

Hope in God When We are Afraid

Pastor Doug Christgau

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Text: Psalm 131

Objectives:

1. Expose the myth of guaranteed security.
2. Hope comes from inside (soul), not outside (circumstance).
3. Have hope in God's love even when you are afraid.
4. The value of God's people when we are afraid.

Motivation

What are you afraid of? I don't like going over 40 MPH on my bicycle. There are much more serious concerns that we see in the prayer cards each week: cancer, marriages in trouble, kids going off to school. No matter what our fear or phobias might be, the Bible commands us to "fear not" at least 135 different times. How come? Because fear is the opposite of faith, and God want us to be people of faith. We fear and lose hope because we don't have faith that God loves and cares for us in a practical way.

There are times when we'd be foolish not to be fearful. Have you ever traveled the intersection of Knights Road and Street Road near Philadelphia? [Photo of intersection](#). Beware! Time magazine states that this is the most dangerous intersection in America. Within one mile of this junction people were killed or injured at least weekly over a recent two-year period. At this infamous intersection it would be foolish not to be at least a little fearful.

Some places in the U.S. strike fear because of natural disasters. Two of the most *dangerous* places for hurricanes are in New Jersey. Valley's own Heather James has the courage to live in this area for several months each summer. She sent me this photo of a storm just 1/10 of a mile from her home. Does anyone want to go swimming? [Photo of hurricane](#).

Do you want to live in place that is safe from violent weather? Move to Montana or Idaho, home to the three safest counties in the USA in terms of weather. Clearly, we in New England are on the wrong side of our country if we are seeking refuge from storms and traffic accidents.

This message is about having hope when we are afraid. But, I will begin by addressing a more fundamental issue. Can we ever expect to feel completely safe and free from fear?

1. Hope When We Are Afraid Starts When We See Safety as a Myth.

John Piper talks about fear in his book *Don't Waste Your Life*. What is the key to freedom from fear? Is it staying away from dangerous intersections and storms? Is it staying in the United States and away from countries where murder rates are high and terrorism is common? No, fear is primarily the result of not knowing the future. God does not tell us in detail what He plans to do five years from now or even five minutes from now. Scripture cautions us not to focus on what our future is going to be since we can't know it anyway.

James 4:13-15 *Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

God allows us to live in ignorance about the details of the future. Uncertainty about the forces around us is part of His plan for building our faith. **Hope is *not* based on what we know about the future. Hope is based on what we know about God.** (Repeat for emphasis. Ask the congregation to say it aloud with you.) The Bible tells us that God is loving, just and good. Being afraid is the result of not truly believing God has these qualities. In fact, many of us don't trust one of the most famous phrases about God in American church history:

God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

This is the first of what are known as the Four Spiritual Laws, one of the most effective evangelistic tools ever created. Over one billion copies of the Four Spiritual Laws have been printed. Millions of people have come to faith in Christ through these four laws. However, many people seem to forget this law after they become Christians. As a result, they find it difficult to have hope when they are afraid. We can believe that God has a wonderful plan for our *afterlife* because that's vague. No one knows the day of his demise. Only when faced with the reality of what might happen tomorrow do most of us become afraid. We forget that God's plan for us is perfect. We want God to follow our plan for our lives but that doesn't always match His plan.

Can we accept God's plan for us as perfect, even if it includes misfortune from a human point of view? Only then we can have hope when we are afraid.

In our culture there is a growing but inherently unrealistic idea that we can live in guaranteed safety. In fact, security and safety have become featured benefits of products offered for sale, along with popularity and good looks. **John Piper: We need to be delivered from the enchantment of security.**

Being completely safe is a myth. If you stay home under the bed covers, you could be the victim of a home invasion or a house fire. If your child plays in a public playground, someone could snatch him or her away when you're distracted. If you drive your car down the street, a drunk driver may hit you head-on. I read of a bicyclist that was killed in Granby, CT, by a drunk driver...at 7 in the morning! I understand that I'm being specific enough to perhaps make you afraid right now, and that's my point. In every direction you turn, there are unknowns and forces beyond your control. Escaping fear-inducing situations is impossible but that doesn't mean we must be hopeless in the face of fear.

