

Most Churchgoers—80 Percent—Wrestle With Isaiah 41:10

Molly Ball, writing in *The Atlantic*, noted that, “Fear is in the air, and fear is surging. Americans are more afraid today than they have been in a long time.” Ball was right, and it is true even among people in the church.

In a recent survey of 2,400 churchgoers we found that 80 percent indicated that they lived with moderate to significant levels of fear (compared to 20 percent for whom fear was only an occasional experience in their lives).

Some of our fears are raised by events happening in our world. What parent of school-age children doesn’t feel concerned when watching events like the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida? And every act of terrorism committed by ISIS and its sympathizers raises the specter of another 9/11. Depending upon one’s political affiliation, the current administration in Washington is either raising fears or quelling them, leading to increasing uncertainty and polarization.

24-hour news, Twitter feeds and a steady stream of news alerts on our phones and smart watches mean that we hear about the unnerving and tragic multiple times every hour. And, as has often been the case in news, “if it bleeds, it leads.” No wonder we’re feeling a heightened sense of anxiety today.

But many of our deepest fears have little to do with the evening news. Our survey showed that the fear of failure ranked highest among those under 35. For some, the fear of failure is paralyzing. Second on the list for young adults was the fear of disappointing others or the fear of rejection, closely followed by the fear of leading meaningless lives.

Many baby boomers and older adults face financial fears (and not having enough for retirement), health concerns and losing people they loved to death, though the top fear for these groups was a fear related to the future of our country.

Some fear is good. Our brain is hard-wired with a “fight of flight” mechanism intended to save us; it is a gift. Fear can be a great motivator, leading us to take action. But often our fears are exaggerated. Sometimes our fears are completely unfounded (some call these **False Events Appearing Real**). Some of the things we fear we have little or no control over.

It is clear when we turn to Scripture that human beings have always wrestled with fear. Over 400 times, fear, terror and being afraid are mentioned in Scripture. This is also why, among the most frequent commands of scripture are the words, “Do not be afraid.”

I love the Bible’s commands to not be afraid, but they beg the question, *How?* How do we set aside our fear? How can we live unafraid? That was the aim of the research we conducted, first for a sermon series on fear that I was preaching in 2017, and then for a book that would delve into the most common fears we wrestle with and how to overcome them. What we found was that while we’ll never completely eradicate fear from our lives—some fear is important in protecting and motivating us—there are things we can do that can help us in living with courage and hope despite our fears.

Among these are four broad categories which have been found consistently to help people overcome their fears. I’ve described them with another acronym for fear,

Face your fears with faith

Examine your assumptions in the light of the facts

Address your anxieties with action

Release your cares to God.

Facing our fears with faith is maintaining a “bias of hope.” It is retraining our thinking to move away from “catastrophizing,” or assuming the worst, and to use the same mental energy to assume the best. Examining our assumptions in the light of the facts is often referred to in therapeutic circles as “cognitive restructuring.” The impact of actually discovering the facts, rather than living with our assumptions, can have a significant impact on our fears. Addressing our anxieties with action includes actually leaning into our fears, which often leads to their extinction. It includes a host of other things we can do to address our specific fears (remember, fear is meant to motivate us to action, though unfortunately for many it leads us to inaction or paralysis.). Finally releasing our cares to God involves certain spiritual disciplines including prayer, mindfulness, Scripture reading and others that can give us a “peace that passes all understanding.”

In *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, I explore the variety of fears we most often wrestle with today and unpack the kinds of specific things we can do to overcome our fears.

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