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Chapter 1

THE WAY FEAR WORKS

Your relationship with fear is the most important one in your life because it's also a mirror of the relationship you have in your core. ♦ KRISTEN ULMER

It was hazy summer morning, grass damp from rainfall the day before. Dark was lingering as the sun was still creeping up, and I sauntered to the kitchen for my morning cup of coffee. Holding my favorite mug, I glanced out the window, and fear crashed upon me. My body shook as I saw what was outside. I dropped my mug, hot coffee splashing all around me, and I hit the floor and peered over the window sill. Twenty feet away, a man was pointing a gun at my house, and walking along my back fence. I didn't know what to do. Who wanted to kill us? I kept peeking over the sill, only to see him pacing back and forth, rifle aimed. I never felt such terror but found

my bearings to crawl along the floor to find my phone to call 911. Suddenly my wife walked into the room. “Get down!” I yelled. She did, and I tried to explain the situation. She too looked over the sill; her response was not terror but confusion. “Dan, where is the gunman?” I pointed him out, but she still didn’t see what I was seeing. “I see a squirrel scrambling along the top of our fence . . . is that your gunman?” Reality began to sink in. It was dark out, and I did not have my glasses on. I thought the outline of the squirrel and its bushy tale was a man holding a gun. I can laugh about this scenario now, and it makes for a great story to tell at parties, but I’m amazed how fear took over my senses. Just a little dim dawn, blurry eyes, and a groggy morning, and I believed I was the target of an assassination. I either have an inflated ego or need LASIK eye surgery. Fear dominated me so easily, so quickly. It has astounding strength to overpower our sense of sanity.

What do you fear?

There has not been a time in recent memory when our emotions, especially fear, have whipped us into a state of such alarm. If the recent election cycle is a mirror, then it’s reflecting a society riddled with fear. It’s not just threats of terrorism, economic collapse, cyber warfare, the police state, and government corruption; we fear each other, we fear strangers, we fear our neighbors, we fear those who vote differently, we even fear those who parent unlike us. We see each other primarily with the glasses of fear. Our current media outlets and professional politicians want to calcify your feelings on people, places, and things, convincing you to have an expert opinion on pretty much everything and everybody—even people you’ve never met. Just take a stroll down a Facebook feed to see everything our culture tells us to fear:

Alt-Right
Conservatives
Progressives
Feminists
White Supremacists
Immigrants
Muslims
Black Lives Matter
Evolutionists
Homeschoolers
Evangelicals
Pro-Lifers
The list goes on and on . . .

We see monsters everywhere right now, potential monsters hiding out in all kinds of places and behind the faces of all sorts of people. It all seems rational, it all seems logical, maybe even justifiable, but it is jet-fueled by the emotion of fear.

What is fear doing to us?

FEAR COMMERCIALIZED

After 9/11, fear built aggressive momentum in every aspect of American culture, especially in advertising. It takes sleight of hand to persuade a debt-saddled and ad-weary public that they should swipe their credit card for products. If you have no memory of being frightened into buying something, that's only because advertisers are magicians. Fear-based advertising is rampant, from off-road vehicles that never leave the streets to anti-aging cream that doesn't do anything. Marketing has long preyed on our insecurities and anxieties to sell us stuff that does not solve our problems but purposely pokes at our

darkest fears that we don't have enough, don't know enough, aren't safe enough.¹

Lately, hand sanitizers and antibacterial products have taken advantage of our pervasive fears of bacteria to market the notion that they can protect us from lethal diseases. One recent Purell ad positions the face of a cute puppy next to this quote: "Your best friend is actually your worst nightmare." Kellogg's also tried to jump on the disease-fearing bandwagon with a claim that their cereals bolster your child's immunity—the Federal Trade Commission debunked this claim and made them stop using it. The Food and Drug Administration has shown that the use of "antibacterial" products offers "no added health benefits," and now warns that they may cause harm.² And yet, the industry is booming.

Fear flat out works, which is why it is used in ads.

