

SESSION 2: OVERCOMING FEAR

UNDERSTANDING OUR FEARS

Fear is a common part of human life, and one of our most powerful emotions. Studies show that almost one third of all people struggle with significant anxiety or phobias. Only in recent years has neuroscience begun to understand the detailed physiology of emotional states such as fear.

Researchers have found that if people feel unsafe, they seldom think soundly or respond well. Fear makes people struggle to act correctly or make good decisions. At stressful moments—when we are lost, confused, attacked, or at risk—we often give into fear. Lawrence Gonzales, in *Deep Survival*, a study on why people survive or die in times of crisis, writes,

“During a fear reaction...the brain and body help to trigger a staggeringly complex sequence of events, all aimed at producing a behavior to promote survival: freezing in place, for example, followed by running away...Only efficient preparation can diminish this panic response.”

I remember telling my young daughters, “If you get lost, go hug a tree. Stay put. I will come find you.” This was to keep them from running deeper into the Colorado mountains in a panic. When we become disoriented or unsafe, we act poorly.

Our decisions become clouded, and we make bad choices. This is true for the people of God:

- The spies in Numbers 13 see “giants” in the Promised Land and convince the Israelites to disobey God. This running away leads to 40 years of judgment, wandering in the desert.
- King Saul and his troops are “quaking with fear” before battle, and when Samuel doesn’t appear, Saul defies the Lord and brings the offering himself. His poor choice in the face of fear eventually ends his Kingdom (1 Sam. 13).
- David flees King Saul to live with the Philistines. He begins to raid villages as if he were a Philistine. (1 Sam. 29-30). And later, afraid his adultery will be discovered at Bathsheba’s pregnancy, David orders her husband killed to cover his sin (2 Sam. 11).
- Peter, for fear of persecution, denies the Lord three times (John 18).

HOW DO WE OVERCOME FEAR?

First, we slow our rising panic. We breathe deeply and choose to turn away from the problem for a moment. We hug a tree. Spiritually, we seek the unchanging Lord. 2 Timothy 1:7 reminds us: “For

Andrew’s Keys from Session 2

- DON’T ACT OUT OF FEAR
- A HEALTHY FEAR OF GOD
- DEVELOP ETERNAL EYES
- A DESIRE FOR HEAVEN

“People will quite simply ignore the possibility that a particular disaster will ever strike them. Some people subconsciously believe that to prepare for disaster is to encourage it. ‘Don’t even think about it’—for fear that it may come to pass...But to experience humility is the true survivor’s correct response to catastrophe. A survival emergency is a Rorschach test. It will quickly tell you who you are.”

■ Lawrence Gonzales,
Deep Survival

God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control." God reframes our earthly fear with his presence: *"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God"* (Isa. 41:10). If we are ready for difficulties, we panic far less.

Secondly, we cry out to the Holy One who is listening. *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you"* (1 Pet. 5:7). Psalm 34:4 is clear, *"I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears."* We decide to trust God. We remember that God loves us with a faithful, unending love, and so we can turn to him.

Thirdly, we act in a healthy "fear" of the Lord. Let me explain how the Bible uses the word "fear" in two ways. The first way speaks of emotional anxiety and panic, as above. We are told to resist this kind of negative, emotional fear. But there is another Bible use of the word "fear." We see this mentioned in Psalm 111:10, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding."* In the original Hebrew, this fear more closely denotes "awe-filled reverence" when it speaks of our relationship to God. It pictures a subject falling before an almighty yet good king in devotion. The Complete Word Study Dictionary notes that this kind of **fear** of the Lord is a positive quality:

This fear acknowledges God's good intentions (Ex. 20:20). It will motivate and delight even the Messiah (Isa. 11:2,3). This fear is produced by God's Word (Ps. 119:38; Prov. 2:5) and makes a person receptive to wisdom and knowledge (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). It is even identified with wisdom (Job 28:28; Prov. 15:33). This fear restrains people from sin (Gen. 20:11; Ex. 20:20; Neh. 5:9); gives confidence (Job 4:6; Prov. 14:26); helps rulers and causes judges to act justly (2 Sam. 23:3; 2 Chron. 19:9; Neh. 5:15); results in good sleep (Prov. 19:23); with humility, leads to riches, honor, and life (Prov. 22:4).

When we look realistically at our troublesome or fearful situation, when we suffer for our faith, we need to put our fear of God first. The Lord asks his people, *"Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"* (Deut. 5:29). And in Joshua 24:14, we read, *"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness."* We see this again in Isaiah 8:13, *"The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear."*

We fear (with awe-filled reverence) him as the Holy One and the Just Judge. Cleverly, Jesus uses the word fear both negatively and positively to make his point in Matthew 10:28-31,

"Do not fear (negative emotion) those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear (positive reverence) the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear (negative emotion); you are worth more than many sparrows." (emphasis added).

