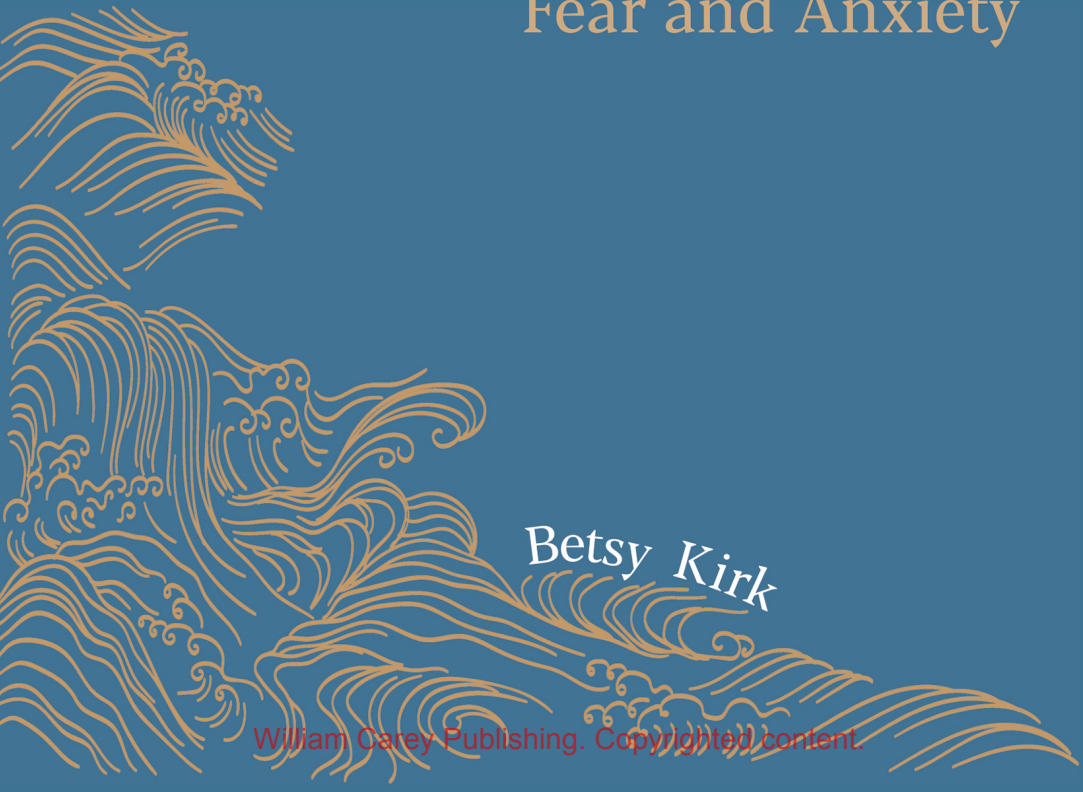
Sacred Courage

Thinking Biblically About Fear and Anxiety



Betsy Kirk

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1
The Prevalence of Fear

> When finally I was free to sit down beside my own fire I felt so tired that the flesh seemed to drag at my bones. I slumped down in the armchair and shut my eyes. But my mind was a cage gnawed by formless creatures that jostled and fretted, worries—some real, some half-recognized, some unidentified and purely instinctive—that wouldn't let me rest.
>
> —Mary Stewart, *Nine Coaches Waiting*

It was a dark and stormy night. I was burrowing in the closet. We were preparing to move to the other side of the world, and I was pulling out clothes to pack and clothes to toss. In the midst of a mental struggle over giving away my cardigans, for which I had a Mr. Rogers–like affinity, I heard high-pitched screams coming from the darkness of my daughters' room. I raced in there, heart thumping, to find my four-year-old huddled in her bottom bunk. She was crying hard, sweaty, and shuddering.

"I had a bad dream," she cried. "It was horrible."

"Tell Mommy," I said. "What was it?"

She could hardly choke it out. I held her, praying for God's comfort. Finally, the answer came.

"Two bunnies!"

It's funny now, but at the time, I did not laugh at my daughter. Her experience brought back memories for me. As a child, I too was plagued by nightmares. I was a fearful child in general. It's family legend that I would hide under my precious blue blankie to avoid seeing horror films such as *Dumbo* (1941). I had many terrifying dreams and often spent bedtime hours in fear—feeling jumpy, lying awake because fearful eyes don't close easily. When I couldn't stand the tortures of my anxiety anymore, I would creep silently into my parents' room and lie on the

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floor next to their bed. I hoped they wouldn't see me and send me back to my room. I still remember how cold I was lying there, pulling my mom's old bathrobe off the end of their bed to cover up.