The oft-repeated phrase that "sex sells" turns out to be inaccurate after a little investigation. Sex just gets our attention. Fear sells units.³ Why? The most likely reason: we want and need things to fear because fear is energizing. Not only has capitalism figured this out, but our entire political system has figured this out and turned it into well-honed strategies.

FEAR POLITICIZED

The raw experience of fearing a common enemy bands us together and can energize us to action. In the early 1980s, a group of psychologists developed a way to study how fear influences our behavior.⁴ Their approach to understanding fear is using the Terror Management Theory. These psychologists were able to determine that, in general, when fear influences our decisions, we can be made to respond in wild ways. They assembled a long list of fear-based code words such as *hurt*,

danger, unsafe, peril, problematic, injure, sick, threat, and then tested them out in various communication forums. These words elicited a dramatic response of action from people.

This language has become the constant drumbeat of American political speeches.⁵ Politicians play to our gut fears of each other. Our leaders are now proficient in pulling our psychological strings to score a vote, but sadly, many of us are desensitized to it. Ironically, President Franklin Roosevelt said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” yet here we are, and it’s become the primary motivator in our times. Whether Republican or Democrat, young or old, we are easily romanced by the words of fear.

In contrast, when the language of hope, possibility, beauty, connection, and unity were used in the Terror Report, they flopped at stirring action. Positive language does not energize nearly as much as fear-based language does. Not surprising, this psychological Terror Management Report has become a formal guidebook for writing political speeches.⁶ Both Republicans and Democrats use this report as a framework for peppering their speech with fear-based code words. Our political candidates have become masters of leveraging the psychology of fear.

Donald Trump delivered a speech that passionately used fear and threat: “The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life,” Trump thundered. “. . . [Many] have seen the recent images of violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities. Many have witnessed this violence personally, some have even been its victims.”⁷

Hillary Clinton wasn’t any better, using the same tactic but for her preferred causes: “I’m the last thing standing between you and the apocalypse,” she said.⁸

Fear is the language of our media powers. They understand

that to make their political interests become your political interests, they must trigger your moral gut. They must stimulate you to feel angry, or indignant, or threatened. This is their strategy to make you see monsters in the faces of other people.

FEAR WORKS WELL

Without fear, we feel unprotected by the world's dangers. In some situations, it is rational and reasonable to fear another person. For example, if someone physically threatens you, the best response is to run away screaming "stranger danger" as soon as possible. However, few of our interpersonal dealings involve such dire threats. Fear has its place, but it's like a forest fire in California when we welcome it unimpeded in our life.

Many of us cuddle and coddle fear because it just makes more sense than the generous, open posture of love. We believe love makes us vulnerable to harm while fear protects us. Love compels us toward people—fear creates a buffer. Love

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welcome it unimpeded
in our life.**

causes us to lean in and listen—fear tells us we don't need to hear any more. Fear offers something in return—a sense of control and safety, placing our wants, our needs, our anxieties at the center of importance.

We sort of like fear. Fear gives us a strange kind of focus. At twelve years old, it was fear that coaxed me to take a different route to school so the neighborhood bully wouldn't see me and pick on me. Fear is a companion in some weird way. We feel deeply that if we don't stay on high alert, identifying what and who could hurt us, we are naive or even stupid. This is why fear resonates with the

American public more than love does. There is a concreteness and clarity to fear that comforts us—I know who to stay away from, I know who my enemies are, I know who to oppose, I know who to potentially hate.

WHAT MONSTERS FRIGHTEN YOU?

Maybe it's part of everyone's childhood, but I wish I could have skipped the stage where the monsters were under the bed. You know that part where you're up all night panicking that something is lingering underneath, waiting for you to fall asleep so it can gobble you up. I had many nights as a ten-year-old when I couldn't breathe. I'd have the covers pulled over my head, making sure my legs and arms were not too close to the edge. One night I had even devised a strategy for protecting myself. I set up my G.I. Joe action figures on the perimeter of my bed to keep guard because for some reason I was convinced the monster would not cross a toy soldier barricade. That was the first night in a while I fell asleep unafraid.

