

FEAR CAN PARALYZE YOU!

Today's Text: Matt. 14: 22-33

Extracts:

And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But, when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately, Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith; why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased [Matt. 14: 28-32]

During my elementary school days, I once represented my school in the fifty yards (about forty-six metres) race in an inter-school athletic competition. The competition was at two levels. First, you had to qualify from your local level, which consisted of all the elementary schools in your home town. Such qualifiers then came together at the district level. At the trials for selecting my school's team (for all the events), I beat every one of my age group to be the first choice for the 50-yard dash. I won my races at competitions against other schools in my small town. Then, we went to the district headquarters, about ten kilometres away from my home town. It was my very first trip ever outside of my home town. Many things looked strange to me. For example, there were more spectators than I had ever seen. Much more, the lanes were marked and you were required to follow your lane throughout the race. We were given the opportunity to practise on the pitch and get used to it a day before your event. On the eventful day, my race was called, and I came to the starting line with the other runners. "On your marks! Set! Go!" Everyone else flew out but I could not move! I remained frozen to the ground on the starting line! The winner turned out to be the little boy that I had beaten so many times at the town level.

What happened to me is what is popularly called "stage fright." Fear took control of me and I forgot my training and skills. It happens to actors, singers and all other people who perform before a live audience. That means every one of us because, in life, you are always operating in the presence of others. Have you ever found yourself tongue-tied when invited to defend the truth? Have you ever studied so hard only to get to the test centre and forget everything? In all such cases, you have the expertise or the means to creditably acquit yourself. What has happened to you is driven by fear, an anxiety caused by approaching danger. It can paralyze you! Therefore, you need to deal with it. That is the purpose of this week's study.

1. Background: A fisherman fears water!

Jesus had just miraculously fed five thousand men, besides women and children. While He was sending the multitudes away, He told His disciples to get into the boat and go before Him across the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gennesaret [Matt. 14: 21, 22, 34]. The Lord's priority at the time also included finding quiet time alone to pray to His Father. So after dispersing the multitudes, He went up to the mountain to do so [v. 22]. However, as soon as the disciples got to the middle of the sea, their boat was "tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary" [v. 24], that is, the wind kept pushing them back to their departure point, not to their designated destination.

That was when they saw somebody that they thought was a ghost walking on the water. As they cried out for fear, Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid!" [v. 26]. On recognizing Him, Peter raised his voice and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus told him to come. Peter did and *actually walked on the water* to meet Jesus [vv. 27-28]. But when Peter "saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid, and *beginning to sink*, he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!'" Immediately, Jesus stretched His hand to Peter and caught him. Jesus said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" [vv. 29-31].

What happened to Peter? To adequately answer that question, we need to pay attention to the following interesting facts:

a) *Peter was an expert on the conditions of the Sea of Galilee*

Peter and his brother Andrew, as well as their business partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were all fishermen and business associates who lived by fishing on the Sea of Galilee [Mk 1: 16-20], also called the Lake of Gennesaret [Lk 5: 1], or Sea of Tiberias [Jn 21: 1]. On the day that Jesus called Peter to be His disciple, Peter and his colleagues were washing their tents. After Jesus had sat on their boat to speak to multitudes by the Sea, He asked Peter to launch "*into the deep*" and let down their nets for a catch. Peter answered, "Master, we have toiled *all night* and caught nothing" [vv. 2-5]. The deep was not near the coast and to toil all night was not for the faint-hearted. Therefore, we can say that Peter was an expert on the conditions of that sea, including its unpredictable weather conditions.

