

Fear complicates life. Fear drives dysfunctional and hysterical responses that can poison families, workplaces and our physical health. A Chapman University study recently revealed the top eighty fears reported by Americans. You'll be interested to know that public speaking made number 52 on the list while Zombies came in near the bottom—number 78. The top ten fears Americans report sound like the evening news: Corruption in government, the American Healthcare Act, water pollution; safe drinking water, money for the future, medical bills, world war, climate change, North Korea and air pollution. There is money to be made in these fears and the news channels regularly feed our fears and sound the alarms. We tense up. We circle our camps. We start shouting. We tense up even more. My advice to you is this: *simplify*. Limit the hours you expose yourself to the news media. Draw a bright line between staying informed and feeding your fears.

The great theologian Paul Tillich observed that there are really only 3 great fears in life. Everybody has them. They are number one: the fear of death. We are afraid of dying. Let me just say I've done it any number of times in the pulpit—it's not a pleasant experience! The fear of dying makes us prudent. We wear our seat belts, we get an annual physical, and we refuse to eat raw chicken. But the fear of dying can also delude us into chasing after youth and beauty. The fear of dying can make us use up more and more of our precious time on earth trying to make ourselves look young.

The second great existential fear of human beings is the fear of guilt. In our quiet moments our regrets and our failures come back to haunt our thoughts. We spend a lot of time and money trying to distract ourselves from our moral failures. We repress our sins, we deny our sins we will even find reasons to justify our sins to ourselves and anyone else who will listen. We fence off our guilty souls with a hard shell of defensiveness, self-justification and anger. This can make life very complicated.

The third great fear is meaninglessness. We are afraid that at the end of our years on earth, our lives will prove to be insignificant and forgettable. Meaninglessness has a way of draining away all the color and flavor of life. We try to meet this fear head on with work or pleasure. But the real fear remains that despite our best efforts, we can't make life meaningful. So forget the university study. The real fears we face are the ones everyone has always faced: death, guilt and meaninglessness. Judgment day is coming. And one day we will all stand alone before a big black hole of death, guilt and meaninglessness.

But the Good News is we have confidence for this Day of Judgment! Perfect love casts out fear. In fact love is the antidote to fear. Fear and love are like a rectangle. If I make the horizontal sides longer then the verticals get shorter. So if you go long on love, you will be short of fear. More love means less fear. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ.

John wrote his first letter about 90 AD—sometime after he finished his gospel. John never named himself in the gospel instead he referred to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He did this to invite us into the story. He did this so that his readers could imagine themselves being another disciple whom Jesus loved.

He wrote this letter to deal with the problem of false teachers in the church. These false teachers said they had no sin. These false teachers said Jesus was just a man who had discovered a spiritual secret. These false teachers said the moral law of the Bible was irrelevant. These false teachers claimed to have immediate access to God and the scriptures were obsolete. There are many such teachers in churches even today. So John writes his letter with a singular purpose stated at the end, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13). His purpose is to restore, to reassure and to bolster the faith of the church. His letter is organized loosely into three sections based on three momentous statements: 1) God is light (1:5), 2) God is righteous (2:29) and 3) God is love (4:8). It is at the head of this third and concluding section where we find our scripture today: God is love. Love is fundamental to the nature of God. Everything that God says and does is an expression of this essential nature of love.

It is a straightforward thing to use logic to prove the existence of God. Many philosophers have done this by arguing from the basic facts of our existence in the universe. But how do we know that God is love? It isn't possible to find love in the equations of chemistry or physics. John tells us that the love of God is vividly on display in 2 crucial events. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world...” (4:8). The coming of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is an historical fact. It is one of the footings of the Christian house. It is something concrete you can see and grab onto. “We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son...” declares John. This is not a vision, a dream or an urban legend. It is fact. Jesus was a real man who publically declared himself to be the Son of God. The other fact is his sacrificial death as the “propitiation for our sins.” That is to say that Jesus satisfies justice by offering his own life as the atonement for our sins. These are facts: Jesus came. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and Jesus announced that his death on the cross would take away our sins. The Christian faith is built upon eyewitness testimony to certain historical facts.

Jennifer Fulwiler grew up in a loving family. It was an atheist home. Her bedtime reading was Carl Sagan's book *Cosmos*. At a young age she embraced a materialistic philosophy of life and continued into adulthood and her early years of marriage as a happy atheist. Then her first baby was born. She looked down at him sleeping and said this:

"What is this baby? Well, from a pure atheist, materialist perspective he is a randomly evolved collection of chemical reactions. If that's true then all the love that I feel for him is nothing more than chemical reactions in my brain...That's not true. It's not the truth."

That was the turning point for her that started her on a journey to Christian faith as she writes in her book "Something other than God". Likewise, the experience of love in the facts of Jesus Christ lead us to the inevitable conclusion God is love.

For John, to really know the truth about God involves the intersection of four key words.

Faith: we must confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. A confession is a public and binding commitment. It is a statement you are willing to be held accountable for.

Obedience: we keep the moral laws of scripture. "Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God and God in him." (3:24)

Spirit: we open our hearts to receive the Holy Spirit. "By this we know we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." (4:13) The Spirit brings conviction to our souls.

Love: we must walk in love. "We love because he first loved us." (4:19)

God is love and if he comes to abide in us then his love isn't perfected until it is reproduced in us as we love one another. The whole point of the Christian story is to make us like God in one and only one important aspect: love. Jesus said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." He wasn't expecting you to have perfect knowledge, composure and power. It was love he was talking about. The word "perfect" doesn't refer to some neurotic obsession. It means mature and complete like a ball player who leaves his amateur status for the minor leagues and then leaves the minor league for the big league. He is mature and fully developed as a ball player. This is what God wants for us. That we should be mature and fully developed in practicing the kind of love he has shown to us.

The best way to simply live to overcome your fears is to start practicing love. Pay attention to the needs of people around you and start meeting them. Could you spend a few moments talking with a lonely neighbor? Could you take the time to listen to a child who has no father? Would you take a meal to a neighbor who is sick? Could you write a note to someone who is discouraged? Could you pray for those you disagree with? Dare you build a relationship with someone very different from you?

Are you afraid of death? Know the word of the Lord: love is stronger than death. Are you afraid of guilt? Hear the word of the Lord: it is love that covers our sins. Are you afraid of meaninglessness? It is love that gives life its meaning. God is love. Go long with God's love and your fears will be short. Or to put in another way: Connect with God's love so that you might grow in God's love so that you may serve with God's love. This would be the closest anyone can come to fearless living.

