Fear

Chapter 8

Psalm 34:4
I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.

Most of us remember that scene from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie Brown at Lucy's five-cent psychiatric booth, trying to figure out why he feels so low. Lucy rattles off a list of phobias, fear of cats, fear of bridges, fear of responsibility, before landing on "pantophobia", the fear of everything. Charlie Brown shouts, "That's it!" and sends her flying off her stool. It's a funny scene. It's also true.

I'm terrified of moths. I know they're just ugly butterflies. Doesn't matter. I also can't handle birds flying loose indoors. Outdoors isn't much better. On our honeymoon in Barbados, a man put a full-grown parrot on my head for a five-dollar tip. We still have the picture: me, frozen in complete terror, while Lori laughs behind me. Worst five bucks I ever spent.

Horses, same problem. I've been on a horse exactly three times, and each one gave me that same look: big bowling-ball eyes staring deep into my soul, sensing my terror, and seemingly personally offended by my presence. Which, in fairness, they probably were.

Here's the thing about fears like these: I know a moth can't hurt me. I know that parrot wasn't plotting anything. None of that knowledge does a single thing

in the moment. Fear doesn't care how reasonable it is. It shows up the same way for a moth as it does for a mortgage.

Funny enough, spiders don't bother me at all, unlike most people. Considering they spend their whole lives hunting down moths, I've always figured we're on the same team.

Those are the fears that don't make any sense. On our third date, I found out what it feels like when fear makes perfect sense.

Fear Is a Gift

Lori and I were driving through Gatineau Park, headed for a lookout to have a picnic, when a bear cub came flying out of the woods and headbutted the side of my Toyota Tercel before disappearing right back into the trees. My heart was still hammering when I got out to check the damage, a small dent, some bear hair stuck to the paint, and while I was crouched down inspecting it, I felt something move under my foot. A snake. Probably just a garter snake, but I didn't stick around to ask. Pure animal panic took over: I bolted back into the car so fast I barely remember getting the door open, grabbed the steering wheel with both hands like it could protect me from something, and got stung by a bee that had apparently been waiting for exactly that moment. Bear, snake, bee. Real fear, all three times, inside of about ninety seconds, on a third date.

I like to joke that nature was trying to warn me about this woman. Twenty-five-plus years later, I can say the warning didn't take.

Looking back, getting out of the car probably wasn't my best idea. Bear cubs don't usually wander around alone, and their mothers tend to take it personally when you're parked beside one. As for the snake, I still don't know what kind it was, and my body wasn't about to wait around while I found out. My body decided before my brain got a vote.

Every alarm that went off in me that afternoon was doing its job. God built us with a warning system that runs faster than thinking. When it fires, we fight, we run, or we freeze. I ran, straight into a car with a bee in it, but I ran.

Researchers at the University of Iowa spent years studying a woman who, because of damage to one small part of her brain, didn't react to danger with fear

the way the rest of us do. When they took her to an exotic pet store, she kept reaching for the snakes, and the staff had to stop her. Nobody would call that courage. Without the alarm, she walked straight toward the danger. She reached for the snakes. I ran from one. Somewhere between the two of us is the right amount of fear.

Fear also has a way of showing me what I love. Almost every fear that has kept me awake at night has had the same few names attached to it: Lori's, and my kids'. Later in this chapter, I'll tell you about the morning I woke up on the pavement beside my car. What scared me most that day had very little to do with what was going on in my chest.

And if you've ever wondered whether a Christian is even allowed to be afraid, look at Jesus. He didn't face the cross calmly. The book of Hebrews looks back on it this way: "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (Hebrews 5:7). Fervent cries and tears, from the one person who never sinned. So whatever else fear is, it isn't a sin.

The same wiring shows up in a better form, too. If I could do life over again and money didn't matter, I'd be a storm chaser. A big summer thunderstorm has me out on the back porch like a kid: the colour of the clouds, the curtains of rain, the whole sky starting to turn, the feel of all that power in the air. I wrote many of my university papers on severe weather, so I can tell you exactly what's happening up there, and knowing doesn't make it one bit less amazing.

One evening I was standing on the back porch with my father-in-law, watching a storm build, when I noticed his hair was standing straight up. Then I noticed mine was too. That's what can happen right before lightning strikes. We got inside. Fast. Nothing hit, but I've never forgotten that feeling of loving something that much and knowing, in the same second, it could kill me.

That's awe. You feel how small you are, and you can't look away. David must have watched a storm like that, because he wrote a whole psalm about one: "The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'" (Psalm 29:9).

Which leaves me with a question I couldn't shake while writing this chapter. If God designed us with an alarm system, and Jesus Himself felt it go off, why does Scripture keep saying, "Do not fear"?

It says it to shepherds, prophets, soldiers, a young woman in Nazareth, and a boatload of scared fishermen. I don't believe God is contradicting Himself. I think most of us have been hearing that command wrong for a long time, and working out what He actually means by it is what the rest of this chapter is for.

