

The Fear-Driven Life

JARED C. WILSON

Do you know what the most frequent command in the Bible is? It's not "love one another." It's not "love God." It's not "do unto others" or "be ye holy. The most frequent command in all of Scripture is some variation of this: "Don't be afraid."

This ought to tell us something about the kind of world we live in. But it also ought to tell us something about the kind of life God calls his children into.

The early days of faith may be awash in wonder, full of energy and wide-eyed boldness. But then days go by, and the walk begins to feel more normal, more mundane. The things of earth grow strangely bright. We hear competing messages, the noise of the world, the noise of our accuser, the noise of our internal anxieties, and insecurities begin to challenge the still, small voice of God. The things of God become less comfortable than the routine of daily life. The vision of God's promise, which drove our faith so strongly in the beginning, begins to wane, perhaps seem less compelling, less immediately gratifying than the promises of the things around us. And as the fulfillment of the promise seems to delay day by day, so the opportunities for doubt and discouragement seem to grow.

And the truth is: there is *always* something to be afraid of. If you have trouble finding something, just turn on cable news—they will help you. And this is why you can hardly go anywhere in the Bible without bumping into the words "Don't be afraid."

In [Genesis 12:10-20](#) it's possible this "ordinary life" dynamic settled in with Abram. Called by God out of his pagan world and culture, to leave everything he'd ever known and to embark on a mysterious journey with the one true God, he had a high passion, high commitment in the beginning. And when we get to [Genesis 12](#), his trek has accumulated so far 800 miles. He's put months into this thing. All along God is saying "I'm gonna give you this" and "I'm gonna give you that" . . . but not yet.

You can bet that over time, for Abram, the temptation to boredom with the promise grew. And I will tell you: the more bored you are with the things of God, the more vulnerable you will be when difficulty comes. And difficulty came for Abram.

You will notice there is a famine in the land (v.10) and Abram makes the logical choice to take his family to Egypt, because there's food there. But the wheels of fear are already turning for Abram. They are going to Egypt because they're afraid of starving to death, but once he starts in with the fear, it seems he can't stop:

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."

We have to say, first, that Abram is not being completely irrational. There is a logic to his fear. Just like there is a logic to inside all of our fear, right? Fear can be often irrational, but most of us when we are afraid have rational reasons why.

It's likely that most of the things we're afraid of are real things. Real stresses, real problems, real circumstances, real possibilities. But it's what you *do* with the reasoning that makes all the difference.

What does Abram do? He starts running the numbers. Egypt + Beautiful wife = Trouble. He starts playing the angles. And there is zero evidence here that his faith in the God who has called him plays into his thinking at all. He is being driven by fear. Not just informed by it but motivated by it. And when you are driven by fear, faith takes a back seat:

1. The fear-driven life is faithless.

There is a good kind of cautiousness, the sort of wisdom that doesn't jump into every situation or make rash decisions. And then there's the kind of cautiousness that has more to do with managing our own disobedience. "How disobedient can I be and still get away with what I want?" And this comes when the vision of the things around us is greater than the vision of him who has called us. The less Godward you are looking, the more afraid you will be.

Ramon Presson writes, "The most repeated command in Scripture is 'fear not.' It appears 365 times—one for each day of the year—and is usually followed by 'for I am with you.' God would have us understand that factoring in his presence always changes the equation."

It seems like for Abram, God's presence did not factor into the equation. He looked at the circumstances: famine, Egypt, beautiful wife, dangerous people. And he did not look at God. And so, his perspective was skewed.

This is us when it comes to fear. We let fear drive our life when we start believing that greater is that which is in the world than he who is in us.

2. The fear-driven life is self-centered.

Look again at [Genesis 12:13](#): "Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."

What is Abram's motivation? Saving his own skin! He's afraid of losing his own life. He doesn't seem too afraid for Sarai. He doesn't seem too afraid of her dying. He doesn't even seem too afraid of her being sexually exploited.

Abram is running the numbers. Perhaps he thinks this will buy them some time. Perhaps he's banking on the Egyptians following the cultural custom of the day of negotiating with a brother for the hand of the sister in marriage. But none of that is certainty. It's just assumptions. And Abram goes that way, ultimately, because he's willing to trade in protection of his wife in order to save himself.

The fear-driven life has a sense of security in its consideration, but it is trying to find in one's own power the kind of security that can only be found in God. As Bob Deffenbaugh says, "Abram was clinging to his wife's petticoat for protection and blessing, rather than to the promise of God."

