

Fear and Courage

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid... for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes before you. He will not leave you, nor forsake you”
(Deut. 31:6).

Fear and courage: we can't think of the one without the other. One definition of courage is fearlessness, but in fact, real courage is facing fear and overcoming it.

Fear and courage have something in common, too: they are both states of the will, NOT of the understanding. Certainly we can *think about* whether we should be fearful or courageous; we can also notice these feelings arising in us and then think about them, and try to control them, but the bottom line is that they are both states of the will, and reasoning about them doesn't always help.

Have you ever tried to talk a child out of being afraid? How about someone who has had a bad experience and is now facing the risk of something similar? It's a tough sell. Why then does the Lord so often TELL us not to be afraid?

Well, He has shown us (especially in the Writings) that we have – or at least can have – two wills, one that is from ourselves or the world (and that we sometimes call “proprium”), the other from Him and from the spiritual world. Our natural will is self-defensive and therefore subject to constant fear – which certainly has its place in preserving life, but needs to be kept in perspective. But our spiritual will from the Lord is not concerned about self except for the sake of serving Him and being useful to others. Ideally the spiritual will rules over the natural will, and so courage overcomes fear, but what we must appreciate is that we cannot change our own will, only the Lord can do that, and He does it just exactly to the extent that we co-operate with Him.

So, how can we do this? Well, we know that things of the understanding are closely tied to words – written or spoken. But things of the will are tied to actions. So we read in one dynamic passage, “*Act precedes, man's willing follows,*” or, in a more modern translation, “Action comes first, then the desire for it in the person's will follows. For when a person is led by his understanding to carry out any action, he is at length led by his will to do it, til at last he has taken it on as an action performed habitually. When this point is reached it is introduced into the rational or internal man; and once it has been introduced, truth is no longer that which motivates him when he does a good action, but good” (AC 4353:e).

Sometimes the only way to overcome our natural fear is to push through it by the force of understanding from a higher plane that something simply must be done. Then, each time after that, it may be a little easier until we no longer have to compel ourselves. (Of course, the other side of this same phenomenon is that if we “bravely” enter into evils or disorders we become accustomed to them as well, and then those bad habits become increasingly hard to break!)

So here's another seeming contradiction. The Writings clearly tell us that the way to enter into spiritual life is to “shun evils as sins against the Lord.” But to shun is to flee from, or to run

away from, which *seems* like an act of cowardice or fear! So what's THAT all about?

Well, as it happens there is a healthy fear, sometimes called "holy fear," which is an aspect of the new will and a very important element of our spiritual lives. In it there is, again, no concern for self but instead concern about offending or doing harm to anything of goodness or truth from the Lord. THAT fear can *inspire* courage in our natural lives, and indeed, one of the precious, vital things that we can do for each other in this life is to stand strong against those things that do so offend. You know the power of peer pressure! Sometimes it takes real courage to "run away" from evil. But run we must, for it is bigger than any of us, especially when we are alone. So we can support each other in true courage by saying "no" *together* in the face of temptations. This is, in fact, one of the reasons why we have a church, and why it is important to build a sense of real community in it.

Fear is a form of love: anxious fear, the love of self; holy fear, the love of the Lord. But it is interesting to note that a real, dedicated love of self typically, *inwardly* expresses itself as hatred, which is the opposite of true love. In short, any thing or any person that does not favour us we hate. And so in selfish fear we lead a miserable, negative, isolating life. But if we love the Lord we can overcome all that, opening ourselves to a very full and rewarding life.

Anxious fear is backward looking, holy fear is forward looking. Of course it *seems* otherwise at first, for anxious fear is always anticipating what might be next. But really this anxiety is always based on the experience of the past: something has gone wrong and we are afraid it will go wrong again. Someone has hurt us; we are afraid we will be hurt again. These things are simply not true – not necessarily. Of course experience is a valuable teacher, but every day is a new day, and if we look forward instead of backward, and inward instead of outward, we will see that the Lord's Providence is always leading us *toward* a happy and fulfilling spiritual state. We read,

"It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning..." (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Remember when the 11 brothers all went down into Egypt during the famine in Israel and there found Joseph in Pharaoh's court? They were afraid! Why? Of course they remembered the past. They remembered what they had done to him, and they knew how they would feel if they were in his shoes. But Joseph reassured them and pointed out the truth that in all that had happened to him GOD had led and guided him for the benefit of all Israel, so in the end of the story he said,

"Fear not! ...You thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore do not be afraid; I will nourish you and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spoke kindly unto them" (Genesis 50:19-21).

