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Presentation Transcript
Fear or Fear Not
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Our title today is *Fear or Fear Not*.

God tells us in the Bible to “fear not” three-hundred and sixty-some times. I think we can safely make four assumptions about the fact that it’s in the Bible three-hundred and sixty-some times. One: He clearly thinks it bears repeating. Two: He does *not* think there’s any need for fear. Three: the extreme repetition implies it’s difficult for us to “fear not.” And four: If we feel afraid, we’re not alone. It’s been a problem for all Christians down through the ages.

Fear is a common experience for humans. I see it so frequently in my counseling practice – all kinds of fears. The question for Christians is, how do we “fear not?” Is it even possible? So, let’s think about this Bible mystery. I’m inviting you to unravel it with me as we attempt to wrap our minds around the scriptures, so we can “fear not” the way God means it.

What kind of fear is God talking about? Well, we’re biologically wired to seek life. That’s why we become anxious when we encounter a threat to life. For example – I use this all the time, but it’s a good example – you’re walking down the street after dark, and you see under a street light a person wearing a hoodie. You go on alert. You keep your eye on the person, looking for clues about this person’s intent. You might experience a tightening in your abdomen. These changes in your attention to your body are caused by anxiety. Anxiety is an early warning system. Trouble may be ahead. As you get closer, you see that this person is holding a large knife. Your anxiety suddenly increases exponentially. Anxiety creates fear.

So, fear is what we’re talking about today. We just said that anxiety creates fear. So, that’s something to remember. Your body starts to secrete various chemicals that get you ready to fight or run. You start to hyperventilate. You become hypervigilant. All your attention goes to the threat. Your body is getting ready to defend itself or run away from the threat.

So, anxiety creates fear. And fear can keep us alive. It's an early warning system, in this case, designed to steer us away from danger and loss of life, and maybe, injury as well. So, this kind of anxiety and fear are helpful and a part of us that God created in us to keep us alive. So, fear is not necessarily a sin. It's kind of like anger. We're told, "Be angry and sin not." Sometimes, fear is good for us.

Here's another example: Ever since the development of nuclear weapons, nations have taken measured care when thinking about going to war. Why? Because we're all afraid that things could get out of control. If it goes thermonuclear, there'd be nothing left to control, nor anyone to control it – annihilation of the human race – destruction of the planet. And because we're all afraid that things *could* get out of control, we are very careful about how we go about inciting other nations – our politicians are – although they can be extremely irresponsible. When we're children, we may be afraid to go contrary to our parents for fear of consequences that they might impose. So, that wouldn't be bad necessarily.

So, these are natural and healthy fears. And God made us to have these to protect our lives and bodies. Look with me in 1 Corinthians 3:16.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 – *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.* An emphatic scripture.

Now, protecting our bodies and our lives are not the only cause of anxiety or fear. We watch people on YouTube doing dangerous things – skiing in an avalanche, for example, or wading in a pool full of sharks, or climbing Half-Dome without ropes – not the way to take care of temple. Better to be afraid of shark bites and avalanches. There's fear doing its job. Not what God had in mind when He said, "Fear not."

There are also other fears that don't have to do with survival. I'm going back for this one, but, as I recall it, it was Monday morning, when I was in the ninth grade, waiting for the most boring and difficult class that has ever been devised by the fiendishness of humanity, Algebra II, as presented by SMSG – the School Mathematics Study Group. Several people won awards for creating a more complicated, devilish way to torment me with Algebra than ever before. So, there I was, sitting there in my chair.... I can't say I was waiting for class to start. I was in, as the comedian said, my nothing box – mind completely blank. And suddenly, Rick Bishop turned to be and said, "Jacobs, did you see the pro-bowl yesterday?" To which I replied, "I don't follow bowling." To which Rick Bishop and all my friends within ear shot, burst into breath-stopping laughter. At that point, I felt a deep sense of embarrassment due to the shame I also felt. Apparently, I believed that anyone who did not follow the national football league and its annual pro-bowl game was defective in a most profound way. And I was afraid – afraid I had just revealed my deepest defect. Now, this all happened so fast I didn't have time to feel anxious or afraid, but after the laughter, guffawing, floor-stomping and snorting had subsided, I became

vaguely anxious about a drop in my social status among other aficionados of the NFL – and maybe, even among the girls.

So, this kind of shame and resulting anxiety and fear is common among humans, especially fourteen-year-olds, because God designed us to be social creatures in need of connection to others. And when that connection becomes doubtful, we can sometimes become anxious. And that can cause fear. So, the prospect of rejection and ostracism is something to be avoided in a healthy peer group. And when we can't avoid it, it can cause anxiety.

