

NO FEAR

TRUST ME—INSIDE OUT



BY JAN JOHNSON



WHAT WOULD YOU SAY is the most frequent command in the Bible? The following answer by N. T. Wright surprised me.

What instruction, what order, is given, again and again, by God, by angels, by Jesus, by prophets and apostles? What do you think—“Be good”? “Be holy”? Or, negatively, “Don’t sin”? “Don’t be immoral”? No. The most frequent command in the Bible is: “Don’t be afraid.” “Fear not.”¹

This idea jarred me. Yet just a few minutes of study showed me that this command is a repetitive melody in the symphony of Scripture: God said it to Abraham, Moses, Joshua; an angel said these words to Mary and Zechariah; Jesus said them to the mother of a dead child (Jairus’s wife—had she just burst into tears?). Jesus told the disciples not to be afraid of the power they saw in a miraculous catch of fish, of the earth’s terrifying elements, of men who would beat and persecute them, of him when he walked on water, of him when they saw him in radiance talking with Moses and Elijah (who were after all deceased), of him in his postresurrection body (Luke 5:10; Matthew 8:26; 10:26; 14:27; 17:7; 28:10).

Furthermore, this command fits with that major biblical theme: trusting God. The Bible’s subtitle could be: *Holy Bible: Trust Me!* “Don’t be afraid” is “Trust me!” turned inside-out. Both are the bass notes underneath “The Lord *really* is my shepherd. I *really* do have everything I need.” If I’m not afraid, I can lay down

in the green pasture as this sheep did because I have nothing to fear: no dangers, no shortage of food.

“Don’t be afraid” speaks to the anxiety that drives much of our waywardness. When we’re afraid, we often use anger to protect ourselves. In fear, we attempt to manage and control those we love and don’t love, alienating them all and proving we don’t trust God. Out of fear, we deceive others to get our needs met because we don’t trust God to meet our needs.

We may be afraid of: failure but also of success; rejection but also of intimacy; looking unattractive but also of looking too attractive; how others are looking at me or that no one notices me; disappointing authority figures or being that disappointing figure myself. We fear that we somehow won’t have what we need or the relationships we need. We’re afraid that we’ll get into difficult situations and God won’t show up in time. We’re afraid that we’ll be found out—others will discover I’m not the person they think I am. These fears move us to violate our conscience so that to do wrong seems like the only way to survive a troubled marriage or cutthroat workplace.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 66.

Our familiarity with Jesus' behavior numbs the appropriate amazement we should have of his bravery, guts, nerve, daring, and confidence. Consider his constant courage.

Living with death threats. From the moment the Nazarene crowd attempted to push Jesus off the cliff, Jesus lived in constant danger (Matthew 21:46; John 7:1; 11:57). Do we know what this is like? Martin Luther King's biographer describes the wear and tear daily death threats had on him. This brave man whose home was bombed and who repeatedly faced mobs and armed men got so "toward the end of his life he was able to relax only when surrounded by friends in rooms without windows."² I'm sure I could not have been as fearless as Dr. King, which makes Jesus beyond believable.

When Jesus' opponents picked up stones to kill him (much like a lynch mob), he simply talked to them (John 10:31–39). Later in that confrontation and at another time when they moved to stone him, he simply slipped away (John 8:59; 10:39). After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Pharisees renewed their plots to kill him, but instead of hiding, he led the way on his final trip to Jerusalem, warning the terrified disciples that he would be betrayed, ridiculed, beaten, killed, and would rise again (Mark 10:32–34). Instead of sneaking into town, Jesus openly rides into Jerusalem with great fanfare. That's an odd thing for a man whose picture is on the Most Wanted List to do (John 12:10–19).

Then when the temple police came to actually arrest Jesus, he sent them away, telling them it wasn't time yet. *They actually went away*, much to the confusion of the chief priests and Pharisees. Their explanation was: "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46; see also verses 32–34, 45–49).

Being arrested. When the actual arrest took place, the scene was backward. *Jesus confronted the mob* twice by saying, "Who is it you want?" (John 18:4, 7). Nor was he quick to be arrested—what with the crowd falling backward and his pausing to heal someone (John 18:6; Luke 22:51). He could have walked through this

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crowd untouched as he did in Nazareth, but instead he courageously moved forward to his glory (John 7:39).

Being beaten. Jesus continued fearlessly with no cowering or shrinking back. In the face of insults, taunts, and beatings, no complaint or murmur or indignant reproach or even cry of pain is recorded. This humble courage was so different from what we know. The daring heroes of movies are usually arrogant. They yell a lot. You have to get out of their way or be trampled. Not so with Jesus. He was "not defenseless, but undefending, not vanquished, but uncontending, not helpless, but majestic in voluntary self-submission for the highest purpose of love."³

PRINCE OF PEACE

One of Jesus' "Don't be afraid" quotations is prefaced by: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). He said this to the grieving disciples when they were afraid of the future filled with harsh murderous people. "Peace be with you" was his greeting from the resurrected body whether he was making a surprise appearance or sending them forth (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 21, 26).

