

## The Sin Of Fear (Part One)

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Because we live in times that are increasingly uncertain and perilous, fear is a reality all will face at some time. A sobering consideration is that fear appears in a list in Revelation 21:8 describing those who will be cast into the Lake of Fire: "But *the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death*" (emphasis ours throughout).

As bad as murderers, the sexually immoral, and sorcerers are, note that God puts first, at the head of the line, the cowardly and unbelieving. *The Bible in Basic English* renders these first few words as, "But those who are full of fear and without faith. . . ." Why are fear and lack of faith such preeminent sins in God's eyes?

Before answering that question, let us first establish that fear and a lack of faith are sins. Notice Nehemiah 6:10-14:

Afterward I came to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was a secret informer; and he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, at night they will come to kill you." And I said, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" Then I perceived that God had not sent him at all, but that he pronounced this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this reason he was hired, *that I should be afraid and act that way and sin*, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me. My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat, according to these their works, and the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who would have made me afraid.

Nehemiah labels fear as sin. Romans 14:23 says the same of unbelief: "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for *whatever is not from faith is sin.*" A lack of faith is also sin.

So, why are they at the beginning of the list in Revelation 21:8? And, of the two, why is fear first? *The New Living Translation* (NLT) provides an answer to that question by rendering the verse's opening words as, "But cowards who turn away from me. . . ." In fear, cowards run from the battle, showing disloyalty to their sovereign. In the spiritual realm, they put their self-interest above everything, including God. Fear violates the first commandment by not giving God the preeminence it demands. It is not surprising, then, that the first sin listed is the one that so directly violates that first great commandment (Matthew 22:36-38).

In his commentary on Revelation 21:8, James Burton Coffman notes, "But it is not of natural fear and timidity that John speaks; it is that cowardice which in the last resort chooses self and safety before Christ." He nails the core problem of fear—at the end, it can cause us to reject God in favor of self.

**Fear Is Contagious**

Additional reasons for listing the sin of fear first are its severity and wide-ranging influence on an individual and those around him. Also, it is often the basis of other sins. Just how destructive is the sin of fear?

First, fear is contagious. Ernest K. Gann writes in *Fate Is the Hunter*: "Fear is a contagious disease, spreading from its first victim to others in the vicinity until it is powerful enough to take charge of a group, in which event it becomes panic." Numbers 13:31-33 begins to illustrate this very thing:

But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

Except for Joshua and Caleb, those who searched out the Promised Land express their fears. Numbers 14:1-3 reports what happened next:

So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?"

The children of Israel panicked. Fear can be like a virulent disease that sweeps through a group and can kill just as surely as any deadly contagious disease, as Numbers 14:27-29 records:

"How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who complain against Me? I have heard the complaints which the children of Israel make against Me. Say to them, 'As I live,' says the Lord, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you: The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above.'"

In our time, an example of this cycle of fear, panic, and death is the occasional news story of people in a group panicking and trampling others to death in an attempt to escape some fear-inducing event, such as a fire in a crowded nightclub.

### **Fear Begets Other Sins**

Fear is also a precursor to many other sins as suggested by Joanna Bourke in her work *Fear: A Cultural History*:

How does fear differ from dread, consternation or surprise? Anger, disgust, hatred and horror all contain elements of fear. Jealousy may be understood as fear of losing one's partner; guilt may be fear of God's punishment; shame may be fear of humiliation.

Even Yoda in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* recognizes the role of fear as a causative factor, explaining, "Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering." Under the word "fear," [thefreedictionary.com](http://thefreedictionary.com), lists 150 phobias—150 names for fear in its multitude of manifestations. Fear resides at the root of many problems.

Finally, and most importantly, fear can destroy the relationship we have with God. A coward puts his perceived self-interests above the wishes of his sovereign. Our sovereign is God. The fear becomes what we bow down to rather than God. As noted by Coffman earlier, fear is "that cowardice which in the last resort chooses self and safety before Christ." Fear can cause us to reject our Savior and eventually our salvation if not addressed.

Something like this happened to Peter as Mark 14:66-72 relates:

Now as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came. And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus of Nazareth." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are saying." And he went out on the porch, and a rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him again, and began to say to those who stood by, "This is one of them." But he denied it again. And a little later those who stood by said to Peter again, "Surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it." Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!" A second time the rooster crowed. Then Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And when he thought about it, he wept.

