

Judges 6:11-25

Intro February 4, 2007 Deconstructing our Fears

As human beings, we pride ourselves on being the only species that understands the concept of risk. Yet we have a confounding habit of worrying about mere possibilities while ignoring probabilities—of building barricades against perceived dangers while leaving ourselves exposed to real ones.

For example, we agonize over the avian flu, which as of today had killed precisely no one in the U.S., but have to be cajoled into getting vaccinated for the common flu, which contributes to the deaths of 36,000 Americans each year. White-knuckle flyers routinely choose the car when traveling long distances, heedless of the fact that, at most, a few hundred people die in U.S. commercial airline crashes in a year, compared with 44,000 killed in motor-vehicle wrecks.

We wring our hands over the mad cow pathogen that might be (but almost certainly isn't) in our hamburger, yet worry far less about the cholesterol that contributes to the heart disease that kills 700,000 of us annually. Shoppers still look askance at a bag of spinach for fear of *E. coli* bacteria while filling their carts with fat-sodden French fries and salt-crusteds nachos.

We put filters on faucets, install air ionizers in our homes, and lather ourselves with antibacterial soap. At the same time, 20% of all adults still smoke; nearly 20% of drivers don't use seatbelts; and two-thirds of us are overweight or obese. In short, shadowed by peril as we are, you would think we'd get pretty good at distinguishing the risks likeliest to do us in from the ones that are statistical long shots. But you would be wrong.¹

The solution to our fears is not to put them aside as though they are irrelevant or to adopt FDR's advice in his first inaugural when he said, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." To which our young people might morph into, "There's nothing to fear but fear itself ... and Chuck Norris." If you don't get it, don't fear, you're just too old for the joke.

Our fears are a microscope into our heart, revealing our inward health or disease by pointing out the essence of our worship, our idols, and our gods. We may have much to fear, but our fears are wrongly placed, not because the terrors are non-existent, but because we don't go deep enough to see what should really frighten us ... and what will finally alleviate those qualms.

Israel during the time of the Judges 3000 years ago had much to fear. Having settled in the Promised Land they did not fully obey God's command to remove from the other inhabitants from Canaan. Because they did not fear God, they soon feared those around them. To get their attention, God used these other peoples to instill fear in His people so that they would return to Him. Such was the case during the time of Gideon. READ Judges 6:11-24

In order to understand what our fears tell us about ourselves, let us look at how reality constructs our fears, that is, we fear for a reason. Then we'll see how God confronts our fears and finally how God comforts our fears.

REALITY CONSTRUCTS OUR FEARS

Our actions betray our fears

How we live indicates our fears, but unless we take the time to look at who we are we may miss what we are really saying about our fears. This is true of Gideon in Judges 6. The scene opens with the Angel of the Lord, the Son of God, pre-incarnate Christ, coming to Gideon under the terebinth tree in Ophrah. Gideon's actions betray his fear as he threshes wheat in the wine press.

To ancient readers such an activity would betray either fear or stupidity. To separate the kernels of wheat from the stalks; one would crush and then winnow the material. It was a laborious process and unless very poor, people would use an ox to crush the stalks. Gideon is doing this on his own, but not because of poverty, (his family had oxen v25) but because of fear. What is more, winnowing the grain took place on a hill top to take advantage of the breeze, for kernels were heavier than chaff, and chaff would blow away and the grain would fall down. But once again, Gideon's actions betray his fear; he is doing this arduous task not on a threshing floor on a hill, but in a wine press. A wine press was located in a valley. The vineyard would line the hills and when the pressing was done, the grapes would be taken to a press hewn out of rock. The reason for Gideon's fear is simply stated in v11 – the Midianites.

If you look back, you will see his fear is well founded. Gideon is no fool. While Israel enjoyed rest for 40 years after Jabin, king of Canaan, was destroyed, they once again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

When we read of their evil, we immediately think of a moral peccadillo, but in Judges the chief issue was not the immorality or injustice committed, but the idolatry engaged. They worshipped other gods. In response, God gave Israel into the hands of Midian.

The Midianites were distant relatives of Israel, descendants of Abraham by his last wife, Keturah. When Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers to the Ishmaelites – they were from Midian. When Moses goes into the desert to escape a murder charge, he meets Jethro, a priest of the Midianites and part of a subset the Kenite. The Midianites show up later when the Moabites try to curse Israel before they enter Canaan and are routed in Numbers 31. Now it is some 200 years later and these cousins from the east come for a visit and eat Israel out of house and home.

Before Israel was faced with the Canaanite iron chariot. This time the fear is not technological, but because of the decimating nature their camels. Covering great distances in short periods of times, the Midianites were raiders, who came in from the eastern deserts at harvest and stole everything in sight. Nothing was left for Israel to eat. What is more, when the hordes descended, the Israelites had no choice but to head for the hills, the caves, the hidden parts of the land and wait it out.