Piper says the tragic hypocrisy is that the enchantment of security lets us take risks every day for ourselves – like making bold moves to improve our business - but stops us from taking risks for the Gospel. So many of us don't even want to let others know that we are followers of Jesus. Yet the Bible tells us quite specifically that we should be willing to risk our lives in the service of Jesus Christ:

Mark 8:35 *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.*

This is a familiar verse, but does it characterize our approach to living the Christian life? I'll never forget visiting with Pastor Afeef and his church planters in a city in the Middle East. Pastor Afeef is supported through our World Outreach budget and he's going to speak at Valley in October. When Afeef introduced me and Dr. Paul Sullivan from our congregation to his Jordanian co-workers a few years ago he asked us to stand up in front of the group. After telling his team we were prayer and financial supporters, he looked at us quite intently and asked, "Doug and Paul, are you willing to give your lives for the Gospel?" It was not a rhetorical question! Afeef wanted

us to commit our lives as all his church planters had done when they decided to share the Gospel among Middle Eastern Muslims.

Indeed the Bible should inspire us not to be afraid. Does this Biblical exhortation mean anything to you?

Psalm 27:1 The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?

We must recognize that we do experience fear and that security is a myth. These are big steps toward having hope when we are afraid. But how do we actually maintain hope in the face of fear? Pastor Judah Smith from Seattle gets it right when he says...

2. Hope When We Are Afraid Starts from the Inside.

Proverbs 18:14: *A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?*

Our physical bodies eventually fail us. We all get sick at some point. Why do some people allow illness to discourage them while others maintain a positive demeanor? It's the condition of our spirit – the part of our being that connects us to God and His place in our lives. Some people count their pains. Others count their blessings.

Our spirit makes a difference even when facing the ultimate fear-inducing experience... death itself. I have visited people with terminal illness who maintain a positive outlook because their inner spirit was not crushed. They know they are going to be with Jesus when they die. But I have also faced death with people for whom it was a very scary experience.

Years ago I represented the church where I was working at the wake of a man who was distantly related to our fellowship. The dead man had been a motorcycle rider of the Hell's Angels genre. His biking buddies showed up in force at his final viewing. As a group they reflected one common reaction to seeing the dead body of their fallen comrade. They were scared! These tough guys with their leather jackets and biker babes were intimidated by the death of their friend. Why? They didn't have an inner spirit to sustain them. Death was ominous for them because they had done nothing to grow their connection to God. Their tough, outside veneer did nothing to uphold

them in the face of death. Emotionally they collapsed because they had nothing on the inside.

I have a friend who is an atheist and is now 73 years of age. He is quite blunt in admitting that he fears death. He's an intellectual and can defend his atheism quite clearly, but he does not have a strong spirit. He's afraid of death.

How would you rate your strength in confronting death or something else that truly scares you? There's a lot of talk in fitness circles of developing our core – the muscles in our back and stomach. Core strength in our bodies is good for physical health, but core strength in our spirits is even more important if we are to have hope in the face of fear.

Psalm 131:1: *My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.* In this information age we can access knowledge on just about everything. “Just Google it.” Isn't that what we say? Is it ok *not* to understand some things – even things that inspire fear - and leave them instead with God? Judah Smith asks an important question:

How big is your “I don't know” zone?

Our “I don't know zone” is the area where we are content with ignorance, with not knowing. It's not being naïve or ignoring Google, but rather reflects our trust in our God who loves us. If we are OK with not knowing everything, we can be calm on the inside and face whatever makes us afraid on the outside. Can we know the fate of a family member with cancer? Can we know if we'll lose our job? Can we be sure we'll be safe when traveling home on a stormy night? All these unanswerable questions should fit in our “I don't know” zone and reflect trust in a God that cares for us.

If you consider the status of author David at the time of this psalm, “I don't know” is an even more remarkable comment. David wrote this psalm at the height of his power as King of Israel. He was the most important person in one of the most important nations in the world. If anyone could assume insight into every challenge, it was

David. And if David could not figure it out himself, he had an entourage of advisers with whom he could consult.

Yet David says, ***I do not concern myself with great matters.*** David knows that he can't know about everything, even important things like why God took the life of the baby he had with Bathsheba.

In verse 2 David recognizes that the key to a still and quiet soul is being like a child who is content once weaned.

But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

A baby is OK with whatever life brings, as long as that child can be at the side of his loving mother whose milk has been his sustenance to that point.

