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Facing Our Fear of the Future

Psalm 23:6

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This past Christmas Jill's parents gave me a couple of books about excellence. One of them, *Mind Gym*, has a chapter, *Fear Lives in the Future*. It begins with these words, "If I asked you to stand on the seat of a chair, or on a table top, would you have a problem doing that? Probably not. But what if that chair or table were twenty stories in the air, and I asked you to perform the same task. What thoughts would you have? How would you feel? Could you do it?"

The task is the same. So what is the difference? For many, it's a four letter word. Fear. Fear is a mental response to a perceived danger or threat. As former golfing great Sam Snead said, *fear is the worst hazard* because it creates tension, doubts, or even panic. Fear can cause us to focus on the negative and to worry about making mistakes.

We all have to learn not to let fear control us in any aspect of life. Stop worrying about making a mistake. Some of us were impacted by people close to us – perhaps family members, teachers, or coaches who spoke to us in negative critical ways rather than in encouraging, constructive ways. When we're young, hearing things like, "*You messed up again! How can you be so stupid?*" can cause us to develop a fear of failure or a fear of doing the wrong thing.

Fear can be like the Wizard of Oz. It is an unseen presence, a booming voice behind a curtain. Fear is as big and powerful as we imagine it to be.

When you resist fear you're only keeping it alive. It's like trying to hold a beach ball under water. The more you fight it, the more pressure you're building up. Don't let fear hunt you. Instead, hunt your own fears. Pull the curtain away. Unmask your fears and face them down. Examine them. Many times when fear starts to hit us, our best chance of overcoming it lies in facing it squarely and examining it rationally. Don't let fear scare you. Fear is often

False Evidence Appearing Real."

Throughout the Book of Psalms we hear expressed in gripping language many of the fears people have, including the fear of the future. Fear of the future is common. It is not unusual to fear the unknown and unseen. However, regardless of the circumstances of our own life, the Bible teaches us that we can be hopeful about the future. Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust. It reflects the belief that the Lord's goodness and mercy or kindness shall follow us - like our shadow does all the days of our life. We believe that God's desire for us is goodness, mercy, and kindness. **The antidote to fear is faith** - faith that

is developing and maturing by spending frequent time in worship, especially in the house of the Lord. For David, that was the temple in Jerusalem, for us it is BBC.

Psalm 23 (New King James Version)

“The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil; for You *are* with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

One of the most meaningful aspects of Psalm 23 is its clear recognition and acknowledgement that even if we walk closely with the Shepherd, there will be dark valleys and enemies. Yet the psalm also tells us if we walk closely with the Shepherd, we will have times of rest and restoration. We will receive guidance and protection along the path of life, even in the most painful and challenging times.

Living in fear is no way to go through life; it is no way to face the present or the future. The question for us is what we will do in our life and in our generation to be people of faith, courage, and hope, rather than fear, doubt, and cynicism. And so Psalm 23 comes to a close by telling us about two women who will follow us around for the rest of our lives – Surely Goodness, Ann Mercy (think about it...).

When we hear this last verse about goodness and mercy following us all the days of our life, we often think of them as following us to bless us. There is also the sense in which we need to be intentionally aware, however, of what are we leaving behind us? Do we leave a trail or wake of goodness and mercy in the lives of other people? In Acts 10:38 Peter says, “*God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*” What a great way to be remembered, “she went about doing good, he went about doing good.” Wouldn’t it be nice if people remembered us that way?

Psalm 23 is very deep, it speaks of an individual's relationship with the Lord, of God's relationship with the people of Israel, and at the same time it also follows a typical year for a sheep from home ranch or ground, up through the green pastures and still waters, through the dark valleys up to the high table grazing land and then back home. In the presence of our shepherd there is freedom from fear and sense of serenity, peace, and contentment that the world cannot give and that the world cannot take away.

The trust expressed in Psalm 23 is not just a matter of our mood. Strength must be found, a way must be walked, harm and evil will threaten. Enemies persist. Heart aches and disappointments threaten to break us and our faith. That is the environment of trust.

Trust is not a rosy, optimistic view of things.

The foundation of trust is a relationship found in worship, prayer, and thanksgiving, it is found in God's story of love and salvation becoming not just something we read about in the Bible but our own life story.

Sometimes the greatest scarcity is not in resources, but in trust or time. Saying the Lord is my Shepherd is a statement of ownership, that I belong to the Lord no in life, in death, and in the future, no matter what happens.

Why are we afraid of the future? There are lots of reasons.

We're afraid of the unknown; afraid we won't have enough money to live life the way we want, to be comfortable and have our needs met; afraid something bad will happen to us or to someone we love; afraid of death, or at least of dying; we're afraid of being alone.

Our view of the future can be influenced by what has happened to us up to the present.

A struggling past or an unstable present may cause us to fear the future.

A successful past and a stable or solid present may make it easier for us to be hopeful about the future.

But you can always learn from your past for a better present.

When you can take a clear look at the present, you can prepare yourself for the future.

One of the things I am happy our senior high students are doing is learning more about themselves in terms of their spiritual gifts, heart, attitude, potential and experiences. The more you understand yourself, your potential and God, the easier it becomes to visualize the future God has for you. We have so many students celebrating graduations from college and high school. To them and to all of us whatever our age: Plan and work to make your dreams a reality.