“Why are you so afraid?” Has anyone ever asked you this question? Have you ever asked it of yourself? You were probably asked some version of that question quite a bit when you were a little one as you faced the first day of going to school or jumping off the swing set at peak height or spending the night away from home for the first time. We know kids are afraid. We permit them to have fear. It's our job as adults to help nurture and coach them through this. But when you become a big person, it's viewed as weakness, cowardice, and humiliating to admit you're afraid. So we pose and pretend that we have no fear.

I'm no longer afraid of invisible monsters hiding under my bed, but I'm not sure you or I have rid ourselves of monsters

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that may not really be there. As adults, we outgrow specific fears, trade them in for new ones, and learn to mask them with a certain amount of sophistication.

Jesus grappled with this as He ministered and disciplined people. They tried to hide behind their doctrines, spiritual clichés, and religious status, but Jesus had X-ray vision to see how constantly afraid they were. This is why Jesus asks of His disciples and the crowds, “Why are you so afraid?” almost forty times throughout the Gospels, and “Fear not” is the most frequently repeated command in Scripture—365 times! Three evenings after Jesus had been crucified and buried, the disciples are huddled in fear in an upper room with locked doors. Imagine the self-loathing and finger-pointing that filled the air: Whose idea was it to trust a guy from Nazareth? I can’t believe I shut down my fishing business for this. Did Jesus trick us? My reputation is ruined. Who is going to get us something to eat up in here? Not me, I’m not going out there, we are a laughingstock. Now what?

When life is uncertain, when civilization seems unstable, fear is our first instinct. We huddle, we hunker down, we hide, we begin to hate the world. We seek the security of locked doors, gated communities, suspicious thoughts about others, talking through technology, impenetrable border walls, club memberships, and spending \$500 billion annually on defense systems. I think Jesus knew something about us that we don’t know about ourselves—we think and do a lot of stuff out of fear.

FEAR DISGUISED

Only a few years ago I convinced myself that one of my neighbors was a jerk—yup, that’s what I thought, don’t tell anyone. I walked past his driveway and out of the corner of my eye I saw him crawl out from under his car, sporting a red bandanna, slam a tool on the ground, and release an expletive. I thought, *Stay away from that dude*. I know I’m not the only one who has done this. I made a judgment from a distance about who he was. Somewhere in my mind, I allowed my perception to conveniently morph into a hard fact—HE IS A JERK. With no personal interaction and one snapshot of observation, I created a mental box that he was now stuck in. How does this happen so quickly? I confess now that my judgment of him was rooted in fear. He was unlike me. His hands were caked with grease, and I have little in common with motorheads (no offense). He symbolized something foreign to me, even intimidating to me from afar, and so I took a step back from connecting. Slowly, a man I never met was morphing into a perceived monster—someone I should be afraid of, and keep a distance. Fear impacts our spirit, our strength, our stamina to reach outward toward others unlike us. Fear ultimately affects love, silencing its voice in our lives.

I’M NOT AFRAID

What blocks most from addressing the fear in their lives? We don’t think of ourselves as afraid. That word *fear* seems too blunt to us, unless we’re talking about fear of snakes, spiders, or heights. When fear is not attached to concrete external objects, it’s hard to identify. This is the nature of fear, to stay elusive, unable to be dealt with directly.

It reminds me of a conversation I had with a young husband who came to me for some counseling. His wife had asked him to meet with me because he was always on edge and barking out orders to his family. In our first session, I picked up some phrases that repeated in his speech. Two of them were the words *control* and *concerned*. These are typically code words for fear. So I asked him, “What do you fear?” He shot back an ironic response: “Fear? Fear is not an issue for me; I’m just afraid my family won’t turn out the way it should!” He couldn’t hear the confession in his statement. Even when I gently pointed out that he just said “afraid,” the idea of “fear” was a step too far. Most of us don’t recognize the signs of fear in our lives and therefore hold on to some level of self-delusion.

