

Which Path do You Choose?

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It was a perfect situation. They lived in a house that had every convenience that anyone could desire. The breathtaking view from the front of the house was only exceeded by what could be seen from the rear. The kitchen was always stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables. The weather was always mild with cool breezes caressing their home. Hiking and swimming was always available in this nature-lover's paradise. No pesky insects or obnoxious intruders ever disturbed the peace in their tranquil surroundings.

Worry was an unknown word in this couple's vocabulary. Every need was taken care of by their benefactor even before they realized they had a need. They never experienced pain or sorrow and their joy was complete. The only work required of them was to be the caretakers for their beautiful garden surroundings.

Regularly, the owner of their garden paradise visited them. Typically, he visited in the evening when the sun was about to set. The couple looked forward to these visits because the owner took a special interest in all their activities as well as a continuing concern for their needs as human beings. These visits were always the highlight of their day.

All of us know the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience and expulsion from the Garden as described in Genesis 1-3. Many times we focus on the sin that Adam and Eve committed. However, rarely do we think about the root consequence of the sin they committed.

The obvious consequences of their choice included being cast out of the Garden, women suffering through childbirth, men ruling over women, men toiling over the ground which produced thorns and being ashamed of their nakedness after eating the fruit.

Certainly, all of these results were significant. But, the most far reaching impact that occurred as a result of their sin is found in Genesis 3:9-10. Adam's response to Jesus' question indicates the problem: "**But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?' He answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.'**" The common perception is that Adam and Eve hid in the Garden because they felt guilty.

However, underlying that guilt was fear. In this article, we will examine Biblical examples of what causes fear, how we can address fear in our lives and some wonderful promises that God has given to help us overcome fear.

The story of Abraham provides an example of great faith. The faith necessary to be able to offer your own son as a sacrifice is beyond the understanding of most of us. But, Abraham's life was not always an example of a pillar of faith. On two occasions, because he was fearful for his life, he attempted to fool a king into believing that Sarah was his sister instead of his wife (Genesis 12:11-20 and Genesis 20:1-14).

Apparently, the type of fear displayed by Abraham was also evident in his son Isaac. **"When the men of that place asked him [Isaac] about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' because he was afraid to say, 'She is my wife.' He thought, 'The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful.'" (Genesis 26:7)** Isaac's fear caused him to fall into the same trap that his father had. (Interestingly enough, both Abraham and Isaac had the same problem when confronted by the same king, King Abimelech!)

The example of Jacob and Esau further demonstrates how fear can permeate the soul of an individual. Jacob was an individual who battled in the night with the Lord, but for nearly 20 years lived in fear of his twin brother Esau. He finally returned to his homeland at the direction of the Holy Spirit. Jacob prepared to meet his brother **"in great fear and distress."** (Genesis 32:7) Consider Jacob's sons. At least ten years after they sold Joseph into slavery, Joseph's brothers interpreted his actions as punishment for their earlier deeds.

The actions of God also cause people to be fearful. When Moses saw the burning bush, he was quite fearful. **"At this Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look at God."** (Exodus 3:6) After the children of Israel left Egypt, God spoke directly to them.

What was their response? **"When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'" (Exodus 20:18-19)**

One last example showing the results of fear. King Saul, during his reign, became more and more arrogant about what the Lord had given him. The Lord rejected Saul as King when he failed to obey God's instructions regarding the complete destruction of the Amalekites, along with their flocks. Saul was fearful of what the people would do if he followed God's requirement.

As he continued to rule, fear began to overcome him. Finally, when the Philistines attacked the Israelites, the Bible says: **"When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart."** (1 Samuel 28:5)

Saul was so completely overwhelmed with terror that he finally consulted a medium. At the end of his life, terror completely controlled him and he ultimately gave his life to Satan.

From the beginning, Satan's activities on Earth have caused fear within the minds of all members of the human race. He has been very successful in creating an atmosphere of tension and fear in all of us. Fear grows almost imperceptibly. Consider the following scenario:

1. If we become separated from God, we open our hearts to fear.
2. As the level of sin increases in our lives, we become more fearful of righteousness.
3. When our faith in God is reduced, we become more susceptible to fear.
4. Allowing fear to consume us can cause us to sin and will eventually eliminate our faith.