### **Where Fear Starts**

What causes this sin of fear? The second item listed in Revelation 21:8 points to the answer—unbelief. Psalm 78:13-16 gives an example of how this works:

For he divided the sea before them and led them through! The water stood up like walls beside them! In the daytime he led them by a cloud, and at night by a pillar of fire. He split open the rocks in the wilderness to give them plenty of water, as from a gushing spring. He made streams pour from the rock, making the waters flow down like a river! (NLT)

Listed are miracles God performed to provide for the needs of His people. Continuing in Psalm 78:17-21, we see Israel's response to God's clear display of His love and care for them:

Yet they kept on with their sin, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They willfully tested God in their hearts, demanding the foods they craved. They even spoke against God himself, saying, "God can't give us food in the desert. Yes, he can strike a rock so water gushes out, but he can't give his people bread and meat." When the Lord heard them, he was angry. The fire of his wrath burned against Jacob. Yes, his anger rose against Israel. . . . (NLT)

Even though God had provided water in abundance, they were afraid that He would not provide bread and meat. What was the basis, the cause, for this fear? The answer follows in Psalm 78:22

(NLT): ". . . for they did not believe God or trust him to care for them." Amazing! After all God did for them, they still could not muster the necessary faith and trust in God and His love for them (Hebrews 4:2). When push comes to shove, do we believe God's promises? Do we trust in the extent of His care and love for us (John 17:23) and that He will come to our aid (Psalm 34:19)?

What was God's response to the Israelites' display of fear? "The fire of his wrath burned against Jacob" (Psalm 78:21, NLT), foreshadowing Revelation 21:8. Fire is the response to fear from the God who does not change (Malachi 3:6).

### **Fear or Faith?**

Fear, then, is the result of a lack of faith, not believing in God's power and especially His love and willingness to act on our behalf. The fearful are that way because they lack faith. Christ reveals this connection in Mark 4:40: "But He said to them, 'Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?'"

When Christ saw fear, His immediate response was to question that person's faith. Fear is a very human reaction. As Christ indicates, how we respond depends on our degree of faith. When faith is weak or non-existent, fear becomes the controlling factor rather than faith. We begin to live by sight and not by faith (II Corinthians 5:7), and without faith, we cannot be saved: "And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:18-19).

Our rest is God's Kingdom. Just as a lack of faith—unbelief—barred ancient Israel from entering their rest, a lack of faith can bar us from entering ours, keeping us out of the Family of God. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). We are seeing that sin is not the result of weakness as we normally think of it, as in we are "weak in the flesh." Yes, there is weakness, but what is the root of sin—its cause? When looked at closely, the root of sin is "unbelief," as Israel's example illustrates. Unbelief—a lack of faith—causes and leads to producing sin in our lives, pointing to our real foundational weakness: a lack of faith. This is Paul's message in Romans 14:23: ". . . for whatever is not from faith is sin."

Using another of Peter's failures, we can see both the cause and the effects of uncontrolled fear:

Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." 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?" (Matthew 14:25-31)

We see that doubt causes fear, but we also see a hint of how we can combat that fear and get it under control. As long as Peter kept his focus on Christ, he could do the impossible, but once he began walking by sight, fear gripped him. Under its control, he was no longer able to do the impossible. Even though fear is a natural human emotion, do we control it or does it control us (see Genesis 4:7)?

Hebrews 3:12 warns, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God." We need to be on guard against unbelief. The author conjures up a picture of an enemy ready to pounce, advising us that we always need to be at the ready for its attack. We must face it and overcome it.

This verse is not talking about the normal unbelief and its fruit of fear that all people have, for fearfulness is a common human condition. As our Creator, God understands that doubts will creep in now and again. Rather, it speaks of a heart controlled by doubt, by unbelief, leading to fear that can cause us to cut and run from the living God. That kind of heart will drag a person down just as Peter's doubt dragged him down into the waters of Galilee.

The central peril of unbelief is that it breaks the trust that is the basis of our relationship with God. We can see how this worked in Satan. God created him perfect (Ezekiel 28:15), yet somewhere along the line he no longer believed that God was good and doubted that God had his best interests at heart. This doubt about God's love led to the fear that he would not get what he deserved. That fear, born of his unbelief and doubt, led to his rebellion and the most glaring example yet of departing from the living God.

Does God have *our* best interests at heart? Jeremiah 29:11 says, Yes! "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." As the old saying goes, this is straight from the horse's mouth—from the highest authority in the universe. The only question is do we believe it with every fiber of our beings?

Why should we not fear? How do we combat it? More answers to those questions will be in Part Two, along with an explanation of the fear paradox.