That point is supported by what happened between the time Jesus dispatched the disciples and the time they saw Him walking on the water. We are told that they left in the early evening [Matt. 14: 23]. We can put that between six and seven in the evening or during the first watch of the night. In the fourth watch, that is, between three and six in the morning, they had reached only the middle of the Sea [vv. 24-25]. What distance do

you think they had covered in almost nine hours? According to John's Gospel, the disciples had "rowed about three or four miles" when they saw Jesus walking on the water [Jn 6: 19]. The old King James Version says 25-30 furlongs. In Imperial measures (used in the UK), eight furlongs make one mile. So, *in almost nine hours, Peter and his colleagues had covered only about four miles, that is, under half-a-mile per hour!* The wind kept pushing them back but they refused to bend to its will. They were seasoned seamen who could not be discouraged by natural elements.

b) *Peter was a good swimmer!*

We cannot assume that Peter could swim just because he was a fisherman. Nevertheless, most mariners are expected to prepare for emergencies should their vessels have problems at sea. But we know for sure that Peter was a good swimmer.

After the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and before His ascension to heaven, He used to visit His disciples at unexpected times. On one occasion, Peter invited Thomas, Nathanael, James and John and two other disciples to come fishing with him on the Sea of Tiberias. They spent the whole night fishing but caught nothing. In the morning, a man standing on the shore said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They told him that they had none. Then he said to them, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." They did so and caught a multitude of fish. At that point, John said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" So, "when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and *plunged into the sea*" [Jn 21: 1-7]. Did he drown? No! He resurfaced, joined the other disciples and dragged the net full of fish ashore [v. 11].

Clearly, when Peter cried to Jesus (in this week's study text,) "Lord, save me!" as he sank, it was not because he could not swim and it was not because of the boisterous wind. Having removed his eyes from the ball (the source of his faith), he could no longer find his feet or stand firmly on them. He forgot that by faith in Jesus, he was actually walking on the water. Fear had paralyzed him. Consequently, the fisherman became afraid of water!

2. What drives you to fear?

There are several reasons why we fear or doubt or show anxiety when we perceive approaching danger, some of which are as follows:

a) *It is natural to fear!*

We all react instinctively with fear when we face danger. What do you do when somebody suddenly jumps in front of you even without any

weapons? Your first reaction is one of fear. It is a natural reaction. It is instinctive and you do not learn it.

For example, when King Jehoshaphat of Judah was told that the people of Moab, Ammon and other nations had surrounded his territory to do battle against him, we are told, “Jehoshaphat feared” [2 Chron. 20: 1-3]. Take also the prophet Elijah’s reaction to danger. After he had killed the prophets of Baal, Jezebel, King Ahab’s queen, sent a messenger to him, threatening to make his life miserable “by tomorrow, about this time.” The man of God that had commanded fire from heaven “arose and ran for his life” [1 Kgs 19: 1-3]! It was an instinctive reaction. A third example: when Saul of Tarsus (Paul) tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem after his conversion, “they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple” [Acts 9: 26]. They had heard what he had done to persecute the followers of Christ. Such fear is natural and impulsive.

b) *We lack adequate human means to handle the situation*

Our fear may derive more from the realization that we may not be able to deal with the coming danger on our own. For example, we may be facing foreclosure at the point that we recently lost our jobs and there is no prospect of a new job in the near future. We have a family member suffering from a painful illness but we do not have medical insurance or the means to provide adequate medical treatment. You can imagine the case of the woman with the issue of blood for twelve years. She “had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any” [Lk 8: 43-44]. Such uncertainty heightens fear.

c) *The expected outcome is unpleasant to us*

Sometimes, our fear derives from the fact that the expected outcome is known to us but it is unpleasant. For example, the doctors have told you that there is nothing else they can do about a family member’s illness and what is left is death. Or, your eviction notice has expired and you have still not paid the rent due. The only option left will be to move out of that apartment. Yet, you do not know where to go. You may have exhausted your unemployment insurance benefits and yet there is as yet no new job.

