

THE BLIGHT OF FEAR

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 23, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Some time ago the famous Bertrand Russell wrote a paragraph that I would like to read to you in the beginning of our study. He began, "If I were about to be executed and were allowed twenty minutes in which to make a farewell address, what should I say? It would be necessary to be brief and simple, and I think I should concentrate upon one issue, namely, the importance of eliminating fear. I do not imagine that mankind can be made perfect. Whatever can be done, some defects will survive. A great many of the defects from which adults suffer are due to preventable mistakes in their education, and the most important of these mistakes is the inculcation of fear ... I do not believe that any good thing is to be obtained through fear."

Bertrand Russell, as you know, is a rugged individualist. We can even go further and say that he is a radical. He is a severe critic of almost everything that most of us believe and hold dear. He is an individualist in morals, in religious philosophy, and in many other things. I am convinced that he has gone too far when he says, "I do not believe that any good thing is to be obtained through fear." There are some values in fear. For example, parents talk with their children about the dangers of being crushed beneath the wheels of a passing truck. They create a fear if such, and so the child, when he comes to the edge of the street, holds back. A deep fear of that very real danger may save his life.

Or, a young man sees some who have failed to prepare themselves to earn a living and who are destitute even before old age comes. Out of fear the young man decides that he will go to school and get an education, lest he also find himself destitute as the years go by. That fear keeps him from frittering away those early, precious years when he could prepare himself educationally and in certain skills to earn a living. Or a man realizing the dangers of certain diseases, and fearing lest he himself might become a victim of some of these diseases, takes special precaution to protect his health. Out of his fear he does that which will protect his health.

Imaginary Fears

I disagree with Mr. Russell; there are some values in fear. But I am inclined to agree that very often fear does not serve a good purpose, but rather is a burden to mankind. Sometimes it can blight a man's life. There are basically two things that are wrong with this burdening, blighting kind of fear. One is that man often fears that which he only imagines. He fears that which is not real, but only imaginary.

I would like to turn back to the seventh chapter of the book of judges in the Old Testament. There is a very interesting story involving the fear of something that did not exist but which caused the downfall of an army of men. In the seventh chapter of judges we are reading the story of one of God's most illustrious judges, a man by the name of Gideon. Gideon was young and inexperienced when God brought him to this place of prominence and power. Soon after he became the leader of God's people there was the crisis of facing a great enemy.

The Midianites and the Amalekites had combined and had amassed a great army. They were encamped in a certain valley and they were so numerous as to indicate that they would be easily victorious over God's people. Especially is that true when you remember that God's people had divided their army of 32,000 and had come out with only 10,000 who were really valiant and fearless. Then God had said, "But ten thousand is too many; cut your army still more." After an unusual selective process, finally only three hundred emerged. Gideon was in command of three hundred men. Then God told him, "Gideon, you go near to the outskirts of the camp of the enemy and listen."

It is there that I want to begin to read the rest of the story. "And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like locusts for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand which is upon the sea-shore for multitude. And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man telling a dream unto his fellow; and he said, "Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came unto the tent, and smote it so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat. And his fellow answered and said ? This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: into his hand God hath delivered Midian, and all the host." You can feel the fear in the heart of the man who dreamed, and in the heart of his companion to whom he revealed his dream.

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"And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped; and he returned into the camp of Israel and said, Arise; for Jehovah hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put into the hands of all of them trumpets, and empty pitchers, with torches within the pitchers. And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and behold, when I come to the outer most part of the camp, it shall be that, as I do, so shall ye do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and

say, For Jehovah and for Gideon. So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outermost part of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch, when they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake in pieces the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the torches in their left hand, and the trumpets in their right hands wherewith to blow; and they cried, The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon.” Then here are the results. “And they stood every man in his place round about the camp; and all the host ran; and they shouted, and put them to flight.” (Judges 7:12-21).

That is a simple and ancient story. Three hundred men with lighted torches and blaring trumpets in the middle of the night put to flight an army of people many times their own number. The only explanation is that when these men who were sleeping waked in the middle of the night and suddenly heard this tremendous sound and saw these many lights they fled in fear. It was God’s strategy for defeating a huge enemy.

I said a moment ago that many of man’s fears are imaginary, illusory. That is true of the many superstitions that have weighed heavily upon man through all past centuries. It is utterly ridiculous to be afraid of Friday the 13th, yet many a man is. The number thirteen has no power to harm, yet few hotels in America have a thirteenth floor. Our postal authorities also avoid a thirteenth zone. The crossing of the street by a black cat in front of your car means nothing, yet many are afraid of a black cat. There are no haunted houses, yet countless people have had superstitious fear of such. Because of these superstitions they have sometimes altered their behavior radically.

