people in. That's why the text in I John insists, "Perfect love casts out fear" and Paul claims God has given us "...a *spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*"

We need not be paranoid to be paralyzed by unreasonable fear. A "spirit of fear" immobilizes us, not so much by overestimating the evil around us; but by underestimating our ability, with God's help, to respond to it.

On the other hand, it's unreasonable to expect a total absence of fear if we have faith. If we pray and still are afraid, we lose hope. Faith is not an absence of fear. I've said before: faith is the decision to act as if we truly believe what we say we believe, even—maybe especially—when we have doubts—when we're afraid.

Still, faith doesn't come "ready to mix:" add water and stir. That's why the 23rd Psalm doesn't begin, "*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.*" It begins with a walk with the shepherd: resting in green pastures, walking beside still waters, where the shepherd "restores my soul," and "leads me in right paths."

Faith isn't built in the darkest valley. If you wait 'til you're in the valley, it's

³ Ibid. p. 156.

⁴ Ibid. p. 157.

too late. You see, ours is not a "manipulative faith". We don't have magical incantations that manipulate nature and nature's God. Faith is not so much a life jacket as it is the ability to swim—learned and developed through years of practice: resting in green pastures, meditating beside still waters, experiencing restoration for our souls, being led in right paths.

Faith isn't built in the valley of dark shadows; however, in the valley of dark shadows, if we already have rested in green pastures and walked beside still waters with the One who "restores my soul," we have a faith upon which to call. And in that faith, we can walk through the valley of dark shadows, and "fear no evil."

When fear becomes unreasonable and paranoia and conspiracy theories abound, Jesus is the shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures, who leads us beside still waters, who restores our soul and leads us in right paths. Have you walked with the Shepherd today?

Prayer Slide