The bottom line is this: God calls us to stop being overwhelmed by fear, and to fear (reverence) him.

This is especially true when the society we live in seems against us. In Ezra 3:3 we see this modeled as the Israelites move back to faith in God, *"Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices."*

We are to fear God and trust him.

It is a high call, and a difficult place to stand firmly on when the battle is joined. In our next session, we will look more at the spiritual battlelines.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) What are the things that we, as westerners, fear?
- 2) How about you personally? What causes you anxiety?
- 3) How does awareness or warning of pain and persecution help us avoid panic?
- 4) Andrew challenges us to have *an eternal perspective*. Practically, what does that look like for you?

ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Write down some things you are afraid of in the area of persecution (e.g., losing friends, being fired from work because of my faith, being imprisoned, being tortured, my children being persecuted). Now simply give each of them to the Lord, praying, "Lord, if this were to happen—you and I will get through it together. I will trust you no matter what." Cross the items out one-by-one and tear up your list of fears.
- ✓ Pray, "Father God, put the fear of you into my heart so that I do not turn away from you (Jer. 32.40). Strike my heart with revelation of Your majesty, that I might live in awe before You (Is 8.13). Unite my heart to Your heart and Word (Ps 86.11) and cause me to delight in the fear of God (Is 11.3)"
- ✓ Read *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn or *Imagine Heaven* by John Burke.

FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—PSALM 84, A LONGING FOR HEAVEN

The Christian life here on earth is one of longing. Jesus understood this: *"Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head"* (Matt. 8:20). Why did Jesus not settle down? Because *"for the joy set before him, he endured the cross"* and then sat down at his Father's right hand in his presence (Heb. 12:2). He knew this world was not his home. He was seeking an eternal home in heaven.

"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

■ C.S. Lewis

As C.S. Lewis noted, we were made for another world. We read about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Heb. 11:9-10) living as strangers in tents in the “promised land”:

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Notice that even though God had brought them to the land of Israel, they hungered for another place. A “city” built by God himself. Even after the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the Israelites knew its glory was just a glimmer of something more ahead. Psalm 84 reflects this longing, this sense that this world is not our ultimate home. Let’s look at this passage in a deeper way.

Text Psalm 84:1-12

1 *How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! 2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 3 Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, Lord Almighty, my King and my God. 4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.*

5 *Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. 6 As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. 7 They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.*

8 *Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob. 9 Look on our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one. 10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. 11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. 12 Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.*

Examination

The word “lovely” means more than beautiful. It means *beloved*, or *lovable*. *God is love*, so his dwelling place embodies love. The psalmist’s hunger for God’s courts of love is tangible—their body faints, and their heart and flesh sing in yearning. Oh, how envious the psalmist is of the birds who have built a home there! Being with God in his place is a consuming desire. How amazing it will be when we, too, can dwell in God’s heaven with him, praising him forever.

The Jews were called by God to seek him, coming regularly to Jerusalem on pilgrimages. But it was a temporary stay, and not fully satisfying. Even so, the psalmist pronounces a blessing on those who seek God. *Baca* means weeping in Hebrew. It is a blessing on those who hunger enough that they walk even through dry valleys of weeping. Even desert places and times of persecution will one day be filled with springs and pools. Note that the destination, *before God*, is a person as well as a place.

This last section, v. 8-12, is a prayer to reach heaven. *Shield* and *anointed one* speak about Israel’s King, whom God had appointed to guard and prosper the people. We, too, have a King and an Anointed One, Jesus, who leads us on our journey to the amazing “courts of the Lord.” Here, in the heaven we long for, the shortest time (*one day*) and the lowest role (*a doorkeeper*) is a blessing. God withholds no good thing from those who seek to obey and trust as they walk this journey!

SESSION 3: GUARDING AGAINST THE OFFENDED HEART

RECOGNIZING THE ENEMY

One of my main jobs as a pastor is to protect the flock of Jesus. I've grown to dislike TV news. Of all kinds. When we watch the news, we often feel like our Christian belief system is being brutally attacked by all sorts of groups. We are tempted to name the enemies with titles from politics, government, or media. We can become troubled at all the foes we see.

Christians, we need to remember that people—no matter their positions—are not the real enemy. Jesus said many counter-cultural things. Perhaps the hardest is in Matthew 5:43-48. He teaches that no matter what others do, we are not to demonize “them.” As children of the Father, we are to pray for those who persecute us, and to show grace and love to all.