So, God doesn't care about the pro-bowl. However, this kind of anxiety and fear may help us conform to our peer group, but most of the time, from what I can see in my counseling practice, this type of anxiety is not helpful at all. Shame is caused by believing we are defective in some way – not good enough, unlovable, etcetera. There are all kinds of way to be defective physically. There's a scene in Season 3 of *The Chosen*, where Little James asks Jesus why he had not been healed of his defect. He had a birth defect for the purpose of the show. He confessed to Jesus that he felt like a burden, because they walked everywhere they went and he was slower. And when he used the word *burden*, Jesus was genuinely surprised. It was clear from His reaction that the thought had never entered His mind. Jesus told him that the Father doesn't care about things like defects. God doesn't look down on us for them and created all of us equally lovable. He loves us all equally – defects or no. If we don't have physical defects, then we have character defects, for certain. So, there's no need for anyone to feel defective in that way. Because of the lies the devil tells us and our believing them, we can still be afraid. This is one of the reasons God tells us to fear not. The truth is, God loves us. What did Jesus said to Jairus, when he came and asked Him to come take care of his daughter, who was dying? He said, "Do not fear, only believe" – that is, believe God instead of the devil.

Another element here to think about is guilt. Guilt can cause fear and anxiety. We do something wrong and we feel fear of the consequences. I knew a man who thought *they* were after him (*they* is in quotes). His wife told me he had drawn all the curtains and would furtively peep out to see if he had been followed home or if *they* were surveilling him. He appeared guilty and fearful, as though he had done something wrong. And this got worse and worse, until his wife convinced him to go to a therapist. And the therapist, after finding out that he really didn't have that many things to feel guilty about – or fearful about – began to suspect a brain issue. So, he went to a neurologist to discover that his brain had suffered damage from a minor auto accident months previously. To make a long story short, his brain was deteriorating and it almost killed him. When I saw him, he was in a constant state of convulsions, held at bay only by drugs, and he'd lost half his body weight. But that almost killed him, until God performed a miracle and restored him completely. Sometimes, we forget that our brain is a physical organ and that it can produce faulty emotions at times. We see this most often in dementia and traumatic brain injury.

Another thing we feel guilty about is breaking God's law – sinning. All humans have broken God's law. We look in 1 John 3:4 and we learn:

1 John 3:4 – *Whoever commits sin transgresses also the law. For sin is the transgression of the law.*

You won't see it that way in most of the modern translations. It says *lawlessness*. But I think it's actually easier to understand what John meant in the *King James Bible*. I quoted it for you. And it is appropriate, most of the time, and helpful to feel guilty when we realize we have broken God's law. Now, some people feel guilty for the wrong things, because their conscious isn't properly educated, but most Christians know what's right and what's wrong.

Now, most of the fear I've talked about so far are not the types of fear God's talking about when He tells us to fear not. So, what's with that? Well, let's look in Matthew 10:28 – Jesus said:

Matthew 10:28 – *And do not fear those – there's a fear not – who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

When God tells us to do something, we should do it, for fear of what will happen to us if we don't. In other words, we need to have respect for the power of God, for His law and for His plan that He's working out to bring us to eternal life and to perfect us. And when *man* tells us to do something contrary to what God would say – in other words, to do something wrong – to break the law – we should not fear man, nor what man can do to us, because *man* cannot take our eternal life. And so, if eternal life with God is the most important desires of our heart, God promises to give us that. But we have to be afraid of Him. (I'm using that in the way the Bible means it – to respect God and know that He's powerful.) God can be dangerous.

Another reason is found in Isaiah 41:10.

Isaiah 41:10 – *Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* God is on our side, not theirs! He has our back. Sometimes that means complete protection and sometimes it means that God will use the trial to make us stronger. That's not our domain. That's God's. We have to be more afraid of what God will do. And we have to love God, and trust God, and rely on His plan, and realize he's protecting us and also perfecting us to eternal life.

Revelation 2:10, where God talks to one of the seven churches:

Revelations 2:10 – *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Oh, they were headed toward suffering. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested – now the devil wasn't throwing them into prison to test them, but God was allowing him to do it to test them – and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

So, God says He's going to help us attain our heart's desire one way or the other. He could resurrect those who are killed by the devil's minions. Look at Hebrews 13:6:

Hebrews 13:6 – *So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.* I'm sorry. I just misread that. I read that the *King James* way. Let's read it the *ESV* way. *So, we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?"* Well, he can take our physical life sometimes, or throw us in prison sometimes, but that's only if God allows it. And, if God allows it, then it's good for us.

So, the big question for most of us, in spite of all this information we've seen so far, is, how? How can we be trusting God to take care of us when there's all this biology that gets in the way and wants to protect our physical lives? Well, let's look at 1 John 4:18 – the first part of it.

