

When life becomes a fugue of fear and a fog of despair and no one gets out of life unfazed and undazed, this book will help you discover how your fears can free you to flee, not from God but to God.

—LEONARD SWEET, best-selling author, professor, and chief contributor to sermons.com

While our circumstances may differ, fear is one of the most common experiences we share in this life. Filled with encouraging testimonies and scriptural references, *Fear Not* carefully and confidently guides us to a place where fear is recognized, understood, and replaced with a courage that can only come from the Lord.

—JO ANNE LYON, General Superintendent, The Wesleyan Church

If you've ever been afraid of what stands in the midst of your journey or overcome with a fear that seems impossible to overcome, this is the guide for you. In *Fear Not*, Ed Love graciously guides us toward an intimacy with God that overcomes the fear and intimidation we so often feel. Along that path he gently nudges us to a place where we find comfort, peace, and the realization that the Lord was with us the entire time.

—CHARLES ARN, professor of outreach and ministry at Wesley Seminary; author of *Side Door*

Those who fully engage in kingdom living are not necessarily more intelligent or gifted—but they take seriously the biblical invitation to “be strong and courageous.” Ed Love guides us into lifting the lid our fears create and courageously experiencing the adventurous life God has for us.

—WAYNE SCHMIDT, vice president, Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University

Decisions motivated by fear drive us into the ditch, but we all have our fears. They are often subtle, unnoticeable fears, and we have trouble articulating them. Ed Love uses insightful Scriptures and relevant stories in *Fear Not* to help us begin to receive our Savior's powerful courage and take the wheel back from the fears that drive us.

—DAVID DRURY, chief of staff, The Wesleyan Church; author or coauthor of several books, including *Being Dad*, *SoulShift*, and *Ageless Faith* (all WPH)

God is asking all of us if we truly trust him. My friend, Ed Love zeroes-in on the issue that courage may well be God's favorite attribute. Success in life often causes individuals to look to themselves for all of the answers. Mr. and Mrs. Fix-It exist on every corner of life. Until life gets tough, that is. As you read this book, consider how God wants to use the storms or delays of today to prepare you for greater things he wants you to accomplish tomorrow.

—JIM DUNN, executive director, Church Multiplication and Discipleship Division, The Wesleyan Church

Ed Love lives the message of the book because he passionately follows the lead of the one he writes about. “Courage might just be God’s favorite virtue” is something that Ed knows by experience through defying the obvious odds for failure and trusting the One who defies the one who is against us—the infernal One who inspires fear. Thanks, Ed for reminding us that we can trust the One who faithfully leads us.

—DENNIS JACKSON, executive director, Global Partners, The Wesleyan Church

If you’ve ever been afraid, this is the book for you. In *Fear Not*, Ed Love brings to light a subject that most of us struggle with every day. Fear isn’t always wrapped up in the big things, it can quietly and quickly leak into our lives, affecting our decisions, attitudes, and interactions. Offering ideas and guidance, Love leads us to a place of confidence that rises above the crippling fear we’ve experienced and into the life that God intended us to live.

—JEREMY SUMMERS, coauthor of *Awakening Grace*; and director of Spiritual Formation, The Wesleyan Church

There’s a big difference between passing along something you learned from someone else and sharing life lessons you’ve lived from your heart. My friend Ed Love is a good pastor, church planter, thinker, and writer. Each of these chapters start with his own stories of deeply personal life experiences. Then he connects them to the timeless promises of God’s Word with great biblical scholarship and sums up each section up with pithy, practical principles that are easy to remember and apply to our own situations. Ed’s sharing what he’s lived . . . and we all benefit! It’s been said that there are 365 “fear not” passages in Scripture . . . start with the ones Ed writes so well about and keep experiencing God’s peace every day of your year!

—TIM ROEHL, director of training and development, OMS;
author, *TransforMissional Coaching*

Ed’s way of writing and explaining stories is straightforward, practical, and packed with thought-provoking nuggets you can use for a lifetime. This book is a must-read!

