

Fear Is Not Sin



by EDWARD T. WELCH

Our common understanding of fear is that it *is* sin, though not the worst of sins. It is a partial, sin-like kind of sin, and is worthy of only moderate or even no guilt. Fear is not on par with anger, and it is not a cause for church discipline. But it is still classified as sin. You can hear it in commentaries, in sermons on “do not be anxious,” and in church conversations. “Could you pray for my sin of anxiety?” I hear a version of this most every week.

Once I was invited to talk about fear and anxiety on a radio program. After a few minutes, the host declared that after he received the Spirit he was never anxious again. I responded that after I received the Spirit, I never had a day without some kind of anxiety. For the remainder of the program, he insisted that I could not really be a Christian and he evangelized me.

The confusion about this topic is understandable. “Do not fear” is the most frequent command God gives in Scripture. On its face, the meaning seems unambiguous and straightforward: our fears must stop. It’s a matter of obedience. But there are biblical reasons to approach fears and anxieties without first assuming they involve disobedience. Confusion here has consequences for our own souls and our care of others.

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My purpose here is to reflect on the question, “Is fear sin?” As the article’s title indicates, I believe it is not and I will discuss various biblical texts to make my case. Though I believe that fear is not sin, I also caution that, when we are afraid and anxious, we must be careful about what we do next. We can cry out to the Lord and grow in our knowledge of him, or we can live like those who have no hope.

A Command Is Not Always a Command

Though the words “do not be afraid” are in the imperative or command form, a command is not always a command. First, consider our common use of the phrase “don’t be afraid.” It is *never* considered a command. No

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reasonable person says “don’t be afraid” and expects the fearful person to comply. We, of course, are not the Lord. He can command whatever he chooses. But a command like this from him would be most unexpected. It stands outside our human experience, and doesn’t make sense to us given who we know him to be.

We had a family living with us and I had a nice relationship with their five-year-old son. One day we were playing in our backyard and I thought he might enjoy a walk through the woods that are right behind us. It would be an adventure. I put him on my shoulders and off we went. Within the first five steps, he began to cry. I responded, “Don’t be afraid. I am big and I will make sure you are safe.” It meant nothing to him, and he cried harder. But I didn’t interpret it as rebellion. He was being a five-year-old. When we say “don’t be afraid” to our children, it is the equivalent of “I am here; everything will be okay.” If our children continue to cry, we don’t rebuke them. We hold them.

Jesus seems to have a similar intent. When he approached a grieving widow in the village of Nain, “he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’” (Luke 7:13). His words, though technically in the imperative form, were not a command, but an expression of care and compassion. He did not *require* something of her. Throughout his ministry when Jesus said, “don’t be afraid” or “do not weep,” it meant that

something good was about to happen. He was going to help in a way that only he could.

When Jesus approached a paralytic who had been brought to him, he said, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” (Matt 9:2). Here again, Jesus was not commanding him to be courageous; he was comforting him, especially in light of the healing he was about to do. Compare this with Jesus’ response to unconfessed sin and those who tested him. He might warn (Matt 23:13–29), grieve over their rebellion (Luke 13:34), or tell a story that silenced those who tested him (Luke 10:25–37). But he did not speak gentle words of comfort or consistently say, “I am with you.”

The command form in Greek¹ can be used to present a request *or* to make an entreaty.² It also includes a more moderate and softened version that is used in prayer. For example, the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer are in the imperative form (*Give us* this day our daily bread and *forgive us* our debts). But these petitions are not commands. Rather, they reveal our desires and intentions.

A Desire Is Not Always a Sinful Desire

Underneath our fears and anxieties are personal desires that are at risk. We are anxious about a job interview because a poor interview jeopardizes our financial future. We are anxious about the results of a biopsy because cancer can be life threatening. Fears identify what we want, what is important to us, and what we desire. If such desires are always wrong, fear is sinful. But such desires are not always wrong.

The Old Testament has a firm category of natural, human desires.

What is desired in a man is steadfast love. (Pro 19:22)

I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me. (Song 7:10)

You satisfy the desire of the afflicted. (Is 58:10)

The Bible certainly has its warnings about misplaced and unleashed desires, but Scripture attests that to be human is to have desire.

1. Greek is the original language of the New Testament.

2. E.g., Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 487.

Among our natural desires are life and health, food and shelter, love, enough money to care for ourselves and our families, peace in relationships, freedom from injustice and oppression, and a good reputation. The New Testament assumes natural desires (Luke 22:15) yet emphasizes lustful desires and the covetous dimensions of the human heart.

Fear expresses our weakness amid the threats of daily life, but *weakness is not sin*.

This emphasis gives us opportunity to consider if our fears are built on excessive desires, but the presence of natural desires does not presume sinful roots to our fear.

