

Faith, Fear, and Trauma

by Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael February 28, 2009

2 Timothy 1:7 tells us: *“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”* We live at a time when threats to our safety and our well-being surround us, and where tragedy and catastrophe occur with regularity. Some of these threats are economic, with our government and economists seemingly unable to agree on what is best to do for the country. Some of these threats are climatic – degrading air quality, diminishing clean water, and dilemmas of how to continue using fuel without making things worse. Some of these are natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, tornados and earthquakes, and some of these are the result of imperfect technology and human error such as airplane disasters. All of these impact us negatively, and some even cause death. Besides these, there are those that are the result of evil in the world, and those for which we have no explanation at all.

Sometimes catastrophic happenings are distant from us and we can avoid thinking much about them – perhaps they are in another city, another country, another community, another family. But sometimes these occurrences come home to us, as has the recent tragic loss of our three friends, and our natural response to all of these is to be afraid.

But John 4:32 reminds us that we, who believe, have resources that the world does not know about, and once again, 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us:

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

There are two kinds of fear that the Scripture is not talking about. The first is the kind that causes us to jump back and defend ourselves or run away when something startles us or attacks us. That is a hormonal physical defense mechanism that God has built into our bodies for our preservation in dangerous situations where there is no time to think or pray. Physiologists call it the response of “fright, fight, or flight.” This kind of fear can persist for awhile, for the duration of the danger, but it is normal and it is helpful.

The second kind of fear that the Scripture is not talking about is a proper fear of God – the kind alluded to in Ecclesiastes 12:13 and 1 Peter 2:17. No, the kind of fear Scripture is talking about is the kind that is the opposite of faith in God. It is the kind that persists and becomes chronic – the kind that does not trust God with our possessions, our futures, our lives, or the lives of our loved ones. It’s the kind of fear that demands to understand why a bad thing has happened so that we can console ourselves in our understanding and seek to control our destinies. Some of us have read the Bible many times through without it occurring to us that the Bible is full of bad things that have happened to innocent people. The stories often don’t pierce us because they are accounts of things that happened many years ago and very far away. But let’s put ourselves in Job’s place for a minute. The Book of Job begins by telling us:

“There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.” (Job 1:1)

When we speak of innocent, how much more innocent can a man be than that? Yet, for His own reasons, God removed His protection from Job and allowed Satan to wreak havoc on his life. Job lost his entire family and all his possessions, yet Scripture says of him:

“Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. and he said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.” (Job 1:20-22)

Then we are told that Job was struck with painful infections all over his body, and Job’s wife entreated him to commit suicide by cursing God so that God would kill him; and what was Job’s response to his wife? In Job 2:10 we read:

“But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”

Wow! Who among us is accepting of adversity? If the word “adversity” doesn’t register, I’ll use another. Who among us is willing to accept terrible things happening to us while believing that God is in control? If the Book of Job stands for anything at all, it stands for the principle that, while we readily pray for and accept God’s blessings, we must also be ready and willing to endure pain and suffering, should it come our way. We should certainly not like it, but we need to be willing to endure it without accusing God or walking away from Him.

Now Job did experience angst that approached despair when he cursed the day he was born and said in chapter 3, verses 20-26:

“Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, who long for death, but it does not come, and search for it more than hidden treasures; who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad when they can find the grave? Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, and whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes before I eat, and my groanings pour out like water. For the thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, for trouble comes.”

Job is a model of sorts, but he was not perfect, for as we see, he fell into despair and questioned God. He recounted his various virtuous acts and essentially complained: “Why do I deserve this? Why has this happened to me?”

Elihu, Job’s friend, attempted to defend God by trying to explain things to Job, and he did a credible job of it, but it was unauthorized because God had no intention of justifying Himself to Job or anyone else. God did finally answer Job, but with questions – not with explanations:

Job 38:1-18 *“Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: “Who is this who darkens counsel By words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the foundations*

of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors, When it burst forth and issued from the womb; when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band; when I fixed My limit for it, And set bars and doors; when I said, 'This far you may come, but no farther, And here your proud waves must stop!' Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the ends of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It takes on form like clay under a seal, and stands out like a garment. From the wicked their light is withheld, And the upraised arm is broken. Have you entered the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in search of the depths? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Or have you seen the doors of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this."

And God goes on with many other questions put to Job, none of which Job can answer of course. And the real lesson of this book to me is that God never does answer Job's questions because He doesn't owe him explanations, and He doesn't owe us explanations either. Nor does Job continue to question God and, instead, puts himself back under God's care and says to God in chapter 42:2-6:

"I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; you said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Years ago I, like Job, wanted answers from God for things that happened but, one day, what I just shared with you hit me between the eyes and, after that, I never questioned God again. It is His will, not mine, and He owes me no explanations. Since I came to peace with that, I have been able to accept losses and disappointments in my life that previously I had not, and I have also been able to come to terms with possible future ones that I am able to imagine befalling me. So long as I stopped myself from thinking about disturbing things, I preserved my tranquility for that moment, but I increased the potential that I could suffer emotional hell in the future.

Fear seems like such a natural thing, and it is for short periods of time, and when it is in response to real danger. But when it dominates or diminishes the quality of life, it is not natural; it is the spirit of fear we are warned about, and we need to cast it out of us aggressively, using the biblical tools of love and faith. Consider these Scriptures:

1 John 4:18 *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."*

Mark 4:40 *"But He said to them, 'Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?'"*

Psalm 56:3-4 “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God (I will praise His word), In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?”