—TROY A. EVANS, pastor of The EDGE Urban Fellowship;
author of *The Edge of Redemption* (WPH)

fear not

Finding Courage to Be Who God Wants You to Be

Ed Love



wphonline.com

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To my greatest support in life and ministry and the one who
models the way of courage—my wife, Emily Love

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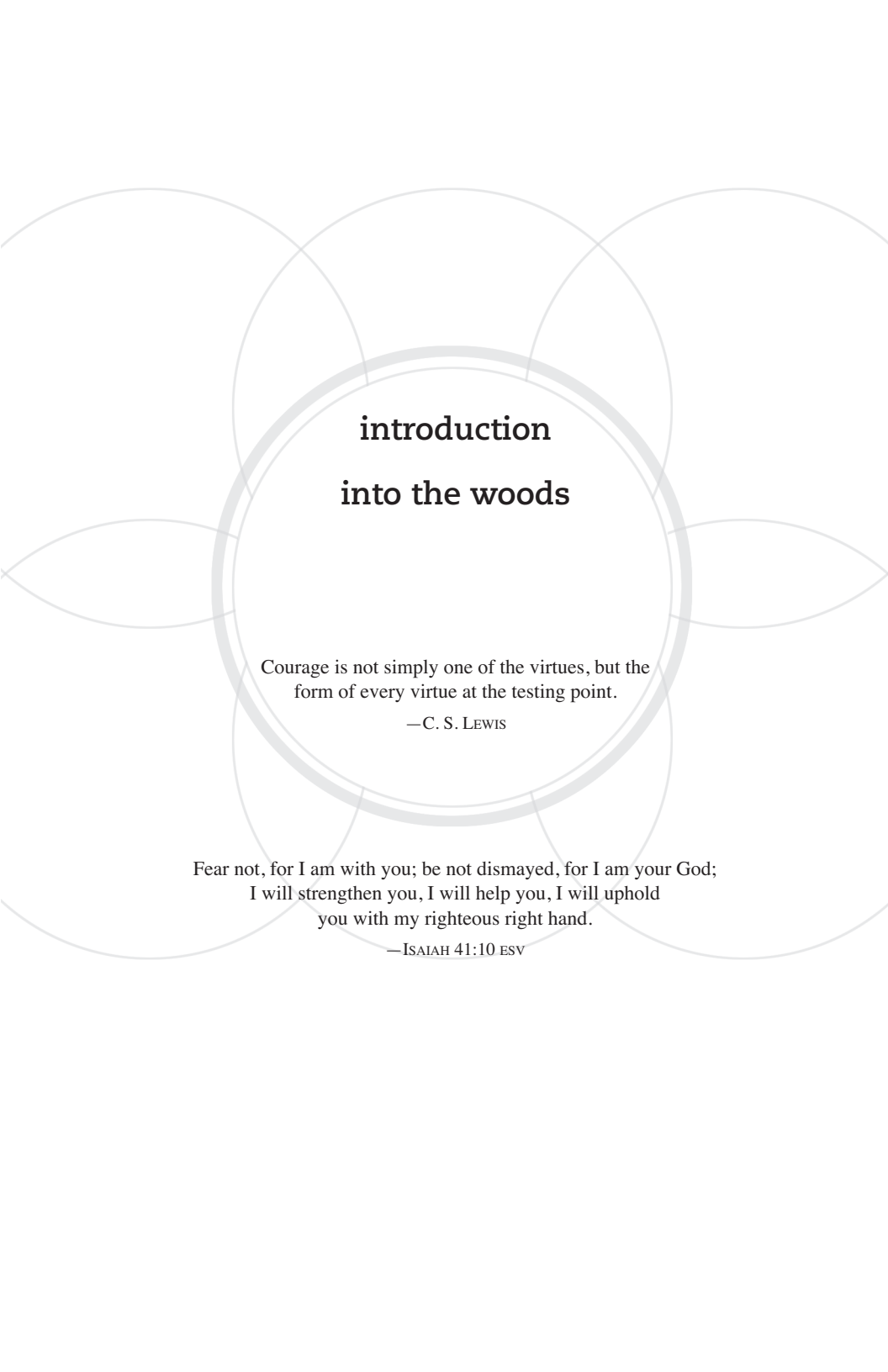
Sermon notes and a group leader's guide are available for download at www.wphresources.com/fearnot.

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I want to thank my wife, my partner, Emily, for having the grace to give me up for the many hours and hours of laboring again and again over the manuscript of the book you now hold in your hand. Her never-ending patience and understanding is an inspiration to me. I also want to thank my children, Jennah, Josiah, and Micah, for teaching me how to live with audacious courage and confidence in God's epic adventure.

My special thanks to Andy Merritt for his hard work, feedback, input, and support through the entire process.

