

## **Fearless: Fear of Worst-Case Scenarios** Sunday, 5/23/21

Last week we learned that it's possible to be aware of the brutality that exists in this world without letting our fear of violence overwhelm us. Thankfully, we know that God's Kingdom will be established on earth and no suffering in this life can prevent our inheritance of an eternal life with Christ. This week, we face our fears of the worst-case scenarios that our fertile imaginations are so good at conjuring up.

I invite you to take a little quiz with me to see how prone you are to catastrophizing. Ready? You're sitting in your living room when the smoke detector goes off. What's your first assumption? A) You forgot to turn on the stove fan when you made your breakfast; B) Your toast is burning; or C) The house is on fire and it's likely to burn down. Let's try another one. You notice a lump somewhere on your body. What's your first thought? A) I should ask my doctor about it on my next visit; B) Maybe Dr. Google can diagnosis this for me; or C) It's probably cancer, and I'll bet it's already spread throughout my body and I'm going to die.

Catastrophizing is the trick we play on ourselves when we let our imaginations give free reign to our fears. Catastrophic things do happen, of course. Within our congregation, we have suffered serious house fires and deadly cancers just in this last year. But thankfully, those outcomes are nowhere near as common as less serious ones. At my last dermatology appointment, I did have a basal cell cancer that had to be removed, but all the other spots I was concerned about turned out to be nothing to worry about. And even the basal removal was a routine procedure.

One author describes catastrophizing as “making a mountain out of a molehill...’an irrationally negative forecast of future events.”<sup>1</sup> When we assume the very worst future based on an uncertain present, we limit our willingness to fully engage in life in the present, becoming obsessed with ourselves and our imagined fate. Assuming the worst-case scenarios has also been linked to psychological suffering such as depression and anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

What are your favorite worst-case scenarios? Cancer? Alzheimer's? Arrest? Embarrassment? Unemployment? Divorce? Failure? All those things do and will happen in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://positivepsychology.com/catastrophizing/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

life, but our experiences usually fall somewhere in the murky middle, and not usually out at the extreme ends of catastrophe.

In our first Bible reading, Jesus faced the prospect of his worst-case scenario: to be on the receiving end of God's wrath. Only this wasn't catastrophizing, it was the real deal. For the Son of God, that must have been inconceivable. Christ, who had co-existed with the Father and the Spirit for all of eternity, faced separation from the Father for the first time. In the Message translation, we read that Jesus "plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony"<sup>3</sup> as he prayed and contemplated the cup of suffering his Father was to give him. Jesus knew fear, because in coming to us in the flesh, he bore all of the infirmities that we struggle with as well. What Jesus did with that fear, however, instructs us in how we deal with ours.

Do you remember the acronym from an earlier message, PEACEFUL? Do you remember what the first P stands for? Pray first. And that's exactly what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in so many other instances in the Scriptures. Max Lucado notes of his prayer that "it was brief (twenty-six English words), straightforward ('Please take this cup of suffering away,' and trusting ('Yet I want your will to be done, not mine')."<sup>4</sup> Did that prayer remove his suffering? Not in the least. It did, however, defang the fear and center the focus of Jesus where it needed to remain: on the will of his Father.

Unlike Jesus, many of us may never actually come face-to-face with our worst-case scenarios. What, then, can we do to avoid plunging into dreadful sinkholes of agony without any real need to do so? One mental health clinician offers the following tips<sup>5</sup>:

Stop time travelling. Jesus knew how much trouble we borrow for ourselves when we get ourselves wrapped up around an uncertain future. Part of his instruction to us to live in the present day is a warning that time travelling in our minds leads to living a fearful future that we can't solve.

Focus on what is. There's a big difference between what factually is and what we fear may be. A fact may be that you just took a difficult test. Your fear may be that you've failed it. Don't give the same weight of credibility to your fears that you do to the facts lest you

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 14:33. The Message.

<sup>4</sup> Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, pp 83-84. Thomas Nelson (2009).