The experience of grief is a helpful analogy. Grief is fear's twin. Fear is a desire that is threatened; grief is a desire taken away. Fear is when a loved one's diagnosis is uncertain; grief is when a loved one dies. The apostle Paul was distressed over a dear friend's illness. When he recovered, Paul wrote that Epaphroditus's death would have caused him "sorrow upon sorrow" (Phil 2:27), and no one would have begrudged him such grief. Grief is met with compassion rather than suspicion of reckless desires. Fear, too, is met with compassion. In fact, the Lord expects us to be afraid.

The Lord Expects Us to Be Afraid

Scripture assumes that we live with fear and anxiety. We are weak people who can control very little. Our reputation, finances, loved ones, and even our lives are at risk every day. The psalms are filled with human fears and anxieties—and these are words that the Lord asks us to speak to him. He actually wants to hear about our fears.

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest."
(Ps 55:4–6)

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart

all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps 13:1–2)

The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the Lord. (Ps 18:4–6)

My heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast. (Ps 22:14)

None of these is a confession of sin.

Like the psalmists, the apostle Paul also acknowledges his fears. “For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and *fear within*” (2 Cor 7:5). God’s comfort came in the person of Titus and in his report that the churches were following the words that Paul had written to them.

Fear and anxiety express our weakness amid the threats of daily life. We are merely human. We are not the creator. Weak people are also sinners, but *weakness is not sin*. Weakness means that we need help from God and other people.

Our Fears Arouse God’s Compassion

Throughout the Old Testament, God made covenants with his people. These covenants were made or reaffirmed when his people were in uncertain times and had reason to be afraid. In response, the Lord gave assurances of his care in the most vivid and culturally meaningful way possible.

Notice the Lord’s renewal of the Abrahamic covenant with Jacob. Jacob was a liar and cheat, and his victimized brother had reason to be angry with him. When Jacob’s parents realized that his life was at risk because of Esau’s anger, they sent him to live with his great-uncle Laban, where he would hopefully find a wife and receive protection. On the way, the Lord met him in a dream and said this to him,

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land [which I will give to you and your offspring]. For I will not

leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

(Gen 28:15)

To a man who deserved rebuke, the Lord focused on Jacob’s fear and led with comfort: “I am with you... I will not leave you.” The Lord committed to be faithful and present, even when Jacob was less so.

In the New Testament, Jesus’ words continue this tradition of reassurance and comfort. In the Gospels of both Luke and Matthew, there is an account of Jesus’ words that begins, “Do not be anxious about your life” (Matt 6:25; Luke 12:22). In Luke’s account, Jesus concludes with this: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Jesus sees us as vulnerable sheep needing his care. His words are gentle and affectionate. Our fears arouse his compassion—not his rebuke. “He has pity on the weak and the needy.... For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps 72:13; 103:14).

From “Little Faith” to Fuller Faith

The word *faith* can have different meanings. *The faith* can be identical to *the gospel*, the story of Jesus who came to rescue us through his death and resurrection. Faith is also the common way that the epistles identify our trust in Jesus. It is an action or response. As a transitive verb, it always assumes the direct object *in* Jesus. So it’s faith in Jesus or confidence, hope, trust, or rest in Jesus. A third use of the word faith, especially in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, is faith as a quantity or amount. People are described as having more faith or less faith. It is this use of faith that we are interested in here because, in several passages, Jesus identifies fearful people as “little-faiths.” Yet, he does *not* label the behavior of these fearful people as sin or call them to repent of their fears.

The phrase *little faith* is usually translated, “O you of little faith” (Matt 6:30; Luke 12:28). It appears only that one time in Luke. But Matthew uses it five times in his gospel, including when the disciples are afraid in a boat that seems to be sinking (8:26), when Peter walked on a tumultuous sea and began to sink (14:31), and when the disciples could not heal a demon-possessed man (17:20). In the context of the story of the demon-possessed man, Jesus also says that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. A mustard seed is tiny so a “little-faith” must, indeed, have very little faith. But these are not rebukes.

To be sure, little-faiths are followers of Jesus. They listen to his teaching and they are with him in small boats. They are his people and even their limited faith can move mountains. Notice the disciples' little, but very real, faith while they are in the storm (Matt 8:23–27). Rather than simply panic, they wake Jesus and cry out for help, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." Three simple words in Greek: "Lord save-us we-perish." A childlike appeal. This is faith.

The task of little-faiths is to *grow* more than repent. We pray: "increase our faith" (Luke 17:5). The apostle Peter uses a similar idea but with love rather than faith. "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Peter 1:22). That is, you have love for your brothers—you are on the right path—now grow in even more love. Increase your love. Whereas repentance means changing course and turning away from a wrong path, growth stays the current course and keeps moving with and toward Jesus.