Finally, I offer my thanks to the people who have allowed me to take them on a journey discovering the courage to be all who God has called them to be. In spite of the many mistakes I have often made in leading them into the future, the people I pastor at The Well have proven again and again that we can be confident in God's promises. They have offered me the opportunity to rediscover that God is still in the business of transforming lives from the inside out.



introduction
into the woods

Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the
form of every virtue at the testing point.

—C. S. LEWIS

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold
you with my righteous right hand.

—ISAIAH 41:10 ESV

“Dad, no, no, no! Don’t go into the woods! Don’t go into the woods!”

My son, Josiah, screamed at the top of his lungs. His eyes brimmed with tears of fear. I quickly turned the ATV and headed back into the open meadow. Curious as to why the woods so frightened Josiah, I cut the motor and inquired. “Why don’t you want to go into the woods? You know that’s where all the fun trails are, right?”

Josiah exclaimed, “Dad, I don’t want to get stuck in the water again. I know you’ll get stuck! I know you’ll get stuck!”

Ah. The root of his fear suddenly became clear to me.

A few months earlier, in the middle of a Michigan winter, Josiah and I had an ATV adventure which ended up marking him deeper than what I could have imagined. Toward the back of our property lie several swampy areas, which are usually frozen solid during the winter months.

On one afternoon thrill ride, I decided to take a risk and drive across the iced-over swamp. Besides a few snaps, crackles, and pops, I arrived on the other side without any problems. The shock came during the second pass.

As I bolted over the frozen water, the ice suddenly began to give way. I tried to maneuver out of it, but the back of the ATV began to sink like the Titanic. As the ice broke beneath us, Josiah tumbled off the back of the vehicle into the subzero water. I quickly leaped into the swamp, grabbed my boy, and with all my might dragged him to safety.

Josiah was pretty shook up in the moment, but once he made it back into the warmth of the house, dried off, and drank some hot chocolate, he calmed down and life went on. He seemingly went back to his normal childhood routines, and I assumed Josiah would

forget about his experience in the backwoods. Unbeknownst to me his fears were far from gone; rather they had gone into hibernation. They were hiding just beneath the surface, waiting for another ride into the woods to rouse them from their slumber.

Now, as we attempted to cross the threshold of the woods again, it became apparent that Josiah wasn't ready to risk riding through the swampy territory. For Josiah, reentering the woods was a reminder of something negative and painful in his past.

Josiah's fear was blocking him from future opportunities.

After sensing Josiah's fright and seeing his tears, I didn't want to force him into doing something he didn't want to do. I took him around the field's edge a time or two and then dropped him off at the house.

Later in the evening, as I tucked Josiah into bed, I mentioned his deep fear of the woods. I whispered, "Josiah, you don't have to worry about going back into the woods. There isn't any ice now, and I promise to never get you stuck again. Don't you trust me?"

It took Josiah a few moments to process, but he eventually responded, "Dad, do you promise to never get me stuck in the water again?"

"Of course," I affirmed.

Josiah replied, "OK, Dad, I trust you. We can go into the woods again."

I'm not usually very emotional, but as I heard my son say those three simple words, "I trust you," my heart leaped with joy. With an uncontrollable smile and happy tears slipping down my cheeks, I said, "Josiah, I love how courageous you are. I am so proud of you."

In that quiet father-and-son moment, I began to realize that overcoming our greatest fear isn't really about mustering up the energy to go through the experience again—it's about learning to trust again.

danger zone

Life is full of fears, isn't it?

It seems as though at every turn, every stage of life, new fears try to wrap their claws around our hearts and hold us back from fulfilling our greatest potential. Sometimes our inner fears remain in hibernation mode for years. They function like a parasite—continually draining our drive and vision for God's preferred future to unfold in our lives.

There are as many cliché and shallow suggestions for overcoming fears as there are fears themselves. Repeating the mantra, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can" doesn't get us very far. Neither does "suck it up," "buckle down," and "just persevere." Fear is too strong a foe to be vanquished so easily. There's more to it.

Conquering any internal fear will always involve a sense of trust—ultimately a trust in our heavenly Father and his plan for our lives. God's people have always been called to face their fears, but becoming a fearless follower of God is not easy. Let's be honest, when it comes to facing our fears, our natural tendency is to run and hide.

We are conditioned from a very early age to avoid pain and uneasiness, not run toward it. Yet playing life safe doesn't seem to be God's primary mode of operation. In the biblical narrative, God consistently challenged his servants to step out of comfortable and known circumstances in faith and to enter realms fraught with danger.