I have never viewed myself as a fear-based person either, but I’ve come to understand how fear is determined to put on disguises. It can be quite successful at masking its presence in our life. We can be pretty proficient at telling ourselves that fear has no part in our story. But we are mistaken. Fear wants to dress itself up, posing itself as “concern,” so it has the power to place wedges between us and others.

When it came to encountering my blue-collar neighbor, my gut lurched (“he’s probably a jerk”), and then I was not able to recognize a possible life-giving relationship with him. Fear disguised itself in my bloated opinion. A fearful person may even appear loving, but suspicion will interfere with the impulse to love someone unlike, different, or foreign—it depletes our energy for that action. When I felt the tinge of fear, rather than identifying it as such and exploring why, I tumbled into all kinds of mental gymnastics that allowed me, even entitled me, to label him. Fear is the enemy of love, and it will do whatever it can to disguise its face. Fear thrives in the shadows

of our opinions, our rants, our judgments, and our preferred labels. Fear turns the face of the unfamiliar into perceived monsters.

DO I SEE MONSTERS?

We see this in the first disciples of Jesus. In Mark 9, Jesus sends out His little band of followers into the world to share the good news of His arrival, and then they discover someone unexpected. “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us” (Mark 9:38). They are triggered by someone who is not like them, not one of them, not part of their tribe. They feel threatened, and a rogue demon-caster-outer becomes someone they fear. In the face of something foreign, their minds, their bodies, and their theology expelled rather than explored. They saw danger where there was none. Thankfully Jesus was there to correct their guttural response. “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:39–40).

**In the face of
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Really? Does Jesus mean this? I can’t imagine how this feels for the disciples. In their first-century world, there are so many lines and borders for who is in and who is out, who is good and who is bad, who is clean and who is dirty, who is acceptable and who is unacceptable. We have very similar

borders and lines that influence who we are afraid of, who appears dangerous to us. The disciples felt a fire within to oppose this fellow. He became someone they feared.

We turn people into monsters when we no longer see them as we see ourselves. Our status, enlightenment, education, race, theology becomes our comparative contrast against another. It makes us feel superior, although most of us would never publicly admit that. People don't have to do heinous evil things for us to see them as monsters; we just have to feel a tad better than they are. Something about their life feels offensive to us. Something about their politics or morals feels repulsive to us.

Ten years ago, I moved into the heart of Syracuse, New York, with my family. I'm embarrassed to admit it now, but I had to face a particular fear, diagnose it, and eventually dismantle it. One glorious spring afternoon, I was strolling through my neighborhood for the first time, taking in the sights and sounds. I squinted my eyes to see into the distance, and noticed a man was walking toward me on the sidewalk—a black man. I confess I felt a surge of fear move through my body. Maybe you're judging me as you read this. Often our fears don't hover on the tip of our tongue, they usually reside unprocessed, hiding out. The imprint of what frightens us doesn't "sit" in the verbal, understanding part of the brain. God is not scandalized, shocked, or disturbed by anything within us.

Was I afraid of black men? Could I openly acknowledge this? If you had asked me that question in conversation I would've absolutely said, "I have black friends." I'd push back, and might even be insulted by the question. Yet here I was, feeling fear, seeing a monster where there was none. It was all in my head. The temptation is to lie to ourselves, soothing

our discomfort. Who wants to confess to being infected with racism? Delusion is more comfortable than daring to face the truth about ourselves.

We all have latent fears of others when they're "not one of us," as the disciple John stated so matter-of-factly to Jesus. It causes us to avoid, dismiss, judge, and even hate others. The voice of fear speaks in very cut-and-dried terms; things are either good or evil, safe or dangerous, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong. Fear wants to be the ringleader of your emotions.⁹ It wants to charge into the various rooms of our mind and yell "Fire!" Can we move beyond our initial reactions, automatic opinions, and perceived threats? The very soul of being a Jesus follower is at stake with how we answer this question.

Delusion is more comfortable than daring to face the truth about ourselves.