But Jesus' most remembered words of peace are "Peace, be still" as he calmed the storm. One time when I led a group in meditating on this passage, a young woman insisted she would not have been afraid because, after all, Jesus was in the boat. I'm astounded by her trust, but I think it stems from her knowing the end of the story. I would have been afraid because I've known people who have drowned while boating in *calm* water. I've been tossed overboard from a raft in rapids on a relatively small river and had to be pulled back in by a guide. The disciples' fear is real to me.

As I ponder this passage, I imagine that the disciples lunge forward, slipping and falling as the boat

² Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 171.

³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 862.



shifts under them. They hold onto the sides or anything else they can grab. They no doubt slip and fall and are probably bleeding but they don't notice because they are already wet. The wind sweeps back their hair and whips their soaked clothes around them until they are shivering. Some try to manage the sail while others bail water. Tired and out of breath, fear fills their gut.

Some of them wake up the peacefully sleeping Jesus to say, "Teacher, don't you care that we are dying?" They want to know whether he is concerned for them and maybe whether he is smart and powerful enough to do something. You can easily imagine their fear-filled faces as they ask this. It is most difficult to imagine—but please try—the calm face of Jesus who actually talks *to* the wind and talks *to* the sea—two entities you and I have never had conversation with (Mark 4:35–41). This is Jesus unafraid—at home with nature, at home with caring for his disciples. When you've seen Jesus, you've seen God, and this tells us God can be trusted.

In the exquisite Rembrandt painting *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*,⁴ the eyes are drawn first to the center where bright yellow light shines on the sail as the disciples tug at it and the sea invades the boat. But after taking in all this, the eyes slowly move to another light in the stern of the boat where a few people sit huddled peacefully in the dark, two of them fixing their gazes on the lit face of Jesus.

I've lived too much of my life in the center of the picture tugging at the sails and trying to manage the winds and the waves myself. Perhaps you have battled storms too. Jesus invites us to move to the stern, where he sits in peace, and join the ones gazing at him.

PICTURES OF PEACE

Part of what Jesus routinely did, then, was to help people move from a place of fear to a place of trust—the journey each of us takes every day: Will I trust Jesus today with this task that's too big for me, this rancorous relationship, this physical body that no longer does what it used to do?

As we make this journey of transformation into Christlikeness, we let go of fear and learn to trust Jesus today, even if only for ten minutes at a time. One of the best ways to connect with God and find both courage and peace is to cultivate pictures in the mind



EXPERIMENTS IN CONNECTING WITH GOD

TO ABSORB THIS FEARLESS COURAGE OF GOD

Celebration: Read aloud Psalm 23 and after each main phrase, add this one: "no matter what." Try it a second time, saying "no matter what" with fierce determination. Repeat this until you mean it.

Confession: Admit your fears to God to release their power over you. Try to get at your core issues with these questions: What drives you to feel you have to stretch or change the truth? What drives you to speak harshly?

Meditation: Read Mark 4:35–41 and picture it happening (again, even if you did so above). Write down the feelings you would have had if you had been in this boat. Jot down anything else about Jesus that comes to you.

Meditation: Imagine Jesus interceding for you (Romans 8:34) regarding the fears that rule you this moment. Consider that this is happening this moment. Ask Jesus to pray specifically about this protection according to your needs and fears. If you wish, hear Jesus pray "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.... My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:11, 15).

Meditation: View a copy Rembrandt's painting *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Where are you in this painting? Where do you live most of your life? If you live in the chaos, can you picture yourself moving from the place of chaos (on the left) to the place of peace in front of Jesus (on the right)?

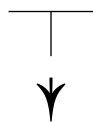
Prayer: Offer the prayer "The Breastplate of St. Patrick" for a week slowly. Taste it and let the images fill you. Consider memorizing at least the part beginning: "Christ before me."

Study: Read Psalm 23 every day for a week and study the pictures presented there with the help of a commentary. Can you see yourself sitting courageously across the table from your enemy (v. 5)? Can you see goodness and mercy becoming a natural result just because you're around (v. 6)? Then memorize it. Finally, pray it as much as you can in your everyday life—in line at stores, while washing your hands, while heating a drink in the microwave.

Worship: Admire God who delights in using power for good, using Psalm 27 or Psalm 91.



⁴ Ludwig Münz and Bob Haak, *Rembrandt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1984), 63.



TO BECOME ONE WHO EXPERIENCES THIS FEARLESS COURAGE OF GOD

Fellowship: Talk to a few friends about fears. What do they think most people are afraid of—especially people who do the kind of work you do all day? Be courageous—ask them if they have any guesses about what you might be afraid of or are willing to admit their own fears. Then take these to God in prayer.

Prayer: Offer the prayer in Ephesians 3:16–21 in which power is highlighted three times. Ask God for power in the same three ways: (1) to strengthen you with power through the Spirit in your inner being; (2) to give you power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ; (3) to help you acknowledge that because God’s power works in us, God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

Prayer: Consider moments when you feel mistreated and where you might pray Psalm 27:3. Begin by picturing yourself with rows of soldiers in a semicircle around you (“though an army besiege me”). They’re all thinking how dumb you are, yet “my heart will not fail” (not imagining the worst, asking Jesus for ideas about what to do, praying for the redemption and restoration of difficult people; praying to keep moving forward, not letting my thoughts become frozen in fear) or “even then I will be confident” (that God is *with me* no matter what, that God *will meet my needs* no matter what).