In a letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul shared his rather painful life experiences with his church family. Here's a glimpse of Paul's highlight reel:

I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after

into the woods

time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather. And that's not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:25–28 MSG)

Does Paul's life and ministry experience sound safe and peaceful? Not so much. Was Paul doing exactly what God created and called him to do? Without a doubt.

Apparently, the most dangerous place to be is right in the center of God's will.

wanting more

When I first believed in God's redemptive work through Jesus, I didn't fully realize what I was being invited into. I thought that if Jesus was saving me, then my life ought to feel easier and run smoother.

I quickly began to feel let down. Not only did it seem like Jesus was not giving me what I wanted, but also that life with Jesus

seemed just plain hard. Besides an eternity in heaven, I genuinely wondered if there was any advantage to the Jesus deal.

Consequently, my wondering eventually led to wandering. For several years, I ran from God and dipped into a dark and sinful world. My life without God appeared to be fun and free, but something in my soul was left wanting. My life felt like a black hole, sucking in every possible pleasure and leaving nothing but an empty void in my soul in return.

Just before I left for college, I decided enough was enough. I was ready for a soul shift. After attending a spiritual renewal retreat, I was certain I needed God and God wanted me. I was finally ready to give my life to Christ. And by giving my life to Christ, I didn't just mean in a spiritual sense, but in a physical sense, too. I was ready to go all in.

Like many teens who grow up in a church environment, I had made multiple commitments to God. However, this time was different. I was finally willing to embrace the fact that life doesn't center on me and my purposes. Rather, everything in my life ought to center on God and his purposes.

Something was clicking in my heart and soul. I couldn't get this new perspective out of my mind. If everything centered on God, then I had to ask myself: What does God want from me? And how might God use me in his purposes? I had never thought to ask those types of questions before. My prayers more typically focused on things I wanted from God, instead of on what God wanted.

As I continued to explore this seemingly radical way of thinking, I had to acknowledge something: If I truly committed to living for God and his purposes, then I must do what God wants me to do, not just what I want to do.

No longer would it be “My will be done”—it would be “Thy will be done.”

I knew the biblical storyline well enough to know that God likes to ask his followers to do some pretty crazy things.

God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22). God asked Moses to deliver his people from the bondage of the Egyptian pharaoh (Ex. 3). God told Gideon to cut the size of his army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred in order to win a battle (Judg. 7). God asked the Israelites to march around Jericho seven times in order to acquire the city (Josh. 6). God told Hosea to take a prostitute as his wife (Hos. 1). Jesus asked Peter to walk on water (Matt. 14). And God asked his one and only Son, Jesus, to sacrifice his life on a cross in order to absorb the sins of the world. Talk about crazy!

And to think, with every big ask from God, each person was required to overcome some type of inner fear. For Abraham it was the fear of being labeled a child murderer. For Moses it was the fear of living in a foreign land. For Gideon it was the fear of being annihilated. For the Israelites it was the fear of looking like fools. For Hosea it was the fear of being shunned by his contemporaries. For Peter it was the fear of not being capable. And for Jesus it was the fear of death.

These types of crazy faith stories made me curious. Would God ask me to do something crazy? Would God ask me to do something I wasn't naturally good at? Would God ask me to do something I would have chalked up as a life failure? Would I be forced to face my deepest fears?

why not you?

I can recall many dreadful moments throughout my grade-school experience. One that stands out in my memory above the others in terms of stomach-churning prepubescent anxiety was when teams were chosen during recess.

Typically, all the students who wanted to play in a game, like kickball, lined up and then the team captains began sizing up everyone and selecting their players. The strongest and fastest players were always chosen first, and the weaker, slower players, last. The further down the line of choice you were, the larger the hit to your self-esteem. Being picked last felt less like an objective assessment of athletic abilities and more like a soul-crushing life prophesy.

My physical development always seemed to lag behind that of my peers. To make matters worse, I wore size 11 shoes in the fourth grade, so I was always a little uncoordinated and not usually one of the first-round draft picks, if you know what I'm saying.

Not only in sports, but in every area of my life, I seemed to be pretty much average. Eventually I accepted the fact that I was just the average Joe.

When I recommitted my life to Christ, I was shocked to discover that God doesn't function like those kickball team captains. God doesn't size up his children and select the strongest first. In a bizarre way, God often uses the weak links—the underdogs—for his kingdom work.

I can still remember the moments after I sensed the Lord calling me to dedicate my life to building up his church. In the midst of a moonlit stroll down a nature trail, I told God, "I'm ready to serve you. I'll do whatever you ask of me." Instantly, God spoke to the

deepest part of my heart and said, “Ed, I want you to build my church.”