FEAR INTERNALIZED

Sometimes I go all Superman with my son, put on a red blanket with its chew holes from our dog, and try to convince him that I am larger than life. Of course, no one is invincible. We are all fragile, easier to injure than we think, trying to make our way in the thickets of the universe. When we're young, we all lean toward idealism, assuming the best is inevitable, interpreting the world simplistically, good or bad.

Eventually we will collide with the immovable wall known as reality.¹⁰ We become more alert to the harshness of the world as we accumulate nicks and cuts from the journey of life. Someone at some point steals from you, taking a measure of hope, a portion of joy, a feeling of peace. Someone you've loved moved away. Friends you've cared about stopped caring back. Leaders

you've looked up to broke your trust. Someone you've let in close mistreated you. You have scars; I know I do. Fear is forged in the bowels of this hard world. So we look into the mirror and see our eyes; they are tired, showing the weight of cynicism. This is a necessary starting point, to look into a mirror honestly.

What has happened to me?

What has hurt me?

Honesty helps us breathe freely. Honesty is not bound to image-management and covering over the real.¹¹ Real honesty looks in the mirror. And this is precisely the kind of honesty that we need to face our fears.

What do we do when we realize we are not in control of the hurts that visit our lives? There is no erasing the experiences we live through. When we are injured, dashed, and royally let down, we begin to fear those around us—we look for monsters. When we lack control over the suffering in our lives, our fears direct us outward into suspicion rather than inward to confront the pain in our souls.¹²

I'd much rather grind against all that has damaged me—the slights that cut me, the ways people have taken advantage of me, the times I've been used up and tossed to the side. "Nobody deserves my love," says a bitter voice within. That voice wants to blast full volume in the echo chamber of my head. It wants to collect all the mistreatments, injuries, and betrayals, and assemble an airtight case that no one is worth loving. I feel the propulsion into the abyss, a closed and comfortable place of only loving myself and a few select people. Have you ever felt that shift within?

We close down, protecting what we have . . . we're afraid someone might ruin what good things we still have. Our souls

feel divided though, don't they? We want to love generously, we wish to extend to others openly, but something pulls us back into the posture of self-protective fear.

How is fear shaping us?

As seen with my pathetic engagement with my neighbor, fear wants to flat-out

crush any compassion for anyone unlike me—my neighbor, the stranger, and my enemies. Our self-protective mechanisms kick in and create buffers between us. Honestly, I no longer felt a desire to discover who my bandanna-sporting neighbor was or who the black man was taking an afternoon walk. Fear ultimately does this—it shuts down relationships. This is quite arrogant, isn't it? We assume we know who someone is, and what they are about, from a snapshot, from a distance.

Acknowledging and naming my fears has opened me up to God, boldly inviting me to be changed by love, to live in love, and to be known by love (John 13:35). While we naturally loathe our enemies, Jesus showed us how to love them. We want to detest those who hurt us; Jesus taught us how to forgive them. We distance ourselves from those unlike us; Jesus showed us to share a meal with them. Jesus came to reveal and resolve a core problem—humanity's tendency toward fear. I needed to unpack how my inner fears were killing the expression of love.

Fear is not an abstract concept to be left to the sociologist to dissect intellectually; it is lurking in us all. Repressing fear in the chaos beneath can undoubtedly make you look put

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from a snapshot,
from a distance.**

together, but you're not fooling anyone.

This is why the first words from an angel's mouth are often "fear not" when they encounter fragile, fumbling humans like us.¹³

God understands we have reflexive fear in us. An angel tells the prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear . . ." (Isa. 41:10). In Matthew, an angel tells Joseph, "Do not be afraid . . ." (Matt. 1:20). In Luke, the angel tells Mary she's having a baby, and says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30 NKJV). Then, when Jesus is born, an angel appears to shepherds watching their flocks and says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news . . ." (Luke 2:10). Fear is a significant blockage to seeing the God of love before us and around us. Fear shoves a potato sack over our head so that we cannot see. It limits our senses for feeling, knowing, and recognizing what love looks like in any given situation.

