

Dealing with Fears

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[0 : 00] It was on the 25th of January 1736. John Wesley, the founder of what came to be known as the Methodist movement, wrote this in his diary.

This was the most glorious day that I have yet seen. It's quite a thing to say. Particularly from somebody who saw quite a lot of things in his lifetime in his ministry.

What was it that was so glorious about that particular day that he saw? Well, let me tell you what it wasn't. Nobody, in at least the context of what he was commenting on in his diary, became a Christian that day, as far as we're aware.

It wasn't any kind of miraculous healings that took place. No bringing anybody back from the dead or anything like that. And yet, Wesley said that this was the most glorious day that he had seen yet. Well, it was a storm. In fact, it was the third storm in the middle of the Atlantic that Wesley had experienced.

[1 : 17] You know, if we ever get nervous or fearful about travelling, we need to rewind a couple of hundred years and think what it was actually like for that generation of people.

Wesley and many others set sail from Gravesend to Georgia in the autumn of 1735. It took them several months.

It wasn't until February that they actually made it right the way across the Atlantic. And the journey was fraught with storm.

Remember, they didn't have any of the communications to get help or anything that we would have today. And it was on the second of the storms that Wesley was actually out on deck and the storm was so violent that he was swept right off his feet.

So you can imagine by the time they had the third dose of this, they were all absolutely terrified, particularly when on this particular third occasion, the wind actually completely ripped the sails in half.

[2 : 25] And so everybody was in chaos, except not everybody was panicking. Because as Wesley made his way across the boat, he noticed that all the English people that he was with were panicking, they were crying and screaming.

Understandably, they thought they were going to die. But then he came across a group of Moravian Christians, men, women and children. And there, in the midst of the storm, they were singing Christian songs and smiling.

And throughout the journey, Wesley had noticed that there was something about these people that was different. They seemed surprisingly differently calm.

They were outstandingly kind and generous and compassionate in their everyday actions. And so in the middle of that storm, as Wesley saw the way that they reacted to it, he knew that he wanted what they had.

Fear is a part of life. Let's not pretend it's not. Every single one of us is afraid of something or other, whether it's heights we saw at the beginning, whatever it may happen to be.

[3 : 44] Something will make each of us fearful, part of our humanity. And probably we'd be in trouble if we didn't have some sense of fear in us.

But as we move towards the end of this series where we're thinking about growing older and wiser, in other words, what it is to grow more mature spiritually, what we see in the story that I've just shared is a story that actually seems to repeat itself time and time again throughout history, where people discover that although they may still feel afraid about different things, whether it's a storm or whatever, faith makes a difference in the way that fear is handled and processed and reacted to. In some parts of the world, they have a way of training and conditioning elephants.

And what they do is they take a chain, a very strong chain, and they put one end of the chain around a very strong tree and the other end around one of the elephant's feet. And then they put some fruit near to the elephant but just outside of the elephant's reach. And the elephant sees and smells the fruit and as it does so, it tries to get near to it.

[5 : 09] It tugs on this train, on this chain. It pulls away. But after a few days, it realises that no matter how hard it tries, it's not going to get to the fruit.

And so it gives up. It accepts its limitations and has been trained and conditioned accordingly. And when that happens, apparently you can then remove the chain and replace it with a rope.

Now, the elephant is strong enough to snap that rope any time it would wish to, but by now it's become trained and conditioned to accept its limitations.

So it doesn't try. But apparently there's one exception, and that is if ever fire breaks out near where the elephant is.

Because when that happens, then the elephant's fear of fire will instinctively overtake its fear of pain and it will just bolt and the rope will snap.

[6 : 11] When that happens, apparently you can never ever train or condition that elephant again. And I hold that image before you because I think it's a really helpful one for understanding this relationship between Christian maturity and fear and the way we handle fear.

Because when we come to absorb a sense of healthy respect for God, when we understand his presence, when we understand his lordship, when we understand his power and his authority over all other things, it puts other things into perspective.

Sure enough, those fears, those concerns may still sort of lurk a little bit around, but they're held in check. They're put in perspective as we encounter the reality of God and his authority and his power in our life.

So let's have a look at the psalm that we have before us. And I just want to pick out one little bit of that psalm. And it's verses five and six. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth. It was you who took me from my mother's womb. I think there's something really, really intriguing and really important there that the psalmist makes reference to being born.

[7 : 40] I've never stopped and thought about that. You know, I doubt we remember it. But every single one of us was born. And according to our Christian faith, we're not just here by random fluke.

We're here by design, by God's design. But it was his desire that we be brought into this world. And we can say more than that. Our existence doesn't just have to do with God's desire whenever it was when we were born.

It has to do with God's desire every day. As long as you are in this world, you're in this world because God desires you to be in this world.

Your existence is part of God's plan and purpose. Now, we might not always understand that. There will be times when we'll find that very, very difficult to make sense of when things are getting difficult.

But the psalmist here is calling us to, when times are tough, to reflect on that, to remember that you're not here by accident or by random chance, that you're here by God's design.

[8 : 53] And so he's brought you this far. He continues to sustain you right now. And whatever may fear you about what lies ahead, know this, you are here now by virtue of the reality that God, God, the author, not just of you, but of the whole universe, desires you to be here.