Rather than a feeling of excitement, my gut reaction was to tell God why he had chosen the wrong guy. “Hold on God,” I said. “I know I told you I was willing to do whatever you wanted, but I didn’t really mean *whatever*. I’m not a preacher, pastor, or leader. You know me. I’m the shy guy. I’m the introvert. I hate public speaking. I’m not very smart. I’m not good at anything. And I’m certainly not a person of influence. You’ve got the wrong guy. I’ll end up messing up your church. Seriously, God, I’m pretty sure I can’t do what you’re asking.”

I waited a few moments for some sort of response. Maybe I was hoping God would make a case for me. But he didn’t. He was silent.

That first response when I sensed God nudging me to dedicate my life to building up his church was to ask, “Who am I, God?” I didn’t seem to have any great natural leadership abilities, and I couldn’t picture how the Lord might be able to use me in his purposes.

This outlandish ask from God didn’t make sense at all, at least not from a human perspective. For weeks, I wrestled with self-doubt and fear. I genuinely wondered if God had his wires crossed. I just did not fit the mold of a church leader. Never in a thousand years could I envision myself leading God’s people, and I knew my friends and family would agree!

Nevertheless, I finally submitted to my heavenly Father. In a quiet moment I prayed, “I really don’t know how your plans are going to come together, but I will trust you.” Immediately, I felt a peace I had never experienced before in my life. I knew I was on the right track. But I also started to wonder how I was going to overcome some of my greatest fears.

run of the mill

One day as I was exploring the Scriptures, I came across an interesting story in Acts 4. Peter and John were preaching and were busted for inciting civil disruption. Apparently, some leaders within the Jewish religion didn't like discovering that people were finding Peter and John's message attractive and becoming Jesus followers.

After their arrest, Peter and John were required to go before the Jewish court of law. In the middle of their trial, Peter rose up, filled with the Holy Spirit, and shared the salvation message. Peter and John's courage astonished the leaders. They realized Peter and John were unschooled, ordinary men, and they also noted that Peter and John had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

This little story grabbed my attention in a big way. God used two ordinary men to do something extraordinary. Peter and John would not have been selected in the first-round draft pick. They were just the average Joes. Then it dawned on me. Two of the most influential disciples of Jesus were run of the mill! This made me wonder even more about my life. If Peter and John were considered average and ordinary, then maybe God could use me after all.

As I saw God's pattern of using those who most people wouldn't think to use, I wanted nothing more than to demonstrate great courage like Peter and John. What I didn't realize yet was where there is great courage, there is also another force at work—a discouraging one.

John 10:10 makes it clear; we have an Enemy who exists to steal, kill, and destroy our lives. After committing to follow God, it doesn't take long to realize one of the Evil One's primary tools is to freeze us with fear. If the Evil One can cause us to lock up, run away, or continue living mediocre and safe lives, then he has done his job.

into the woods

If fear is the Evil One's tool, then it makes perfect sense for faith to be God's tool. Second Timothy 1:7 says, "For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (YLT).

God has given his faithful followers access to catalytic courage!

God's favorite virtue

Courage is admirable, isn't it? We love to tell stories of people who embraced their fears and stepped into the realm of courage.

Do you remember the story of Chesley Sullenberger? The plane he was flying was disabled shortly after takeoff when it struck a flock of Canada geese. He then successfully executed an emergency landing in the Hudson River, saving all 155 passengers and crew who were onboard that day. It was amazing.

Or, do you remember the story of the Chilean miners who were trapped underground for sixty-nine days? It was incredible. All of the miners were rescued.

Or, do you remember the story of Aaron Ralston? He survived a canyoneering accident where a boulder fell onto his hand. After 127 hours, Aaron finally dislodged himself by amputating his own forearm with a dull multi-tool. Unbelievable!

You see, we love to capture and share stories of courage. And so does God.

God's courage is more than human ingenuity or initiative. God's courage gives us the ability to conquer fear and, in a strange twist of irony, allows us to fulfill our greatest potential in life.

Courage just might be God's favorite virtue. God loves to see his people abandon their self-interests, rise up in courage, and trust

in his plan. Wouldn't it be remarkable if the world equated being Christian with being courageous?

