

THE FEAR FACTOR

DOUG BRENDEL
DAVID G. BROWN

WWW.COMPASSDVDS.COM
Phoenix, Arizona, U.S.A.

THE FEAR FACTOR

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FOREWORD

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” —*Matthew 22:37-39*

This is a book of messages, presented almost exactly as they were delivered at The Compass, a house church in Arizona. Since that time, The Compass has also become a nationwide television program.

The Compass is about two things: loving God, and loving people (Matthew 22:37-39). Sometimes, in a nod to Dr. Seuss, we refer to them as “Thing 1” and “Thing 2.”

These messages were written and presented by teaching pastor Doug Brendel, with enormous input and editing throughout by lead pastor David G. Brown.

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1

HOW AM I DRIVING?

Well, the NFL regular season ended this past Monday night, and the playoffs will begin this Saturday with the first of the wild card games.

I grew up in the Chicago area and this basically means for the most part I've been rooting for a really bad team: "da Bears." If you're a Bears fan, one of the teams you hate the most is the Green Bay Packers. So it's a horrible thing for me to say anything good about the Packers, but you have to admit that their quarterback, Brett Favre, is amazing.

He's a phenomenon. Back in November he started his 200th consecutive game; nobody else has ever even come close to such a record — and he's still going strong. And this is not a matter of luck. He has faced adversity. Last year, Favre played with a broken thumb on his throwing hand. This season, he was knocked out of one game with a concussion. During another game, his left shoulder popped out of its socket. His father died of a heart attack this past year. Nine months later his brother-in-law died in an accident. Then in October, Favre's wife was diagnosed with breast cancer.

You might expect him, after all of this, to go around making motivational speeches about facing life's challenges and toughing it out, etc., etc. But Favre has a different perspective. He doesn't see himself as a hero. He just sees himself as a working stiff. A guy who goes to work every day and gives it his best, come what may. He's not cold-hearted — he's cried over the losses of his loved ones, he's grieved over his wife's illness. But when the reporters come to interview him about how he deals with the pressure, Favre just kind of shrugs his shoulders and quotes something his wife told him: "See life through the windshield, and not through the rear-view mirror."

We're driving into a New Year this evening, and our journey this year will be shaped by where we're looking. Am I

driving with my eyes on the road ahead? Or am I driving with my eyes on rear-view mirror? Am I eager for this year's challenges and opportunities? Or am I afraid I'll fail? I can't drive well if I'm always looking backward. Expecting something terrible to be sneaking up on me.

There are two basic motivators in life: desire for gain, and fear of failure. Every choice I make is driven by one or the other.

Look at how true this is, not only at the great over-arching decision points of our lives, but all the way down to the details. For example:

My choice of a wife — a huge decision — was motivated by a desire for gain: I imagined I would gain her companionship, her affection, her wisdom ... her money! I could have chosen a different wife, but I was afraid of failure: I was afraid I wouldn't like her very much after a few months.

My choice of a Christmas gift for my wife last month was motivated by a desire for gain — I imagined I would please her, and this would reward me in some way. I could have chosen a different gift, but I was afraid of failure: I didn't feel confident Kristina would really appreciate the Chicago Bears beer stein.

My choice of which restaurant to suggest for dinner on Saturday night was motivated by a desire for gain — I imagined she would approve my suggestion, and we would have a lovely evening together. I could have chosen a different restaurant, but I was afraid of failure: afraid she wouldn't like my choice, or afraid the food would be bad, or the service would be lousy, or the cost would be too high.

My choice of which car to drive on Date Night was motivated by a desire for gain — I wanted the comfort of my own car; I hate her car. I admit I had some fear of failure — I know she prefers her own car — but I sort of calculated that she knows I prefer to drive my own car, and she loves me and wants me to be happy, and this issue isn't as important to her as it is to me, so I overcame my fear of failure and let my desire for gain make the call.

My choice of whether to open the car door for her or let her open her own door was motivated by a desire for gain — if I opened the door for her, I would gain her approval. If I let her open her own door, I would gain a few seconds and we could be on our way quicker. I felt so confident that I was going to get

away with it either way, I had hardly any fear of failure on this one at all.

My choice of how fast to drive — my choice of whether to actually use my turn signal — my choice of which parking space to take — every decision is motivated by a desire for some kind of gain, some kind of advantage — or a fear of some kind of failure, some kind of loss, or disadvantage. Every decision we make lands somewhere between the two.

Some of us have a strong desire for gain — so strong that we're reckless. But not most of us. Most of us default way to the fear-of-failure side of the motivation meter. Most of us live with a fear of failure.

This is why, when someone makes a gain-motivated choice in a situation where millions of other people would have made a fear-of-failure choice, we call that person a "hero." The firefighter who charges into a burning building to save a child is making a gain-motivated decision, overcoming the natural fear response to achieve the goal. If everyone were wired to make this kind of choice every day, it wouldn't be heroic to us; it would be normal. But the normal response to a burning building is fear. It takes a hero to go in there.

Is the firefighter fearless? No. The firefighter is facing the fear. It's crazy not to fear something that's dangerous. To deny our fears or repress them would be hypocritical, and foolish. They're real. They're there. Fear happens. There are risks in life, every day. Our choices have consequences, so fear can be healthy.

But the crucial question is: *Am I driven by the fear?* Am I making decisions based on the fear? Am I able to see potential for gain, and go for it — or am I blinded to the potential for gain by my fear of failure? Am I in balance?

One of the ways in which we're made in God's image is that we have a free will — and one of the effects of having a free will is that I can make a decision that contradicts my emotions. I am free to default to my instincts, of course — so when something scary approaches, I can just run away. But I am also free to harness my instincts, to inspect my own thinking, and choose another response to that scary something that I'm facing.

Jesus told a story about desire for gain and fear of failure, in **Matthew 25:14-30**. It was that famous story of a business owner who turned his operation over to three top managers for a

while. He divided the pie into eighths — and gave the smartest guy five-eighths, the middle guy a quarter, and the last guy one-eighth. After a long time, the boss came back.

Matthew 25:

20 The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have *gained* five more.’

The boss loved it. Gave the guy a big promotion.

22 “The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have *gained* two more.’

The boss loved this too. Gave this guy a big promotion as well.

Then the third guy reports in.

25 ...I was *afraid*, he says, and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

The boss flips out. Fires him. Votes him off the island. He hadn’t hired the guy to be fearful. He had hired the guy to manage his money for him. But the guy’s fear of failure had obscured any vision of the potential for gain. Living in fear is a squandering of opportunity ... of life.

* * *

What am I doing, really, when I ponder a challenge or an opportunity, when I consider a decision? I’m trying to make a prediction. I’m trying to predict my emotions. How will it *feel* if I make this choice? How will it feel if I make the *opposite* choice? How will it feel if I compromise between the two? How will it feel if I do nothing at all? If I gain something, it’s going to feel good. If I fail and lose, it’s going to feel bad. I’m trying to forecast my own happiness.

But I have interesting news for you. Scientists have now documented the fact that I cannot forecast my own happiness. A series of studies conducted by psychologists Daniel Gilbert of Harvard University and Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia found that people are *incapable of accurately predicting their own future feelings*.

The central problem, the essential emotional miscalculation that we tend to make, is something called “durability bias.” This is the tendency to exaggerate how long a feeling will last. When I’m brokenhearted, it feels like I’m going to be brokenhearted for a year. When I’m giggling with delight, I

can't really focus on how miserable I may be feeling tomorrow. And when I imagine a decision making me unhappy, I imagine being unhappy for a long, long time. It's difficult for me to imagine that decision making me unhappy for just a short time — so it's difficult for me to take that choice.