<sup>5</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/09/what-to-do-when-your-mind-always-dwells-on-the-worst-case-scenario>

give them reality that they don't deserve.

Play out your worst-case scenario. Think about what might realistically happen if the worst of what you're imagining actually took place. Often we discover that our feared outcomes aren't as catastrophic as they first appear, with unforeseen constructive options coming to mind when examined more carefully.

Play out your best-case scenario. Like worst-case scenarios, best-case scenarios don't usually happen. Imagine being told by your doctor that not only don't you have cancer, but you're the healthiest specimen of humanity the doctor has ever had the pleasure to behold! Ridiculous, right? Most of our worst- and best-case scenarios are only fantasies, black-and-white thinking that seldom comes true in the real world.

Max Lucado offers the following story that illustrates the predicament we face when deciding whether we'll trust our futures into God's hands: "I'm writing this chapter while sitting on the edge of a hotel swimming pool... A father and his two small daughters are at play. He's in the water; they jump into his arms. Let me restate that: One jumps; The other ponders. The dry one gleefully watches her sister leap. She dances up and down as the other splashes. But when her dad invites her to do the same, she shakes her head and backs away. A living parable! How many people spend life on the edge of the pool, consulting caution. Ignoring faith. Never taking the plunge. Happy to experience life vicariously through others. Preferring to take no risk rather than any risk. For fear of the worst, they never enjoy life at its best. By contrast, their sister jumps. Not with foolish abandon, but with belief in the goodness of a father's heart and trust in a father's arms. Such was the choice of Jesus. He did more than speak about fear. He faced it."<sup>6</sup>

Because Jesus faced his fear, he's able to intercede for us when we face our fears. We'll hear about that in our next reading from Hebrews, chapter 5, beginning with verse 7. I'm reading in the New Living Translation. **{Read Hebrews 5:7-10 NLT}**

This is one of the many passages in Hebrews that's a little confusing without some background study. Melchizedek was an Old Testament figure who in some important ways prefigured Jesus. The name Melchizedek means "King of Righteousness."<sup>7</sup> He was also the

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<sup>6</sup> Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, p. 81 Thomas Nelson (2009).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-melchizedek/>

King of Salem, or “Shalom,” meaning peace. The author of Hebrews is trying to convince his Jewish readers that Jesus is the Christ, by making a reference to this figure from Genesis 14. He’s basically saying, “Jesus is the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace.” Melchizedek is also shown to be a priest in that same passage, offering a blessing to Abraham on behalf of God.<sup>8</sup> So too is Jesus our priest, making offerings to God to atone for our sin, and petitioning God on our behalf in prayer. Jesus went to his Father in prayer for himself in the Garden of Gethsemane when he faced his worst-case scenario. Jesus still goes to his Father in prayer, but now on our behalf when we face our own worst-case scenarios.

Lucado’s reluctant girl at the pool finally did get up the nerve to trust her father and not assume that she’d drown if she jumped into the pool.<sup>9</sup> Imagine how much more fun it must have been for her to join her sister in the water, and what she learned about trusting her father? Where’s the water in your life that you’re afraid to jump into? Are you staring at the bottom of the pool or the out-of-control waves, or are you looking into the eyes of your Father through prayer?

Awful things happen to people every day, as if we needed this past year to remind us, right? But awesome things also happen to people every day. Most of us get a mild mix of good and bad, easy and hard, and some of it we can control, but most of it we can’t. What we can control is how well we manage to stay in the present and stay focused on the facts and on our faith. An acorn falling on our head doesn’t often mean that the sky is falling. Maybe an acorn falling on our head means that God is providing something for a hungry squirrel! And even should the sky begin to fall, we know that we can find shelter in the arms of Jesus, who faced his worst-case scenario and overcame it that we might find grace in his righteousness and peace.

Please take some time now to reflect on God’s good future for You.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 14:18-20

<sup>9</sup> Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, p. 88 Thomas Nelson (2009).



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