I'll be the first to admit, I struggle with the pursuit of courage. In my human nature, I prefer to be comfortable. I don't enjoy taking risks which invoke emotional, psychological, or physical pain. I would rather take life easy and do the bare minimum. I would rather not lead my family in the ways of Jesus. I would rather not be in front of people communicating God's redemptive story. I would rather not plant new churches. I would rather not start a new ministry. I would rather not continue to build up Christ's church.

Why? Because I am forced to face my greatest fears!

Even though courage isn't my default disposition, I am always amazed by the inner fulfillment which comes from conquering my fears. This sense of fulfillment is worth every moment of tension and turmoil.

a summoning

Are you beginning to see the connection between your spiritual growth and conquering those fears that hold you back from fulfilling your greatest potential?

Maybe the Evil One has frozen you with fear. Maybe you have pictures of the past when you took great risks for God, but have no dreams of the future. Maybe you are stuck in your spiritual growth. Maybe you feel like there must be more to this Christian life. Maybe you need to learn how to trust again. If you have any of those feelings, then you have the right book in your hands.

Perhaps it's time to look within and ask yourself, "What inner fears are holding me back from fulfilling my greatest potential?"

Throughout this book, we will explore many of the New Testament stories where God or his messengers commanded an individual to “Fear not!” Each chapter will expose a different fear common to humanity. At the end of the journey, you will have a clearer understanding as to how you can overcome your deepest fears and allow God to accomplish his great purposes through your life.

As we journey together, I’ll be honest with you about my fears, and I hope you’ll be honest with yourself as well. Perhaps, with God’s help, we can learn how to conquer our fears, trust God more, and fulfill our greatest potential.



1

**when God's ideas
seem
impossible**

Expect great things from God;
attempt great things for God.

—WILLIAM CAREY

The Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold
of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?

—PSALM 27:1

One moment I'll never forget was when a local youth pastor called me and asked me to speak to his youth group. I had shared with a few of my friends how I was preparing to go to a Bible college and study youth ministry, but I was certainly not a recognized youth speaker in the area. At the time, I honestly didn't know why this particular youth pastor felt compelled to ask me to speak to his teens.

Never in a million years would I have pictured myself sharing my life story and teaching God's Word in front of people. I was the shy kid who tucked behind my parents when people tried to make small talk with me. I hated public speaking with a passion. Nothing frightened me more than having a group of people looking at me. I even dreaded the moment when teachers would take attendance and I was required to say, "Here," after they announced my name. Simply put, I was not a communicator, and I had no desire to be one.

When the youth pastor asked if I would speak to his students, everything inside me screamed, "No way!" So imagine my surprise when I heard the word "Sure" slip out of my mouth.

I had no sooner hung up the phone than I once again began giving God a litany of reasons why this was a mistake. "This is a terrible idea, God. What if I freeze up? What if I forget the punch line? What if my zipper is down? What if some kid falls asleep?" From every angle I looked at it, speaking to people did not seem like a good idea. I was sure to fail. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that God wanted me to do it. Some comfort came from the fact that if I failed, at least I could say, "It wasn't my idea!"

I had two weeks before my newfound date with destiny, and during that time fear not only nipped at my heels, but tried to consume my being. It seemed impossible to overcome. Those two weeks of

when God's ideas seem impossible

prayer and preparation dragged by with agonizing slowness. Thoughts of being in front of people caused me intense anxiety, not to mention sleepless nights. After writing and rewriting my message more times than I could count, I finally gave it to God and in jest said, "God, you know I need a miracle on this one!"

it's possible

Even though this unexpected foray into the world of speaking caused my stomach to somersault and my body to toss and turn all night, something was compelling and propelling me to stay the course. I knew I was breaking through a deep fear of mine and maybe, just maybe, God was going to use it for his good purposes.

Something impossible was being made possible.

In the book of Luke, we read about a man named Zechariah. Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist, the wild man who prepared the way for the Lord Jesus. By the time Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, came onto the scene, many God-followers were beginning to lose hope in God's future plans for his people. It seemed like the sell-by date on God's promises had expired, and that all the people were left with was rotten milk.

The story of Zechariah is a story about God making the impossible possible. What God did in Zechariah's and Elizabeth's lives was a significant foreshadowing of what God would soon do in and through Jesus' earthly parents, Joseph and Mary. In Zechariah's life, God made a small move with little John before he made his big move with Jesus. In a unique way, God was preparing his people and building up their confidence that he was at work.