1 John 4:18 – *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

When I first read that scripture, I didn't understand it. I thought the opposite of fear was courage and opposite of love was hate. Both of those things are probably true, but I didn't understand that, if we love God the way God loves – which is perfectly – I would be fear free and courageous in the face of threats to my life. I just didn't get how it worked.

So, how does love drive out fear? Well, that's what we'd like. That's what we need to know. So, let's look at it. Jesus is telling us that, to be a successful Christian, we need to put all our effort on following God, no matter what people might do to us. To paraphrase: love God with everything you have, above everything and everyone else. That's what a Christian should do. That's what our goal is. Some people become Christians because it's just what their family does. It's sort of an after-thought, just to follow along. Some people become Christians because it will raise their social status, like joining a country club. Some people become Christians because they're superstitious. Some people become Christians because they think it will advance their political status. Some people become Christians because they think it will make them rich. Some people become Christians because they want an easier life – good luck with that, by the way. Some people become Christians because they feel guilty. Some people become Christians because they don't believe in evolution. Some people become Christians because they don't want to go to hell. Some people become Christians because they want to live forever. And none of those reasons is the reason *God* wants us to be Christians. It may be okay to start out with some of those reasons, but not what we should end up with. God wants us to become Christians because we want to love and be loved by God.

In 1 John 4:8, John said:

1 John 4:8 – *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

God is love. So, to become a member of God's family in eternity, we must become love too. How many times and ways does He say that? "I love you. Love Me back." If, as a Christian, you

are not there yet, don't worry about it. Don't worry about it. God will take you there if you hang in there with Him. While He does it, He'll take you there.

But how's He going to do that? Well, there's a scripture I like to think about. It says that the law of God is perfect, converting the soul. Okay, that's the law. What does the law have to do with love? Well, we're just going to quote Jesus to answer that question. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" – John 14:15. So, that's where the rubber meets the road – in that scripture right there.

It's easy to think we love God perfectly, right up until we think about how well we keep the law. In Matthew 22:37, Jesus said:

Matthew 22:37-38 – *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. So, that statement – you shall love God with all your heart, all your soul and all you mind – is encompassed in the first four commandments. Love God with your whole heart.*

So, loving God and obeying God's law are the same thing. So, loving God and loving His commandments will perfect us. That's what the law does. That's how we're going to get from where we are to perfect love. They're the same thing. So, the law shows us how to do that.

Let's look at some examples. There were these three Jewish boys, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. They lived a long time ago. They lived in Jerusalem, I think. And after Babylon captured Judah, and carried off a good bit of their population – including these three boys – Nebuchadnezzar set up a gigantic statue of himself, done up in gold. And at the dedication, he commanded everyone to bow down and worship it – read, *worship him* – reinforcing the fact the he was god. That's what those despots did back in those days. It was fashionable to call themselves a god.

This dedication was a big deal because he also said that anyone who would *not* bow down would be thrown into a big blazing furnace. Now, we know that bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar – to any man or to a statue of a man – was a violation of God's law – don't worship idols. So, it put huge pressure on the Jews who were there. And probably because they were insanely jealous of these three Jewish guys, who were also a member of the king's court, the officials of the king accused Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael of being disloyal because they would not bow down.

This caused Nebuchadnezzar to absolutely blow his lid. He got slobbering-at-the-mouth angry. It was humiliating that these three young captive boys refused to follow his rules in front of everybody, even though he was supposed to be the all-powerful lord high omnipotent supreme eternal ruler of all the universe. And in his anger, he told them they'd better bow down right now or he was going to heat up a furnace and they would go in it. And then, in his out-of-control raging, made a serious mistake. He added, "And then, who is going to save you?"

So, the three Jewish boys stood up and they told the king, in the most respectful way possible, that they knew he had the power to throw them in the furnace, if that's what he wanted to do. He was the king after all. And they told him that their God – the *real* One – could rescue them – and they hoped He would. But even if He didn't, they still were not going to bow down his shining image. There are just some things you don't do. And worshipping a man, even if he thinks his god, is one of them. So, they drew their line in the sand.

Well, we all know the story. The boys were tossed in the furnace, and when they looked in there, they saw four people, not three, walking around. So, God had sent an angel, and that was pretty much the end of the story, except that Nebuchadnezzar elevated the boys in his court – way above where they had been before. And Nebuchadnezzar, out of his own mouth, admitted their God was really *the God*.

So, how committed were they? And how were they committed? Might be the more important question. And that's the answer to the question we're asking right now. How? How do you get that commitment? Well, they loved God more than their own lives even. *Love not your lives unto death*. They did that. And they expressed that love by obeying His law. They refused to bow down. Notice also, they didn't know for sure whether they would be saved. They knew that they did *not* know God's will at that point.