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Along the way, we meet those with greater faith. They are all in dire straits and have reasons for fear, yet they are heroes we hope to emulate. Watch for centurions (Matt 8:10), friends of a paralytic (Matt 9:2), a woman who touched Jesus' garment (Matt 9:22), a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:28), and many others whom Jesus healed.

The writer of Hebrews mentions many who were "commended through their faith" (Heb 11:39). There are some surprising names on the list, including Gideon and Samson. These two men would seem to barely make the little-faith list. Gideon was a coward and idolater; Samson was a fool. Yet, when you look closely at their stories, you discover a mustard seed of faith. Gideon "worshiped" after receiving a third sign from the Lord that he would deliver the Midianites into Israel's hand, and he went into battle with courage (Judg 7:15). Samson "called to the Lord" (Judg 16:28) after he was captured by the Philistines, which was not typical of the judges. These small acts of faith were accompanied by God's large acts of deliverance.

God has determined to use little-faiths and short bursts of faith to partner in his work. By this he reveals that he delivers through *his* strength. His strong deliverances also help our faith to grow and mature.

Maturing Faith Includes Courage and Confidence

Fear is always a time to grow in faith. “Jesus help!” This is what we want to master during our fears and anxieties. “Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me” (Ps 56:1). If we make this a habit, our faith will strengthen and mature and we will come to have greater *courage* and *confidence*.

Courage. Growth in courage will not abolish fear but it might help us to be less paralyzed in the midst of it. When heroic soldiers are awarded for their valor, they will tell you that they were afraid during the combat mission that brought them recognition. Courage, then, is not the absence of fear, but is what enables us to persevere despite being afraid.

Fear takes many forms. Consider a time when you avoided a conversation because it was relationally risky. Let’s say that your spouse, or someone with whom you have a close relationship, has wronged you and you believe it would be best to speak about it. But you are anxious. You risk the possibility of anger and a larger rift in the relationship. Courage means that you speak even though you fear the outcome.

Or consider something more severe. So much of our fear is connected to death. Here again you can be courageous, even as you have fears. Courage can be outweighed by love and duty. One of my vivid memories from childhood was when my older sister fell into a pond, and my father, lame from polio and a poor swimmer, immediately cast off his crutches and ran into the water to rescue her. That image of love conquering fear has never left me.

Courageous faith cries out, “Lord, save me.” Yet courage, like the psalms themselves, doesn’t stop there. It leads us into a mature and tested understanding of the Lord.

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? (Ps 56:3–4)

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident....For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock. (Ps 27:3–5)

So we call out to the Lord when we are in peril. Then, we call out again. When we stop and consider our God—both his love and faithfulness, fully made known to us in Jesus Christ—it nurtures us and nudges us forward in faith. We hear Jesus say, “Take heart; it is I” (Matt 14:27), and we add to our cries, “Yes, Lord, I believe.”

Fear is always a time to grow in faith.

Maturity must reckon with the troubles that surround us. The psalmists often are delivered from their foes, but our foes *can* overtake us. We fear that a loved one might die, and the loved one dies. We fear being alone, and we are actually quite alone. Our troubles are a consequence of the curse and they arouse the compassion of the Lord. But these troubles are also a “testing of your faith” that exposes little faith and grows us to be “perfect and complete” (James 1:3–4). They are occasions to grow in courage, in which we are more certain that God is with us, that death will not have the final word, and that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Confidence. Another way Scripture speaks of maturity is as confidence in Jesus (e.g., Eph 3:12; Heb 10:35). I stepped into an old boat recently that was headed for rocky waters. Among our small party, I was the only one who seemed unafraid or at least unaffected by the combination of a rickety boat and bigger seas. My secret was that I knew and trusted our skipper. He had navigated that same course countless times and he was unconcerned. In a similar way, the better we know Jesus, the more a psalm-like structure will guide us through our fears. Psalms begin with fear, move toward the faithfulness of the Lord, and end with confidence and hope.

This confidence in Jesus is also the message of 1 John. Jesus is our advocate before the Father. When we confess our sin, we can be certain that he will forgive us. Having put our faith in him, we are children of God. He abides in us and we in him. He will not abandon his children, so we can have confident hope.

And now, little children, abide in him, *so that* when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. (1 John 2:28)

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we [will] have confidence before God. (1 John 3:21)

When guilt persists, and fears attach to that guilt, we have misapprehended the fatherly love of God and the propitiating work of Jesus. God is love, yet our fears anticipate punishment (1 John 4:18). The message to us is of joy, belonging, and confidence in the day of judgment. We are God's children *now* (1 John 3:2). As beloved children, John urges us on toward a more confident maturity.

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The apostle Paul identifies this confidence as a clear conscience (e.g., Acts 24:16; 1 Tim 3:9). As with John's use of the word *confidence*, a clear conscience does not mean sinless, but it does mean

that we are open with the Lord about our sins, confess them, and rest in his forgiveness. As we remember what Jesus has done, we are persuaded that he hears and forgives us when we call out to him (1 John 5:14).