Gilbert and Wilson experimented with college professors achieving tenure — they studied couples falling in or out of love — they looked at people facing the prospect of a serious medical problem — and in every case, people predicted their emotions *wrong*. In every situation, people thought that good news would make them way happier, way longer, than it actually did. People thought that bad news would devastate them far more terribly, and for a much longer period of time, than it actually did.

Big situations, small situations. Didn't matter. The results were the same. People couldn't accurately predict how happy they would be 15 minutes after eating a bite of spaghetti, any better than they could predict how happy they would be 15 years after their wedding, or 15 years after their divorce.

The ramifications of this phenomenon are significant. If I don't have a handle on my materialistic instincts, for example, I will see something I want and imagine that it will make me happier than it actually will — and I'll be driven to buy it. Or I'll imagine that *not* having that new toy or piece of equipment or whatever will make me sadder than it actually will, and for a longer time than it actually will — and that fear of loss will compel me to buy it. Either way, I'm going broke because of my “durability bias”!

The conclusion that Dr. Gilbert comes to in this research is that “if people were better emotional forecasters, they would realize that fears of unhappiness tend to be overblown, and they could act more on their hopes.” Even if the thing I fear comes to pass, it will not hurt me as deeply, or for as long, as I imagine. Barry Schwartz, writing about the Gilbert and Wilson experiments, says, “the surprise isn't how often we make bad choices; the surprise is how seldom they defeat us.”

I think this is why Jesus said over and over, “Don't be afraid.” This is why the Bible says “Don't be afraid” in some form or another more than 400 times. It's not that bad stuff will never happen to you. It will. And he's not saying that you shouldn't calculate the risks. You should. But bad stuff will happen whether I'm afraid or not. And bad stuff will happen

whether I accurately calculate the risks or not. But good stuff will happen too. Life zigzags.

If I've given my life to God, he's committed to me. He is committed to planting healthy desires in my heart, so the things I desire to gain will be things he desires for me to desire! He is committed to helping me get there, so I'm not going on this mission under my own power. He is committed to giving me his best, even if it looks like I've failed. He is committed to comforting me, even when it hurts.

What does all this mean? It means I can be at peace while I'm going through this zigzagging life. I can have a healthy, appropriate fear of failure, and a healthy, appropriate desire for gain, and live in balance, and face challenges, and enjoy life.

* * *

Our lead pastor David G. Brown has a certain illness — I'm sharing this with his permission. He calls it POM disease. POM stands for Part Of Me. When David is facing a big decision, this syndrome flares up. He says, "Part of me wants to go this way, but the other part of me wants to go the other way." He wants the gain, but his vision of the potential is clouded by his fear of failure. "I sit paralyzed," he says, "because all I can see is the potential for catastrophe."

Jesus says "Don't be afraid," and Romans 8 assures us that God is giving us his best, and now the scientists confirm that life won't be as bad as we fear — and yet we live in fear. It's sad and unnecessary, because as God's child, I have the option of trusting God.

I *could* trust God to plant healthy desires in my heart, and I can pursue those desires. In other words, I can judge a risk intelligently, and then go for it, without a lot of anxiety. Psalm 37 says I can.

I *could* trust God to strengthen me in the quest. Psalm 28 says I can.

As God's child, I *could* trust him to be in control of my life, so even if I seem to fail, God can make use of that situation for the ultimate good. Romans 8 says I can.

As God's child, I *could* trust him to comfort me when it hurts. Psalm 71 says I can.

But many of us live with a fear of failure, because when you get right down to it, we don't really, truly trust God. We don't actively, consciously believe God is going to do all this

stuff he says he's gonna do. We don't really trust him to make good on these promises. And as a result, we live a diminished life.

* * *

What if you want to live differently? It's probably not realistic to expect you to just flip some kind of internal switch and instantly trust God totally. We're only human. We need some tools to help us get there. Let me offer you a kind of checklist — maybe you'll want to put this someplace where it will catch your eye every day, maybe you'll want to review it and talk with God about it as you face your next major decision. Or maybe just as you're trying to get to the weekend!

1. Tell God specifically that you want him to be the boss, and ask him specifically to give you healthy desires.

Jesus says in **Matthew 6:33**: **...seek first his kingdom** [his kingship] **and his righteousness** [his design for your life], **and all these things will be given to you as well**. Make him your personal King.

Psalm 37 says:

4 Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

5 Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this.

It's a firm promise! If I have honestly asked God to be the one giving me my desires, then I can trust that the gain I desire is from him. I'll have a deepening sense of peace, rather than turmoil, about the decision I'm making.

2. Decide to decide.

Circle a date on the calendar, and determine to make a decision one way or the other on that date. Courage is not the absence of fear — it's the decision to act in spite of the fear. When you "decide to decide," you determine to act *as if there were no fear*.

Proverbs 3:21-26 suggests that if you've studied the situation as best you can, using what the Scripture calls **sound judgment and discernment**, then you can afford to relax.

Proverbs 3:

24 When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

25 Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,

26 for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.

3. Set up an Ebenezer.

What's an Ebenezer? In **1 Samuel 7:12**, Samuel took a stone and set it up in a certain spot and named it Ebenezer, which means **"Thus far has the Lord helped us."** Look back over your life to remember situations where God protected you or helped you or improved your situation — and then set up physical reminders of that evidence. Maybe you'll program your calendar to remind you of it on a certain day each week. Maybe you'll stick a little sign on your bathroom mirror. Maybe you'll put a symbol of God's provision on your keychain, so you'll notice it every time you unlock your door or start up your car.

In that story that Jesus told, about the business owner and the three managers, there's a little phrase toward the end of the story that's often overlooked. Jesus says:

Matthew 25:29: ...Everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

The way God has already provided for you — the blessings he has already brought into your life — the stuff he's already given you — the way he's protected you — the scrapes he's gotten you out of — the messes he's helped you escape — the joy he's allowed you to experience from time to time — the sources of pleasure he's arranged for you — what makes you think he's done? Jesus says, there's more for you. What God has given you is just the beginning. Set up an Ebenezer. Recite God's blessings, to build your faith for the good things God is going to do in the days ahead.

4. Memorize the truth.

Memorize **Psalm 27:1: The Lord is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life — of whom shall I be afraid?**

Or **Romans 8:28: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

Or **Jeremiah 29:11: For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**

Or **Philippians 4:13: I can do everything through him who gives me strength.**

Or Philippians 4:19: And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

If my brain is full of this kind of talk, there's less room for the negative, hopeless, dreary story that my fears are telling me. I'll be able to get through the day a lot better!

5. Be willing to fail.

This is not a cop-out. It's reality. **1 Corinthians 1:27** says: **...God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.** And this was written by a guy who got run out of town, arrested, ultimately got the death penalty — the apostle Paul. Yet even so, he could say, **...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8).**

And even when God allows difficulty to come our way, he offers us comfort. **Psalm 71** says:

20 Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.

21 You will increase my honor and comfort me once again.

God may take you down the road to great victory. Or to failure. Or to something completely unexpected somewhere in between. But walking with him along the way will be the valuable experience — more valuable than the victory you dreamed of.

In the eternal scheme of things, my failure will be pretty small. Having given myself to God, I have nothing to lose. The thing that I fear — the thing that has me tied up in knots today — probably won't shape eternity. The fear I feel may not actually have anything to do with reality. Our fears are often “gut level” — and they could be banished if we just asked ourselves honestly, “What am I really afraid of?” God is going to preserve my life. He's committed to that. I can't really help him do his job better. He's already omnipotent!