But then the psalmist takes that even further because he says, I have relied upon you. Or as I think it's a better translation, the NRSV, it says, I leaned upon you.

That he puts this image of how from his youth he had learned gradually to lean on God. Now, we all lean on something. Whether we are Christians or not, whether we believe in God or not, everybody leans on something.

You know, occasionally people will pull out this criticism and say, you know, Christianity is just a crutch for weak people. Well, of course it is, because everyone's weak and everyone leans on something.

It's just that we don't always recognise that we're leaning on something. But look into any human life. Sooner or later, you will realise that every human being in history leans on something for strength and for support.

[10:08] The question is, is that thing that we lean on a reliable source? Probably most of the time, we're not even conscious of what we choose to actually rely on, what we lean on, what we lean into, particularly when we're feeling afraid of things.

There's a verse in Proverbs 3 that says, Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

Don't lean on your own understanding. And this is where I think it's very subtle. We probably, an awful lot of the time, don't recognise how much we actually do lean on our own understanding. Let me tell you a story. I think we can probably all, probably this will resonate with all of us to some extent. There's a story about a guy who was not a Christian, but he had a lot of friends who were. And he found that he was always getting into conversation and discussion with them about Christian faith. Weeks went on, months went on, when they were gradually, gradually challenging him as he found that the questions that he was asking about why they believe in God they actually seemed to be able to put forward, to his surprise, some pretty plausible answers.

[11:26] And he was gradually, gradually, gradually beginning to think maybe there's something in this. And so they were starting to challenge him more and more and say, why don't you do something about this?

Why don't you just take a step of faith? Why don't you just try, just try God. Come along to church with us sometime if you like. That's not what it's about, but try and see.

Just give it a go. Just say a prayer and give God a chance. Why don't you try it? Well, this guy was climbing up the career ladder gradually and he happened to apply for a job that he desperately wanted.

It was a big job. It was a very, very important job and one that he'd been after for a long time. And he was invited for interview. So the morning came where he was ready to go for his interview. He drove, he left early, but he knew that parking was going to be a challenge. And as he drove into the multi-storey car park, and that was the only option that he had for parking for the purposes of this interview, he looked at his watch and he realised that he was beginning to cut it rather fine.

[12:37] And as he began to drive around the car park, which was beginning to fill up, he was feeling really rather anxious. And so he began to think about some of the conversations he'd had with his friends about prayer.

And he did something which I don't know whether any of us are going to own up to. I will own up to, okay? He prayed what I would call a parking space prayer.

Has anyone done that? I do it all the time. And I'm not going to try and be all pious and holy with you and say, I only do it when I'm working, I'm visiting somebody in hospital. I don't!

I do it all the time. The reason I think it's okay to do that is because I think God's interested in every area of our life. So long as that's not the only kind of prayer or the main type of prayer that we pray, I think that's okay.

Because life is an ongoing conversation with God. He's there in everything. So I... Anyway, this was the first time that he'd done it. And he found himself clutching this wheel with very, very sweaty palms, knowing that you only have minutes to go before this job interview.

[13:45] And he prayed out loud because he thought, that's safe, there's no one else in the car and the windows all wound up. God, I don't know if you're there or not, but if you can just give me this car parking space, which I need, give me this space, then I will become a Christian.

It goes round, circles round one more time, there's still nothing there, so he prays even loud, Lord God, if you are Lord, if you are God, if you're real, please hear my prayer, just give me that space and I will completely commit myself to you.

The moment he said, Amen, he saw a car, bearing in mind this was early in the morning, he wouldn't expect people to be leaving, he saw a car flash its reversing lights on and it started to back out.

Space provided. So he closed his eyes and he said, it's all right, Lord, I've found one. Seriously, do we ever do that sort of thing, that kind of dynamic, where we want God on our terms?

Now, well, this sort of thing, these circumstances happened because, well, it was because I did that or because that person did that. There's an explanation behind that. It's not really God involved in my life, surely.

[15:17] Surely. wanting God in our own terms is about leaning on our own understanding, which thousands of years ago, the writer of Proverbs knew was a possibility, that we can choose to lean

on our own understanding instead of leaning on God.

Listen to this poem. It's about leaning on our own understanding and having God on our own terms. I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.

Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine.

I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please. To lean on God rather than our understanding is about vulnerability.

[16:33] vulnerability. I'm not going to pretend that's easy, but the psalmist knew that when the psalmist described God as the one that we can lean on like a rock, like a fortress.

But that involves being willing to lean and to trust when we're feeling afraid. A boy was in a burning building.

He was terrified. Everybody else had escaped, but he was there standing on the window ledge. He was quite some way up in this building and he was terrified about how he was going to get out of this house.

There was smoke everywhere and then through the smoke he heard his father's voice shout out to him, just jump, jump. Understandably he didn't want to and he shouted out to his dad, I can't see you.

His dad shouted back, no, but I can see you and that's all that matters. Sometimes we can be in those situations where all we can do is trust.

[17:46] I'm not saying for a moment those are situations where we desire to be or we should seek out or we should, but sometimes they happen. but God does call us to seek out opportunities to trust.

and our temptation to get to hope