SCARCITY IS WHERE IT STARTS

Fear comes from a place of a tense, aching, insecure restlessness within us—a gurgling cauldron in the basement of our gut. Even though we may have virtually every practical reason to be happy—friends, health, material affluence—we experience an unsettled, insatiable, and disquieting discontent within.¹⁴ The majority of us are dissatisfied. Research is showing that our mental and emotional state is at unprecedented lows. It's been traditionally thought that humans are generally pleased when they apprehend vocational goals, financial wealth, and good health, but neuroscientists are exposing that things

“going well” doesn’t make us happy. When a sampling of two thousand young people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five was tested multiple times throughout three years for feelings of well-being, they discovered a shocking reality. Even though their job satisfaction was high, their physical fitness was good, and their financial status was decent, their neurological receptors tested as agitated and unsatisfied.¹⁵ What was discovered is that we have expectations that are not being met, but we are not sure exactly what those expectations are!

We have natural propensity to zone in on scarcity, to zero in on our lack. Scarcity is the emotional framework that “we do not have enough” of something: enough time, enough money, enough education, enough safety, enough energy, enough attention, enough strength, or enough to be okay. We believe we have too little, and the cost is that we feel “needy” instead of freehearted. I know this dwells in me, and it has shown up in how I’m tempted to parent my two-year-old son. There is a subtle but identifiable pull to buy the car seat built like a tank, to put gates on everything, to buy the crib with all the safety features, to buy the thermometer for bathtub time, to place a protective cover on the shopping cart, and even to buy the Owlet that sends oxygen stats to my phone while my baby sleeps. I have not fallen into that bottomless hole, but something inside says, “You’re not doing enough to keep your baby boy safe.” This is the voice of scarcity making me feel afraid.

“Scarcity promotes tunnel vision making us less insightful, less open, less safe, less free,” writes Sendhil Mullainathan.¹⁶ We seldom feel fully satisfied with our current status. We feel a few brief moments of euphoria, but we spend most of our lives waiting for a fuller amount to come.

Can you relate to this feeling? Are you waiting for something more to happen?

STINGY WITH LOVE

Many see the miracle in which Jesus divided the fish and loaves as a lesson on God fixing a problem of hunger; however, there is more to the scene. Five thousand people traveling a great distance and forgetting to bring food is highly unlikely. However, as time wore on, many people's supplies started to dwindle. Mom looks into the backpack and realizes there are no more snacks for the kiddos. I suppose that many in the crowd felt scarcity rather than generosity—stinginess settled in. Folks were less likely to share with those who had not prepared well for the day.

A young boy offers his loaves of bread and fish, and a miracle is sparked (Luke 9:10–17).

**Scarcity depletes
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Jesus is contradicting the everyday impressions that scarcity besets the world—that God's love and care are limited.¹⁷ Jesus is confronting the fear that we don't have enough, that there is not enough to go around, that love is not enough.

Jesus breaks in with a paradigm of plenty.

Jesus comes as the King whose kingdom flows with lavish love.

Jesus was guiding His disciples to live without fear in a world in which there seemed to be pervasive violence. When we feel like we don't have enough, we're stingy with who we're helpful to, who we're kind to, who we're openhearted to. When my heart is content and open, there is room to be present to anyone. When I am afraid, I turn in on myself and zone in on

only those who are like me. Scarcity depletes our desire to be warm and welcoming to people who don't seem to have anything in common with us. When our lives are in a place of scarcity emotionally and mentally, we essentially hunker down into a state of self-preservation.

OUR SURVIVAL INSTINCT

Fear thrives off our powerful human instinct to survive. Our early ancestors were guided by the ability to survive, fight for their food, and continue to reproduce their own kind. Just about everything that humans have become has served that essential purpose. The way we relate with others illustrates our survival instincts. Fear is felt vigorously. This emotion signals an imminent threat to our well-being, which then triggers an urgent action in response to its cause (e.g., an attacker or rotten food).¹⁸ This quick and forceful response keeps us alive and even prevents us from ingesting moldy broccoli that's been sitting in the back of the fridge for a month. Our senses are heightened when something frightens us or something repulses us, and so we make a judgment call. Without these instincts, our primitive forbearers would have died, and we wouldn't be chilling, perusing Pinterest, and sipping on Frappuccinos in the twenty-first century.