A friend of mine recites kind of a “mantra” that might help you as you face the future — it goes like this: *I admit I am afraid. I also admit my fears are unfounded. I will press on.*

It's the “unfounded” part I struggle with — because my fears *feel* so *well* founded. The idea that God's commitment to me is total ... the idea that God's commitment to me is airtight ... the idea that God's commitment doesn't necessarily mean I'm

going to succeed at everything ... all of this stuff is hard to swallow. But I will press on. Like Brett Favre of the Green Bay Packers, I will keep showing up. I will try to keep my eyes on the road ... looking out, full of hope, through the windshield, not back, full of fear, through the rear-view mirror.

* * *

This is what Jesus did as he headed to Gethsemane. He was approaching the most frightening episode of his earthly life. But he pressed on. **Hebrews 12:2** says **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

He kept his eyes looking forward. Past the terror — to what was coming after that. He focused on the joy that would eventually come — the fulfillment of the Father's promises. He was proving his love for us. He was demonstrating to us that he was worthy of our trust.

If he loved me enough to die for me, he certainly loves me enough to see me through what I'm facing today. Let's celebrate his astonishing love as we remember his sacrifice this evening.

2

THE DUMMY LIGHT

Heidi Reese drives a Toyota Tercel; it has about 97,000 miles on it. And a few weeks ago the dummy light went on. One of the dummy lights, I mean — Toyotas have a number of dummy lights. *Dummy light* is the term we use to describe the light that comes on, on the instrumental panel of your car, to let you know that something's wrong — but it doesn't tell you exactly what the problem is. And it doesn't tell you how bad the problem is.

In the old days, cars had gauges. Your speedometer, for example, is a gauge. It's a meter. It tells you how fast you're going, in miles per hour or kilometers per hour. Or your tachometer. That's a gauge. It's a meter that shows you how many revolutions per minute your engine is turning over. But in more recent times, the car manufacturers have switched over, more and more, to dummy lights instead of gauges. For example, in many cars these days, you don't know how hot your engine is. Some cars have a temperature gauge that tells you pretty precisely what the temperature is under your hood. But many cars, maybe most cars, don't give you any indication — unless it gets too hot under the hood: then the dummy light comes on. It's usually red, and it has a little picture of an automobile engine, and that tells you: oops, it's too hot under my engine; I've got a problem I need to fix.

Now, let's face it: it wouldn't do you much good to have a dummy light for some aspects of your car's performance. You know, if you didn't have a speedometer, and you were going really fast, at some point a dummy light would come on, and it would say "Speed! Lots of speed!" Or let's say you were racing the engine really fast, and a dummy light came on that said "High rpm's!"

My PT Cruiser has an external thermometer built in; it tells me what the temperature is outside. (I can set it for Fahrenheit or

Celsius. I guess this is to tell me what the temperature would be if I were driving in Minsk.) The external thermometer is another kind of gauge. It tells you *how many* degrees the temperature is. A dummy light would not help you much — you know, a light coming on that says “Really, really hot!” — that kind of light is going to be on about half the year, here in the desert. If we want to know the temperature, we really need more information than a dummy light could give us.

So Heidi’s driving down the road, and a dummy light comes on in her Toyota Tercel, and it says “Check engine.” It doesn’t say “Here’s what’s wrong with your engine.” It doesn’t say “Your engine desperately needs a new timing belt in exactly 23 miles” or “You are going to blow a valve before you get to 40th Street.” No. It just says “Hey, dummy! Check your engine. And as for what’s wrong with your engine ... good luck!”

Now here I am. Doug Brendel. Reasonably normal human being. (Please, let’s not dispute this.) I also have a dummy light. The dummy light, in my life, is fear. The light goes on — it tells me something’s wrong inside of me — but it doesn’t tell me what. It doesn’t tell me *how* wrong. It just says, Hey dummy, check your engine.

This is how fear functions in our lives. This is why we feel fear. You might say it’s a gift from God. Actually, in a perfect world, we would never experience fear. Adam and Eve never knew what fear felt like, until they stepped outside of God’s perfect design. They did the one thing that God warned them not to do, because it would be unhealthy for them, and what how did Adam describe the side-effects? “I was afraid,” he says in Genesis 3:10. His dummy light went on — the light that said, “Psst! Adam! Hey, buddy ... something’s wrong now!” If God hated people for busting his design, he wouldn’t have built this fear response into us. But thanks to his foresight — he knew we were going to need this — he built in a fear response that gets triggered when something is wrong under our hood. If we had no fear instinct, we would blindly blunder ahead, making more and more of a mess, until we self-destructed. If there was no dummy light in the Toyota, Heidi would be sitting on the shoulder of the 101 right now, crying into her cell phone.

On the face of it, I think I would rather have a gauge. A meter. I would like to know exactly what is wrong under the hood of my life, and how bad is it. But I think if I knew how bad

my problem was, I might be inclined to say, “Oh well, I can hold out another thousand miles before I get that fixed.” “Pretty expensive. I think I’ll see how long I can go before I get that looked at.”

So God doesn’t give me gauges. He doesn’t give me precise information. He gives me a dummy light. And if I recall correctly, when these lights first came out, my dad called them “idiot lights.” “Oh brother! This car doesn’t give you any information! All it’s got are idiot lights!” But what does an idiot light, or a dummy light, force you to do? It forces you — or at least it inclines you — to go back to the dealer. The guy who sold you the vehicle. It was brilliant, really, for auto manufacturers to install dummy lights instead of gauges — because now you have no choice but to go back and have a conversation.

And I think God may have played the same game. “I’ll install a dummy light — and maybe when it comes on, Doug will come back to me and check in, and say ‘Hey, God, would you please take a look under my hood? What do you see going on there?’” When the auto dealer gets you in his service bay, he says, “Well, you know, you need a new timing belt NOW, but you’re going to need new valves pretty soon; we should probably just do all that work right now.” And when I go to God with my fear, and I say, “Excuse me? My dummy light is on. I’m afraid. Will you look under my hood?” ... he often surprises me, by showing me how much work needs to be done in the engine compartment of my life. It ends up being good for me — maybe kind of uncomfortable along the way, but ultimately good for me. But I never would have gone looking for it, if my dummy light hadn’t come on. That’s what fear is. It’s the dummy light. It sets in motion this dialogue with my manufacturer. It sets the stage for my hood to get opened up, and for someone smarter than me to look under there and tell me what needs worked on.

* * *

If you talk to an auto mechanic, he can tell you what problems most car owners come in with when the dummy light comes on. He has a checklist of likely problems that he runs down, if someone comes in and says “My engine light is on.” What is the most common problem under *my* hood, when *my* engine light — fear — comes on? What is my most common

fear? What is my most basic fear? The fear that I live with the most constantly, day by day, moment by moment?

The fear of what you think of me.

I really want you to like me. I really want you to think well of me. And if you don't like me or think well of me, I really want you to like the fact that I am willing to do whatever it is you don't like about me!

I really want you to respect me. I really want you to agree with me. And if you don't respect me or agree with me, I want you to respect me for taking the stand I took that you don't agree with!

My dummy light goes on quicker over this fear than any other fear I have. The fear of what you think of me is the most fundamental fear of my life. I think this may be true for a lot of us.

Ed Koch was the mayor of New York City in the 1980s. He was famous for asking people on the streets of the city one question, over and over and over: "How'm I doin'?" He was more open than most politicians about his longing for approval. (Ironically, in an Internet poll, he scored an "annoying" rating of more than 67%.)

Look at the plastic surgery industry. Two years ago it was a \$7 billion business. By 2007 it's going to be at \$11 billion. First Lady Betty Ford was probably the first public figure to admit, yeah, I want to look totally different. While her husband was in office, she went to the doctor and got a radically different face. When people looked at her, she wanted them to see something different. It was shocking back then, in the late 70s — now it's commonplace.

