



## Coping with Fear

### A MEDITATION ON 1 JOHN 4:18

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#### INTRODUCTION

St. John tells us:

*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).*

Well, it seems, then, that I haven't been “perfected in love” yet, because I have fear.

How about you? :)

This is a study about coping with fear, and I want you to know — up front — that I accepted the assignment to write this study, quite frankly, because I needed it. I have fears. Some of them I want to run from. Sometimes I overwhelm them with avoidance activities. Some of us avoid our fears with video games. Some with food. Some with busyness. Some with idleness. Some with sex, drugs, rock n' roll, or a host of other things.

But my guess is that you're watching this because you know — deep down — you need to deal with your fear. To that I can only say, “Thank you.” One of things I've learned along the way is that I can be pretty stupid and try to do this on my own. I need companions on the journey, and I know that you do, too.

So, right off the bat, if you can, I suggest that it will be better to do this study with a trusted friend. If you need to start it on your own, or do the whole thing on your own, that's OK. You have to start somewhere. But if you can, get a friend and confront your fears together.

That, in fact, is exactly where coping with fear begins, and in many respects, also where it ends ...

## I. MEDITATION

For this study we're going to meditate on a single verse: 1 John 4:18. We'll look at other verses along the way, but our focus will be on that single verse. In doing this meditation we're using an ancient Christian practice. As we begin, consider what Dr. John Kleinig writes about *Christian* meditation:

*Christian meditation focuses on Christ and His Word. It starts with Jesus and ends with Him. He is the be-all and end-all of Christian meditation and determines what happens in it. His Word brings life and light, comfort and health to the soul. We who belong to Him meditate on Him.<sup>1</sup>*

## II. FEAR AND LOVE

*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).*

1. What's your first reaction to this passage?

*For many of us, I think our first reaction to this passage is to think, “Oh, great. Just another reminder of what a failure I am.”*

2. Are your first reactions always right?

*Probably not.*

Our initial reactions to something are often wrong. So also with the things that cause us fear. But if we can get past our first reactions, if we dig in to this passage from 1 John 4, we have a lot of help to face our fears.

**“THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE...” (1 John 4:18a)**

## FEAR

Sometimes in the Bible “fear” has a more positive sense of “awe” and “faith” (e.g., “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge ...*” Proverbs 1:7a), but that's not the sense of “fear” in 1 John 4:18, and that's not the way we typically use the word “fear.”

3. How do you define “fear”?

*Allow some general discussion. The naming of specific, personal fears comes with the next question.*

Here's a dictionary definition that might be helpful:

**Fear: (from Greek *phobos*) A state of severe distress, aroused by intense concern for impending pain, danger, evil, etc., or possibly by the illusion of such circumstances.<sup>2</sup>**

4. What is your fear? What are you afraid of? Now is the time to be specific.

*To get the most out of this study we need to acknowledge our fears. We need to “put it on the table.” Take the time to draw this out as much as you are comfortable.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kleinig, John. *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 315.

5. Can you think of people in the Bible who had fear?

*Explore examples people can think of. Here are three examples:*

】 **Zechariah, father of John the Baptist**

*“And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him” (Luke 1:11–12).*

】 **Shepherds, after the birth of Jesus**

*“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear” (Luke 2:8–9).*

】 **Jesus’ disciples on the water during a storm**

*“When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened” (John 6:19).*

## LOVE

We use the word “love” for a lot of things. We say “I love pizza” and “I love you” — same word, “love” — but hopefully we mean very different things.

6. When you hear St. John say, “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18a) what does “love” mean there? (Consider the definition below, and read 1 John 4:9–10, 19.)

**“Love [Greek *agape*] can be known only from the actions it prompts. God’s love is seen in the gift of His Son, 1 John 4:9, 10.”<sup>3</sup>**

*“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).*

*“We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).*

7. Now, when you hear “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18a), how do you understand it?

*Explore responses that call us to understand “fear” in light of the love of God in Christ. These answers lead in to the next part.*

**“There is no fear in love, BUT PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR...” (1 John 4:18a–b)**

**Perfect: (from Greek *teleios*) having attained the end or purpose, complete, perfect.<sup>4</sup>**

8. Whose love is “perfect” in the sense above? (Read 1 John 4:9; 1 Cor. 13; John 19:28–30.)

*“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).*

*“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:28–30).*

<sup>3</sup> W.E. Vine and F.F. Bruce, *Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan NJ: Revell, 1981), 21.

<sup>4</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 809.

9. How does the love of Jesus help us understand the clause, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18a–b)?

*Explore responses that reflect on the love (agape) of Jesus.*

*The next clause helps us further understand how God’s love helps us with our fears:*

**“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. FOR FEAR HAS TO DO WITH PUNISHMENT, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).**

10. What does fear have to do with? How does that relate to your fears?

*Explore responses. Deep down, much fear relates to punishment or the threat of punishment.*

11. In Christ, do you have to fear “ultimate punishment” (i.e., God’s wrath or sin, death, hell)? (Read 1 Peter 2:24; Rom. 3:21–26; 1 John 4:10.)

*No, in Christ we do NOT need to fear ultimate punishment. That is what Christ’s sacrificial life and death were for. He stands in our place. He took the punishment for us.*

*“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).*

*“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:21–26).*

*“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).*

12. For the Christian, what is the difference between “ultimate punishment” and “discipline”? (Read Heb. 12:7–11.) How does this help us understand our fears and the difficulties we endure?

*“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:7–11).*

*Many of us will need to confess that deep down we fear God’s punishment. We need to recognize that the fear of punishment takes our focus off Christ, who forgives us through His death and resurrection. The experience of fear is a call to repent and trust in Christ.*

*The experience of fear is also a call to a more mature faith which understands that God’s children are always under discipline. Sometimes our “fear” is really just a fear of discipline, of possible consequences for our actions or for experiencing injustice in the world.*

**“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, AND WHOEVER FEARS HAS NOT BEEN PERFECTED IN LOVE” (1 John 4:18).**

13. We've been reminded of the perfect love of Christ and what our own fears often are, deep down. Look back at when we meditated on "perfect" earlier. Since "perfected" means "completed/finished" — considering all that we've meditated on thus far — how do you *now* receive the clause "whoever fears has not been perfect in love"? (Read Rom. 8:1–2; 2 Cor. 4:7–11.)

*Explore responses, but at the beginning the verse may have reminded you of your failure. After meditating on it and related Scriptures you may be saying, "OK. I have fear. That means God's still working on me. But God has me. I am safe in his hands."*

*"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1–2).*

*"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:7–11).*

14. Dealing with fear is to face our own sins and weaknesses. Jesus' disciples faced this after they'd all run away during His trial and crucifixion. How do the resurrected Jesus' words to them also apply to you? How does a more mature understanding of the Christian faith receive these words? (Read John 20:19.)

*The same Jesus who gave the apostles His peace also gives us His peace.*

*A more mature understanding of the faith learns to receive the trials and troubles of the world and rest in Christ's promises.*

*"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (John 20:19).*