Remember, too, how many times in the story of the Lord's birth angels comforted the leading characters saying, "Fear not!" The point is that in the past angels were often sent by God to punish people for their sins. But this was different! The Lord had come "to save them from their sins." And He can save us, too, if we will take care not to resist or fight against Him.

– Which brings up another important issue, namely, the presence of angels and evil spirits in our daily lives. Anxious fear is actually caused by evil spirits who inspire all our negative thoughts and affections, shutting off our access to more interior things. Holy fear, and thus courage, on the other hand, is inspired by good spirits and angels who are buoyantly, creatively and generously alive, full of the powerful, healing spirit of the Lord. And the Writings clearly tell us that if we would just believe, as is the case, that all good and truth come from the Lord, and all evil and falsity come from the hells, we would be able to avoid two fundamental mistakes, blaming ourselves for all the bad things that flow in, and taking undue credit for the good (DP 320).

Anxious fear takes away freedom and rationality, binding us in prisons of doubt and fallacy. But the fear of the Lord is healthy, positive and clean, opening our minds to His wisdom and our hearts to the dispensations of His Providence as well as the encouraging support of angels.

But again, how can we overcome our natural fears? After all, if we are paralyzed by them, how can we work our way OUT of them? Can we fight against ourselves?

The answer lies in the Lord's merciful and wise separation of the will from the understanding, so that we can see the truth even when we don't like it, and we can learn what actions we can take to escape the prison of fear. We cannot change our own will. In effect this would be like doing open-heart surgery on one's self. Think about it.... But the Lord CAN do this if we co-operate, and we co-operate simply by doing what we're told.

Note, the old heart – the old will – cannot be repaired. It serves its purpose in the natural world but ultimately has to be replaced. This is done through the medium of conscience, the commitment to what is good and true because it is good and true. And with that the Lord provides a new will *in the understanding*, which as before mentioned leads to good habits, which ultimately leads to a new attitude and thus a new heart, “a heart of flesh” as it says in Ezekiel (11:19) to replace the old, hard, “stony heart.”

Of course, heart surgery is not without its painful aspects. We may have to give up a lot of things we enjoy. And it takes a while to recover. But the new energy and freedom we gain in the long run make it all worthwhile.

And there's another thing. When we're governed by our old fears, clinging to life with a defective heart, naturally we lose sight of the angels who would inspire and comfort us. So the Lord often compensates by providing the next best thing on the natural plane, in effect, angels clothed in flesh and blood: friends, companions, teachers, mentors, fellow members of the church. If we can learn to seek out and trust these angels, and give them a chance to offer their support, they can help restore perspective and invite the further influx of the angels on the other side.

One way to start is to be honest, and to share your problems with someone who cares about you. Sure, it may seem selfish, and it may seem weak. No doubt it will make you feel even more vulnerable. But that's just the point: without the help of angels and supportive friends we ARE weak and we are vulnerable. Human beings are designed to live in community, to support one another, not to be alone. But if we open *ourselves* up to others we may invite *their* trust to be more open, too. Then we are in a position to support them just as much as they support us. And

being useful, *helping somebody else* is one of the surest ways to escape the curse of our own personal turmoil and fear.

Finally, we noted earlier that anxious fear is backward looking, thinking always with anxiety about the future because of the past. But even if we're stuck in the past we can still recognize and appreciate some good things that we will always find there. "Count your blessings" is no idle proverb. Every one of us can see, if we think about it, how very fortunate we have been *even in our misfortunes*, or, if you like, how we have been spared something much worse. We can see the wisdom and insight, patience and empathy that grow out of hardships, the value of knowledge, integrity, determination, perspective, friendships and simple pleasures, the miracles in all our near misses, and many other things. And if we're open to the idea we can see the Lord and His providence in them all, leading as the passage (AC 8478) says "no matter what the appearance of the means" to a happy spiritual state especially in the life after death.

So the Lord said,

"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags that do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:32-34).

In any case, aside from our own personal history, if we want to dwell on the past we can do it in a way that speaks to the present and reveals the future at the same time *by studying the Lord's Word*. There is a universal history with deep spiritual meaning – a history in fact written selectively and purely for the sake of its meaning so that we can see how the Lord works in our own lives. And just as the Lord pointed to His victories over Sihon and the Amorites to give Joshua new courage, so in those same stories He points to His victories over worldly thoughts and affections in us, to give us courage. These victories can be won, and they can be won today with His help. All we have to do is put one foot in front of the other and start, living in the present, asking for His daily bread, and letting Him lead. As he said,

"Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid... for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes before you. He will not leave you, nor forsake you"
(Deut. 31:6).

Amen.

Lessons:

Judges 7:1-8 & 16-25

Children's talk on Courage to Overcome Evil

Luke 12:22-34

Arcana Caelestia 8403:2-3 & 8413:3