Believe in yourself and in God, and do your best and the future will be full of possibility rather than fear.

Another critical element for conquering fear is to see the bigger picture. I find it helpful to remember that no matter what I am dealing with there are at least 5 billion people on this planet who really don't care how well or how poorly I do. Developing a larger perspective of life gives us a healthier outlook on life and allows us to put less pressure on ourselves. What is the worst thing that can happen? How does it compare to war or cancer for example?

Dr. Michael Lardon writes,

“Faith is fear’s most formidable opponent. Faith kills fear.

Faith is our strongest ally in the battle against fear.

In my internal medicine training at UCLA, I always dreaded seeing the terminally sick patient who was an atheist; conversely, I was relieved when the dying patient had strong religious and/or spiritual beliefs. There was always a palpable difference in the comfort level between the two individuals. Reinforcing my experience are many studies suggesting that the quality of life is better for terminal patients if they have a strong faith.

“The concept of faith implies complete trust. Faith implies having complete trust in God, and it this core component that has allowed religion to serve mankind in many ways. In ancient times religions provided a framework for human behavior – teaching society morality while helping the human psyche deal with life’s fragile and uncertain nature.”

“The great psychiatrist Carl Jung was once asked on national television in the late 1950’s, in a high-drama moment, if he believed in God. The intellectual community and religious communities anxiously waited to hear what this great genius of their time would say. Dr. Jung told the world that he did not believe in God, and everyone gasped. He continued with an unwavering conviction, paused, and said he *“knew God.”* Faith in God...allows us to feel connected and united to something greater than ourselves.

Faith can be many things, but at its center it is a belief that we belong to something larger than ourselves. This belief system gives us a sense of immortality that allows us to act without fear. Faith allows us to stay calm in the face of adversity. It shields us from reacting to negative emotions and thoughts.”¹

¹ Michael Lardon, M.D., *Finding Your Zone*, (Perigee Books, New York, New York, 2008) pages 131-133.

Our fears about the future can be very personal – what will happen to me, to those I love, how and when might I die, what will happen then? Psalm 23 and many other Bible passages affirm that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

I read a story about a little boy who was desperately ill. His parents recognized that he would probably die soon. They sent for their local pastor. He came that night to visit the child who was semi-conscious. He was unable to speak and apparently never spoke in acknowledgement of the pastor's presence.

The pastor was alone in the child's upstairs room and left late at night. He returned early the next morning and the boy had died. He did his best to console the parents. He prayed with them. He grieved with them. Later the parents asked the pastor if he had any explanation for something that had happened. They told the pastor that in the hours before their son died and at the time of his death, he was holding the ring finger of one hand with his other hand. He died in that position.

It was then the pastor explained what he had said that night in the child's room. The pastor wanted to explain to that child on the edge of eternity not only the importance of being a Christian but in a child's language how to become one. The pastor said he had taken their son's hand and first held his thumb and said, "*The*" – because we're talking about one of kind. Then the pastor held his next finger and said, "*Lord*," the Creator of all. For the next finger, he said, The Lord "*is*" – right here. The next finger: "*My*," a personal relationship and commitment. For the last finger: "*Shepherd*," the one who owns, who died, who cares and loves: Jesus.

While he had not spoken, the child had heard. Before he died, he put his hand around his ring finger to say, "*The Lord is my shepherd.*"

As we finish this series on the 23rd Psalm I want to ask you, Is the Lord your shepherd? Knowing a psalm, going through the Bible, attending worship, giving an offering, none of those things alone means that the Lord is our shepherd or that we are a Christian.

To be a Christian is to choose Jesus as Shepherd and Savior.

To be a Christian is a deliberate decision to become one of God's own sheep, to have a warm, intimate, personal relationship with the Lord.

Have you been facing fear, have you been worrying about having enough to resources to get by? Have you found yourself longing to over to the other side of the fence and belong to the Good Shepherd where the pastures are green. In just a moment, we're going to pray. I'd like to suggest that if you claim the Lord as your shepherd – whether for many years now or maybe today for the first time, that as we pray, you take your hand and hold the ring finger of your other hand. By that you say, for you and God alone to see, that you are making a declaration of dependence. You are admitting to God's ownership, and you have the confidence of a personal relationship with God through Jesus.

Don't do it lightly, we're talking about a life-changing and eternity-lasting decision, not something to be done casually but decisively in faith.

Let's pray: Our Shepherd, would you look at our hands? Lord would you listen to our hearts? For some of us, it is a choice that was made many decades ago – a confession of sin, a commitment to you, and acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Shepherd. For others of us, it is a moment of decision impacting now and forever. At this moment we commit our lives to you.

With our hearts and our hands, we say, *"The Lord is my Shepherd."*

Almighty God, take away all our fears, help us to pull the curtain back on them and face them rationally, calmly, and directly, knowing that you are with us, now and forever; that faith is always stronger than fear; and that your perfect love casts out fear. Amen.

Blessing –

In John 16:33 Jesus says these words to his disciples who are fearful of their future in the world, **"These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."** Be of good cheer and go now in peace and continue to follow the Shepherd.

A Few Quotes about the Future

"When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened." John M.

Richardson, Jr.

"The best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time."

Abraham Lincoln

"I am not afraid of tomorrow, for I have seen yesterday and I love today."

William Allen White

"My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there"

Charles F. Kettering