

HAVE YOU EVER been afraid? I mean *really afraid*. Not just a little scared but *terrified*. Have you ever been so filled with fright that you were absolutely paralyzed? Or, have you been so thoroughly possessed by fear that your body and soul seemed powerless to do anything against it?

The fear monster has gripped you by the throat, lifted you off your feet, and pinned you against the wall. There you are, dangling in the air, caught in his stranglehold, unable to breathe, unable to move, unable even to cry for help. As he squeezes your throat tighter and tighter, all you can do is look down at that stark, grotesque face of this monster called fear whom you dread more than almost anything else!

Perhaps you know exactly what I'm talking about. Or, maybe you have had milder encounters with the fear monster. You've seen him from afar and you respect him, although you've never been as utterly disabled by his paralyzing grip as I've just described. If you are reading this booklet, my guess is that you or someone you love has caught more than just a glimpse of him.

If so, I have good news for you: fear doesn't really possess you outwardly like the paralyzing grip of a monster. It is an emotion that you ultimately can learn to control (and you are responsible before God for doing just that). The fear monster *was born, resides, and must be slain—in your heart*. I would like to show you from the Word of God what you can do to slay this bogus bogeyman so as to keep him from terrorizing you.

Let's begin by briefly examining the place fear *should* have in your life. Fear, like every other emotion (anger, hate,

and jealousy, to name a few), can be both constructive and destructive. It has power for *good* as well as for *evil*.

“But how can fear be constructive?” you wonder. Well, first, fear can keep you from *physical* danger (such as falling off buildings or going to jail or getting HIV/AIDS). Second, it can keep you from *spiritual* danger (such as falling into displeasure with God, exposing yourself to temptation, being brought into bondage by a life of dominating sin, being disfellowshipped by your local church, or being disqualified from ministry). Solomon said, “By the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil” (Prov. 16:6).

If you are a fearful person, you undoubtedly have *some* idea of how destructive fear can be. It is essential, however, that you understand that above and beyond the misery that sinful fear produces, it is truly offensive to God.

So, at what point does fear become sinful? This is the question I would like us to consider next.

Characteristics of Sinful Fear

Fear is sinful when it proceeds out of unbelief, or distrust, in God.

When you are afraid because you do not believe that God *can* or *will* do what he has clearly promised in his Word, your fear is sinful.

And in the fourth watch of the night [Jesus] came to them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were *terrified*, and said, “It is a ghost!” And they *cried out in fear*. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage, it is I; *do not be afraid*.” Peter said to Him “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But

— | | —

seeing the wind, *he became frightened*, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (Matt. 14:25–31)

Peter was afraid because he doubted. He distrusted God because his faith was small. Which promises of God do you sometimes not believe?

Fear is sinful when that which produced the fear is attributed more power than what the Bible allows.

When you believe that what you fear has more power than God, your fear is sinful.

“I say to you, My friends, do not be *afraid* of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: *fear* the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!” (Luke 12:4–5)

Make a short list of the things that you fear. Think in terms of the following categories: your feelings, your enemies, your environment, your circumstances, your future, your finances, or the loss of your most cherished possessions.

Do you *really* believe that God is *bigger* than these things? If you really believed that God is omnipotent, you wouldn't be so frightened.

Fear is sinful when it attributes to God characteristics that are inconsistent with his nature.

When Christians are afraid, it is almost certainly because they have a misperception of God. Some people have what I refer to as the “Good Lord” mentality. These people can usually be spotted by their statements such as, “My God wouldn't send anyone to hell,” or, “I'm going to sin and God is going to forgive me. No big deal!” These individuals probably don't fear God enough.

The other extreme is what I like to call “The unmerciful tyrant' mentality.” This is the view of God as a “cosmic killjoy” who not only shows little mercy and compassion on his children, but also makes it his goal to quash any happiness and fun they might experience. Hebrews 11:6, however, effectively refutes this view: “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that *He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*”

I appreciate what Samuel Bourn said in his discourse titled “On Religious Fear,” published in 1760.

All true fear of the Supreme Being can only spring from a right knowledge of him. And it consists, first and fundamentally, in conceiving and believing him to be what he is, most powerful indeed, but at the same time, most wise, just, and benevolent. . . .

The character and title most constantly ascribed by our *Savior* and his *Apostles* to the Supreme being is *The Father*: and the appellation [or name] by which we are taught to address him, [is] *Our Father in heaven*. . . . But if we impute