

SE031200  
STRESS BUSTERS

1. Fear and Indecision

Did you know you can actually get an indexed listing of all the phobias known to modern psychology? It's a big list. I stopped counting after three hundred. Here's just a few you might not be familiar with:

- Ailurophobia - fear of cats
- Barophobia - fear of gravity
- Ecclesiophobia - fear of church
- Courtrophobia - fear of clowns
- Homilophobia - fear of sermons
- Sesquipedalophobia - fear of long words

**MEDIA and FEAR**

Sociologist Bernie Glassner writes,  
"We live in the culture of fear."

He notes how the media seems to encourage fear. Catch this irony:

- Life expectancy has more than doubled this century in our country.
- No group of human beings has ever been healthier or lived longer
  - o yet no group of human beings has been more worried about their health.
  - o Why is that?

Well, check this out: if you tallied up all the health articles in the "Washington Post," "USA Today" and the "New York Times", according to experts in these three publications,

- 59,000,000 Americans have heart disease,
- 53,000,000 suffer from migraines,
- 26,000,000 have chronic kidney disease
- 25,000,000 from osteoporosis,
- 16,000,000 from obesity, millions more from cancer, back ailments and
- 12,000,000 from severe disorders like brain injuries.

Total it up. Just from the articles in those three publications, we read that 543 million Americans are seriously sick - which is really shocking in a country of 300 million people! Ask yourself, is it a more dangerous world out there for my kids now than when I grew up?

- Between 1990 and 1998, the murder rate in the U.S. had declined by almost 20%
- but murder stories on network news increased by 600%.

So we tell Junior that he can't ride his bike down the street to get a package of gum... when you rode across the street when you were that age all the time. Why can't he? Because as you tell him: "it's a dangerous world out there." The ubiquitous media cultivates fear:

Are dangerous chemicals threatening your family's health right now and if don't do something immediately you'll all die? Tune in at 11.

We reinforce fear. And so we grow up feeling vulnerable and afraid. When I was young the Russians were coming. Now, environmental disaster is just around the corner.  
Be afraid. Be VERY afraid!

## **GOD AND FEAR**

Well, you turn to the ancient text of the Bible and you read that God doesn't want living in chronic fear... so God says over 150 times in the Bible

**"FEAR NOT, put away your fear. Do not be afraid."**

Soak this in from Isaiah (imagine this was on the news at night):

The Lord, who created you says, Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you.

## **FEAR SELF CORRECTING**

Now if that were true... what should that inspire in us? COURAGE TO ACT. In fact, think about fear. Fear is actually a God given emotion designed specifically to lead to **action**. Fear says,

- "there's danger here, there's a problem, move, duck."
- Your brain stem actually is a built-in threat assessor that bypasses your conscious brain by assessing threats before you even realize it.

I'll be in my office, and I push away from my computer, put my feet up on the desk and start to read. Then about 10 minutes later, the screen saver on my computer kicks in. My vision and mind are totally focused on the book, but out of the corner of my peripheral vision, a sudden flash of the screen registers subconsciously in my brainstem as a threat! I flinch violently! My whole body convulses, adrenaline is squeezed into my system.

I'm always a little self conscious of someone walking into my office while I'm in one of these spasms.

"just me, getting me ready to run away from or attack my evil computer."

See, God has wired us with this ability for fear. Because fear is supposed to motivate you to take action. It's a self correcting emotion.

But is that what happens? No. Instead of fear leading to action, generally people get **immobilized** by fear. Fear becomes chronic. You get frozen by fear. And here's where we are tempted in our day to then treat the symptom... chronic fear, instead of the cause of our immobilization. So we avoid.

## **AVOIDANCE OF FEAR PRODUCING SITUATIONS**

The Bible records that the very first reaction to fear was avoidance. When Adam had

sinned against God, God comes to speak with him about this and Adam says,

- "I heard you, so I hid because I was afraid."
- I didn't come tell you, I didn't confess, I hid

Think about how this works in your own life. I'm guessing all of us have run from fear producing situations before in at least of one of three ways:

### 1. PROCRASTINATION

There's a phone call I need to make, but it's going to be unpleasant; it's going to involve unpleasant words and feelings. So you put off making it because you're no sadist... you don't enjoy pain. You secretly hope maybe the person will die before you have to call.

But friends, the longer you delay, the more unpleasant it's going to be. When we procrastinate we usually push off pain and make the situation even more frightening.

### 2. DENIAL

The second form of avoidance is denial. I just pretend like something doesn't bother me. Or I try to get distracted by something else. Or I try to cover it. Researchers did a study of people who had cancer-like symptoms. They found that not only were these people often not going to the doctor, these people were *less likely* to go to a doctor than people that had no symptoms at all.