Let’s now look at some of the circumstances that can cause fear. They can be severe, and they can involve severe loss. I lost both my parents when they were elderly, but I lost my younger brother to heart disease when he was relatively young. After each loss I felt disoriented – it was unreal that someone who had been there all my life was no longer there. I knew my parents were with the Lord, but that did not counteract the emptiness in my heart. Because I knew they were with the Lord I was not grieving for their sakes, but for mine, and I was comforted by Romans 8:28 that says:

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

It’s hard to see how God will turn some things for good, but He will. I remember Joseph’s plight on his being taken captive and sold into slavery by his brothers. Much later on when Joseph had gained prominence in Egypt and was reunited with his brothers, he said to them:

“Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:19-20)

He said it then, but can you imagine how abandoned and alone he must have felt when he was first abducted? These things are put in Scripture so we can learn from them. Psalms 27:1 reminds us:

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

And Luke 12:4 admonishes us:

“And I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.”

In order for that Scripture to give us comfort, we have to have faith in Scripture’s teaching of the afterlife, so we ought to examine ourselves and ask ourselves – “Do we?” If we do, 1 Corinthians 15:51-55 has meaning for us, and if we don’t it doesn’t; here is what that Scripture says:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’”

I'm finished speaking to you about fear, so now I want to change the subject and speak to you about trauma to us humans that can result from disastrous occurrences like the one we have recently encountered. The human nervous systems contain neurons that are like the electric wires in our homes. A typical extension cord in our home is rated at 15 Amperes, and as long as no more than a 1500 Watt electric heater is connected to it, it will not be overloaded; it will remain cool, and it will last a very long time. However, if you connect a second heater to the extension cord, it will begin to heat up because it was not designed to carry that much electric current. Eventually, the plastic insulation of the extension cord will succumb to the heat, and will melt, and the resulting short circuit will blow a fuse in your house, thereby disabling a significant part of your house's electric system.

It is much the same with our bodies when we are assaulted by disastrous occurrences that our bodies were not built to handle. Our hormones and other chemical and electrical components move toward overload, and the result can be as mild as undetectable, as moderate as the electric wire barely heating up, or as severe as the house circuit blowing a fuse. Since we are all different, each of us will react differently, and some of our reactions will be delayed like the wire that heats up and simmers for a prolonged period of time.

All of these reactions to stress are normal among humans; it is the disastrous occurrence that is abnormal. Nevertheless, like the wire that we notice is heating up, we want to do something about our condition if we notice ourselves heating up. Now I know we don't really heat up, but we do sometimes begin to experience certain difficulties following a disaster, so we need to recognize them and take steps to return ourselves to our former presumably peaceful state.

It turns out that between the military's experience with battlefield trauma and years of civilian experience with disasters such as airplane crashes, storm destructions, and the terrible attack of 9-11, much has been learned about human responses to stressful encounters, and how to deal with them. In fact, there has developed an entire specialty of psychological counseling and chaplaincy now devoted to helping victims of disasters heal from their emotional and spiritual wounds.

It happens that a friend of our congregation, Rabbi Michael Weiner, who leads a Tikkun Messianic Jewish congregation in Knoxville, introduced us to a chaplain whom he knows well, and who is certified in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, which is part of the ministry of Disaster Spiritual Care. The chaplain's name is Dr. David Trempe and, at my request, he wrote this for me to read to you:

"Members of Ohev Yisrael: Sometimes we come to a time in life when trauma can wound our heart and soul, and we search for answers and try to find solace in a broken and chaotic world. Whenever something catastrophic hits our sphere off its axis, our world is forever changed. Your congregation has just gone through a very serious traumatic event that will affect you for many years to come. Because of your Rabbi's and elders' love and care for you as a family, they want to provide you with every means available toward a path of biblical healing, and so they have invited me and my associate in ministry Rabbi Michael

Weiner to visit you in a few weeks, at which time I will share some personal experiences, and speak to you further about how to cope with events such as you have encountered.”

Dr. Trempe is correct that the Ohev elders and I desire only the best for you our Ohev family, and for that reason we have made arrangements for him and Rabbi Weiner to visit us on Sunday, March 22, which is three weeks from tomorrow. They will spend about half a day with us, teaching us and ministering their wisdom and experience. This is not just for those of us who may be experiencing difficulty. It is informational, and needs to be part of our congregational knowledge, so all should try to attend – especially parents and their children.

But I have a vision of going even further. I believe God would have us honor the memory Beth, Connor, and Brittany, by receiving Dr. Trempe’s teaching as a first step toward developing our own Ohev Yisrael Disaster Care ministry, to serve our surrounding community as we may be called from time to time. In this vision, I see some of us ourselves becoming certified first responders, and our congregation becoming known as a center from which compassionate caregivers can be dispatched to wherever they may be needed, in the name of our Lord Messiah Yeshua. To this end, I have enrolled in a first course entitled “Disaster Relief Training for Crisis Care Chaplains,” that will be given in Richmond Virginia, April 29 through May 1, and I intend to take other courses as well, that will lead to my receiving certification to serve and to train others. I invite anyone from Ohev who wishes to join me in taking the Richmond course to do so. And, by the way, our own Dr. Rickie Simpson already has her certification in Crisis Intervention Stress Management, and she also has experience serving in New York post 9-11. I believe God is putting this together as a partial fulfillment of his promise to us in Romans 8:28 that we cited earlier:

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

I pray for this in Yeshua’s Name, Amen!