But when the dummy light of fear comes on in my heart — when I fear what you think of me — what is the real problem? Is it the dummy light? No. The light is not the problem. The light is just an indicator of a problem *under the hood*. You could take an ice pick and a hammer and poke that light out if you wanted to — I've been tempted to do that a few times, on my cars. But that wouldn't solve the problem.

What is really happening when I worry about what someone else thinks of me? If I ask God to look under the hood, what does he see? If I let God hoist me up on the divine hydraulic lift and look under my spiritual chassis, what does he find? This dummy light can mean one or more of at least four

related problems. If you jot these down in your notes this evening, you can save lots of mechanics' charges later on.

1. I have a balance problem.

There's a balance in life between behavioral norms — that's what society considers appropriate — and the priority of "individuality." You experience the value of cultural norms when you're at a party and someone drinks too much or becomes over-talkative or both. You deal with cultural norms when someone uses crude language, or when someone dresses in a lewd manner. There's something in us that says "Hey, please, conform a little; this is uncomfortable for the rest of us!"

But on the other hand, we pride ourselves on individualism. We've been struggling with the balance between the two since we were adolescence. A teenage boy will get very exercised over the right to wear those baggy pants and a T-shirt in order (quote) "express his individuality" — but then you visit his school, and every other boy is *also* wearing the same baggy pants and T-shirt. We spend our lives wobbling on the tightrope, trying to balance between being ourselves and fitting in. Our fear of being lost in the crowd, looking like a dope because we're just like everyone else, has to be balanced against our fear of standing out, of looking foolish. In a way, you might say, both fears are the same fear: it's our fear of what others will think of us.

I can be consumed by this fear, quite easily — unless I know who I am. *I am terribly concerned about what you think of me if I don't know who I am.*

Romans 12:3 gives us a cheat sheet for how to think about ourselves. This passage of Scripture advises each of us "**not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.**" "Soberly" means when the dummy light of fear goes on in my heart, and I'm concerned about what you think of me, I can relax and say to myself, "You know what? I am not all that important. My reputation isn't all that important. In the grand scheme of things, I am making something relatively unimportant way too important in my mind." When I get this kind of balance, the dummy light goes off.

Is it easy? Not necessarily. This is why Romans 12:3 says that this has to happen as "**a measure of faith.**" What is "faith"? Not just a religious word. It's a practical matter. My faith is

nothing more or less than the level of trust that I invest in God telling me the truth. If God says he loves me and I believe him, that's faith. If God says he is caring for me and I believe him, that's faith. If God says I am so important that he would invest all of his supernatural resources to provide for me, in this life and the next, and I believe him, that's faith. So as I exercise my faith — as I train myself, each day a bit more and a bit more, to trust God, the measure of my faith increases. And my dummy light comes on less often. It goes off quicker. Because I'm not so concerned about what you think of me. What you think of me becomes, relatively speaking, less and less important. I know what *God* thinks of me — and that becomes, relatively speaking, more and more important.

* * *

What else might God find when he puts me up on his cosmic hydraulic lift and looks under my spiritual chassis?

2. *Maybe I have a fuel shortage.* A leak, maybe? Or maybe I'm not putting the right kind of fuel in the tank. Somehow, I'm not getting enough fuel.

I am terribly worried about what you think of me if *I am trying to get my value from you*.

Here's my typical thought process, whether I realize it or not — consciously or unconsciously, here's how I think: How does Tami Lang see me? I think highly of Tami. So if Tami values me, then I must be valuable. If I am valuable, I can feel good about myself — so I urgently need Tami to think highly of me. To like me and agree with me. This seems okay — but in reality I'm filling my tank with water instead of gasoline. Why? Because Tami's opinion is worthless? No. Simply because Tami's opinion of me doesn't change what God thinks of me. Doesn't affect what Jesus did for me. Doesn't influence my relationship with the One who makes all the difference in the world: the one who created me. The one who is nurturing me day by day.

This is my most difficult thing, personally. I urgently want approval. I tie up my value in your opinion. As if my value goes up and down, like the stock market, based on what someone thinks of me. I've had a lot of approval and affirmation in my life, and I'm grateful for that; but isn't it interesting that I can tell you in excruciating detail about practically every person who has ever disapproved me down through the years! I have little video

loops in the archives of my brain that replay these encounters with people who expressed disappointment in me or criticized me — maybe totally justified! Often totally accurate in their assessment! Why do I keep these files in the database? Why don't I hit "delete"?

I am linking my value as a human being to their opinion of me. I'm not getting enough fuel. It's like I'm putting water in my tank. Your opinion of me won't carry me very far. My engine will sputter and quit.

The only fuel that will really keep me going is God's love. What God thinks of me. How highly God values me. How heavily invested God is in me. This is what I need to refuel with when my dummy light comes on — when I'm afraid of what you think of me. In **Luke 12:4**, Jesus urges us not to be afraid of people, even if their opinions are so harsh that they take physical action against us. The spiritual battle, he says, is way more significant in the long run.

* * *

And then, if I ask God to look under the hood of my life, he may find **3. I have a guidance system problem.** A steering issue. A directional malfunction.

I am worried about what you think of me, but in reality, I can never know what you really think. Even if you tell me, it may not be the whole story. Even if I think you're signaling clearly what you think of me, I can never be totally sure. *I can't know what you really think — so I am chasing an illusion.* What you think of me is ultimately unknowable. It is unattainable. When I drive for your approval, I am driving in the wrong direction.

I think if God had wired me to thrive on your approval, he would have given me a very accurate gauge for reading your opinion. But I'm not wired to thrive on your opinion of me. I'm not designed to be fueled by your high opinion of me. I am designed a different way. I am designed to be fueled by loving you, regardless of your opinion of me. I'm designed to spend my life serving. Meeting your needs. I gain a healthy self-image as a byproduct of servanthood. When my focus is inward — look at me, what do you think of me? — I'm not getting where God designed me to go.

Do you realize that God never commanded us to love ourselves? The Scriptures say, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"

not “Love your neighbor and love yourself.” Why? Because we already love ourselves. It’s assumed! It’s a natural trait of the human condition. God built it into us. It’s a survival instinct. We are built to meet the needs of the self. Even suicide is a selfish act — it’s a means of ending the pain. We don’t have to be told to look out for ourselves; we just do.

But God has to *tell* us to love others. Why? Because it’s not natural. It’s counter-intuitive. It’s so counter-intuitive that loving others actually demonstrates to the world that we’re God’s people. This is what Jesus was talking about in **John 13:35**, when he said “**By this all men will know that you are my disciples, [if you love yourselves? No:] if you love one another.**”

This is related to another problem I may have under my hood:

* * *

4. I may have a blockage somewhere.

If I’m not about serving you — if I’m really about you serving me by having a high opinion of me — then God’s love isn’t flowing out of me into your life. I’m not functioning the way I was designed to function. This kind of blockage isn’t going to feel right. It won’t feel right to you, and it sure won’t feel right to me. I am not going to feel good as I go down the road. The peace that the Bible talks about? I won’t have that. *I have to focus on loving others, not gaining their approval, in order to function well and be at peace.*

Think about applying for a job, showing up for a job interview. We typically show up thinking, “I’ve got to get them to like me, and hire me!” There’s a fear factor. My dummy light is burning bright red — maybe it’s blinking! Maybe it’s beeping! I’m afraid, throughout the process, that I’ll say or do something that makes the interviewer dislike me.

But if get my blockage cleared — if I realize that God put me here to serve, not to be served — then the question energizing me in that interview is different. *Instead of “What does this person think of me?”, I’m asking, “How could I serve this person?”* I’m asking, Could I serve well here? Because if I couldn’t, I wouldn’t be happy here anyway. I’m not fixated on what the prospective employer thinks of me — something I can’t truly know, and can’t control anyway — I’m focused on something I *can* know, and *can* control: My heart for

servanthood. My attitude. My actions. My commitment to a practical, everyday kind of love, powered by Christ's love for me. **1 John 3** says: **18 ...Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us....**

If I get the job, this is going to be the most important component of my work there anyway. So in the interview, I'm at peace. I sit in the same room; I answer the same questions; I go through the same process. But in one scenario I'm petrified — in the other, I feel "in control"; I feel relaxed.