Why? Because they were afraid, that they might be really sick. It's ostrich syndrome. People avoid in all kinds of ways:

- by not thinking about them.
- watch television,
- take another drink,
- change the subject,
- get on a prescription or
- stay real busy

How many of you would say denial is your chosen form of avoidance?

### 3. INDECISION

For example, someone might be afraid to make a decision about a career path because what if they choose to go down the wrong career path? Disaster. Pain. Fear! So they don't make any decision. What if they choose the wrong school to go to? What if they make a commitment to marry the wrong person? That would be horrible.

So people end up avoiding a decision for weeks or months or sometimes years. They avoid restaurants with big menus! How many of you would say you're sometimes indecisive?

How many of you can't decide?

Here's the deal with avoidance: Avoidance is tempting to us because it promises

short-term relief from the fear producing issue. Then I don't have to face whatever it is. And sure enough, avoidance often provides short-term relief from fear, but it's a long-term prison. The ostrich probably feels temporary relief with it's head in the sand. But the situation is just growing worse.

Friend, you don't want to mimic that ostrich, do you? Chained to feeling vulnerable and powerless your whole life?

### **APPROACHING FEAR PRODUCING SITUATIONS**

We talked last month about evil spirit beings. People involved in depression, fear and anxiety – listen to how they talk:

They talk about the voices in their head.

The talk about wrestling with their personal demons

They'd tell you that this is metaphorical language, but is it? Is it? Jesus said, there is a even spiritual Enemy who comes to steal, kill and destroy. I believe he was right. And I believe one of the things he wants to steal from you is your free will. To pillage your sense that you can DO anything to stop feeling afraid.

God would restore your dignity and your freedom. So God's way with fear is not to avoid, but to give power to **approach**. Now, all those times in the Bible God says "fear not" he's generally not saying, "hey, stop **feeling** afraid." You can't fight feelings with will power. What he's saying is,

stop being **immobilized** by your fear – how? By taking action based firmly in your trust in God's reality in your life.

### **ELIJAH**

Let's look at this in the life of a man in the Bible named Elijah. Elijah was a prophet of God who served during the time of a queen named Jezebel. Even if you don't know the story, you can figure out whether Jezebel was one of good guys or bad guys - the name kind of gives it away. You notice not too many parents name their little girls Jezebel these days.

Well, Jezebel lead the nation of Israel to Baal worship, which, among other things admonished it's adherents to sacrifice their children – she was a real peach. In a climactic showdown, Elijah destroys the whole Baal cult in a single day. However, quickly Jezebel sends this message to Elijah,

"May the gods strike me dead if, by tomorrow, I have failed to have you killed."

Yikes! Now, Elijah has to decide. Is he going to approach his fears? Or is he going to avoid it? Listen to what the text says: (1 Kings 19:3)

1 Kings 19:3-5 Elijah was **afraid** and ran for his life. ...he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

Which response is that: Approach or avoid? I'd say it's big-time avoidance. Listen to his responses:

- **"I've had enough"** - He felt like he couldn't cope. He can't handle the stress.
- **"Take my life"** - He says, 'just put a bullet in me right here, Lord.' Fear and depression have a way of making you turn on yourself.
- **"I'm no better than my ancestors"** He's saying? I'm not superman, God. Why are you piling on? Why do I get the college entrance course in trouble 301?

Look what fear has done that to Elijah's mind. He's sullen, depressed, self absorbed, quitting. Thinks he's special, like he's the only one whose ever been afraid before.

It's very interesting what God does when Elijah pours out his fears. He's very gentle. First coaxing Elijah to lie down and sleep for awhile. Then he wakes up and has some food. He basically treats Elijah like a toddler:

***have a snack, take a nap, and then we'll talk.***

And then, when God finally addresses him, this is what he says,  
"...what are you doing here, Elijah?"

Notice what God does not say. He does NOT say,  
"You know, Elijah, you're dead right. You can't handle this. You just wait here and I'll go take care of that Jezebel – all the things that create fear in you I'll just wipe those out. Then when it's safe you can go back to your life."

It would be nice if God would say that, but he doesn't. Here's what he DOES say,  
**"Elijah, you must go back the way you came."** In other words, you'll have to face the same set of problems that you ran away from. They're all still there. Jezebel is still there. She hasn't been through therapy or anger management. You'll have to go and face her."

Friend, this is what God might say to you and me.

"I have no plans for an emergency air-lift. My plan is that you will **overcome!** When you take one step in faith – to deal with that which you're most afraid of – you set in motion my power in your life."

Hear that again.

It's like God is saying to Elijah,

"I know you're afraid. I'm not asking you to stop feeling afraid. I'm asking you, in the midst of your fear, **to you trust me and SHOW IT by taking action?**

One of our Board members was sharing a few years ago about this job he was on where the contractor wanted to cut all sorts of corners. And so here you can just imagine the fear rising inside of him. If I go with this, I could be liable for shoddy work that could wind up hurting people. But if I say something, I could be out of job.

