

## When Your Child Struggles with Fear

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On April 8, 2022 @ 7:00 am

Series

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Context

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What do you do when your child is struggling with fear? Or when a scary story is being replayed by the mind and a sticky, frightful image won't stop haunting?

As parents, we have walked with our children through many a sleepless night, wiped many tears, looked under the bed gazillions of times, held them in our arms, and prayed over them for many hours. Answers seem easy and obvious, but it is a struggle to guide this child through the battle in her mind.

A good starting point when working with fear is to examine what the Bible says about fear. It doesn't simply tell us not to fear — it provides evidence on why we are not to fear. And it calls those who are around fearful people to "encourage the faint hearted" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). We know that Christ, as he walked among imperfect people, often said, "Fear not." We know that his presence was gentle, as Isaiah had prophesied about him: "A bruised reed He will not break" (Isaiah 42:3).

The Bible also has a solution to fear: trusting the Lord. There may be dangerous and frightening things out there, but we belong to someone who holds our very existence in His hands by the power of His Word (Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:3). The reason why we need not be afraid when we go through the valleys of the shadow of death is that the Shepherd has gone through those Himself. He took the punishment for our sins, including our tendency to seek refuge in things other than Him, and He has even defeated death. The death and resurrection of Christ apply to big things in our life —like terrible dysfunction of this world—and the little ones, like a night terror.

### **What Not to Do When Helping Someone to Work through Fear:**

Get frustrated and resort to manipulating the fearful out of fear. Often, we want immediate results and try to get the child to stop being afraid by bribing him or threatening.

Appeal to logic. Fear is often not based on reality and it is hard to rationalize it and make the feelings go away.

### **What We Do Need to Do:**

Speak about it openly. Help the child put his feelings into words: it looks to me that you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_, is this right?

“Turn to the Lord” — help the child turn to the Lord with these feelings. Help her see how big God is. Fear makes real things around us, including God, seem small and insignificant. As a parent, my role is to help the child keep the right perspective. And by the way: talking Big God theology with kids is important in the calm days so that in the days of crisis we have something to call to mind and something to lean on.

“You are not alone” — we say this all the time. One of the many lies of fear is that you are all alone facing danger and that it is up to you alone to overcome this. The Lord is always near us, His presence never leaves us. He does not sleep or grow weary of us, and His heart is tender toward our weaknesses. It is in these weaknesses that His grace is manifested. Help the child to ask for help and reassure him that the Lord delights in those who hope in His steadfast love (Psalm 147:11).

And here is what my husband says all the time, in times of crisis and in times of calm:

“Trust me.” A child needs to learn to trust the parent – that is how he learns to put his trust in something other than himself, and on a very basic level it starts with trusting his parents.

### **A Simple Exercise**

As parents who are called to raise these children in the Lord, we wanted to put this struggle with fear in the context of her life with the Lord. Here is a simple exercise we did with one of them to help root her confidence in Christ. This is by no means a formula to follow, but an example of how engaging a child in the life-giving Word may look like. We read Psalm 23 with her and asked her to do some simple things:

Let’s take turns dictating the verses to each other and **writing** them down. You **read**, and I write and then we switch. What do these words **mean**?

Can you **circle** three things that stand out to you about God and us? And I will circle mine. Can you **explain** why you picked these things?

Let’s pick a couple of things from this Psalm to **draw**. Can you explain what you drew? And here is my drawing! Can you bring this picture to mind —yours and mine— when you feel afraid? We can hang it up in your bedroom if you wish.

Let’s pray together about this Psalm.

What can we learn about Jesus in this Psalm?

### **Some Truths We Dwelled On as We Read the Psalm Together:**

God is the Lord of all: we do not have to let fear control us, but instead, can be led by our new Master, the Lord. Fear lies that it can make us its slave to obey its commands: “retreat, play frightful thoughts over and over, feel terror, hide”. But we already have a master —the Lord, who also calls Himself a Good Shepherd! God is the Good Shepherd who knows all our paths, which sometimes lead to the still waters, and sometimes they cut through valleys of the shadow of death.

He not only knows His sheep but takes care of us every step of the way. He is always near: the rod and staff are symbols of His guidance and protection.

He is the God who grants peace and victory in the midst of war.

His love is inseparable from us.

### **What Was Important to Me as I Worked with Her:**

That the child had a maximum *engagement* with the Word, not me talking *at* her, but that she would absorb it through different channels: writing, hearing, drawing, talking about it, picturing/imagining it, meditating on it.

That the child had some *initiative* in this: I gave her a choice in what to draw and which concepts to talk about.

That she saw *me* actively engaging with the Word and me being affected by it as well.

That she had an *image* in her head that could help solidify the truth for her.

That ultimately, she could get to know God's character through this, **because it is easier to trust someone you know!**

All the above is just an example of how we as parents can turn to the Lord with any situation and lean on Him and guide our children to Him. It may not bring about desirable results immediately but engaging with the Word of God will certainly bring good fruit of trust and rest that comes with it.

And last, but not least: besides helping my child through these points, as a parent, I also must depend on Christ to help me be patient and gentle as He is with those who are afraid. This situation works both ways: for me and my child to grow into Christ more!

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