



Overcoming fear

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I can remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday – the first time I felt really frightened. I was only six years old and had wandered away from the caravan my family and I were staying in. I can still picture myself standing in a forest, all alone, surrounded by trees and not knowing where to turn with every potential route back looking identical. Disorientated and frightened, I started to shout, ‘Mummy, Daddy!’ In no time at all the shouting became frantic, terrified screaming and crying. The fact I’m writing this now, forty-seven years later, tells you though that I wasn’t lost forever or eaten by a bear – which would have been a quite remarkable end to the story as we were in Dorset at the time!

My parents heard my screams. It seems I’d not wandered very far away at all, and so I was very soon back in the safety of the campsite and licking





an ice cream, with the added bonus of a chocolate flake, because I'd been such a brave boy!

Since then, I've experienced fear many times: when I nearly drowned in a local swimming pool; when I was cornered by a vicious dog; when I was about to ski down the black run at the top of Mürren's 9,744 foot Schilthorn; and when I have tried to talk to friends about Jesus Christ. Yes, talking to friends about Jesus engenders fear. When I think about it in the cold light of day, I wonder why I get so fearful. It's not as if I live in a part of the world where trying to proselytise carries the death sentence. Usually I'm not talking to unpredictable strangers with raging tempers. Often I am talking to people I know well – to good friends. These people are not going to punch me on the nose. They're not even likely to give me a verbal tongue-lashing, leaving me publicly humiliated. For sure, some of my friends have strong opinions about 'religion'. They disagree with the things I say about Jesus Christ. But they are still my friends. We debate everything from what the current England football manager should do following another disappointing World Cup, to the way the government is running the country. I join in those debates without feeling any fear whatsoever. But





when the conversation turns to Jesus Christ, my heart rate rises, my palms get sweaty and my mouth goes dry. It's a strange thing, but it seems I'm not alone.

Whenever I ask people what most inhibits them from sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others, the most common answer I hear is 'Fear'. Fear of not knowing what to say. Fear of losing friends. Fear of being ridiculed. Fear of saying the wrong thing and putting people off Christianity. And, if the conversation is at work, the fear of losing a job, or a promotion.

The Bible's answer to fear in evangelism is not complicated. It is to fear God more than people.

The apostle Peter, writing to Christians who were tempted not to speak about Jesus, said:

'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord (1 Pet. 3:14–15).

Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering for their faith. These believers were not suffering for





doing wrong but because they were Christians. If they just kept their heads down and their mouths shut, they'd have enjoyed a quiet life. But Peter wanted to encourage his readers to stand up and speak out for Jesus, even in the face of considerable opposition. In verse 14 Peter quotes Isaiah chapter 8 – another occasion when the people of God had good reason to fear. Back in Isaiah's day, Judah feared the invasion of a mighty army, but, through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said to them:

Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear (Is. 8:12–13).

Fear the Lord, says Isaiah. Fear the Lord more than people, even when you have good reason to fear people. The people threatening Judah in Isaiah's day could have done them very real harm. The people of Judah faced death no less. Peter's readers also faced serious threats from unbelievers. Would they give way to fear and keep quiet about their faith in Jesus Christ? To overcome the fear of others, the answer is always to fear the Lord. Or,





as Peter put it, we are to 'set apart Christ as Lord'.

The Bible often speaks about fearing the Lord, but it can sound like a strange idea to us. As Christians, surely we no longer fear God's judgment on our sins? That is true. We do not fear God's punishment. But there is another way in which believers should retain a right fear of the Lord.

When my twin daughters were toddlers, they used to love playing a game called 'lions'. The game was very straightforward. Susannah and Bethan would run into another room in the house, I would get on all fours, crawl into the room they were in and roar like a lion. They would then run past me into another room, and I would crawl into that room, roaring again like a lion. The girls loved it. They would giggle and scream with delight, and as the game went on, they would whip themselves into an excitable frenzy. 'Louder, Daddy, louder,' they would shout, wanting me to produce a bigger and bigger 'roar' as I entered the room. On one occasion, with the girls' giggling having turned into uncontrollable laughter and their pleas of 'Louder, Daddy, louder' having become ever more desperate, I got up off my hands and knees, stood up as tall as I could and ran into the next room,





letting out the biggest roar I could muster. The girls burst into tears ... and ran towards me, grabbing hold of my legs. Once Mummy had arrived to sort out the 'mess' I'd created and the girls had calmed down, I realised the girls' reaction was a brilliant illustration of what it means to fear the Lord. My girls were genuinely frightened of me as I roared like a lion. They couldn't escape me. I was bigger than them and more powerful than them. But I was also their father. In their fear, they instinctively knew that the safest thing to do was to run to me.

That's what it means to fear the Lord. God is the Almighty Creator of the entire universe. He

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is to be feared. But he is also our strength, our fortress, our stronghold ... and our Father. Running to him brings us to a place of ultimate security. Being with him is the safest place in the universe. So to overcome our fear of others and what they might do to us, in our hearts we

need to fear the Lord, or, as Peter put it, 'set apart Christ as Lord'. That means putting Christ first and above all others. It is being more concerned to please him and live for him than anything or anyone else.





It is running to him for our protection and security.

It is easy for us to lose sight of who really rules the world and the future and every detail of life, especially when unbelievers look impressive and threatening. But it is Christ who is the all-powerful Lord of the universe. Our future is ultimately in his hands, not in the hands of those who oppose us. Christ is the one who controls and protects our eternal destiny. We need to remember how awesome and holy Christ is. In that sense, we need to fear and revere him. He is the Lord we serve. We need to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts. Christ the Lord is also our loving saviour who laid down his life to save us. We should love him and we should fear displeasing Christ more than displeasing those who oppose us. If we fear the Lord, it changes how we see everything and everyone else. Fear of the Lord is the first step to overcoming fear of others. That applies whether it be the fear of not knowing what to say when we're talking to people about Jesus, or the fear of losing friends, or of being ridiculed. It is true whether we fear losing out on a promotion or losing a job through standing up for Christ. If we were in a different culture, it would also be true even if we were in fear of losing our life.