Like flatlanders from south descending on Door County in July, the Midianites were a blight to be feared. So Israel was brought very low (6). So for Gideon to thresh wheat by hand in a winepress makes sense. He has reason to be afraid.

Our fears have a basis in reality

What about you? What are your fears? Are they justified? Rational? Triple checking the curling iron is rarely needed, but there is that time when it was left on or a friend's cousin, whose neighbor lost their house to appliance malfunction – so you fear.

Urban legends are a treasure trove of fears. One such story takes place on a stormy flight aboard a Boeing aircraft; an off-duty airline stewardess is sitting next to a man in the grip of serious white-knuckle fever as he watches, through his porthole, the aircraft's wing bending and bouncing in the tempest. The stewardess tries to reassure him; she works in the industry and flies all the time, she tells him. There is nothing to worry about; the pilots have everything under control. "Madam," he replies, "I am a Boeing engineer and we did not design this aircraft to do what it is doing."

What do you fear? Marriages do fail, lives are ruined, savings are lost, health deteriorates, loved ones die ... but each of those fears reveals where we place our hope, our security and thereby pull back the curtain on those idols of our hearts.

It's 4 a.m., and you're wide awake--palms sweaty, heart racing. You're worried about your kids. Your aging parents. Your 401(k). Your health. Your sex life. Breathing evenly beside you, your spouse is oblivious. Doesn't he see the dangers that lurk in every shadow? He must not. Otherwise, how could he, with all that's going on in the world, have talked so calmly at dinner last night about flying to Florida for a vacation?² But you fear ... for good reason.

GOD CONFRONTS OUR FEARS

God confronts our fears corporately

As the people cry out to the Lord because of the Midianite oppression, God responds, but not in a fashion I think anyone really appreciated.

Remember, their fears are the consequence of their sins. They wanted their culture's security, so they engaged the gods of that culture. In response, God gave them over to their deepest yearnings so that they became terrorized by their own desires. They call to God for deliverance and he responds (vv7-8).

God sends a prophet. That is an odd answer to the problem. It is as if your car breaks down, you call AAA and they send a philosopher to discuss the Zen of mechanics. What kind of help is this, God?

The prophet gives a mini-lesson on the covenant, using the common formula of what God did in the past. "I've delivered you before. You shall not fear the gods of this land, but you have not obeyed my voice." The prophet points to what God has done and their sin of fear, an Old Testament term equated with worship. They allowed the culture to dictate their agendas.

The prophet then gives a brief conclusion which leaves them in mid-air: "you have not obeyed my voice." Now what? Nothing but a Sunday School lesson, so it seems.

This prophet prepares the way for the deliverer to come, but not with any new truth. He simply declared what had once again been forgotten, discarded as antiquated religious and historical interpretations. Verse 10 again makes clear that the main problem is not oppression, but idolatry. False worship, false gods, and disobedience to Jehovah, are destroying the nation, not the oppression of the Midianites.³

God confronts our fears individually

The Angel of the Lord greets Gideon and in so doing confronts his fear. What at first may appear sarcasm is really the solution to his problem of fear: "The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor."

Calling Gideon a valiant soldier is a deep cut, as he tries to rescue what little grain is left from marauding Midianites. This is really a comfort, but at first confronts Gideon as to how he is now acting. He believes there is reason to fear. His response explains why.

God is powerless in my life

Angel of the Lord questions Gideon and elicits a telling response. Gideon illustrates what disobedience to God's voice means – "what has God done for me lately!"

What Gideon misses because he is so fearful is that God has been yelling loudly to everyone in the land. The reason they are afraid is because their fears are misplaced.

They are afraid of the wrong thing. Gideon has no fear mouthing such blasphemy.

When troubles come to insinuate that God is absent is to say that God's presence is only in the good times. But God's presence is especially felt when times are tough.

When life is askew, spiraling out of control – it is not because God is somehow on vacation, but he is very present in the darkness of that time.

Gideon's own family is part of the problem. Look down in v25, before this mighty man of valor can act as God's deliverer; he has to deal with his own family and their false worship. But God doesn't deal with that yet, rather than debating Gideon, God simply commands: "Go in your might...do I not send you?"

I am powerless in my life

Again Gideon's fears outweigh what he is told. He cannot hear what is being said to him. As the command gets more personal, so does his excuse. Not only is God not good enough, I'm not good enough ... this gets to the heart of the problem. His self-esteem is shot through.

Again his fears are not irrational. The tribe of Manasseh was divided into two portions in the Promised Land, so they are already weak. Gideon's clan is weakest of the tribe and he is least in his father's house. This is not making for a great hero.

It is like the man who went to a psychiatrist because he felt he had an inferiority complex. After a while, the doctor told him that he had some good news and some bad news for him. "The good news is that you don't have a complex," said the doctor, "the bad news is that you are inferior!" Gideon is inferior all right, yet God chose him.

Gideon fears because he worships a false god – himself. Since his god cannot save him, he wallows in paralyzing fear. Gideon is now in the perfect place, crippled by fear, to find the comfort he needs.

