

CONQUER YOUR FEARS

By Rev. Will Nelken

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There is no sleep so deep and restful that it will not be pierced and shattered by the scream of a child overcome by a nightmare.

And so, dad, his mind reeling to know what day and time it is, and his still half-sleeping body stumbling through the dark, narrowly missed the frame of the bedroom door with his little toe as he lurched into the hallway.

His heart pounding, and his chest heaving, he stood now in the doorway of little Tommy's room. Composing himself as best he could, he asked, "What's the matter, Tommy? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Yes!" Tommy cried. "Will you stay with me? Will you sleep in my bed?"

"No, Tommy, I have my own bed. But I'll pray with you and ask Jesus to stay with you."

Tommy's cry became a whimper, as he replied, "I know Jesus will be with me... but sometimes I need someone with skin on to be with me."

Don't Be Afraid

Fear comes in all shapes and sizes, from the fear of great heights to the fear of small crowds. Fear threatens our marriages, shatters our families, shakes our businesses, and divides our churches.

The Bible says "don't be afraid" hundreds of times, because God knows we deal with it so frequently. Yet we still have to move forward, even if we're afraid.

Five months ago, none of us were afraid of COVID-19, but times have changed.

Three months ago we weren't afraid of looting and destruction in our city streets, but now we think twice about attending a protest.

Two months ago we weren't afraid of the name of Sir Francis Drake, but today educated people are publicly apologizing for his perceived racist lifestyle and taking his name off our high school and perhaps the thoroughfare that links West Marin to the 101 Corridor.

What other major changes lie ahead? It's confusing, disheartening, and frightening. So, "don't be afraid" is sorely needed.

But just being told to not be afraid won't get you through times like these. We need more than words. We need the power of the Holy Spirit. Where can we find the "how to" that turns fear into victory? I think I can show you, from the example of Jesus.

But first, let me remind you that virtually every hero of the Bible wrestled with fear.

Moses almost missed the potential of his life because of his fear of speaking in front of people, until God interrupted his day from a burning bush and sent him to speak to a king.

The children of Israel almost missed entering the Promised Land because of the fearful report of 10 spies, until Caleb and Joshua reminded them of the promise of God's presence.

Jonah was afraid of the Ninevites and fled to Tarshish to avoid his responsibility to preach Good News. Surely, God couldn't find him there!

A rich young ruler feared giving up the wealth that he valued so highly, to the loss of his own soul

John Mark was afraid of the unknown, so he left Paul's missions trip to go back home.

Moses feared his followers who threatened to stone him because they could find no water.

Jeremiah and Stephen actually were beaten with stones for speaking what the Lord had given them to say.

Then There Was Jesus

But of all the Biblical leaders who were afraid, the One we think of the least is Jesus, who offered the greatest lessons on how to deal with fear, because He knew what lay ahead of Him, and because He would not give up.

Matthew 26:36

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, "Sit here while I go over there to pray."

It's not a sin to feel afraid, and Jesus felt afraid. His betrayal with a kiss from His friend, Judas, the mock trial before the High Priest of His people, the beatings authorized by Pilate and his mocking soldiers, all loomed before Jesus, before the sun would rise again. Don't think that because He was God's Son He just took it all in stride.

True, He was God in human form—but He was in HUMAN form, and as fully human as you or me, except for our brokenness due to sin.

If you look closely with me at this passage, Jesus will demonstrate five godly responses to feelings of fear. Think of the five fingers on your hand. When you respond to feelings of fear in the same five ways, it's like making a fist to knock fear off its feet.

1. The first finger in that fist it to GET TOGETHER WITH SOME TRUSTED PEOPLE.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and moved away from the rest of the group. Then Jesus confided in them what He was battling with.

Matthew 26:37-38

³⁷ He took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed.

³⁸ He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Fear doesn't dissipate in isolation. Who do you trust? Who can you speak frankly with? Who will sit with you, without judging you?

Are you familiar with the story of Job. A blameless man, by God's own testimony—he lost all of his flocks and herds, and his ten children were killed in a single day. And you thought you were having a bad day!

A short while later, he contracted an illness that created oozing sores, from his head to his feet.

Most of his friends avoided him. His wife urged him to curse God and die. Yet he refused to blame God for his circumstances.

Three friends did not desert him. When they heard of his tragedy, they got together and traveled to his home "to comfort and console him." When they arrived, they saw his grief was worse than they had imagined. They wailed in grief, then they sat down on the ground with Job for seven days and seven nights, without a word, because his suffering was

“too great for words.” Whatever you may think about their theology, those were some real friends!

Jesus needed “someone with skin on” to be near Him for this battle. He chose Peter, James, and John.

Fear is not a battle that anyone else can fight for you, but it’s encouraging to have trusted friends with you, even if there’s nothing to be said.

2. The second finger in that fist it to SPEND TIME WITH GOD.

Fear is always diminished when you bring it to God. What frightens you cannot remain so large when you drag it into the presence of Almighty God.

Matthew 26:39-41

³⁹ He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

⁴⁰ Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour? ⁴¹ Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!”

The crowd couldn’t give Jesus the answer He needed. Even His three close friends couldn’t provide what He needed beyond the comfort of their presence. The depth of Jesus’ fear drove Him deeper into God’s presence. He laid it all down before the Father.

He fell to the ground under the weight of His responsibility, and He prayed, “Can we change the plan? Is there some other way?”

You may not hear the answers you would like—you may hear nothing at all—but if you look for Him, you will find the Mighty God, who has never lost a battle.