The worst nightmares came after I saw the film *The Hiding Place* (1975) when I was about nine. I became terrified of the Holocaust and what happened to Corrie and Betsie ten Boom (for whom I am named). Scenes from the film played over and over in my mind. I didn't want to believe people in the world could be so wicked to each other. It made me want to find a safe place to hide. Somewhere deep inside of me, I determined always to stay safe, to stay close to home, and to be sure never to let anything bad happen to me. I looked forward to a time when I would outgrow my fears, as everyone seemed to think I would.

Eventually the nightmares lessened, and I thought fear had receded in my life. By the time I was in high school, I had begun to feel a stirring, a sort of internal restlessness, when I thought about missions. I felt maybe God was leading me that way. But missionaries tend to leave home, go far away, and take all sorts of crazy risks. It sounded to me like a dangerous life, a life of hardship. But I started to make decisions in response to the stirring in my heart. It really made no sense given how afraid I was, yet I think now God led me on, despite my fear, to follow the path he had prepared for me. After high school I went on a short-term trip to Mexico. I went away to college. I went on a trip to Israel.

One such stirring when I was twenty led me to a missions conference for college students in Atlanta. There I first became conscious of how much fear I had. John Piper was preaching from Colossians 1:24 in which Paul wrote, "In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Piper said there was nothing lacking in the atonement Jesus made for our sins. The atonement was full and complete. The only thing lacking was the communication of it to the world—Jesus's death needed to be lived out in the death (either the actual death or the death-to-self) of the Christian.

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In that hour I saw in the Bible, for the first time, that suffering is a planned part of the Christian life. God hasn't removed suffering for all time for those who know him—yet. This life, even when we know Jesus, isn't guaranteed to be safe. That was his plan—unavoidable, inescapable, unchangeable, out of my control. I returned to my hotel room, locked the door, laid on the dirty carpet, and cried. I wasn't wanting to serve or follow Jesus. I was weak, selfish, and terrified of suffering. God was calling me to follow him, and I did not want to do it at all.

I wish I could tell you my struggle ended that day and somehow fear in my life was triumphantly defeated for all time. But it was the beginning.

When I first married my husband, I constantly worried that he would die. I thought he would not be in this world long. I felt anxious and worried about him for no apparent reason at all. If he came from work fifteen minutes late, I'd spend the last five minutes imagining police cars pulling up, a knock at the door, a man standing there saying, "Ma'am, we have some bad news for you." Alex is healthier than a horse and tougher than a rhino. The biggest risk he took in his job at the church was probably operating the microwave. It didn't matter. I would freak out if he was late—ugly freak out.

Then my husband had a few opportunities to travel and get teaching experience in Myanmar and Nigeria. I was certain he was a dead man, and all my hopes of a happy life together were about to be ashes around my feet. I went to his funeral so many times in my mind. It didn't occur to me that this was fear operating in my life. But loving him had given me even more to fear because I had more to lose.

When we had our first baby, I learned a great deal about my subconscious. In those early months of fatigue and night-time feedings, I would frequently jerk awake and frantically slap the bedcovers, hunting for the baby. I was always sure I'd fallen asleep holding her and then squashed her or dropped her on the floor. I wouldn't remember laying her in her crib. I'd suddenly punch my husband at three o'clock in the morning, "Where's the baby? WHERE'S THE BABY!"

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He'd say calmly, "In her crib."

You mamas, have you ever done the breathing check? What makes us risk waking our finally sleeping infant just to see if he is still alive? Where does this terror come from? Some fear that our children will drown in the bath, some that every bump and lump means cancer. What did I learn about my subconscious in those early months of motherhood? My subconscious was not trusting God. Somewhere deep inside I was very, very afraid. Whatever was built deeply into my soul as a child was still with me.



I'm more than forty years old now, have four children, and live in Indonesia. If I'm honest I still see the world in terms of safety and danger, I'm still determined to avoid suffering at all costs, and I still battle with deep and oppressive anxiety. Fear pulls the strings that move my emotions, reactions, and decisions. It seems that I am not going to passively outgrow it. It is an elemental force in my life. But I know I'm not alone.

Everyone is afraid. People live at differing levels of freedom from fear, but no one is absolutely free. It may appear that some are because our responses to fear morph and look different for each person. Not only are we afraid of different things, but our awareness of fear also differs. We show fear in different ways. Fear, as a sort of underlying emotion, can disguise itself as many other emotions. Fear is what you find underneath if you drill into insecurity. Fear is sometimes the root cause of depression and often hides beneath the mantle of anger. Do you have an anger problem? The angriest people are usually scared to death. Fear twists relationships and creates overprotectiveness, possessiveness, jealousy, and an obsession with control. A substantial portion of stress is actually fear.

Not all of us would admit to being fearful. Some of us genuinely do not identify fear among our most common feelings. But probably

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Discussion Questions

1. What were you afraid of as a child?

2. How have these fears shaped you? What have you "built into your soul" in response?

3. What fear/power dynamics can you see in the culture(s) in which you live?

4. What fear would you most like Jesus to silence in your own life?

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