The Bible comes at our struggle another way. It teaches us that we, as believers, are engaged in a spiritual battle, *“not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Eph. 6:12-13). Eugene Peterson’s Message version says it this way: *“This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.”*

The Christian walk is a battle, whether we like it or not, because we have a very real enemy. In Revelation 12:17, we see behind the curtain to the spiritual battle. *“Then the dragon was enraged at the woman (the church) and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.”*

The Dragon is enraged. Why are we surprised at this truth? Notice that the target is focused on people who keep God’s commands, and who hold on to their faith in Jesus. The western world—including what Andrew earlier called “the commanding heights of American culture”—is increasingly hostile to followers of Jesus, because Satan has polarized some key beliefs:

- We believe Jesus has the right to ask obedience in how we live.
- We believe in the exclusivity of faith in Jesus as a means of eternal salvation.

Satan hates these things. Our enemy’s hope is that under persecution we will surrender our obedience or our faith, or both. Peter clearly understands this spiritual battle. He writes to his Christian friends and brothers, *“Be careful—watch out for attacks from Satan, your great enemy. He prowls around like a hungry, roaring lion, looking for some victim to tear apart”* (1 Pet. 5:8-9, TLB).

Andrew’s Keys from Session 3

- OFFENDED AT GOD
- OVERCOMING OFFENSE
- FIGHT FOR OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD
- LOCK BOX
- TESTING
- LEAN INTO JESUS

“The first step on the way to victory is to recognize the enemy.”

■ Corrie Ten Boom

TAKING OFFENSE AT GOD

Satan's plan is to create such pressure on the church that God's people turn away from the Lord. Satan wants people to see God as the enemy. Alone in his Turkish cell, Andrew was enticed to doubt God. To be angry at him. To doubt his goodness. When we are vulnerable, we can feel like God has failed us, deserted us, cheated us, or cast us away from his care. In our minds, we hear an ice-covered voice: "A good God couldn't allow this. Why is he punishing you? After all you've given up for him, God didn't come through for you, did he?"

Does God really love us? The attacks, pains, and aloneness can overwhelm us, and we, too, can question his presence or his character. We can cry out with King David:

- *"My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak...I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I have heard the slander of many, crying, 'Terror is on every side!'" (Ps. 31).*
- *"Look to the right and see; For there is no one who regards me; There is no escape for me; No one cares for my soul." (Psalm 142).*

Anger, fear, resentment, and bitterness can rise inside us until we become hardened like God's people of Israel:

- *"Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Ex. 14:12).*
- *"Our offenses are ever with us...rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God" (Isa. 59:12-13).*
- *"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" (Hab. 1:2-3)*

Testing is a part of spiritual growth. As persecution comes our way, will today's believers turn their hearts against God?

LEARNING FROM NORTH KOREA

"North Korea remains one of the most oppressive regimes in the world and among the worst violators of human rights. The government tightly controls all political and religious expression and activities, and it punishes those who question the regime. Genuine freedom of religion or belief is non-existent. Individuals secretly engaging in religious activities are subject to arrest, torture, imprisonment, and sometimes execution. Pyongyang's abuses are *"without any parallel in the contemporary world."* Thousands of religious believers and their families are imprisoned in labor camps, including those forcibly repatriated from China."

■ United States
Commission on
Religious Freedom, 2015

A few years ago, I lost two of my best friends just months apart. Both left young families behind. I wrestled with God over his allowing this, and my heart was torn apart. Even as a Christian leader, it took time for me to return to a place of peace. Pain is part of breathing on earth. When it comes, will we blame God? Or will we make it without becoming offended at God? What about if our children and friends suffer? Who will we hold responsible?

These are sobering questions. Jesus, as always, is truthful to his followers:

"At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold..." (Matt. 24:10-12).

Sadly, hearts can grow cold in the dark.

OVERCOMING OUR OFFENSE

How do we avoid becoming cold hearted? How do we fight being offended at God? There are lessons to be learned from the struggles of ancient Israel, and from David's pain. The first might be this:

God—because of His faithful love—is leading us, even when the way seems too hard, and our faith seems too weak.

In Exodus 13:17-18 we read, *"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.' So, God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea."*

Sometimes the Promised Land is only discovered after the harshest desert road. We should remember that we are never out of God's reach. It is his love which secures and leads us. Even after all the wrong choices the Israelites had made, and how far they had wandered away from God, the Lord remains faithful, *"The Lord replied, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'" (Ex. 33:14).*

"Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

■ C.S. Lewis

We must resolve to stand in faith when the times are darkest. We must choose to trust God and not give up. We must remain faithful.

For Andrew, Isaiah 50:10 spoke into the darkest places of his difficulties: *"Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and lean on their God."*

On my desk is a petrified, ancient starfish, given to me by one of my friends before he died. It reminds me that pain tries to turn our hearts to stone. We must resist, and trust God. Each day I

choose to have a soft heart, instead of one of stone. God is looking for people who, through times of testing, will overcome offense and prove their devotion and allegiance to Jesus. We must choose to turn toward him, if only in the smallest degree. We must run toward the Lord. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor. 12:9).

