

Fear and Faith

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a seven-part series

July 21, 2019

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Numbers 13:30-14:4 (NRSV)

³⁰But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we.” ³²So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ³³There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴So they said to one another, “Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.”

Luke 8:22-25 (NRSV)

²²One day he [Jesus] got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.” So they put out, ²³and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. ²⁴They went to him and woke him up, shouting, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵He said to them, “Where is your faith?” They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?”

Peter 5:6-11 (NRSV)

⁶Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 4:10-13 (NRSV)

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Imagine a life without fear, worry, or anxiety. Though God wishes such a life for us, freedom from anxiety often seems beyond our grasp.

The unknown. If we stop to think about it, our lives are pretty much one large pile of unknowns. We take risks of one sort or another every day of our lives. Most of these unknowns don't trouble us at all and if they do, we deal with them easily. But sometimes, we face an unknown that terrifies us, paralyzes us, and robs of us whatever

peace of mind we might have enjoyed. Such an unknown can cause us to make terrible¹ decisions.

Trust or turn back?

Today's passage from the book of Numbers tells the story of a choice the Israelites had to make after escaping from slavery in Egypt. After they had fled across the Red Sea, God led Moses and the people to Mt. Sinai where God laid out the covenant within which God and the people would live together. God gave them a set of instructions for what it means to love God and to love neighbor, including the Ten Commandments. God gave them instructions to build a moveable home in which God would dwell with them. And God led them from Mt. Sinai to the borders of Canaan so that the Israelites might move into the land that God had promised to Abraham centuries before. Yet despite all this, the people seemed plagued and troubled by fears, doubts, and anxieties, sometimes even going so far as to wish they were still back in Egypt. Time and again, they quickly forgot about their escape from Pharaoh and even the food God had rained down upon them from heaven (Exodus 16). Instead, they could see only the unknowns ahead and embrace only their own fears.

When the Israelites arrived at the borders of Canaan, at God's instruction they sent in a team of spies to check things out. Sensible enough. However, when the spies returned after forty days, they reported that though the land flowed with "milk and honey," the Canaanites were simply too strong and as big as giants. In their fear, the people turned back, some even desiring to return to Egypt. Despite their experiences *with* God, their experience *of* God, their faith was weak. They trusted God too little. They weren't really sure that God would or could keep his promises. Indeed, their faith was not really placed in Yahweh, the God of Moses. Rather, their faith was in a god of their own making, a god much too small to trust with life and death. So, led astray by this tiny god of their own conception, the people would wander aimlessly for forty years until they had died, until their children were ready to trust, *fully* trust, the God-Who-Is and begin their conquest of Canaan.

Trust or panic?

Jesus' disciples were faced with big unknowns of their own and, regrettably, their response was often little better than the Israelites at the borders of Canaan. As told by Luke, one day Jesus and some of his disciples got into a boat to make the trip across the Sea of Galilee. It is a pretty big inland sea and Jesus fell asleep while making the trip. Because the hills encircling the sea are unusually steep (1200-1400 feet above the surface of the sea), storms come up quickly, and a real nasty one did so while Jesus slept. As we might, the disciples panicked, waking Jesus up as they screamed for their lives. Jesus promptly did two things. First, he "rebuked" the wind and the waves, bringing calm back to the sea.² Second, he admonished his disciples for their lack of faith. But the disciples have only traded one fear for another. They had been terrified by the storm, but now they were afraid of a new unknown. "Who is this?," they ask. Jesus commands even the winds and the water.

"Who is this?"

The disciples fear the storm because their faith in, their trust of, Jesus is weak and feeble. They fear the demonstration of Jesus' authority because they do not really comprehend who it is that they claim to follow. The disciples are like the Israelites who turned back from Canaan, in that the disciples' conception of Jesus is too small. Their

¹"Terrify," "terror," "terrible," and "terrific" are from the same Latin root, *terribilis*, meaning "to frighten."

²This will have to wait for another time to fully explore, but notice that Jesus rebukes the wind and waves. For many of the ancients, demons inhabited the sea, causing storms and other problems. This was especially true for the Jews, for whom the sea was a symbol of chaos and terror. This story is not about Jesus' power over nature, as we often think. This is the story of an exorcism! Hence, the personal "rebuke." Look at Luke 4:39, where Jesus "rebukes" a fever to save Simon's mother-in-law. Surprising stuff.

minds and hearts will require some significant expanding if they are to grasp who Jesus really is and trust him enough to set aside all their fears.

I once asked a colleague for a good book on overcoming our fears. I figured it would be something like, *The Bible's Ten Steps to Conquering Your Fears*. But no. Instead, I was urged to pick up J.B. Phillips', *Your God Is Too Small*, a slender volume written more than a half-century ago. After working on this study, I think understand a little better the recommendation. Underlying the fear of the Israelites was their lack of trust that God could actually keep his promises despite the presence of giants in Canaan. Yahweh might be their God, but, they asked themselves, was he *really* more powerful than all the other gods on the block? Jesus might be the disciples' Master and Teacher, but did he *really* have authority over all creation, including the demons in the sea? These people feared the unknown because their gods were too small.

Trading in anxiety and fear for contentment

Paul's God is definitely not too small. Even though he sits in prison and think his execution could be near, Paul finds contentment. In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as "content" (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ.³ But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian

What is the Opposite of Faith?

The disciples panic during the storm and Jesus scolds them for their lack of faith. Fear & faith. We sometimes tend to think that doubt is the opposite of faith, but Fred Craddock suggests that, as in this story, fear is the opposite of faith. Part of this is a language problem.

We translate the Greek word, *pistis*, as "faith." Regrettably, though *pistis* has a verb form, "faith" does not. No one says, "I faithed yesterday." This is too bad, because Bible translations use "believe" as the verb form of "faith," even though "believe" speaks to a state of mind, including an opinion. Similarly, "doubt" refers to a state of mind. But the best synonym for "faith" is "trust." Faith speaks more to matters of the heart than does belief. It is not so much, "what do you think"? as it is "whom do you trust?"

When the disciples panic, it is a lack of trust that leads to their fear. Despite all that they have seen and heard from Jesus, they don't really trust enough to put their lives in Jesus' hand.

perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the "content" person couldn't be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different; it is resting in the Lord whatever comes.

Yes, Paul knows that he may soon executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution.

How has Paul learned this? What is his "secret"? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul's secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist's portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will "fear no evil," confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul's cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God's house forever, because nothing – "not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ

³For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul's appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. The Greeks had always questioned the nature of "being." Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and "have our being." He talked to them about Jesus, but in their own words and ideas. Paul knew that all truth is God's truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in a really big God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul’s joyful contentment . . . and Peter’s . . . and our own.

Daily Bible Readings

More on fear and faith

Monday, Exodus 16 The people have fled Egypt but now fear starvation in the wilderness. They need not.

Tuesday, Joshua 10 Joshua and his soldiers fear the opposing armies (v. 8). They need not.

Wednesday, 1 Samuel 17 All Israel fears Goliath. They need not.

Thursday, Isaiah 61 & 62 Living in exile, the people fear that God has abandoned them forever. They need not.

Friday, Acts 7:54-8:1 Stephen faces death by stoning, but is unafraid! By the power of the Holy Spirit, his God is plenty big.

Saturday, 1 John 4:16b-21 “Perfect love casts out fear.”

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying key portions of Isaiah.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the parables of Jesus.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Video of each week’s class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy

Current series: *Amazing Stories*