* * *

When I feel a pang of anxiety about what someone thinks of me, that's the dummy light going on. I need to see the dummy light for what it is — what it says. It says there's something wrong inside of me. I'm asking the wrong question, seeking an outcome that won't ultimately satisfy me. I'm believing some kind of lie about myself or my situation. I'm believing the lie that I'm not valuable, that God's not taking care of me, that I need someone else to fill me up. I'm believing the lie that my life will be rich if I gain a certain status or position — when in reality, my life will only be rich if I learn to be a giver, a servant, someone who loves.

Out of love for us, God has told us plainly to respond to the dummy light — and let him fix what's wrong under the hood. In **1 Samuel 16:7**, he shows us how he ignores people's appearance, people's height, people's birth order, people's social status. None of that matters.

Tonight, let's give God permission to look under the hood of our lives. Let's give him our fears. Let's let him make us right.

3

CRIME BUT NO PUNISHMENT

Years ago a friend of mine, a business owner, was going through the difficult time financially. He had always been a generous guy; and he was always taking clients out to dinner at really nice places and picking up the tab. But when his business ran into some difficulty and money wasn't flowing in like it had been before, his wife urged him to stop automatically picking up the bill at every meal. Let the other guy have a chance to grab the bill and pay it once in a while, she said, for heaven's sake! Well, my friend didn't heed her advice, and she kept nagging him about it — until finally he had had enough; and he arranged a small practical joke. He had a big client whom he was on pretty friendly terms with, so he could make a secret deal in advance of a dinner date with the client and his wife. So at the end of this quite lavish dinner — \$300 or so — the bill came. But instead of grabbing the bill, my friend just let it lie there. And instead of taking his cue and politely taking the bill himself, the client *also* just let it lie there. The two couples kept talking, kept talking, kept talking ... the bill kept lying there. My friend's wife was growing more and more uncomfortable. She's looking at the bill, stealing a glance at her husband, stealing a glance at the client, wondering *Who in the world is going to pay for this meal?* Eventually, as the conversation dragged on, my friend quietly let his hand fall on the table near the bill, and he proceeded to slowly slide the bill away, toward the client's side of the table, and then casually bring his hand back into his lap. His wife was mortified! But even then, it wasn't over — because now, as the conversation *continued* to drag on, the client let *his* hand fall near the bill, and he slowly pushed the bill back across the table toward my friend! Finally it was too much for my friend's wife to take. She smacked him on the shoulder and shouted, "Pay the

bill, will you!” Somebody has to pay, and until somebody pays, we feel somehow unsettled.

We feel even more keenly the need for a debt to be paid when it’s a case of someone breaking the law or committing a crime. We’re wired for justice. There’s a website where kids in Arizona can go online and ask questions about the law; it’s called LawForKids.org. It’s quite revealing to go there and see what questions our young people are asking about crime and punishment. Here’s just a small sampling:

What is the sentence for computer hacking? (Answer: up to 5 years and a fine for the first offense — this is a federal offense — and up to 10 years and a quarter million dollars for repeat offenders.)

How much marijuana is considered a “usable amount”? (Answer: less than a third of a gram, although it’s ultimately up to the judge.)

You kind of see how today’s teenagers are thinking, as you read through the questions: *What crimes can you get the death penalty for? Can juveniles be given the death penalty? Do you receive a worse sentence if you have one felony conviction and then do another felony? What crimes can you get a life sentence for?*

Here’s a question that made me stop and think: *How long is a life sentence?* (Answer: Until you die.)

We live in a world of crime and punishment. We think in terms of mistakes and penalties. We have an innate desire for justice. In fact, even though we have an innate desire to get away with as much as we can, there is still a little alarm system built into us that says, whenever somebody does something wrong: “Somebody’s gonna pay for that!”

Did you follow the Laci Peterson case? She was pregnant, she was murdered, her husband was arrested for the crime, tried, convicted, now sentenced to death by lethal injection. The jury deliberated 11-1/2 hours about what his punishment should be. Since they had already agreed that Scott really did murder his wife and their unborn child, they only had two choices under California law: life in prison without parole, or death. He did something wrong; he had to pay for it. And he’s not alone. While his case is being appealed, Scott Peterson is standing in line behind 641 other people on death row in California alone.

When somebody does something wrong, we instinctively say, “They should pay.” When you see a traffic accident, you wonder, “Whose insurance is gonna pay?” We’ve set up the entire insurance industry as a way of avoiding paying for mistakes. In a football game, when one player grabs the other player’s face mask and hurls him to the ground, there’s a *penalty*. The whole team has to move back 15 yards — while they carry the victim off the field in a neck brace. Warner and Sari’s son Taylor is an avid hockey player. When Taylor takes his stick and smacks one of his opponents in the chops and knocks out all his teeth and gives him brain damage — well, that was probably an accident. But even though it was totally accidental (because we know that Taylor is a fine upstanding young man), Taylor has to go to the *penalty* box. He isn’t allowed to play for a certain number of minutes. For that certain span of time, he cannot contribute to his team’s utter annihilation of the other team. There’s a price to be paid for every mistake. There’s a punishment to be exacted for every sin.

When I do something wrong, this built-in alarm system goes off. Some of you have fancy car alarms. If your car is locked and somebody tries the handle of the door a couple times, suddenly there’s honking and whooping and sirens. The car is screaming at you: “Something has happened that wasn’t intended to happen! I am being violated! Something is wrong. Take action! Figure out what’s wrong and do something about it!”

In much the same way, when something outside of God’s design for my life is entering my space, my internal alarm system goes off. My internal alarm is silent, but it’s very effective. My stomach churns; my head swims.

And I have a terrible time shutting down this alarm system. It’s factory-installed. Bummer! I want to be able to do whatever I want, without any internal signals to the contrary. I want to be able to make a flirtatious remark to a woman. I want to be able to sign the bill at a nice restaurant and steal that really nice pen that the server left me. When I get cut off in traffic, I want to be able to give the bird to the driver who did it to me. But every time I try one of these stunts, my internal alarm system goes off. My siren starts screaming. This is the impulse known as *guilt*. It’s the alarm system that quietly reminds me, “Somebody’s gonna have to pay for this. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. In fact, you may not see how anybody will

have to pay for this. But you know it will happen. This is wrong, and a wrong has to be righted. It's a debt that has to be paid. Somebody will pay. Do *you* want to be the one who pays for this?" That's guilt. Lovely, isn't it!

Now many of us grew up in a religious system where we acquired a strong focus on sin, guilt, and punishment. I did. I had this idea growing up that God was kind of "out to get me." His goal, in my mind, was for me to comply with his rules. If I failed to comply — which was, like, every day — then he was eager to punish me. My automatic guilt reflex was connected to this idea. I was taught, by word or by example or both, that the reason I felt guilty was because God was angry with me for breaking his rules. And furthermore, whenever I broke those rules, God would punish me.

Of course I also heard that "God is love." So when I tried to square these two seemingly contradictory ideas — God is love, and God wants to punish me — I had a hard time reconciling the two. The only logical conclusion I could come to was that *God only loves me if I'm doing good*. If I'm not doing good, if I'm disobeying, if I'm sinning, then God's love shuts off. I was afraid of this — I was afraid of God's punishment — but I somehow couldn't seem to stop doing bad stuff. So I lived in fear of punishment every day of my life. My innate sense of justice was going crazy — I knew somebody had to pay for my wrongdoing, and I assumed that person would be *me* — and just *contemplating* what kind of penalties God might be arranging for me, in order to extract justice from me, left me paralyzed with dread. It wasn't obvious; I was keeping it all in. But deep inside of me, I was terrified.