LEANING INTO THE LORD

When it comes to persecution, there are no earthly certainties. It is in these ambiguous moments when need to cling to our faith and turn toward the Lord. The prophet Habakkuk, urged by the Spirit, writes a song of resolution amidst persecution. Even though the people of Judah are about to be marched away into captivity in Babylon, he sings an honest song to the Lord. This is despite the promised chains (spiritual and actual) which lie ahead for those he loves. Can you imagine his melody amid his tears of the coming judgment and pain?

"The only true conqueror who shall be crowned in the end is he who continues until war's trumpet is blown no more.... Christian, wear your shield close to your armor and cry earnestly to God, that by His Spirit you may endure to the end."

■ Alistair Begg

I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. (Hab. 3:16-19).

Habakkuk chooses to stand in the darkness. He locks his doubts away. He resists the urge to blame God for the weakness he feels or the despair swirling around him. He simply declares his faith: "The Sovereign Lord is my strength." This is turning toward the Lord. The persecution remains and will get much worse for the Israelites. But Habakkuk knows he must run toward the Lord.

As Andrew insightfully observes, "What you do in crisis will define your life." We do not know how, when, or if our testing will start or end. Yet like biblical leaders of old, we choose to trust the Lord.

Our answer is to lean into Jesus, and to trust him.

God is still leading us, even when we are on the desert road. He is never the enemy. He is holy and just, and, yes, there are consequences for sin. But God remains present with us and good, even if we cannot see it. We are his kids. His blood (through Christ) is in our veins. He is faithful. *"If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself"* (2 Timothy 2:13). Our job is to seek his heart. More on this in the next session.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) In what ways are temptation and persecution similar?
- 2) What does it look like to "lean into Jesus"?
- 3) Are there practical ways we can prepare our hearts to remain faithful?

ACTION STEPS:

- ✓ Has your heart become wounded toward God? Has offense taken root because of disappointment? Deal with it now by releasing it. Pray, "Lord, I confess the offense toward you in my heart that formed when you didn't come through for me in _____. I choose to release this."
- ✓ Then imagine your own "lockbox." Are you willing to give up your "right" to have answers? Pray, "God, I don't need answers to have a relationship with you. I will no longer insist on getting the answers to my questions."
- ✓ Finally, decide: I choose to lean into Jesus, even when I don't understand.

FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—REMAINING FAITHFUL EVEN IN SUFFERING

David, in the suffering of difficulties, chooses to remain faithful to his God. Look again at his desperate cries—and **then at his conclusions to trust God despite the darkness (in bold)**. Just like Andrew, David has no certainty that he will be saved or delivered. But he knows—like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—that God is worth following no matter the conclusion. It is David's declaration of faith.

- *"My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak...I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I have heard the slander of many, crying, 'Terror is on every side!'" (Ps. 31:10, 12-13).*

"But I trust in you, Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me. Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love." (Ps. 31:14-16)

- *"Look to the right and see; For there is no one who regards me; There is no escape for me; no one cares for my soul."* (Ps. 142:4).

"I cry to you, Lord; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.' Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong

"God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ."

■ John Piper

for me. Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me. (Ps. 142:5-7).

Read the Bible and you know that King David is a sinful man who often struggles against God's will. He often vents his frustration at heaven. David knows his weakness ("*my strength fails,*" "*they are too strong for me*") and can feel overwhelmed ("*I am forgotten,*" "*no one cares,*" "*there is no escape.*")

But David remains a person who continues to seek the heart of God and chooses to trust him. Even in the dark. "*My times are in your hands,*" he cries. You see where I am and what I am suffering. His prayers look beyond the pain: "*Listen to my cry!*" "*Rescue me!*" "*Set me free!*"

David, in faith, leans into the Lord. He remembers God's "unfailing love." He believes there is light in the darkness ahead: "*Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.*"

So do Habakkuk and the Old Testament prophets. They cling to God even when the world is against them.

James writes,

Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course! You've heard, of course, of Job's staying power, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That's because God cares, cares right down to the last detail. (James 5:10-11, The Message)

Paul, urged by the Spirit, writes,

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 2:1-3)

"Whenever the Church has been thoroughly distinct from the world, she has always prospered. During the first three centuries the world hated the Church. The prison, the stake, the heels of the wild horse, these were thought too good for the followers of Christ. When a man became a Christian, he gave up father and mother, house and lands, nay, his own life also....

But then was the age of heroes; that was the time of giants. Never did the Church so much prosper and so truly thrive as when she was baptized in blood. The ship of the Church never sails so gloriously along as when the bloody spray of her martyrs falls upon her deck. We must suffer, and we must die, if we are ever to conquer this world for Christ."

■ Charles Spurgeon