Prayer: Pray Psalm 27 or 91 but insert the details of your fears and the appropriate people’s names. For example, fill in these blanks of 27:3 (KJV): “Though ____ encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though ____ rise against me, in this will I be confident.” You may want to fill in those blanks not with a person’s name, but with feelings or categories of people: “being overlooked” or “scary surprises” or “arrogant people” or “people who try to thwart me.”

Reflection: Journal about someone who scares you. Why does this person scare you?

Sacrifice: Give up something you know you need (bus fare, your lunch) in order to make way for God to provide in miraculous ways, thus increasing your trust.



Within us each day, Jesus can overpower our fear and chaos and quiet us with peace. We need to have a picture of it firmly planted in our mind and his words “Peace, be still” on our lips.

such as the one above. What happened on the Sea of Galilee was not fantasy. The reality of Jesus and his power overpowered the force of the wind and quieted it. Within us each day, Jesus can overpower our fear and chaos and quiet us with peace. We need to have a picture of it firmly planted in our mind and his words “Peace, be still” on our lips.

While the above picture is powerful, another scene in Jesus’ life fits my everyday circumstances even better. In this down-to-earth picture of Jesus’ serenity, he acts out Psalm 23:5: sitting across the table from his enemies but in complete peace as the anointed one. Even in the presence of his enemies, he was not intimidated by *anyone* (as I am).

The table is situated in the home of the leader of the Pharisees where Jesus is a guest (Luke 14:1–6). It is the Sabbath and “he was being carefully watched.” The word translated “watched” is the word used for “‘sinister espionage.’ Jesus was under scrutiny.”⁵ Noticing the man with crippling swelling in his joints (dropsy), Jesus challenges the watchers: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” His adversaries are silent, so Jesus takes hold of the man, heals him, and sends him away from the controversy.

Jesus’ calmness both puzzles and fascinates me. First, think about how you behave under negative scrutiny. Take yourself back to high school and imagine your geometry teacher standing over you as you take a test, the same teacher who called you “stupid” the day before. Feeling panicky and demoralized, you need courage and serenity to provide you with the necessary clear-headed thinking to answer the test questions. Apparently Jesus had these. We can also assume Jesus possessed a “right heart” (focused, clean, and compassionate) toward these questioners based on how those involved in healing ministry inform us of the necessity of having one’s heart free of resentment and full of trust in God to be a useful pipeline of God’s healing power.⁶ “He did His Work of power and love unrestrained by their evil thoughts.”⁷ Compare this scene with the one in which the disciples could not cast out a demon—which they had done easily before. Had the scribes unnerved them or made them angry (Mark 9:14–18; Luke 9:1–6)?

After healing the man, Jesus questions his opponents further, but they have nothing to say again. Jesus had that pure and weighty presence that leaves opponents speechless. A steely gut alone would not have been free of resentment. An overflow of compassion alone would not have confronted his opponents. Jesus’ knowledge of who he was and what he came for

5 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1956), 194.

6 Agnes Sanford, *Sealed Orders* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972), 200.

7 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 684.



gave him a courageous, compassionate, serene presence in the face of tormentors. They “could watch him all they liked, but the power both of his healings and of his explanations was too strong for them.”⁸

As I meditated on this passage once, I found myself puzzled about why Jesus would go to eat at a Pharisee’s home in the first place. Come on—these difficult people weren’t going to listen to him! He could have found this suffering man elsewhere. This suggestion helped me: “Jesus never refused any man’s invitation of hospitality. To the end He never abandoned hope of men. To hope to change them, or even to appeal to them.... He would never let a chance go. He would not refuse even an enemy’s invitation...we will never make our enemies our friends if we refuse to meet them and to talk with them.”⁹ This possibility put Jesus in a new light for me. It meant that Jesus didn’t go there and simply endure the stress of it all. I tend to do this; *Just get through this*, I tell myself. This does not help. It forces on me a victim identity and throws me into self-pity: *Why do I have to go through this?* Instead of gritty endurance or silent suffering, Jesus came full of hope, looking for the one or two who would eventually believe. Courage grows by replacing cynicism with hope and self-pity with trust. Suddenly I felt brave and I wanted to be a disciple alongside Jesus in the home of our enemies. I could sit there full of hope, not intimidated but content, peaceful, and even a little joyful. Such is life in the kingdom of God.

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8 Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 176.

9 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1956), 194.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. After reading this article, what part did you need to hear most? Why?
2. Which of the fears listed in the fourth paragraph are the most common ones for people in your work or family situation?
3. Which situation from Jesus’ life would have been most scary to you: living with death threats, being arrested, being beaten, sitting with your opponents, other? What do you admire most about Jesus?
4. What does this article lead you to want to pray?
5. Which of the experiments in the sidebars do you see yourself trying out this week?

NOTES

Series of horizontal wavy lines for taking notes.