Separation from God

In the Garden of Eden, by their act of sin, Adam and Eve separated themselves from the source of their strength. Until they ate the forbidden fruit, they had never felt nor experienced guilt. They did not know what death was, but they knew they had sinned and they were *afraid* of the consequences of their act. A sinful act causes a sense of guilt in the sinner and this guilt separates us from Christ.

Separation from Christ affects us all differently, depending on our focus. For the individual that has given his or her life over to sin, there is a constant, nagging fear that evil deeds will become more and more apparent and eventually there will be a price to pay for this type of lifestyle. "Be sure that your sins will find you out."

The people that strive to live up to a moral code have a more difficult dilemma. Most people who have high moral standards believe that there will be an afterlife. Specifically, some Christians believe they have the potential for Heaven if they meet the moral standard established in the Scriptures.

Satan is our accuser and he constantly reminds the struggling Christian where they have fallen short. However, the Bible is clear: **"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** (Romans 3:23) We all have sinned and continue to sin. So, if we evaluate our lives by our works, we cannot help but be fearful. No one is worthy of Heaven.

If we do not accept the grace Jesus Christ provided by His shed blood and believe instead that we can attain salvation through our deeds, we open the door for Satan to place fear in our hearts. This fear separates us from God and prevents us from walking the walk of a true Christian.

Fear of Righteousness

Many times we become focused on God's power and how it will be displayed during end-time events. The power of God is truly awesome. However, it is the righteousness of God that sinners fear most. The children of Israel were fearful when God gave His law to them. They recognized their sinful state and realized that they could not be exposed to the righteousness of God and live. Even people close to God realized that they were not worthy to be exposed to His righteousness.

The prophet Isaiah cried, **"Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."** (Isaiah 6:5)

Certainly, there is a stark difference between sinners and the glory and righteousness of God. We can also see this distinction in the world around us today. Individuals who are consumed by sin have no desire to associate with Christians. Even though they cannot express their feelings adequately, they recognize how uncomfortable they feel around Christians. Consequently, they

try to stay away.

Perhaps the best description of sinners facing the righteousness of God is the seventh seal of Revelation 6:15-16: **"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, `Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"**

Fear Instead of Faith

If we do not exercise our faith, we give Satan the opportunity to gain a foothold in our lives. We all have heard the story of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus had just spoken to a large crowd. He was very tired and fell asleep in the back of a boat that was crossing the Sea of Galilee.

The waves caused by the storm were so high, they broke over the boat and nearly swamped it. The disciples woke Jesus and said, "**Teacher, don't you care if we drown? He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, `Quiet! Be still! Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, `Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'"** (Mark 4:38-40)

Many Biblical examples illustrate that when we lack faith in God, we allow fear to overcome us. As a result of misplaced trust, Adam and Eve were frightened when the Lord walked in the Garden. Abraham and Isaac did not always believe that God would see them through, so they allowed their fear to control their actions. King Saul became convinced that his own actions enabled him to accomplish much, thereby placing faith in himself rather than where it should have been placed. Then, he decided to place his faith in Samuel, the man, rather than the God of Samuel.

The first time the children of Israel approached the promised land at Kadesh Barnea, God directed them to send spies to explore the land. The twelve spies brought back a report about the wonders of the land.

However, ten of the twelve spies did not have the faith in God that Caleb and Joshua had. Because the ten lacked faith, a fear-full report caused an entire nation to rebel against God and ultimately caused them to wander in the wilderness for 38 years. Their wandering lasted until the men who had the opportunity to observe the miracles in Egypt and the desert died, allowing their children to inherit the promised land.

The strongest Biblical support of fear replacing faith is the story of Peter's attempt to walk on water.

Read Matthew 12:25-31: **"During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. `It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: `Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' `Lord, if it's you,' Peter replied, `tell me to come to you on**

the water.' `Come,' he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was *afraid* and, beginning to sink, cried out, `Lord, save me!' Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. `You of little *faith*,' he said, `why did you doubt?'" When Peter took his eyes off of Jesus, fear overcame him and consequently, there was no possibility for him to have faith in Jesus.