3. The third finger in that fist it to REMEMBER GOD HAS A GOOD PLAN.

Just because you’re afraid, God’s purpose has not been set aside or lost. It probably won’t look the same as your plan, but it’s a good plan, and He’s committed to working it out with you and for you.

Matthew 26:42-43

⁴² Then Jesus left them a second time and prayed, “My Father! If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³ When he returned to them again, he found them sleeping, for they couldn’t keep their eyes open.

The psalmist reminds us that God knows everything about us:

Psalms 139:16

¹⁶ You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in Your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

God has everything under control. Don’t just remember that He has a plan; submit yourself to the plan He has for you. Easy to say, but submission seldom comes without a deep struggle. Jesus agonized, under the joint pressures of sorrow and fear, as He wrestled with His commitment to the Father. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews (5:7-8):

⁷ While Jesus was here on earth, He offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the One who could rescue Him from death. And God heard His prayers because of His deep reverence for God.

⁸ Even though Jesus was God’s Son, He learned obedience from the things He suffered.

Don’t miss Jesus’ struggle. Pushing against God’s will won’t reduce your fears. Rebellion never leads to peace.

The psalmist wrote, “Whenever I’m afraid, I will put my trust in You” (Psalm 56:3). Remember the plan God has shown you, and re-submit yourself to it. Re-enlist. Re-dedicate. Re-commit.

“Not my will, but Yours be done.” What a fear-de-destroying, faith-building declaration that is!

4. The fourth finger in that fist it to NOT ALLOW DISAPPOINTMENT IN PEOPLE TO STOP YOU.

Jesus asked His closest friends to watch and pray with Him. They didn’t; they slept. He awakened them twice, but they couldn’t keep their eyes open. Well, the weight of the world was not on their shoulders!

Matthew 26:44-45

⁴⁴ So he went to pray a third time, saying the same things again. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said, “Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest.”

Some of the burdens you carry will be (can be) carried by no one else. Not because they don’t love God. The disciples followed Jesus; they served Him. But this was beyond them. Jesus had to carry this alone. Even their strongest prayers would have had little effect.

There are some things, especially fears, that you must face alone. (That doesn’t mean you cannot bring others with you; it simply means they can only do so much for you.)

Jesus contended with God alone, like Jacob before Him, who wrestled all night before He secured his blessing. This battle was won on His face before God—long before the unjust arrest, the mock trial, the scourging, the crucifixion, and His death took place.

5. Now fold down your thumb to complete that fist with this: OVERCOMING FEAR ALWAYS LEADS TO ACTION.

Fear can immobilize you. But once you get your faith out in front of your fear, then you can respond appropriately and do what you’re supposed to do, and then you can help others around you who are also afraid.

Matthew 26:45-46

⁴⁵ But look—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Up, let’s be going. Look, My betrayer is here!”

It was time to go. The sorrow of death led Him into the battle. Now, He was transformed—from falling to the ground in utter isolation to standing His ground before an armed mob, and having the courage to let Judas kiss Him on the cheek—transformed by His devotion to God.

His time in prayer with God didn’t alter the circumstances He faced or the events of that day, but HE was changed. As a direct result, He was able to walk through the trial before His accusers, the mockery of Roman justice, the beatings and the shame of His sentence, and the agony of His death.

As you reflect on the well-documented events of the next 24 hours—of His sacrifice, of His grace, of His courage—listen to what Jesus said, and to what He didn’t say. Look at His resolve.

The Jesus who struggled in fear and isolation had become a man of conviction, strength, and resolve, who led His disciples, embraced the will of God, and drank that cup of self-sacrifice until it was emptied.

There was no more fear, there were no more tears, there was no more desperation—Jesus dealt with every bit of all that in the Garden. Then, changed and empowered by prayer, He dealt with our sins on the cross.

Fear is strong; it can change you. But God is stronger!

Whenever you're afraid, trusting prayer will change you again, so that you can change the stuff that's happening around you. Jesus' prayers did something more powerful than change His unfavorable circumstances. Prayer won't alter most of your circumstances, but it will change you so that you can deal with the circumstances victoriously.

There was still a beating to come, still a crucifixion, still a death and burial. God didn't change His plan for Jesus, because you still needed a Savior—and Jesus accomplished that for us.

Only God knows what the other people in your life need from you, and He is determined to mold you into that for their sakes.

There are plenty of reasons to fear in the days in which we live. I will never deny you the right to feel afraid. You just can't live there. There's too much at stake.

Yes, the Bible tells you not to be afraid, hundreds of times. But just telling you, doesn't help, unless you know *how* to overcome it. It starts with remembering Jesus.

Remember how He depended on the words of God. Remember how He prayed with the Father. Remember how He conquered death. Remember that He's coming back for you.

And, whenever you're afraid, remember to practice these five points:

- Get together with trusted people
- Spend time with God to dissipate your fear
- Remember, God has a plan
- Don't allow disappointment in people to stop you from moving forward
- Get your faith out in front of your fear, and act courageously (do the right thing)

Here are a brief declaration and prayer to get you started:

Fear, you don't own me! I've been bought by the blood, and I belong to Jesus Christ.

Fear, I'm serving you notice: you've got to go!

Holy Spirit, fill me again until I see You far greater than the thing I was afraid of. Let Your perfect love drive out all my fears.

Grant me wisdom to know what is best, and courage to do what is right. Let Your love direct my steps and crown my life, each and every day.