In a deeper sense, much of the religion of the world has been fraught with unnecessary, ungrounded fear. Most of the pagan religions, the primitive religions particularly, have made much of fear. There are the fetishes and the taboos in ancient religion of all kinds. Even in some modern religions there are evidences of meaningless fears. Fears of many, many kinds fasten themselves upon man. Many of these fears are groundless, because there is no basis in fact behind them.

#### The Antidote

The antidote for all of these imaginary fears is a sentence that our Lord spoke when he was here on earth. It is John 8:32: “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” None of us wear around our necks the little asafetida bags that once were worn by so many. Medical science has shown us that they did no good. It was all in the mind. In similar fashion, the discoveries of thoughtful men have blasted many other things that once were considered truth. “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,” applies in the realm of material things, and in the realm of religion as well. As men come to know this book which I hold in my hand, the Bible, there are many burdensome fears that will evaporate like dew in the morning sunshine,

#### Fear and Failure

In the second place, man often fails because of his fears. In the Old Testament there is a fine example of this. In the book of Numbers we read the story of God’s selected people, the Israelites, as they came out of Egyptian bondage and went into the wilderness. It was God’s intention after a brief interval to lead them into the land of Canaan. Toward that end he called Moses to send spies into the promised land that they might know where best to enter and how best to proceed. The spies came back after forty days with this report. “We came unto the land whither thou sentest us; and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it. Howbeit, the people that dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified, and very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there.”

Then the twelve men who had made the trip differed in their advice as to what to do. “Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. But the men that went up with him said, We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we ... And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night.” They wept because of their fears that they could not take the land. “And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, or would that we had died in this wilderness.” When Joshua and Caleb urged them further to have faith and to go on to conquer, the story ends by saying that “all the congregation bade stone them with stones.” (Numbers 13:27-28, 30-31; 14:1-2, 10).

We look back from the vantage point of all these centuries and see these people who had been freed from the yoke of Egyptian bondage, had been led through the Red Sea and had been fed with manna. It seems obvious to us that God who created the world would be able to defeat the few relatively weak enemies in the land of Canaan. But somehow Israel became afraid and that fear caused them to be turned back to wander in the wilderness.

#### Moses Afraid

A few pages earlier in the Old Testament is the story of Moses. God almost lost Moses as his great leader, through fear. There on the back side of the wilderness, when God called him to come and lead his people, Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Ex. 3:11). Then came a second excuse, “Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me,

what is his name? what shall I say unto them?" (Ex. 3:13). A little later he said, "But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say, Jehovah hath not appeared unto thee." (Ex. 4:1). Finally Moses said, "Oh, Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, not since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." (Ex. 4: 10). All these objections grew out of Moses timidity and fear. Only when God overpowered the objections did Moses lead the people.

On our day there are many who fail because of their fears. There is many a person who would have been a fine wife and mother, but she feared that she could not, and she did not begin. She was afraid that maybe she would not make the right choice of a mate, and so out of that fear held back, never to enter marriage. There are those who could have been fine successes in business, but they were afraid to try, afraid to start. There are those who could have gotten an education, but when they finished high school, college loomed too large and there were so many unknowns that they did not try.

More tragically, there are those in church who could have taken a meaningful part in the Lord's work, but through timidity and fear they never quite tried. There are whole congregations who could do infinitely more than they are doing, but through fear they remain content with limited effort. Often because of fear the church does not grow, either at home or abroad.

### The Antidote

As there was an antidote to the fear of groundless, non-existent things, so there is also an antidote in God's word for the fear of the real. In the Philippian letter Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:13). Everything God wants done we can do if we will try.

I am sure that fear will play a part in each of our lives as long as we live. That is not entirely bad. But let us be sure that the things that we are afraid of are things worthy of fear. Let us not let imaginary things blight our lives. Let us not let little, trivial things burden us down. Let us shake off the shackles of such fear, as we know the truth that will make us free. Then, when we are tempted to do nothing, or to do little, because we are afraid of our own weaknesses, let us balance our fears with a dynamic, radiant faith in our God. "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." Each one of us, believing God will build us up and help us, can do more than we would otherwise do.

There are so many who are borne down by fear. Nervous frustration leads to anguish and eventual breakdown. Oh, what a wonderful thing it is to have a God in whom we can trust, a Savior whom we can follow. As we close these brief minutes of study on this ever present problem of fear, I know of nothing quite so wonderful to say as, "Give yourself to the Lord, do the best that is in you with all your might, and then you have no reason to fear." Would you come now and give yourself to Christ? Lay all your burdens on him and he will carry you through. Life will be happier and someday it will end in eternal bliss in heaven. If you are not a Christian, come to Christ, repent of your sins, obey his commands, now.