Was I doomed to live the rest of my life this way? Was there no cure for this fear that I was living with? As it turns out, God *did* prepare an antidote for my fear. In **1 John 4:18** the Scripture says: **There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.**

God says if it's love, there's no fear — and he claims he loves us. If he's telling the truth, then he loves us — and we don't need to fear. So whatever I'm fearing ... ain't him! I have a wrong idea about God. On this subject of God wanting to punish me, I have made some kind of mistake. Either I don't get how he

loves me, or I've forgotten how much he loves me, or I don't really believe how much he loves me.

What God claims is that he loved me so much that he gave Jesus as a payment, in my place, for my sins. **John 3: 16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

Jesus took my punishment for me. This doesn't sound like punishment! It sounds crazy, actually — but it doesn't sound like punishment. Why would Jesus do it? Why would God send in a substitute on my behalf? Because I'm so good? Hardly. I know better. Because I'm so valuable? No. Because I'm so smart and wise and—? No. Just because of love. Just because he loved me.

And he didn't just buy me eternal life. He paid the price for the stuff that was going to keep me from experiencing eternal life. The day-to-day junk of my life. My imperfections. My daily sins, large and small. Jesus died to pay for my cussing out the guy at the insurance company. Jesus died to pay for me leaving my wife and children. Jesus died to pay for the sin I'm going to commit tomorrow.

This is what some have called “the scandal of the cross.” It's scandalous to think that somebody can walk away from all their sins scot-free. And it's scandalous that somebody else would be punished in their place. What if the judge in the Laci Peterson trial had received the guilty verdict from the jury, and then sentenced Sarah Weddle to death by lethal injection to pay for his crime? We would be horrified. Our internal justice alarms would be screaming. This is not fair!

Why doesn't Sarah get the death penalty for Laci Peterson's murder? Because the governing authority in the Laci Peterson case is California law, decreed by the citizens of the state. They decided, by putting the current law in place, that the person who commits the murder is the person who must pay the penalty. But in the case of my life full of sin, the governing authority is not California law. The governing authority in my case is God himself. God tells me in **Psalm 51:4** that my sin is really against him: **Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.** God set up the system; I contradicted his system. My sin is against him. He gets

to decide what's right and what's wrong, and what the payment will be for the wrong stuff.

Now we think we know what the appropriate punishments are. We have our own human view of sin. We see big sins and little sins and in-between sins. We think in terms of big punishments and little punishments and in-between punishments. We think in terms of retribution — compensation — paying for our sins.

I like to think that if I walk around feeling guilty, I am paying for my sin. Or if I am really, really good the next time, that will pay for my sin. Or if I go to church and worship and achieve some kind of religious “high,” that will pay for my sin. Or if I give a really generous financial gift, maybe even a sacrificial gift, that will pay for my sin. Or if I read more of the Bible. Or if I pray more fervently. Or whatever.

But God doesn't buy any of that as adequate compensation. He never says the adequate payback for sin is good deeds. He never says the appropriate sentence for the crime of sin is lots of prayer and worship and Bible study. He never says feeling really, really guilty will pay my debt.

He says something that shocks us. In fact, two things that shock us. First, he says, **the wages of sin is death** (Romans 6:23). He does not grade on a curve. He does not have a system of misdemeanors, felonies, and capital crimes. He does not take into account first-time offenders or serial criminals. God's class is pass-fail. Any imperfection puts me outside the circle. God set up the world perfect — he gave human beings the opportunity to keep it perfect, by his own wisdom and power and love. But human beings said no to that deal. We failed. **Romans 3:23** says **...All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** So we have to pay the penalty — and the penalty is, we die. The penalty is death. For any and every sin. Whether you and I think of it as large or small.

Big penalty! We like to think we're smart and good and that we're somehow in control, and God can't possibly take such an extreme position. But the error isn't in God's design. The error is in our own thinking. In the story we tell ourselves. In the way we compulsively strive to let ourselves off the hook. We don't want there to be a God, but there is. We don't want there to be a God's design, but there is. We don't want there to be consequences, but there are. We don't want it to be so

straightforward, but it is. So our sophisticated, modern sensibilities are shocked. But in spite of how wrong we think God is, God is God and we're not. We're in his show, not the other way around. In our prideful human way, we say, "God, your system is primitive!" In God's divine, loving way, he says, "People, my system is simple."

But God says something else that shocks us — and that is that he will let someone else pay our penalty for us, if we want. That's what Jesus came to do. **Romans 6:23** doesn't just say "**For the wages of sin is death**" — it goes right on to say: "**but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" **Romans 3** doesn't just say "**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**" It goes right on to say: **Romans 3: 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.**

If God's cosmic sentencing guidelines had called for a million-dollar fine, Jesus would have come with suitcases full of money. If God's sentencing guidelines had called for years of hard labor, Jesus would have come with a huge sledgehammer, ready to work. But God's sentencing guidelines didn't call for a fine or hard labor. Just death.

God's law for us, from the very beginning, was very simple: Live! You can live! Here's how to live! Please live! I want you to live! Yes, live! Or don't. Live, or die. Those are the choices. I want you to live, but you have the option.

When I chose to walk away from God's best — in fact, as I choose sin day after day after day, in all different kinds of situations — I incurred the death penalty. But God's love didn't stop. It was too great. Too strong. The same love that overwhelmed him and compelled him to create me in the first place ... that same love compelled him to find a way to save me from myself. Save me from my fate. Save me from death row — even though I had placed myself there. He wouldn't force me, but at least he would make a way for me to get out of jail free. He would send Jesus to take the punishment himself. In my place.

"His blood" (**Romans 3:25**) was the payment. His death was payment in full. God did a swap. He placed Christ's righteousness into my account. He placed my sin into Christ's account. He switched our paperwork. He let me walk out of jail.

Let's be clear on this. It's our sin — Sunday through Saturday, the junk we do that contradicts God's design — that earns us the penalty of death. Our pride, our selfishness, our lust, our greed, you name it. All death-penalty crimes. So when Jesus lets me off the hook, he is not just buying me a ticket to heaven at the end of my life. When he went to the cross, he was paying the price for each and every one of my sins — past, present, and future. If I bad-mouth my neighbor tomorrow, I am committing a sin that in God's system should actually earn me death — but Jesus has already taken my punishment. If I kick my kid, if I steal from my employer. Or — maybe more realistically — if I steal from my kid, and kick my employer. That would be more satisfying! Either way, I am guilty. I have committed a crime that is punishable by death. But Jesus did not just die for my "sin" — my sinful condition, my sinful nature. He took the punishment for the stuff I do that separates me from God and earns me the death penalty. He died for the garbage of my life, because he knew how huge the stakes were. He knew that even though I might think of it as inconsequential flaws, this was actually a capital murder case — and I was bound for the death chamber. I deserved death. I deserved God's wrath. I deserved him coming after me and smiting me with plagues. My built-in justice alarm system tells me it's true — that guilt reflex goes off, and I know I've broken the law. I know instinctively that I deserve punishment. I know it — and God knows it.

But God did not want me to live this way: cowering in fear, in the agony of guilt, twisting in the wind, wondering how and when and where the ax would fall. He created a system that would allow me to live life motivated by love, not fear. Free. Exonerated. Acquitted. Case closed. Of course God would rather I choose not to bust his design — because the world is difficult enough as it is. Newton's Third Law of Motion tells us that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. For every puncture of God's design, there's a consequence. The world just exists that way. But even if I go ahead and puncture God's design, he still lavishes his grace on me. Scandalous grace. Unthinkable grace. Inconceivable grace. I stand clean before him, because he had the outrageous idea of sending someone in to take my punishment for me.

