The Dangerous Distortion of Fear
Edward Song, Christianity Today 9.22.26

Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered perhaps his most famous line—"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"—at his first inauguration in 1933. That speech stands as one of the most significant in American political history, but I confess that this best-known claim has always baffled me. In 1933, the United States was in the middle of the Great Depression. Unemployment was at 25 percent, and the economy had contracted by almost one-third. Poor land management and droughts had created the Dust Bowl in the Great Plains. Striking workers engaged in violent conflicts with employers, and Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany just one month before Roosevelt's speech. There were many real things to fear in 1933.

Contemporary research into the psychology of fear, however, shows that Roosevelt was onto something. Fear itself can transform how we perceive the world, turning even benign surroundings into a landscape of threats. Neuroscientists have shown that when we perceive threats, our amygdala—the brain's fear-processing center—leaps into action before the more rational parts of the brain can catch up, leading to a cascade of far-reaching changes to how we see and engage with the world. Fear increases our sensitivity to perceived threats, for example, making us more likely to interpret ambiguous facial expressions negatively. It can impair our memory and visual perception of the world.

We often try to cope with fear by seeking out more information, but ironically this practice can intensify feelings of anxiety. In a study of media exposure in the wake of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, people who consumed high amounts of news about the attack experienced more acute stress than those actually at the bombings. Doomscrolling, apparently, is a real thing. Unsurprisingly, fear can radically reshape how we see others, making us more tribal and distrustful. Numerous studies have indicated that individuals who are induced into fear exhibit a pronounced empathy gap and a reduced willingness to help people whom they perceive to be different from themselves.

And so just as Roosevelt understood, fear itself can be a dangerous and distorting force. Fear twists our perceptions, narrows our vision, and turns us inward in self-protection. It induces a kind of calculated madness—a frantic need to seize control, to take matters into our own hands. In our desperation, we gird our loins and harden our hearts to neutralize the threats. From the vantage of fear, doing what it takes to claw our way to safety is not just permissible but responsible.

It is telling that the very first effect of Adam and Eve's disobedience in Eden was fear: "[Adam] answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid'" (Gen. 3:10). So the first fruit of the Fall was fear, a result of the broken relationship between God and humanity. The Reformer Martin Luther described sin as the soul turned in on itself *homo incurvatus in se* (*humanity turned inward upon itself*) Fear deepens that curvature, leading us to hide from God, distrust our neighbors, and retreat into our tribes. Fear is not merely a powerful emotion but also a description of the human condition, a sign of our brokenness. To be human is to be vulnerable and afraid.

If fear is a central problem of human existence, it should come as no surprise that the Bible talks about it so much. It is often said that the most frequent command in the Bible is "Do not be afraid." It is surely a mistake, however, to treat this as just another of the commands in the Bible that we find impossible to reliably fulfill on this side of eternity. Rather, it is equally a word of comfort. The Bible never says there is nothing to fear. What it offers instead is something far stranger: the reassurance that we will never pass through our fear alone.

Near the end of the first century, a Christian community in crisis received a letter that would eventually be called 1 John. His church was unraveling. Believers had split over theological disagreements—perhaps about who Jesus truly was or what it meant to live a righteous life. Some members had left altogether, and those who remained were likely disoriented, uncertain, and afraid. The letter is dire and apocalyptic in tone. Twice, John says it is the "last hour" (2:18), and he frequently talks about the Antichrist or the Devil (2:14, 18, 22; 3:8, 10; 4:3; 5:18–19). It reads like John's last desperate instructions to a church in a world that is spinning apart.

It's striking, then, that he doesn't spend much time on arguments or abstract theology. Instead he writes about love. Again and again, he insists that love is the defining mark of the Christian life—not certainty, not self-protection, not doctrinal purity, but love. And in this context of real uncertainty and anxiety, he offers this: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (4:18, ESV).

We often hear that verse as a kind of spiritual benchmark, as if once we've matured enough in our faith, fear will evaporate. But John does not describe a state we must achieve. Rather, he describes what the love of God does: It casts out fear not by removing threats but by reorienting our hearts away from any illusion of self-sufficiency and toward the trust that we are held by someone greater than anything we may face.

This love does not deny the danger, nor does it guarantee that we will escape suffering. Instead, it assures us that we are not abandoned. Fear isolates and contracts the soul in grasping desperation; love draws near and invites it to open. In drawing near, the love of God displaces fear—not because the world is safe but because we are not left alone in the midst of it.

There are, to be sure, many real things to fear in the world (and many more imagined ones). That was true in 1933, and it is true now. Worse than these dangers, though, is what fear can do to us. Fear distorts. It narrows our vision, hardens our hearts, and tempts us to grasp for control, to protect ourselves at the expense of others. When we give in to fear—when we let it name the world for us, dictate our loyalties, and justify our actions—it doesn't just corrode our politics or poison our relationships. It deforms our souls. And so perhaps Roosevelt was more correct than he knew: The real thing to fear, in the end, is not some specific danger or threat but the way we let fear pull us away from the love of God and neighbor.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you," God says through the prophet Isaiah (43:2). The waters may yet rise, but we won't be left to the flood. Our task as Christians is not to deny our fear but to refuse to let it rule us—to be the kind of people who choose self-sacrificial love over self-protection, trust over control, and the presence of God over illusions of security.