The most common threats to humans in primitive times remained relatively obvious—the danger from a wild animal or a rival tribesman. Maybe that's where we get “kill or be killed.” Not much room for nuance in who is your enemy, right?

The notion of survival has changed dramatically in our first-world environment since the earliest days of humankind. I can't remember the last time I had to fight someone because they threatened my water source. Unlike threats of the past,

today's threats are often in the form of ideas and opinions. Rather than moving toward each other, we obey our immediate survival-emotions. We react with fear because something about our life feels under attack, and we strike out verbally or virtually (gotta love social media). Fear rewires us for defense rather than discovery.¹⁹

OUR PRIMAL FEAR

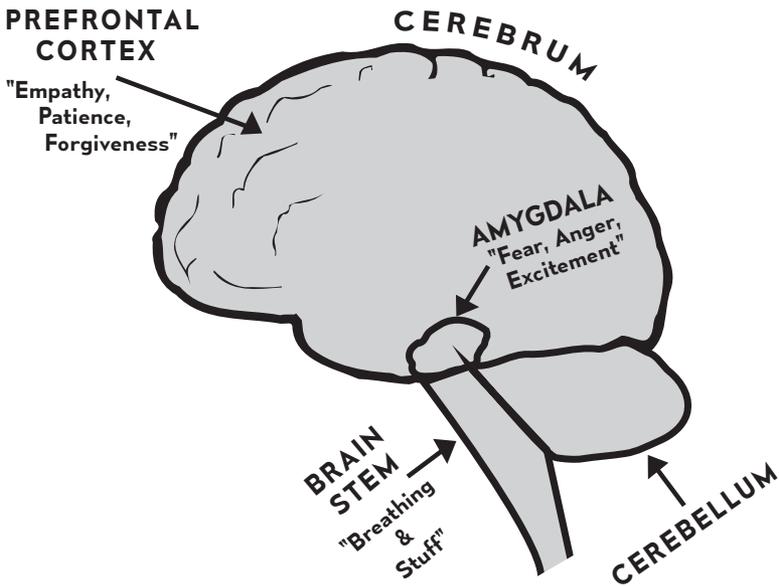
We are wondrously made, and the more we discover this, the more we reveal how our bodies and brains are affected by fear. It has become increasingly verified through the developing science of neurology.

Nerd out with me a bit as I unpack this. We have three parts to our brain: the brain stem, the cerebellum, and the cerebrum. The first and smallest part of our brain is the stem. The stem controls breathing, heart rate, digestion, excretion, etc., which is why I short-circuit my brain stem the morning after I eat that late-night burrito.

The second and next most substantial part of our brain is the cerebellum. It is responsible for voluntary movements such as posture, balance, coordination, and speech, resulting in smooth and balanced muscular activity.

The third part of our brain is the cerebrum. For our exploration into fear there are two significant parts located here that are important to us. The amygdala, which is buried within the cerebrum and the prefrontal cortex, which is located at the outer layer of the cerebrum. The amygdala is responsible for emotions in human beings that are often impulsive or unconsciously automatic like disgust, laughter, fear, excitement, sex drive, and anger. Fear lights up the amygdala within this part of the brain. With many of these emotions that light up

our brain, our bodies receive a robust chemical release of dopamine and serotonin. Fear is a primal response that does not require active contemplation, it is typically triggered when we feel threatened by another. We make our first judgments about what could hurt us quite rapidly, and we hardly ever seek evidence that might debunk our initial emotional judgment.



The prefrontal cortex is associated with higher, more complex brain functioning such as empathy, forgiveness, self-control, patience, hospitality, and listening (not just hearing), etc. Though the prefrontal cortex is the largest part of our brain, it is the least utilized part by the majority of the population. Dr. Joshua Greene said “our best estimates are that only 10% of the population uses their prefrontal cortex on a regular basis. Theoretically, it’s possible to go your whole life and never use this part of our brain.”²⁰ Why is this? The prefrontal

cortex requires the development of higher thinking while the amygdala is essential but impulsive and in many ways lower thinking.