When I fail, when I sin, I don't have to brace myself for God's punishment. I may brace myself for the natural

consequences — but I can still trust God’s absolute love. God doesn’t want to punish me. Life is going to do enough of that on its own. I don’t have to huddle in fear. His perfect love casts out all fear. I can live in his love. I can live life totally enraptured by the scandalous grace He has given me.

This will be the life that accurately reflects who God really is. Not a God eager to punish. A God obsessed with loving me. Running interference for me. Covering for me. Paying an exorbitant ransom for me.

* * *

When I do bust God’s design, that’s no cause for celebration. But when it happens, as it inevitably does, and my internal alarm system goes off — that’s the time to thank God that he paid for my sin. I can train myself to use that alarm as a reminder.

Not only will this kind of training realign my thinking to what’s really true ... that my sin *is indeed* paid for already — that justice has been served ... but it will also remind me that there *is indeed a price* for my sin. It can readjust my perspective, reminding me that God does care how I act — because I can hurt myself. If I am genuinely grateful for what he’s done for me, I will want to live differently. I won’t want to continue failing, continue sinning, “**sinning so that grace may increase**” (**Romans 6:1**). “**By no means!**” (**Romans 6:2**) When God first dreamed me up, he dreamed a life of love and thankfulness. That’s what we celebrate tonight.

THE FEAR FACTOR

4

RIGGING THE SCALES

Those of us in The Compass Book Club have been reading *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. As the senior demon Screwtape is teaching his nephew Wormwood how to influence a Christian, someone he calls “our patient,” Screwtape tells his nephew he’s happy to learn that the patient might be called up for military service. (This book was published during World War II.) The prospect of military service, Screwtape says, is a good thing for the demons’ cause: “We want him to be in the maximum uncertainty, so that his mind will be filled with contradictory pictures of the future, every one of which arouses hope or fear. There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human’s mind against” God. Why? Because God “wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.” Tonight we wrap up our series on facing fear.

This is a scale. You put heavier stuff on one side, it goes down on that side. You put heavier stuff on the other side, it goes down on the other side. Simple. Everybody understands this.

You have a scale like this in your head. You use it to measure the future. Really! On one side of the scale is what you know. On the other side of the scale is what you don’t know. The known vs. the unknown.

When you think about some event that’s coming up, some activity you’ll be involved in, something in the future, it’s as if you take little “value pebbles” and put them on one side of the scale or the other. You imagine what the situation is going to be like, and you imagine what you’ll have to give up, and put on the scale, when that event occurs.

For example, my wife and I will go out to dinner Saturday evening. Where shall we go? To the Italian place, where we have been a million times before? We know this place. It’s familiar. I

put a pebble on the “known” side of the scale. It’s a likely bet that the Italian will be a good choice. Had a good experience last time we were there. I put another pebble on that side. I value what I know.

Or should we try a new place? That place that just opened? Asian food. Never been there. But that might be kind of an adventure! I put one “value pebble” on the side of the unknown. Never even been in that part of town. Wonder what it’s like? We’ll kind of be explorers! Another pebble in favor of the unknown. Don’t know what’s on the menu. Could be exotic, who knows? Another pebble. I think Patrick Harvey mentioned it once, said it was good. Another pebble. Asian food is winning! The unknown is outweighing the known. Why? Because of where I have placed the value.

Some of you are thinking about this decision and your skin is crawling — you would *never* choose Asian food of questionable quality in an unknown part of town! *What are you, crazy, Doug? Run away, run away!* In this situation, you would put your value pebbles on the known side of the scale — and wait for the Brendels to report to you on the Asian restaurant.

Why is it that sometimes I look into the future and I’m filled with fear, and other times I look into the future and I’m filled with excitement? Let’s measure my vocational situation. I learn that the company I work for is being bought out by a huge corporation in Texas. I hear they’re talking about layoffs *and* promotions. On the known side of the scale, I’ve got my current job (one pebble), my current salary (another pebble), my current lifestyle (a third pebble). I place value on the duties I’m familiar with (a pebble), the colleagues I’ve been working with for however long (another pebble).

What do I value over on the unknown side of the scale? The possibility of a promotion? Uh, I can’t really count on that. Maybe I’ll make more money? Uh, not with my luck. I may actually like my new position better? Probably not. I may find I’m better suited to my new responsibilities, and it takes my career in a whole new direction that I never dreamed, and who knows what cool stuff lies ahead! *Naaaah*.

So my scales are tipped way over in favor of the known — and I feel *dread* about the future. Every day I’m just waiting for the ax to fall ... just waiting for the memo to come ... just waiting for that pink slip.

But *what if* I could somehow see the possibility of a promotion? (I could put one little pebble over on the other side.) What if I could place a little value on the hope of making a somewhat bigger salary? (One more little pebble.) Isn't it at least *possible* that I could enjoy my new job more? (Another pebble.) Can't I imagine myself being better suited to my new responsibilities, and my career shifting course, and this turning out to have been a wonderful "defining moment" that I would actually thank God for someday? If I can somehow imagine the positive — if I can somehow hold onto the hope of something good coming out of my situation — then I can at least balance out my emotional scales. I may not be jumping up and down, thrilled about my company being sold and my situation becoming uncertain ... but at least I can be steady through this passage.

Now I go to the doctor. He finds a lump where there shouldn't be a lump. He has to take a biopsy and send it to the lab. I'm petrified waiting for the results. How can I possibly value the unknown in this situation?

But let's say I go to the Chrysler dealer to buy a brand spanking new Crossfire. I fill out the loan application. There's a possibility that I'll be rejected — but I go for it anyway. In fact, I can't wait to get back the results so I can get in there and drive my new car home! The outcome of the loan application is unknown — but I'm reveling in it!

What's the difference between waiting for the biopsy results and waiting for word on the loan application? The difference is what I'm gambling on. What am I willing to lose? If the scales are set up on the question of Italian food vs. Asian food, it's pretty easy to load up the pebbles on the unknown side. But if the scales are set up on the question of my job — my income — my family's financial future — it is way harder for me to value the unknown. If you're asking me to weigh out the embarrassment of being rejected for a loan against the thrill of driving a new Chrysler Crossfire, I can go there. But if these scales are weighing my medical future, then I'm not putting any pebbles over there on the unknown side! This is my health, maybe my life!

Look at medical malpractice lawsuits. A Brooklyn jury awarded a woman \$94.5 million. That was a couple years ago; there may have been even higher awards since then. But one

ugly truth about malpractice suits is that only 5% are actually decided by a jury. According to the Physician Insurers Association of America (PIAA), more than a quarter of all cases are settled out of court. Even in cases where the question goes to a jury, the family bringing the lawsuit will often cut a deal with the doctor's insurance company before the verdict comes in. They'll agree that the award will be, for example, no less than \$2 million but no more than \$6 million — regardless of what the jury says. And in return, the doctor's insurance company agrees not to appeal — they just immediately cut the check and the deal is done. If we're talking about bucks, there's an aversion to the unknown.

Lottery winners — they have a choice to take the entire jackpot in one lump sum, or in annual payments spread out over a number of years. What percentage of lottery winners choose the lump sum? Wanna guess? About 80%. There's an aversion to the unknown. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." When the stakes get too high, we opt for the safest alternative. Immediate satisfaction wins over the long term.

Why are suicide bombers so effective? Because of what they value. What they're willing to gamble. What they're willing to lose. There is no way to defend against someone who is willing to die. The suicide bomber has already decided that his or her life is worth losing. What they will gain has greater value to them than what they will lose.

