

How to Overcome 4 Common Fears

As we progress on our spiritual journeys, we discover that God has a life purpose for each one of us. We also come to know that this purpose is unique and extraordinary in scope.

Often we can't begin to imagine how we can muster the courage to tackle a God-size life purpose. But the good news is that we don't have to muster anything.

Courage is a gift from God. To receive it, we need only show up and rely on God's complete faithfulness.

The gospel writer Matthew describes the step of taking courage as a directive from Jesus (see Matt. 14:27). That means Jesus commands us to be fearless.

This is not to say that God can never use us to accomplish His purposes if we are afraid. And it doesn't mean that if we take this step of courage all our fears will magically vanish.

Taking courage is a determined act of our will that helps us release our fears and enables us to move forward. Taking courage begins with our understanding that the Lord God has called each of us by name and promises to be with us. The prophet Isaiah explains this concept best when he reminds us that we are precious and honored in God's sight, that we are loved, and that our heavenly Father will never leave us nor forsake us (see Is. 43:1-5).

This encouragement gives me great comfort and peace of mind. Even when I feel afraid, I can persevere because God has promised to be with me.

Jesus vividly illustrated the same message to His disciples while He was with them on Earth. In the darkness of a stormy

night, the disciples were in a boat that was being tossed about by violent waves. Jesus appeared to them on the water, and the already frightened disciples became terrified that He was a ghost. How did Jesus respond? He said, “‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid’” (Matt. 14: 27, NIV).

How comforting it is to know that Jesus is the one who encourages us as He did Peter that night. He calls us to step out of the boat and walk on the water toward Him, knowing He will reach out His hand to catch us when we start to sink under the fearful pressures of life.

He is the reason we can be fearless. Whether our fears vanish or whether we press on toward our goal even though we are afraid, we will receive courage as we obey God and experience His faithfulness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COURAGE

I know from personal experience how immobilizing it is to be wrapped in layers of fear that cause worry. I sometimes see women whose secret fears of flying, abandonment, public speaking, heights, rejection, being attacked and so on have prevented them from being all God designed them to be.

Fear blocks creativity, productivity and relationships. When you face your fears by grasping onto God’s courage, you regain your capacity for experiencing these things as you live out your life purpose.

As you obediently take courage, your view of God’s faithfulness and power will increase. You see, God wants to calm your fears so that your relationship with Him will be more trusting and intimate.

The more you trust Him, the more you live with the assurance that He is in control. As your relationship with Him deepens, you become more and more willing to be entrusted with bold and difficult opportunities to serve Him.

Here are some fears you can overcome with His help:

Fear of Ridicule and Criticism For years this fear kept me from evangelism. I was terrified that someone would criticize the core beliefs I hold so dear or would embarrass me about my poor recall of Scripture.

But one day I asked myself a crucial question: "Do I really intend to let somebody's comments or criticism keep me from stepping out in faith to do the work God gave me to do?" When I thought about it that way, the answer was, "Of course not!" I wanted to fulfill God's purpose for my life, so I had to choose to take courage and do the work He had given me even though I was afraid.

Fear of Success This can also prevent you from fulfilling your life purpose. It may cause you to torture yourself with thoughts such as: If I succeed, people will be jealous and won't include me anymore. I'll have to live up to other people's expectations of me, and I won't be able to coast anymore. Besides, I really don't deserve to succeed. And success might make me swell up with pride.

Fear of success not only makes you easy prey for those who are not on fire with God's vision, but it also makes you easy prey for your own concerns about what they might think. The best thing you can do to counteract this fear is to recognize that true success is only what God views as success, not what others think or say.

Fear of Being Found Out I refer to this fear as the "impostor syndrome." It is an excessive concern that people will figure out you're not really smart enough, good enough, funny enough, articulate enough, organized enough or loving enough to fulfill God's purpose for your life.

I remember well my fear of being found out after I was laid off and spent 14 months securing a new job. Although I was

doing excellent work for my new employer, I dreaded the day when someone would find out I wasn't competent enough or productive enough. Instead of seeking to fulfill my daily purposes in a way that pleased God, I directed my energy into being a boss-pleasing impostor.