And in that moment he just felt God saying,  
“I know you’re afraid. But I’m asking you to face your fear and do what I tell you.”

And he just realized in that moment that there was not going to be any emergency air lifts. God wasn’t going to smite the contractor or have him win the lottery. He had to schedule a hard conversation. Which he did, and what a sense of peace he told us came over him, because he didn’t avoid his fear, he approached it saying, God you’re right here with me.

So Elijah does what? Obeys God. Which means embracing a scary confrontation with Jezebel and her evil husband Ahab. Let me read you the words of a scared man whom God turns into a LION through his faith filled action: He says to Ahab,  
“I have come because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of God. You and your wife, Jezebel, are on a path of destruction. You’re on a collision course with God, my friend - count on it!”

Breathtaking courage! All the more so, because we know how scared he was. Every one of us, like Elijah, comes to God with fear, everybody in this room. Maybe your fear involves an **external** risk.

- Maybe it’s about a job or vocation.
- Maybe it’s about a financial risk.
- Maybe it’s about doing something new at church – involving initiation, taking the next step

Maybe God’s asked you to take a more **internal** risk

- Maybe God is calling you to reveal yourself to another person and be truly vulnerable, and you’re scared to death.
- Maybe God’s calling you today to acknowledge the truth about your sin and that terrifies you.
- Maybe it’s selling out to God... you’re afraid he’s a party pooper and he’s going to ruin all your fun if your turn fully to him.

No matter what it is, here’s the deal. God doesn’t say to us, “that thing that has you petrified, I’ll just make it disappear.” Instead, he says, “Go back the way you came. Go face it, and I’ll go with you.” I’m asking everybody in this room today - this week - to take that faith based action that you have been avoiding in some fear-filled area of your life.

## **CONCLUSION**

As you do, I want to close with this warning. It will not feel natural. It will feel hard. But God will honor you.

When I was a youth pastor, my wife would joke that I’d think about all the fun things that I’ve always wanted to do - like rafting, hiking, rock climbing etc - and then I’d proceed to plan the youth calendar around doing all those fun things. Ministry is hard, but someone has to do it.

One thing I planned was yearly ski trips. But I'm not a West Coaster, I'm a land lubber by birth. The nearest thing we had to hills on the prairies was some farmer's manure piles. So when I came here and saw these huge skiing areas on actual mountains, I was a little intimidated.

And what didn't help was watching these little local kids, who'd been skiing ever since they were born, ski with no poles and no fear at all. Their favorite game as you know is to try to find an adult who is kind of shaky on his skis, and see how close they could come to you without knocking you over. They go right between your legs!

Anyhow, I remember after doing the bunny slope without breaking any bones, I thought, "I'm ready for a challenge"

One of my students says to me, "dude! Follow me." So he takes me to this ski slope. Slope is really not the best word for it. More like... cliff. You know how when you get to a ski slope, they have a green dot or a blue dot or diamonds to help you assess how difficult it is? There was like a skull and crossbones on the sign for this slope.

The student was a real good skier, and he had figured out I hadn't done this too much - perhaps the 5 major spills on the bunny hill where his first clue - and he said, "This is very important, Rick, when you're going down a slope like this one, you're going to want to lean backwards because it will feel a little scary. But", he said, "that's a big mistake because if you lean backwards, you'll be out of control, and you'll just sail." He said, "What you have to do will feel kind of unnatural to you. You lean forward - into the slope. Trust me - leaning forward, is scary, but it's actually the only safe way down - Choi!" And he was gone.

So I started down the slope/cliff and in about two seconds I forgot everything he said. I leaned back and I was out of control, and the only way I knew how to stop was to crash. I had to keep a very careful eye out for small children to find one to break my fall.

Here's the deal: God says to his frightened children, this may not seem real easy or natural to you, but you have to lean into the mountain - that fear producing situation. Trust me, it's the only way down, you have come back the way you came and face it head on.

So here's your assignment for today: I'd like to ask you to identify one area in your life where fear has produced a debilitating amount of stress in you recently. Then I'd like to ask you to commit in the next seven days to taking one step, however small, one step faith filled action toward that fear producing situation.

Maybe you've been

- procrastinating
- or locked in indecision
- or denial.

- maybe your fear involves a relationship,
- maybe it's a marriage deal, you're afraid of the mess and the confrontation,
- maybe it's a vocational thing

Whatever it is, will you identify, right now, one area of your life where fear has been holding you back externally or internally? Will you decide, that one, first step? Will you say, I'm going to go take this hard step. I'm going to go face this big fear, because I know that there's nothing God and I can't handle because He's said,

***“Do not be afraid I will be with you. You'll walk through the waters and not be destroyed. You'll walk through fire and not be burned. I'll be with you.”***