

I. Introduction

When Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated President on March 4, 1933, this country was in the depths of the Great Depression. 4,000 banks had failed in just the first two months of 1933, and billions of dollars' worth of deposits were lost. Thousands of people had lost their life's savings, and many lived in fear of what might come next. Things looked pretty grim and hopeless: unemployment was at about 25%, and Roosevelt was facing a nation in crisis. In the introduction to his inaugural address he recognized that nation-wide fear and said this:

“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Our Thursday evening study has to do with fear: understanding it and dealing with it from a biblical perspective. While things aren't as bad as they were in 1933, there's still a lot to be apprehensive about these days.

II. Jesus in the Boat

Max Lucado, who wrote this study, uses the story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee to begin his discussion of fear. As we read, Jesus and his disciples got into a boat in the evening and headed for the other shore of the lake that is known as the Sea of Galilee. The lake is 8 miles wide at its widest point, and about 13 miles long.

Now you might ask, “How bad can a storm on a relatively small lake be?” As it turns out, those storms can be pretty bad. We know because those storms still happen. Today there's a tour boat that goes across the lake, which Sue and I took during our tour of Israel in 1993. Fortunately the lake was calm that day, and it was a pleasant trip. However, a pastor I know had been on that same boat when one of those severe storms suddenly came up. The storm was so bad that this sizable boat was pitching like crazy, and this pastor was becoming afraid they might not make it. Fortunately nobody lost their life, although I suspect quite a few lost their lunch. Let's look at some principles we can discern from the Bible, especially this story of the storm:

1. Fear Is a Warning System

First of all, fear is a God-given warning system that prepares us for fight or flight. It pumps adrenaline into our system to give us the strength to do what is necessary to save ourselves from whatever is threatening us. For example, I'm sure those disciples were using all their strength to row and keep the boat from capsizing, plus bailing out the boat. They needed every ounce of strength to battle that storm.

So fear can be healthy, and even life-saving, up to a point. Yet ongoing fear isn't good, because it produces stress – which is life-threatening. I'll talk more about stress in a minute.

2. Life is Stormy

The second lesson from this story is that life is stormy. Jesus himself said that his followers would not be immune from the trials and tribulations of life. The highly paraphrased version of the Bible called "The Message" puts Jesus' words this way (John 16:33):

"I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you *will* continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world."

Notice that Jesus said you *will* have difficulties, not might, not possibly, not could have, not maybe. The Apostle Paul certainly suffered for the cause of Christ. Paul was encouraging Timothy while he himself was in a Roman prison. So it's possible that followers of Jesus may suffer persecution and other difficulties in addition to the usual trials people have in this life.

Then why follow Jesus? Why ask for more trouble? We follow Jesus because of both the heavenly rewards as well as the divine help we receive in this life. The prophet Micah understood this power from God when he wrote (Micah 3:8a):

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might. NIV

Power and the Holy Spirit are needed when we're afraid, suffering, or otherwise experiencing troubles of various kinds.

3. Things Come Up Suddenly and Unexpectedly

The third lesson we learn from this story is that things come up suddenly. These experienced fishermen wouldn't have gone out in the boat if the weather looked threatening. But this storm happened suddenly, just as many of our difficulties or trials are unexpected and sudden.

As I've said many times before, we can handle these problems better when we already have a vibrant relationship with God thru Jesus. Our faith is stronger, we've learned to depend on God, and we know how to pray. Life is full of surprises – many of them unpleasant – so be in a position to have the faith in God that will get you thru the trials.

4. God Can Handle Whatever Comes Our Way

The fourth point ties in with that thought: God can handle whatever comes our way. Jesus was awakened by the terrified disciples, and immediately calmed the storm. God may or may not eliminate our problem, but he will certainly help us to get thru it. As we read in the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 4:6b):

“This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.” NIV

So let’s remember that it’s by God’s Spirit when we’re facing difficult and fearful situations. God can calm our storms just as Jesus did in that boat.

III. Fear and Stress

Earlier I mentioned stress, and stress is a killer. A couple of weeks ago I saw a TV program on stress which was very timely. Ongoing fear, of course, is what produces stress. When we’re fearful about something and that fear goes on for a while, it becomes stress. When we’re experiencing fear, extra blood goes to our muscles and other bodily functions slow down so as to conserve energy for fight or flight. When we’ve got stress, it does terrible things to our bodies: arteries clog up, blood pressure rises, and the immune system becomes less effective. We end up with all kinds of health problems because of stress and all that adrenaline continuously pumping into our system. I’m convinced that spending all of those years in stressful jobs caused me to have a heart condition.

IV. So Why Are We Afraid?

God thru the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:15:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. NRSV

If that is true, then why do we fear? At least four reasons come to mind:

1. Perceived Loss of Control

First, we fear because of perceived lack of control over our circumstances or destiny. We feel that odds are against us, and we don’t see a way out. For example, if there’s going to be lay-offs at work, we have no control. However, we may have more control than we think, at least in terms of being prepared. We can prepare ourselves in practical ways, plus emotionally, and spiritually. When we are prepared and have contingency plans, the situation becomes a little less fearful.

2. Fear Dulls Our Memory

Second, fear dulls our memory of how God has helped us and provided for us in the past. When we focus on the present we become more and more afraid, until it almost becomes an obsession. If we step back and remember how God has been faithful in the past, our fear will diminish quite a bit.

3. Safety and Security Become Paramount

Third, when we are threatened, safety and security become extremely important to us. When there is a perceived lack of safety and security, our fear grows and we can almost

become paralyzed with worry and feelings of insecurity. What may have been a legitimate concern can easily develop into full-blown dread.

4. Lack of Faith

Lastly, we fear because we lack faith. Remember how Jesus challenged the disciples when they woke him up in a panic? “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” We think God can’t or won’t help us, or is asleep in the boat and just doesn’t care. Lack of faith brings more fear and a spirit of hopelessness, causing despair.

V. Conclusion

If we understand what drives fear, we can better cope with it. If we build up our faith, God is more real to us and we can learn to trust him. As I’ve said before, God may not eliminate the problem but he will enable us to deal with it appropriately and calmly. Even in the midst of apprehension and uncertainty we can have the joy of the Lord, because we have the confidence of a child of God.

So let us not have a spirit of fear and anxiety, but one of trust in the Lord that God will work things out. Yes, some things are inevitable and we grieve over them, but God walks with us in our sorrow. Let us remember God’s word of comfort to us thru the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. NIV

Amen.

Mark 4:35-41

As evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let’s cross to the other side of the lake.” So they took Jesus in the boat and started out, leaving the crowds behind (although other boats followed). But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water.

Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re going to drown?”

When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the water, “Silence! Be still!” Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. Then he asked them, “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

The disciples were absolutely terrified. “Who is this man?” they asked each other. “Even the wind and waves obey him!” NLT