GOD COMFORTS OUR FEARS

God comforts our fears by His Word

Prophet's words comfort even as the confront

Notice how it does not end? He makes clear that their fears, their worship is wrongly placed, that they have broken the covenant God established with them, yet the next scene we see the second person of the Godhead speak with confidence to a doubter.

When God confronts, he does not leave us in despair, wondering how we should change ourselves, but he takes the first step every time, showing us that our fears reveal our worship.

You may fear for your children, wondering if the Midianite hordes of our culture will consume them. We may thresh our grain in secret, afraid to show our face in the culture; for fear that we will be destroyed. Yet in our false worship of family and personal peace, God takes us back to the promise he has made, that no matter how fearsome the world may seem, God's promise generations ago, still stands.

What Israel needs before a deliverer was a prophet. They need to hear the gospel.

Before your fears are allayed, you need to know what God has already done for you.

Yet people want a deliverer from their troubled marriages, from their financial stress, but God sends a prophet and reminds them of the gospel.

Angel of the Lord's words comfort us

The Lord is with you (12), Do I not send you? (14), I will be with you (16) - each of these refrains points us to him, not to our problems. God's cure for fear is not to debate the fear, but to turn up the heat to reveal the basis of our fears is false worship. The cure is not the command to stop worshipping falsely, but to turn to your only help found in the gospel.

We try to convince ourselves that our problems are not as bad as we think they are. We may be right ... or we may be wrong. They may be even worse than we think! But we are never wrong to remind ourselves of God's abiding presence. Fear attacks those basic truths. When you fear, you picture what you may lose, often something that is important, but at the core of that fear is your idol. The solution is to know that God will never leave.

God comforts us by His peace

As the Angel's words settle in, Gideon's attitude changes. In v13 he addresses the visitor as "sir", then in v15 the formal Lord. Then in v17 he does the most peculiar thing.

He asks the visitor for a sign, then tells him to wait while he prepares an elaborate meal. He's not just running in to grab some food, but he slaughters a goat, takes a bunch of flour (a rare commodity at that time) and makes a meal. But this is not just any meal. While Gideon is not a Levitical priest, he presents a modified peace offering, a sacrifice communally eaten, as a sign of our acceptance by God.

The Angel instructs Gideon to place the meal on a rock, pour the broth over it, then he touches it with his staff and fire springs up from the rock and consumes the meal. With that the Angel of the Lord disappears.

Gideon's fears are now set aright. No longer fearful of the Midianite invaders, he responds with reverential fear, recognizing who it was who just appeared before him. At last he uses the covenantal name LORD with reference to this visitor.

Now Gideon has reason to fear. No one sees Jehovah and lives. This sounds so strange to us; we have lost the sense of terror in the awesomeness of God. But if there is nothing terrifying about God's holiness then there is really nothing amazing about His grace.

But Gideon, with good reason to fear, is told that there is peace. The offering is accepted, judgment has passed. Gideon responds with worship by building a memorial altar, visible for generations to come, reminding God's people that God's judgment has passed and His peace is secured.

Wilfredo Garza lived the life of an illegal immigrant for more than 35 years. Year after year, he eked out a living crossing the border from Mexico into the United States—some days finding work, some days not. Regardless, he was constantly looking over his shoulder. He was caught by the Border Patrol four times during that period, and bused back to Mexico every time. Undeterred by each apprehension, he swam back across the Rio Grande to try again.

The cycle would likely have continued for several more years if not for an amazing discovery. One day, Wilfredo worked up the courage to walk into an immigration lawyer's office. There, incredibly, he found out that his father was born in Texas and spent time working there, which meant that Wilfredo was actually a U.S. citizen!

All these years he possessed the very papers—his father's birth certificate—that proved his citizenship. And yet he lived in guilt and fear. But now he has a certificate of citizenship. Now he doesn't have to live in fear; he can walk through the main gate, assured of peace.⁴

No longer do we need to live in fear that all we are will come crashing down on our heads, having nothing to show for our lives.

We are not aliens to God, but children, born anew by His grace, adopted and part of his family. We need not sneak in here with heads covered, afraid of his wrath. We come to a table of peace here. Simple meal of bread and wine before us. We need not fear fire consuming the offering, for God's wrath already enveloped that first offering, his Son, Jesus Christ.

This is a table of peace, here all our fears subside. Here we taste and see that the Lord is good, that we need not fear loss, hunger, death. Our God is with us, today. Come, eat and know that God is for you.

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- ¹ How Americans Are Living Dangerously, J Kluger, 11/26/06, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1562978-1.00.html>
- ² The Science Of Anxiety, C. Gorman, 6/10/02 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1002605,00.html>
- ³ Dave Hatcher, Eastside Evangelical Fellowship, January 5, 2003, <http://www.eefweb.org/sermons/topical/Misc/miscella.htm>
- ⁴ Anderson Cooper, "360 Degrees, On the Border" (aired 5-25-06), CNN