The fear-driven life is self-centered. It doesn't see the union we have in Christ, and therefore the perfect security we have in God. It sees only what it stands to lose. Not what it has already gained! The fear-driven life cannot even rightly claim to be for others.

And as if Abram needs the help of focusing on his self, look again at what happens as the result of his scheming:

When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. (12:14-16) It looks like his logic has paid off! He sought his own comfort, and he got it!

But it comes with a greater price. Because Abram might have gotten a whole bunch of stuff for his own comfort, but the second part of v.15 is chilling: "The woman was taken into Pharaoh's house." And I'm picturing the reality of what he's just done beginning to settle on Abram as he watches his beloved be led away by the Pharaoh's men and as she gets smaller and smaller on the horizon and perhaps disappears behind the stately gates or through the palace door, his sense of dread brims in his heart. He has sold his wife out, put her in grave danger, to protect himself.

3. The fear-driven life idolizes comfort.

Sarai is up in Pharaoh's house now enduring God-knows-what while Abram is enjoying the spoils of his scheming. And—really—Abram has never been in more danger than he is right now.

My first mentor in the ministry Mike Ayers once said, "To be a follower of Jesus you must renounce comfort as the ultimate value of your life."

One wonders what this is even teaching Abram. It's not even clear, after all is said and done, that Abram learns his lesson, because in [Genesis 20](#), he repeats this same scheme. Old fears die hard.

Fear will drive us away from faith in God. Fear will drive us further into ourselves. Fear will drive us into a self-deluded comfort. When we are driven by fear and not by the glorious grace of God in Christ Jesus, we will begin to think that there is nothing worse than suffering.

But Jesus who said, "Take up your cross and follow me" also said, "Do not fear him who can take your life. Fear him who can take your life *and* your soul." In other words—there is a fate worse than dying. It is dying after you die. Which is why Christ also says, "What does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul?"

We have this notion that difficulty is not normal. We say we don't, but we just wait until difficulty happens. We think, surely God wouldn't have meant this! Surely God only wants ease and comfort for us. But God never promises comfort. He only promises peace. And he never promises safety. But he promises eternal security.

The fear-driven life is motivated by comfort, but the faith-filled life is motivated by him in whom we have believed. And the faith-filled life is persuaded that *he* is able to keep that which we've committed to him until the end of days.

The thing about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is so disturbing to our little protected areas of comfort. The places we've set up our little idols, Jesus comes marching through, knocking stuff over, plowing down the fences, establishing his own real kingship over our pretend kingdoms.

If you are seeking your security in something other than God himself, he will come disrupt you. And make no mistake: the worst thing that can happen to you is to sail through life, comfortable and safe and easy, never realizing your need for God's salvation, just gliding through the happy days of life right into the pits of hell.

And God did not allow this little fear-driven, self-promotional wonderland of Abram's to continue. He barged in and showed them all who's really in charge:

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So, Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. ([Gen. 12:17-20](#))

We can't be sure if Sarai was sexually compromised by Pharaoh, but even if she wasn't, it doesn't make what Abram did okay. No, the point is that Abram trusted in himself rather than in God and God said, "No way. I'm not letting you play this game."

And when you seek a security that can only be found in God in anything other than God, you will always be seeking. Not until you place your faith in Jesus Christ do you find the kind of security that nothing in the world can assail! He says, "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." How did he do this? Well, facing the terrible dark cloud of the cross, Jesus was running the numbers. He saw the pain, the betrayal, the darkness of the cross. In that garden, with blood and sweat and tears, he felt the weight of the danger he was walking into.

And he could have sold his bride out! He could have handed us over to who-knows-what! But he didn't. He took on the full weight of the cross, so we wouldn't have to. And he died to forgive sins and rose again to secure eternal life and he ascended into heaven and [Ephesians 2:6](#) says that those who trust in Christ have been "raised with him and seated with him in the heavenly places." [Colossians 3:3](#) says that the Christian is "hidden with Christ in God."

You talk about security! Christ went where we would not—to sacrificial death—to bring us into the place we could not—namely, the very life of himself. The Christian is united to Christ, inexplicably connected to Christ. And if we are united to Christ by faith, hidden with him in God, we are as secure as Christ is! Now: how secure do you think Christ is?

This reality overturns the fear-driven life! It reverses it. Once you realize your security in Christ, and once you realize the world is governed by the sovereign God who loves you, it changes *everything*. Or, it ought to.

Don't let fear drive your life.