I will be forever grateful to a good friend who showed me a practical way to take courage in that situation. He insisted that I write down examples of how well God had provided for my children and me while I was jobless.

As I began to remember God's miracles in my life, I saw how God had been with me all along—just as He promised. That evidence of God's faithfulness in my life infused me with courage and allowed me to enjoy my new job.

Fear of Failure Many people view personal failure as if it were the AIDS virus—life-threatening, devastating and too sad to discuss. But we will fail, and God graciously will offer to forgive us for our shortcomings.

Put your failures in perspective and keep walking forward in spite of them. If God can forgive us, why not take courage and forgive yourself for your mistakes—past, present and future?

No matter what our fears, the only way we can create a place secure from fear is to do nothing and go nowhere. We will perish either from lethargy or claustrophobia.

So if you find yourself living in a tiny, fear-enclosed box about what God is asking you to do with your life today, pray for claustrophobia! At least that way your instinct will be to break out. Seriously, accept God's forgiveness and ask Him to help you step out of the box.

I don't know what fears stop you cold in your tracks. Whatever they may be, I urge you to take a step of courage each time.

God has promised to be with you. Nothing beats taking hold of

His hand as you walk through fear, shouting, "God struck down Goliath for me today, and all is well."

We really have only two choices when it comes to fears related to fulfilling our life purpose. The first is to complete God's assignments while kicking and screaming in fear. The second is to make the entire journey easier by beginning today to give our fears to God, or at least to trust that He is with us as we do His work.

HOW TO BE A WOMAN OF COURAGE

The following suggestions will help you step securely onto the rock of courage. Take as much time as you need to complete the steps that are most helpful to you, and repeat them as often as necessary to continue stepping forward with courage.

Rank Your Fears List the things you fear about living out God's purposes for your life. Are you afraid He will send you to Africa as a missionary? Are you afraid you will somehow fall short of God's intentions? Are you afraid you will need to repent of a pet sin or work on your character?

Are you afraid you will not have enough money for the task or that you will have to quit your job? Are you afraid you will have to give up your current ministry or invite a neighbor to church? No matter what your fears are, rank them in order from least to worst.

Pray over your list, and ask others to pray on your behalf that God will reveal the truth about your fears as they relate to His purpose for you. Then, boldly claim God's promise that He will be with you.

Next, take a baby step and offer one of your lesser fears to God. Keep working the list, fear by fear, for as long as it takes. Reward yourself when you overcome a fear.

Be Honest With Yourself First, ask yourself, "How does fear keep me focused on myself?" Write down your answer and review

it in a week. If it fills you with a godly sorrow, repent of your self-focus.

Second, ask yourself, "What has fear stolen from me?" (It could be an opportunity for God to bless me or for me to bless God or others.) Discuss your answer with a friend and ask for advice on how to take courage against your fears.

Apply the "just eat your spinach" approach. Sometimes you just have to go ahead and eat the dreaded spinach—by giving your first speech, presenting your idea for a novel or making your difficult request—before you have time to smell and taste the awful stuff called fear. Sometimes the best course of action is to just "go for it," even when you're afraid of what is ahead. Trust God to see you through.

FEED YOUR COURAGE

Here are just a few courage-building passages from the Psalms. Read them, meditate on them and journal about them:

"I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side" (Ps. 3:6).

"Even 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" (Ps. 23:4)

"Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident" (Ps. 27:3).

"Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea" (Ps. 46:2).

"You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day" (Ps. 91:5).

"He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord" (Ps. 112:7).

Although your knees may be shaking, will you trust your kind God to reveal more about Himself to you and to accomplish His purposes through you today and tomorrow? Now is the time to get rid of your fear of ridicule, your fear of success or failure, your fear of not being good enough, or any other fear you may have.

To walk through fear, you have to choose to break out of the self-defeating box that limits you and your perception of God. He is beckoning you to trust Him and take courage. There is no better time than now to begin.

Read a companion devotional.

Katie Brazelton *is the author of* Pathway to Purpose for Women *(Zondervan).*