Fear did not directly cause Peter to sink, but the loss of faith resulting from his fear did.

One Bible story of Elijah is a constant source of encouragement to me. Immediately after Elijah witnessed an incredible display of power by God (fire coming down from Heaven to burn the sacrifice), Elijah allowed his mind to wander from the awesomeness of God.

Instead, Jezebel's threat to take Elijah's life sent him running in fear for his life. But, even if we allow our sinful human nature to take over, God still attempts to cut through our fear, giving us an opportunity to build our faith, just as he did with Elijah.

Fear Causes Sin

The emotion of fear overcomes us only when we take our eyes off Jesus Christ and what He can do in our lives. If Satan is allowed to gain this one foothold in our soul, through this one weakness he can draw us further and further into sin. This is what happened with both Abraham and Isaac. They feared for their lives and eventually lied to an earthly King, rather than place their faith in the Heavenly King, who could see them through any circumstance they would ever have to face.

The children of Israel had numerous opportunities to build their faith, but instead, they allowed their fears to control them and thereby, placed themselves on Satan's ground. They ultimately paid for their lack of faith with their lives.

Instead of placing his faith in God, King Saul allowed his fear to consume him to the point that he completely placed himself under Satan's control by visiting the witch of Endor.

Today, "experts" abound, trying to help people analyze and overcome deeply rooted fears. Fear of heights, fear of meeting people, fear of confinement . . . these "phobias" are recognized and treated. However, if fears (or paranoias) like these are allowed to control our lives, we will never be able to accomplish the mission God has given us.

Most readers believe that a number of global disasters will soon occur. Many could become very frightened by these soon-coming events. If we focus on the horrendous nature of these events, to the exclusion of telling the end-time story, we will allow Satan to gain a foothold in our lives just like the children of Israel did. A more insidious problem for many people, who believe that end-time events are about to occur, is the fear that other people will reject what they have to say.

Rejection by peers can have a significant emotional impact. Closely related to the fear of

rejection is the fear of being wrong. Satan utilizes his strongest temptations on the people who are striving to walk with Christ. He will use these tools to bring the emotion of fear into the mind of the strongest saints. The only way we are able to defend ourselves against Satan's attacks is to completely place our faith in Jesus Christ.

He is the **only** one that can cast the fear out of our lives and prevent Satan from using his wiles against us.

God has used the emotion of fear to protect us from dangerous situations. Satan, on the other hand, often uses this same emotion in an attempt to control us. The challenge for us is to recognize that by placing our faith in God, He will eliminate all unnecessary fear.

God has given us many tools to face our fears and achieve victory over them. God can give us peace. Jesus stated "**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.**" (John 14:27)

The peace Jesus offers, gives us the confidence to face any peril this world has to offer. People throughout the world are searching for peace. Currently, world attention is focused on Bosnia Herzegovina as the Dayton Peace Accord is implemented. People are saying "Peace and safety," but Christians desire a peace this world cannot offer.

How can we obtain the peace that only Jesus can provide? In His own words, Jesus said "**Don't be afraid; just believe.**" (Mark 5:36) If we place our faith in Jesus, the peace that only the Holy Spirit can provide will permeate our existence, helping us fulfill the work Jesus has given us to do. The children of Israel rarely had an opportunity for peace.

Examine the promises that God gave them if they were willing to keep their covenant with Him. "**I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid . . .**" (Leviticus 26:6) "**The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will speak no lies, nor will deceit be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.**" (Zephaniah 3:13) We can have that same result if we put our faith in God and trust Him to remove fear from our hearts. He says "**I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.**" (Jeremiah 31:33)

Two simple words, two profound results. Fear or faith. Are we going to open our hearts to fear and allow Satan to accomplish his goal in our life? Or, are we going to accept the peace that passes understanding through our faith in our Heavenly Father?

One word leads us to sin and death. The other word leads to peace and salvation. Which word do *you* choose?