Take the case of King Saul when the Philistines gathered to attack Israel at Shunem and “when Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly” [1 Sam. 28: 4-5]. That was to be expected as the first natural reaction. But when he tried to inquire of the Lord on what to do, he received no response by dreams or vision or by Urim. So, he went to a medium, the witch of Endor that God allowed to conjure up the spirit of Samuel, the late prophet of Israel. Samuel bluntly told Saul that the Lord would deliver Israel into the hands of the Philistines, adding,

“and tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me.” On hearing about his unpleasant end, “Saul fell full length on the ground and was *dreadfully afraid* because of the words of Samuel.” Fear paralyzed him. [vv. 6-20]. . The following day, he and his sons were killed in battle [1 Sam. 31: 6].

d) *The outcome is unknown to us*

Sometimes, we do not even know how what we are afraid of will be resolved. For example, it is now four years since you left college and you are yet to obtain your first job. Your country’s economy is not getting better and the political leaders do not care because they thrive on a corrupt electoral system. Meanwhile, you have bills to pay, such as your student loans and family responsibilities. This kind of fear torments. That is why fear has been called a tormenting spirit [1 Jn 4: 18].

Take the case of Jehoshaphat as his kingdom faced formidable forces from Ammon, Moab and other nations. He gathered together men, women and children from all the cities of Judah and the whole assembly, after fasting, stood in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem to seek God’s help. At the end of his prayer, he said, “We have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; *nor do we know what to do*, but our eyes are upon You” [2 Chron. 20: 3-12].

3. Conclusion: Dealing with fear

From the forgoing, we see that fear can in deed paralyze. Ordinarily, Peter was a bold man who was also skilled and experienced in his fishing profession. However, it appears that Satan was particularly on his case from the time that Jesus told him that He would make him a fisher of men [Lk 5: 10]. For example, when Jesus unfolded to His disciples God’s plan that He had to go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and be raised the third day, Peter took Him aside to rebuke Him. Jesus responded sharply, “Get behind me, Satan!” [Matt. 16: 20-23], confirming that Peter was at the time under the devil’s influence. When the Jewish leaders came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew his sword and sliced off the ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant [Jn 18: 10]. He was ready to defend his Master. However, by the time Peter saw Jesus humiliated in a mock trial and sentenced to death, his boldness eluded him. Out of fear, he denied Jesus three times [Matt. 26: 69-75], again under the influence of Satan who had sought Jesus’ permission to sift Peter as wheat. The Lord prayed for him, that his faith ‘should not fail’ [Lk 22:31-33].

However, after the Holy Spirit had come on Peter on Pentecost Sunday, he became a brand new man, boldly leading the disciples before the Jews and foreign visitors to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire [Acts 2: 7- 14]. . Before the Sanhedrin, he told the Jewish rulers and leaders that were trying to stop him and the disciples from preaching Jesus that it was right to listen to God rather than to men [Acts 4: 1-14]. After Herod had killed James the brother of John and put

Peter in jail, hoping to kill him too after the Passover, Peter did not fear. Even though he was chained and guarded by four squads of soldiers, he was sound asleep until an angel woke him up and set him free [**Acts 12:1-6**]. His faith had finally flowered to conquer fear.

In summary, the following suggestions will help you to overcome your fear:

- Focus on your faith, not fear

Fear is a tormenting spirit and I doubt if you want to remain in that state. Do not allow Satan to push you to the abyss by working on your fear. The word of God says, “There is no fear in love, but *perfect love casts out fear*, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” [**1 Jn 4: 18**]. God has given you a spirit of power, love and a sound mind, not of fear [**2 Tim. 1: 7**].

Take the example of Paul as he was returning to Jerusalem from his last missionary journey. In every city along his route, the Holy Spirit testified, through prophets, that chains and tribulations awaited him in Jerusalem. What was Paul’s reaction? He said, “None of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so *that I may finish my race with joy and the ministry, which I received from Jesus*, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” [**Acts 20: 22-24**]. He focused on faith, not fear. So, if you must fear, fear God because the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom [**Job 28: 28**].

- Anchor your faith on God by Christ Jesus

It was Jesus who asked Peter to come, and Jesus is the only way to God [**Jn 14: 6**]. Some people trust in horses and some in chariots (i.e., human contraptions) but we rely on the Lord our God. That is why they bow down and are fallen but we rise and stand upright [**Ps. 20: 7-8**]. Take your stand on God and His peace which surpasses human understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus [**Phil. 4: 6-7**].

Fear paralyzes. Faith facilitates. Make the right choice!!