Fear is *always* a time to grow in faith. As we seek his help, God uses our trials to help mature our faith. But fear is also a time to watch for sinful responses and desires.

Sins to Watch For

We have captured Scripture's priorities and have seen that the seminal texts on fear do not focus on sin and repentance. But when we are fearful and anxious, we still need to keep our eyes open for sin. Here are two places we might find it.

Sin in our response to fear. Fear and what we do with our fear are two different things. Fear is natural; our responses to fear can be more complicated and are best assessed by whether they turn us toward the Lord or not. Sinful responses to fear can be divided into two categories: disobedience and silence.

1. *Disobedience.* After Israel left Egypt for the land God promised, they heard ominous reports about the land's inhabitants: they were strong and lived in heavily fortified cities. The people, in response, were afraid. Their fear was not the problem. It was how they responded to their fear that was the problem. They cried, wished they had never left Egypt, and wanted to stone the leaders who still wanted to conquer the land (Num 14).

This response was sinful. It was rebellion against the Lord. And his response was decidedly different from encouragement and compassion.

And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they." (Num 14:11–12)

The Lord had commanded the people to take the land, and he had demonstrated that he was both with them and over all the other kingdoms. His command was clear—so their disobedience was beyond doubt.

There is a similar story about King Saul (1 Sam 15). God commanded him to destroy Amalek and everything associated with the city. But Saul "feared the people and obeyed their voice" (15:24) and chose to spare the Amalekite king and the best of their animals. As a result, God took the kingship away from Saul and gave it to David. The Lord would likely have sympathized with Saul if he had become unpopular for obeying him, but God disciplines those who violate his direct and unequivocal commands.

We will rarely receive specific commands in the way Israel and Saul did, but these stories invite us to consider whether our responses to fear violate the Lord's commands by either doing something he prohibits or not doing something he requires. For example, as a result of fear we might lie or fail to love. By such acts, we rebel against the Lord.

2. *Silence.* We might occasionally act in disobedience when we are afraid but more often, if we have a sinful response, it will be silence before God. When we are afraid, it is not unusual to redouble our efforts,

consider our options, and find new strategies. These are not wrong, but if our human effort is not accompanied by prayer, we are sinning.

When the nation of Israel split into two, the northern kingdom was the first to be seriously threatened. In response, they cried out in fear—but *not* to the Lord. Instead, they trusted in foreign alliances rather than his protection, and they turned to idols and self-harm rituals to ensure their food supply. The Lord said, “They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds; for grain and wine they gash themselves; they rebel against me” (Hos 7:14).

King Ahaz followed this tradition of self-reliance when the southern kingdom was threatened. After the Lord gave assurances that the tribes who opposed Ahaz would not stand, the Lord asked for a response from Ahaz.

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” (Isa 7:10–12)

Why wouldn’t Ahaz ask for a sign? Because he trusted in his foreign alliances to protect him.

When we are afraid, we are vulnerable to temptation, so speak honestly to the Lord. Ask for his help. This is harder to do than it seems. It takes more than a mere human response; it is a response of faith. Silence in times of fear is evidence that we trust in ourselves, and this is sin against Jesus. To speak to him is evidence of the Spirit’s power in us.

Sin in our excessive desires. Key passages on fear and anxiety rarely push us to identify the sinful roots of fear. But we know enough about excessive desires to want to keep them in view whether they are actually connected to present fears or not. Have our desires become idolatrous? Do we *love* health, money, and reputation above all else? When fears and anxieties are especially loud, persistent, and frequent, look for overgrown desires that can be tangled up with them. Keep an eye out for fears that are immune to God’s promises, perhaps mixed with indifference to them. These attachments to our fears cannot be assuaged. Rather they are best cast off by way of repentance. As we repent, we jettison encumbrances to a truly fuller life, and know God’s loving forgiveness, which will build our confidence that he is still God-with-us.

Fear in the Age of the Spirit

Jesus remains very aware of our vulnerabilities. Our fears are to be expected, and they are consistently met by the God who hears and cares. We are his little flock and he does not minimize our worries, as though they are excessive. He treats them as real hardships, not as sin. He is our high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses and frailties (Heb 4:15). And when we are afraid, those fears become an occasion for the Lord to repeat his greatest promise to us: “I am with you.”

Indeed, he is always with us. Yet there is more. Because we live in the age of the Spirit, we are more active in response to our fears. We want to grow. We are all little-faiths who hope to honor the Lord with growing confidence and courage. During that maturing process, we expect to speak more openly to him, cry out for help with less delay, and learn from people of faith who came before us. We grow in confidence that Jesus loves us, that he is with us in the storms, and that he is very, very strong.

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