* * *

So why are we afraid of the future? Because we have set up the scales, we have made the comparisons, and we have decided that we value the "known" of what we *have* more than the "unknown" that the future might bring us. I can value the unknown if the stakes are relatively low — if it's just a new restaurant. I can make that gamble. If it's just a loan application — I can make that gamble. But if the stakes are high ... I'm afraid.

To turn my fear around, I have to find a way to *value* the unknown. I have to believe that something good is coming. I have to believe that there's something risking the "known" for. I have to tip the scales back toward the unknown, to get some balance in my emotional life.

The apostle Paul faced his share of dangers. In 2

Corinthians 11:24-27 he catalogued some of them: He took 39 lashes *five times*. He was beaten with rods *three times*. He was stoned. He was shipwrecked three times. He spent a night and a day on the open sea. He says in **2 Corinthians 11:**

26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

Frankly, if I had a track record like this, I would be kind of paranoid. I would wonder what was coming around the next bend in the road. And Paul wasn't some superman who didn't feel any fear. He admits, in **2 Corinthians 7:5-7**, for example, that when he and his team first came into Macedonia, he was afraid. Here was a Jewish guy, coming into heavily Gentile territory. And here was a Christ-follower, coming into heavily pagan territory. So he was in double jeopardy. He was afraid — and it was reasonable under the circumstances to be afraid!

But Paul found a way to balance out his fears. He talks about it in **Philippians 3:**

7 ...Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

Paul has set up the scales. He has made a comparison. He has decided to place all of his pebbles on one side of the scale. He has decided to place extremely high value *not* on his physical safety, *not* on his health, *not* on his comfort — but on something that our culture would say is totally irrational: “knowing Christ.” Establishing a relationship with him. Growing in relationship with him. Learning to hear with his heart. Learning to see life through his eyes. Growing to trust his care for me.

Paul came to realize that if he truly knew Jesus, he could easily give up anything of earthly value without fear. He could face jail. He could face torture. He could even stare death in the face. In **Philippians 1** he says if his work is over, he's ready to

die.

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;

24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

His struggle wasn't with fear of the unknown. If he had any struggle at all, it was between loving God and loving people — he was ready to end this life and be with Christ in heaven, but he was equally interested in helping people connect with God. Regardless of the risk.

* * *

There is no such thing as life without fear. We're imperfect human beings, so we get afraid. The question is, what do I do with my fear? Who is the master of my life? Me, or my fear? Who is making my decisions? Me, or my fear? Courage, as we've already said in this series, is not the absence of fear; courage is the decision to act in spite of it.

So when I feel afraid, what can I do? I suggest setting up the scales. Figure out what it is you're actually deciding. What it is you're actually comparing. You're facing the potential for some kind of loss — you've placed a lot of value on something, and you're afraid of losing it. Is it something you need to devalue in some way? Have you made something more important than it really is? Have you falsely inflated its significance in your mind?

Someone in a new job may dread the phone ringing. Every time she hears that sound, she cringes with fear. She's afraid she won't know the answer to the question, or what to do in the situation that the phone call represents. Maybe she could decide that she's making this way too important. It's not worth the expenditure of all this emotional energy. She can expect a learning curve on this new job. It's OK not to know all the answers in the early going. God has promised to take care of her — he has promised her peace — maybe she can trust him to be telling the truth, and access his peace, and relax a little bit.

Isaiah 26:3 says to God, **You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.**

Maybe it's not a matter of decreasing the value of what's

unknown, but increasing the value of what's known. Seeing God's power and provision for what it really is: complete, and consistent, and compassionate. Maybe someone is preparing to quit a job, or take a new job. Stress is high. There's a fear response. What does the future hold? It's unknowable. The old saying goes, "I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future." God has promised to take care of us. We can load more value on that side of the scale — God's love is something we *know*, it's something we can count on! I need to make God's provision as big and complete in my mind as it is in real life!

This doesn't mean I'm going to become some starry-eyed fanatic, always saying everything is good and perfect — you know, a positive thinking extremist. It just means I can achieve some balance in my emotions. I don't have to be weighted down with fear about the future.

I confess, I do not have this nailed down myself. I'm afraid for what might happen to my children. I deal with paranoia about my children's well-being just about every day of my life. I have to entrust them to God, consciously, all over again every single day. I have to recite to myself the truth about God's love. God has cared for me and my family all this time. He has promised to continue caring for us. I can increase the value I place on my relationship with him, and his care for us. I can choose to see God's love for my children as more complete than any amount of love I could give to them. But this doesn't come naturally to me. I have to ask God to give me this perspective every day.

* * *

We talk about our "faith" in God, and sometimes I think we have kind of a foggy notion of what this really is. It's really nothing more than trusting God. You never find the word "faith" and the word "trust" in the same verse of Scripture — why? Because "faith" and "trust" are the same root word in the original language of the Scriptures. Do I trust God for my future? Or is my faith basically just lip service? Maybe my trust is partial. Maybe I'm OK trusting him with some stuff but not other stuff, small stuff but not big stuff.

When I find myself wracked by fear of the future, I need to realize that the stuff I am worrying about has, in a way, already been decided. God knows the end from the beginning. The

question that warrants my full attention and energy isn't "What's going to happen?", but rather "How am I loving God and loving people? How fully am I trusting him — because if I trust him fully, I'll be at peace, and I'll be able to focus my life's energies on the stuff I was designed to spend my life on: loving people, caring for people, serving people, meeting people's needs. Becoming Christ's hands and feet in the lives of the people around me. I don't have to live in fear of the future. I can be free to focus elsewhere. Jesus said in **Matthew 6:33**, **"...Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [your necessities] will be given to you as well."**

When I look at the scales of my own fear, I realize that I don't really see it as a weighing of the known vs. the unknown. When I'm worrying about my children, for example, I put the unknown of their future over on one side — but on the other side, I don't have God's provision as something I *know*. I think of God's provision as something *also unknown*! I'm always asking myself, "Will God protect them? Will God take care of them?" Instead of seeing God's care as a "given." Why? Because God might decide that his best is something I don't like. So I not only fear for my children's well being; I'm also actually fearing God's care for them!

This is a tragedy — because I'm exhausting myself on a question I can't decide (since God is God and I'm not, and God is going to make the ultimate decision) — but also because God is so committed to giving us his best. Even when we don't understand it, we can know that it's his best. We can be at peace. To live with the torture of fear is pointless. There's no profit in it. But to receive the peace that God has promised us, we have to ask him to help us ... because it's something only he can supply. Paul the apostle called it the peace **"that transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7)** when he wrote to the Christians at Philippi, in Macedonia.

In fact, two thousand years ago, when Paul wrote that letter, the Christians in Philippi had plenty of reasons to be fearful of the future. They were living in a difficult world — they were under fire from the government, from the pagans, from the Jewish community, and on and on. So when Paul wrote to them, you might expect him to sympathize with their fears. But that's not the tack he took. Instead, he had the audacity to say: **"Do not be anxious about anything...."**

How could he expect this, realistically? He goes on to tell how — this isn't even the end of the sentence:

Philippians 4:

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.

Paul isn't talking about flicking some kind of fear switch and making everything OK in a minute or two. He's talking about a lifestyle. He's talking about a few pebbles a day, added to the scales. He's talking about daily training in fear management. Prayer, petition, thanksgiving, talking to God about it day after day. Thinking about what's true and right. Seeing our fears for what they are. Telling ourselves a truthful story about God's power and love. And over time, our fears can get balanced out.

Let's ask him to start helping us face our fears, right now.

If you would like to interact personally about your spiritual journey, please feel free to contact The Compass Fellowship via www.CompassDVDs.com.