Now, some people think you have to believe in spite of God's will, and when you do that, you're really not believing truth. You can be healed, just like they were saved from that furnace, by admitting that you don't know what God is going to do. But you need to believe that he *can*. That's what they believed. And they knew He *could*, but they didn't know if He would. So, in their minds, it wasn't an issue of will He or won't He. The issue was, they loved God too much to bow down.

There's another scripture we can look at – more modern – only two thousand years old – Mark 15:43.

Mark 15:43 – *Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council – so he was a Pharisee – who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. So, there's that word courage.*

Often, we feel like cowards, because we feel afraid. But it's been observed that there's no need for courage when there is nothing to fear. When we're faced with death, everyone is afraid, but courage overrides it. So, Joseph isn't a big player in this story, but he did know the right thing to do. He was a leader in that.

So, how did he know it? Well, it seems to me that he had to love Jesus. He saw Jesus' mother there, watching this horrible spectacle of His crucifixion, and he saw that only John – of all His

disciples – was still there, and he knew that they needed help. But, would he do it? Now, we can be sure that he knew the risk. Pilate had only to snap his fingers, and Joseph could have been himself crucified. But his respect – that is, love for Jesus – caused him to take courage, as it says in the scripture, put aside his fear, and ask for Jesus' body so He could be buried.

Now, there's an example of perfect love casting out fear. It wasn't even perfect love, because he was a human. But he overrode his fear. He took courage. So, Joseph was risking his life, but love cast aside his fear and helped him act with courage.

Notice something else. It's in Psalm 31:24. God tells Israel:

Psalms 31:24 – *Be strong, and let – let, LET – your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!*

Are you waiting for the Lord? Well, courage is offered to us by God, but we have to accept it. We have to *let* it happen. It's a choice we get to make. And, when we realize, that He is offering us courage in our spirit by His loving Spirit, we can choose to take it, as did Joseph. We *have* the Holy Spirit.

Look in 2 Timothy 1:7. On our own, nothing is possible, but with God, all things are possible.

2 Timothy 1:7 – *...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.*

We can override the biological desire to stay alive – or, the narcissistic desire to stay alive. And all we have to do is let God do His work in us – *let*, let – just *let* God do it. He'll do it for us.

And then, of course – this is the final example I want to give you – there is the example of Jesus in the garden, just before He is taken by the Jews. His disciples were sleeping after He asked them to pray – not that He was abandoned. It says they were sleeping for sorrow. So, I think they knew something bad was about to happen and they were depressed. People, sometimes, want to sleep all day when they are depressed. So, sleeping for sorrow – not making excuses, just trying to clarify. And He asked God – Jesus did – to let the trial pass so that He wouldn't have to suffer that death. But then, He added, "But not my will, but yours will be done." Why? Why did He do that? Well, because He loved those in slumber a short way from Him. He that they needed to be forgiven of their sins or they could not inherit eternal life, and because, as the Creator of humankind, He loved *all* of us and His Father in heaven, and He obeyed God and chose eternal life over physical life.

Sometimes, we say, “Well, of course He did. He was God.” But that’s the whole point. He was also a *man*. He had a very lively biological life within Him and He wanted to live. And that’s why He asked that that cup could be bypassed. But, when it got down to it, and He had to follow the plan, He did.

That brings us to what is the most important about this whole issue. It’s not supposed to be easy. It wasn’t for Jesus. It wasn’t for the three Jewish guys. It wasn’t for Abraham. All of God’s sacred people – holy people – have been tried and tested. We’re not made fear-free. We’re humans. It’s okay to be afraid. But in the face of fear, by the power of God’s Spirit, Jesus and the Father living in us, we can let ourselves take up courage, because we love God and we want to be with Him for eternity.

To wrap this up, it seems that God is offering us everything we need to enter His Kingdom. The devil, his lies, doubt, fear, anxiety and human weakness – all that aside, all those things are overcome by trusting God and acting on that trust. All the fear is overcome by connecting to God’s Spirit in us.

So, how are you doing with that? Where are you strong and where are you weak? Well, if you find some weaknesses – and some of us won’t, because we are in a state of self-deception – but, if we’re weak, don’t worry. Don’t worry. God’s going to take us where we need to go. Look at the end of the story. It’s in Jude :24-25. This is what’s going to happen, if you hang in there.

Jude :24-25 – *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

Jesus Christ has a plan to present *you* faultless before your Father. And, if we let Him, God will take us there. Fear not.

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God. Remember, as an adult member of a congregation of God’s church, you’re responsible to help promote peace, safety and inclusiveness in your congregation. We’re a youth advocacy ministry. One of the reasons we made this presentation is to strengthen you in the faith. We know that we can’t do that ourselves, but we believe God uses us and lots of other people to help all the members of God’s church do that. And it’s not just for yourself, but so that you can help all your congregation’s children, who are the future of the church and who are also a vital part of your spiritual family.