When the Alarm Keeps Ringing

People use fear and anxiety like they're the same word, but they aren't quite the same thing. Fear is your body reacting to something that's happening right now: a bear, a snake, a bee. Anxiety is your body reacting to something that might happen. The alarm goes off the same way, even when there's nothing in the room.

For a few years, my heart had a habit of slipping out of rhythm. It's called AFib, and I'll tell you more about it later in this chapter. Before an ablation finally fixed it, I had my heart shocked back into rhythm eight times over the span of a couple of years. When an episode was actually happening, the fear made sense. My heart was doing something it shouldn't, and I needed a hospital. The harder part was the time in between incidents. Usually it started with one odd beat. Strangely, it almost never came when I was busy or stressed. It came when I was finally sitting still, and after a while, the quiet moments were the ones I stopped trusting. I'd freeze and wait to see if another episode was starting again, and more than once, I wondered if my heart was going to be what killed me. Most of the time, nothing happened at all. My imagination was running the whole show.

Jesus had something to say about that, and it might be the most practical sentence He ever spoke: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34). He never promises tomorrow will be easy. He just tells us to stop carrying it today.

Anxiety only ever wants one thing: certainty. Tell me exactly what's going to happen. Tell me nobody's going to leave. Tell me the money's going to be there. Tell me it's going to be okay.

Faith rarely hands over that guarantee. What it offers instead is Someone to trust while the outcome stays unknown. It's the trust fall from the first chapter: you lean back before you know exactly what happens next. That's a much harder thing to sit with than certainty.

For some people, though, the alarm never shuts off. I need to stop here for a second, because this is where I could accidentally sound more qualified than I am. I'm not a doctor, psychiatrist, or therapist. I've simply lived alongside people I love whose fear didn't disappear when they were reassured, shown the evidence, prayed over, or reminded that what they feared wasn't realistic. Watching them taught me that understanding a fear and being able to turn it off are two separate things.

Some alarms keep sounding long after everyone in the room, including the person hearing it loudest, knows there's no fire. You can know the door is locked, the test result is clear, or the thought makes no logical sense, and still feel the alarm going off inside you.

That kind of fear can't always be prayed, argued, or willed away in the moment. Telling someone in that spot to just trust God more can pile spiritual shame on top of a mind that's already carrying too much. Sometimes faith looks like prayer. Sometimes it looks like sitting with a counsellor, following a treatment plan, taking prescribed medication, or learning to let a frightening thought pass without obeying what it demands. God is no less present in a therapist's office than He is in the prayer you said before you walked in.

Elijah might be the best proof of that in the whole Bible. He had just faced down four hundred and fifty prophets of a false god and watched fire fall from the sky. Then Queen Jezebel, who had already killed the Lord's prophets, sent word that he was next, and Elijah ran for the wilderness. He sat down under a tree and asked God to let him die (1 Kings 19:1–4).

What gets me every time is how God responds to Elijah. Not a lecture. Not "After everything you just saw, how could you doubt Me now?" An angel wakes him, feeds him, and lets him sleep, twice, before God ever says a word. Then a windstorm, an earthquake, and a fire all pass by, and God's voice comes after them, in a quiet whisper (1 Kings 19:5–8, 11–13). Care before correction.

Maybe you've known that kind of crash yourself. You hold everything together through the actual emergency, do what needs doing, and then completely fall apart once the adrenaline finally runs out. That doesn't mean the strength you showed yesterday was fake. It means yesterday took more out of you than anyone standing next to you could see.

Scripture says God expects that of us: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13–14). A stuck alarm isn't proof your faith is broken. God knows exactly how we're built. He's the one who built us.

When Fear Starts Making Decisions

Most of the time, my own alarm goes off for a good reason; something really does deserve my attention. Where I get into trouble is the next step, when fear moves from warning me to making the decision for me.

Israel learned that the hard way. When they reached the edge of the land God had promised them, the spies they sent ahead came back with good news and bad news. The land was everything God had said it would be. It was also full of fortified cities and people so big the spies called them giants. "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes," they said (Numbers 13:33). They weren't wrong about the danger. But fear didn't stop there. Before long, the whole camp was ready to choose a new leader and go back to Egypt (Numbers 14:4). Back to slavery. Fear looked at the promised land and decided chains were safer.

Fear can tell the truth about the danger and lie about the outcome.

I stood at my own version of that border in 2008. No giants, just a policy change I was scared to make.

Every morning before I opened my flooring store, I used to walk the showroom and pray over the business. Never about money specifically. I'd ask God to help me be a good businessman, a strong leader, an honest salesperson, someone who looked after his staff well. I figured that covered the parts I never thought to name directly: payroll, accounts payable, inventory, shipping, all of it.