Here's the story of Zechariah and a glimpse into his preparation phase:

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to [Zechariah], standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

But the angel said to him: “[Fear not], Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. (Luke 1:11–22)

when God's ideas seem impossible

Let me give you a bit of context for this story. Zechariah was a Jewish priest. He belonged to the priestly section of Abia. Every direct descendent of Aaron was automatically a priest. This meant that for all ordinary priestly functions there were far too many priests. They were therefore divided into twenty-four sections.

In addition to the three major Jewish celebrations, each priest was only on duty for two weeks out of the year. Most priests looked forward to their two weeks of service. It was likely the highlight of their lives.

During Zechariah's era, there were approximately twenty thousand priests altogether, which meant there were almost one thousand priests per section. Each of the temple duties would be distributed among these thousand priests by a lottery system.

One of the most valued duties of a priest was the privilege of offering the morning or evening incense to God. It was quite possible many priests would never have the honor of burning the incense during their lifetime. However, on this particular day, Zechariah won the lottery! This was the day Zechariah had been dreaming of, and he must have been thrilled to the core of his being. Within this moment, the impossible was becoming possible.

Nonetheless, Zechariah and Elizabeth had one big problem in their lives. They were childless. Infertility in the first-century era was tragic. Believe it or not, childlessness was grounds for divorce.

Some Jewish rabbis said there were seven people who were excommunicated from God. The list began with, "A Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife and who has no child." You see, childlessness led to hopelessness.¹

We can imagine that, for many years, one of Zechariah and Elizabeth's daily cries to God was, "Please allow us to have a child. Please allow us to have a child!"

Since Zechariah was a priest, his problem was amplified. Anxiety-producing thoughts most likely plagued him. He probably wondered things like: Am I not being faithful to God? Am I not a good priest? Or, is God mad at me?

By the time Zechariah had the privilege of offering the incense in the temple, he was well along in years. He had most likely given up on the idea of his family tree continuing through his genes.

Nevertheless, as Zechariah entered the temple and faced the altar of incense, God's messenger came to him and said those two life-changing words—*fear not*. The messenger then told him, “Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.” After this, the text says, Zechariah was gripped with fear.

Imagine what was going through Zechariah's mind. Not only was a messenger from God in his presence, but a lifelong prayer was being answered in a miraculous way.

What is more, this baby of his was described as no ordinary baby. His baby would be connected to God's redemptive plan for the world. A personal prayer was being answered, but this was more than just personal—a collective prayer was also being answered for all of God's people. This baby was a huge bundle of joy.

I suppose Zechariah's response, “How can I be sure of this?” was only normal. I mean, Zechariah's wife was probably the age of most grandmas and he was being told she was going to have a baby. I know I'd be thinking somebody in the room had been inhaling too much incense!

Even so, Zechariah wanted some evidence of God's seriousness. In Zechariah's mind, what the messenger said was impossible. So he questioned God, which, we discover, is a big no-no. Zechariah obtained his proof, but not in an ultrasound photo. The messenger

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proved it by muting his vocal chords until the day his son was named.

Making Zechariah speechless may seem like an odd way to discipline him for not immediately embracing God's crazy plan. However, a deeper message was unfolding in the story. God doesn't mind receiving questions, but he doesn't like to be questioned.

Questioning God is a sign of distrust.

Since God desires a relationship with his people and trust is the foundation of any good relationship, we can see how God's reprimand is justified. It's quite possible God wanted Zechariah to remain silent and spend time reflecting on his trust issues, as he learned to embrace the impossible.

believing versus trusting

Recently, I was swimming in a hotel pool with my children. My two older children were leaping off of the edge and dropping into the pool cannonball-style. My youngest son, Micah, is a bit more timid. He was extremely nervous about jumping into the pool on his own. He would approach the edge, but then run backward terrified.

I could tell Micah really wanted to be like his older siblings. However, something was holding him back. I moved closer to the edge and yelled, "Hey Micah, jump to me. I'll catch you!"

After several warm-up attempts, Micah finally leaped into my arms.

"See Micah, it's not hard; you can do it," I asserted.

A giant smile displayed on his face as he said, "I did it, Daddy. I did it!"

Then I lifted him up over the edge, and before I even had time to get ready to catch him, he jumped cannonball style into the pool without a second thought. I scooped him up just before the water swallowed him, and he said, “Do it again, again, Daddy!”

After about the twentieth time I lifted him up over the edge, it dawned on me—it wasn’t Micah’s belief of being able to jump into the water that allowed him to overcome his fear; it was his ability to trust his father’s arms of love.