When speaking of a soul that is *stilled*, the Hebrew conveys a person that is *leveled* – calm and square with life's circumstances no matter how tough they are.

Want to have hope at a time of fear? Learn...

How to be calm on the inside:

- 1) **Admit that a) you are not God b) you are not the boss of your life c) you can't know everything.** Atheists love being the boss of their lives, but in the end none of them claims to understand everything and neither can you.
- 2) **Accept that God does know everything, including which of life's mysteries should be revealed to you.**
Deuteronomy 29:29 *The secret things belong to the LORD our God.*
- 3) **Recognize that the antidote to (human) fear is fear (of God.)** Rev. Brett Hilliard Whatever strikes fear in our flesh can be overcome by our respect...our fear if you will...of our sovereign God.

The bigger your issue with fear, the smaller your acceptance of God's control in your life.

3. Hope When We Are Afraid Comes from God's People.

Hope in the face of fear is much easier when God's people face it with us. Christians are told in

1 Thessalonians 5:11 *...encourage one another and build each other up.*

Let me share two contrasting experiences: God's people were not present with me when I visited a remote province of Sierra Leone, West Africa in 2006. This was an unusual mission trip where our team of five people was sent to different parts of the country where their unique skills were needed. A banker on our team stayed in the capitol city of Freetown to review a micro-finance program. Another man skilled in construction went to a region where homes were being built for people who had lost theirs in a civil war. My task was to train pastors in a city that was a six-hour drive from the airport.

The night before meeting the pastors, I was doing final preparation in my sweltering hotel room. There was no AC and the overhead fan was just pushing the hot air from the ceiling down towards me. The sweat was literally rolling off my elbows as I pecked away on my laptop. The other occupants in this modest guest house were Egyptian cell tower workers. They were a pretty loud bunch and their ceaseless Arabic chatter put me a bit on edge. The next day I would meet a group of godly pastors who walked and rode bicycles long distances to attend my workshop, but at that moment I was a lonely Christian man among a dozen rough and tumble Arabs. I had no choice but to trust God to protect me, but I was more inclined towards fear because I was alone.

In contrast I had a very hope-inspiring experience in 2013 when meeting two people I knew from Valley just before my wife, Christine, had a serious back operation. These were hospital employees about to start their day's work who knew us from church. At separate times they briefly stopped what they were doing to offer encouragement. One of them prayed with us. The fact that I knew these people from church and that they were willing to spend a few minutes with us contributed greatly to our sense of hope. We had never faced major surgery in many years of married life. Without relationships at Valley, we would not have known these gracious people and could not have been reassured by their concern.

If you call Valley your church but go through each week without connecting with anyone relationally, you are missing a huge benefit of being part of this body. God's hope in the face of fear is much clearer when you have friendships within this church. In fact, it distresses our pastors greatly when we try to help someone facing a fearful situation and they don't know anyone at Valley who can stand with them. We

do all we can to make a friendly connection, but it is so much more effective if we can call on relationships that they have already established at the church.

Conclusion: Having hope when we are afraid isn't just important for our sense of well-being. It impacts our service to God. Earlier I referred to the work of Pastor Afeef who trains Arab Christians to plant churches in the Middle East. Last year this group planted over 200 churches and saw almost 2000 Muslims come to faith in Christ.

Someone asked me why Afeef's people were so effective at doing something that is so hard: reaching Muslims. Afeef's workers are effective because they are willing to put their lives on the line every day. They must have hope in the face of fear. They faithfully serve regardless of danger. If we are willing to put our lives on the line, I'll bet the same could be said of us.

Since it helps to face fearful situations when we are supported by other Christians, I want to tell you that Sunday night I will leave with Tim Ploszaj to go to Egypt, where we will minister to almost one thousand Egyptian Christians who are considering being missionaries in the Arab world. These are not workers with Afeef or anyone else yet, but they are willing to come to a conference and think about it.

I'm not so afraid of traveling to the Middle East, but I am concerned that Tim and I have an impact for the Gospel among these brave folks. We don't want to just show up and give a few talks. We want to communicate hope in God so these Christians will commit themselves to missions, no matter how scary the idea of reaching Middle Eastern Muslims might be.

We're going to conclude the service by having a representative of our Elder Board, Tim Ponzani, and our World Outreach team pray for me.