It takes mindful, careful work to move beyond the automatic impulse of fear. Because the amygdala is the source of fear, it produces a dose of dopamine and serotonin as a reward in our bodies. Think about that—fear gives us a dose of drugs, a feel-good chemical. As counterintuitive as it sounds, fear feels good. When someone makes a fear-based statement about another, I like to say, “That’s just the drugs talking.”

In contrast, the prefrontal cortex does not generate those type of potent chemicals and therefore feels less rewarding. No wonder we are hooked on fear; we’ve become junkies. Fear is as primal as primal gets. Being afraid of others—who could hurt us or who are simply repelling to us—is quite natural, but Jesus followers are being called out of the natural into something unusual, supernatural even.

SECURITY TO SELF-PROTECTION

All of this fear can be traced back to humanity’s origins. The story starts with a God who profoundly enjoys making the world. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit engage in a fascinating conversation about how to make humanity: “‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ . . . God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’ . . . Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. . . . God saw all

that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen. 1:26, 28–29, 31). It’s as if God builds a gorgeous home and manicures a ridiculously beautiful yard and tells the first humans, “Look what I made for you . . . for realz!” (paraphrase mine).

God creates out of community of Father, Son, and Spirit as the fountain of love brimmed over. They enjoy one another, and They enjoy us! That is why God uses the term “very good” to describe the situation. God is providing for and caring for Adam and Eve, and it’s very, very good. The first words about us are that we have received the good life. And it’s all holy, it’s all sacred. The whole world is God-bathed. It’s drenched in love.

Let’s not miss that the Trinity is not saying everything is perfect. In fact, in Genesis 2:18, God describes Adam’s alone state as “not good,” and that is before things go sour and sin enters into the world. It’s important to understand that the main point of the garden of Eden is not that it’s a place of perfection, but that it’s a place of presence—God’s abiding presence.

Adam and Eve are not on their own to look out for themselves. This is good news for you, for me, and for the world around us. Our lives do not have to be perfectly manicured. Our lives do not have to be perfectly hemmed in with safety barricades. Our wants don’t have to be perfectly provided for. God is with us in the midst of our ordinariness. God is present in our imperfect lives, and this changes everything.

Then the voice of fear slithers its way into the love-soaked garden of Eden and plays with our head. The Bible reveals this voice to be Satan (2 Cor. 11:3), the tempter (1 Thess. 3:5), the one who comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). The serpent introduces the first rustlings of fear, pretending to be our ally. Fear begins to pick at us: “Are you sure you have enough? Are you really secure? Isn’t someone holding out on you?” It points fingers, blames others, and talks into our soul,

masquerading as “wisdom.”²¹ It’s quite interesting that Satan is called “more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made” (Gen. 3:1). This is one of the ways fear disguises itself: “Well, I’m just being wise.” This is not the voice of divine love; it’s the voice of self-protective fear.

Fear tells us love is not enough: “Maybe I’m not okay, maybe I don’t have enough, maybe I’m not safe,” shifting us into a self-preserving state. This is why Adam and Eve run, hide, and start a new fashion trend of wearing fig leaves. They are convinced they must protect themselves, cover themselves, and separate themselves to be safe. Where there was once harmony, there is now hostility. Ever since, all of humanity has been haunted by apparitions that if we don’t first take care of ourselves and our interests, then no one will. This turn toward self-protection is a sad theme throughout the Scriptures.

Being alive is a scary, unpredictable experience, but Jesus is inviting us into a different way of being in the face of the unfamiliar, in the face of our perceived monsters. Jesus is calling us out of our survival instincts, out of our politics of fear, out of our perceptions of others, into a lush landscape of love. We sense it, we feel it beneath our feet, but we look up and see it overhead—fear and love are at war.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the big idea that sticks out to you in this chapter?
2. What part of “how fear works” brings you some conflict or clarity in your life?
3. What practical step can you take to unplug from the culture of fear in and around your life?