Part of our confusion about how to overcome an inner fear stems from a failure to recognize the difference between belief and trust. Believing in something is different from trusting someone. We may believe something to be true, and it may be. Yet if we don’t act on that belief, it doesn’t make much difference. Trust, on the other hand, lets us act. It’s a proven confidence in someone that allows fear to be set aside. Belief alone doesn’t do that. So what makes overcoming an inner fear possible is when we learn to trust our heavenly Father’s arms of love.

Often we believe certain things about God, but we don’t fully trust him. We might believe God is good, but we don’t trust him to do something good. We might believe God is for us, but we don’t trust he will be with us. We might believe God is more powerful than the Evil One, but we don’t trust in his ability to fight our battle for us in the spiritual realm.

George MacDonald is noted as having said, “To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.” God doesn’t just want our adoration or belief—God wants our trust.

But developing trust takes a lot of time.

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time to listen

From relational experience, we know trust does not develop overnight. Deep relational trust might take years to obtain, and it always takes listening ears.

Genuine listening has become a lost art in our culture. Even on a day during which we are in constant contact with people, we rarely take the time to truly hear people out and understand where they are coming from. Have you ever noticed how quickly people cut in on conversations or try to finish another person's sentences?

It makes sense that one reason God silenced Zechariah for nine long months was because God wanted him to spend some time working on their sacred trust. It is quite possible Zechariah had fallen into a bad habit of cutting God off. God knew Zechariah would need an extended period of time to retune his hearing aids.

I'm afraid, much like Zechariah, we too tend to cut off God and don't take the time we should to hear him out.

Think about your God-experiences throughout your lifetime for a moment. When were the times you felt like God was speaking to you or calling you into deeper levels of transformation? I suspect they were times when you shut your yapper and were in listening mode. In most of my spiritual growth experiences, God just so happened to break through to me during times when I was removed from my regular pace of life and had space to be silent.

Silence has a way of leading us to salvation.

Zechariah needed to learn a few things about how God works in order for him to overcome his fears. He needed to learn how to trust in God and God's timing.

When we live in a rush-rush world, it's hard to remain hush-hush. However, remaining in a listening posture for an extended period of time is precisely what allows us to release our fears and see our situation from God's perspective.

side-mirror living

Inscribed on most side mirrors on vehicles there is a small note which reads, "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." The reason side-mirror makers decided to insert this warning is because the mirror was intentionally made to collect a large field of view, causing objects to look small or more distant. Since the mirror collects a larger scope of images, the actual objects are closer than they seem.

As we attempt to deal with our fears, it's good to keep this in mind; God's perspective is kind of like what we see in our side mirrors. When we listen and look into the side mirror of our life, we will discover God's view on our lives has a much wider scope than ours. In a unique way, God's perspective shows us things we are likely to overlook from our vantage point.

Recently, I was invited to participate in a chapel service at a prison in our area. The service was for level four inmates, which is the level reserved for those who did something really bad.

Many times, I have read Hebrews 13:3 which says, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Yet, in the past, something always blocked me from actively engaging with prisoners. Ministering in the prisons didn't seem to fit my purposes. Not to mention I just didn't feel comfortable in the prison setting.

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Finally, after two years of processing, I decided to face my fears and go for it. On the day of the event, I was as nervous as a cat in a dog house. I was hoping a good excuse would rise up, but nothing presented itself. I was going to prison whether I liked it or not. As I approached the gates, I said a prayer and asked God to be with me. There was no turning back.

The prison guards patted me down and whisked me away to the chapel area. In a unique way, when I entered the chapel room, my fears vanished. I knew I was in the right place at the right time.

The service was powerful, and the inmates were drawn closer to God. At the end of the gathering, several men boisterously came up to me and thanked me for being there and for blessing them with my words.

As I departed the prison, I then saw God's side-view mirror. I wondered how many times in my life inner fear and my selfish disposition held me back from being a blessing to others.

Like Zechariah, we constantly face fears associated with things we perceive as impossible. Imagine what life could look like if we truly believed nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

ideas to remember

God likes to make the impossible, possible.

Everything good requires preparation.

To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.

More time with God will lead to deeper levels of trust.

God will use us to bless others as we overcome our fears.

fear not

questions to discuss

What inner fear seems impossible to overcome?

Why do you struggle to trust God with the outcome in that area?

How much space and time do you carve out of your life in order to listen to God's promptings?

When it doesn't feel good to overcome the impossible, how will you push through the anxiety and tension?

To whom might you be a blessing by overcoming your fears?