

LIVING BOLDLY in the Absence of Fear

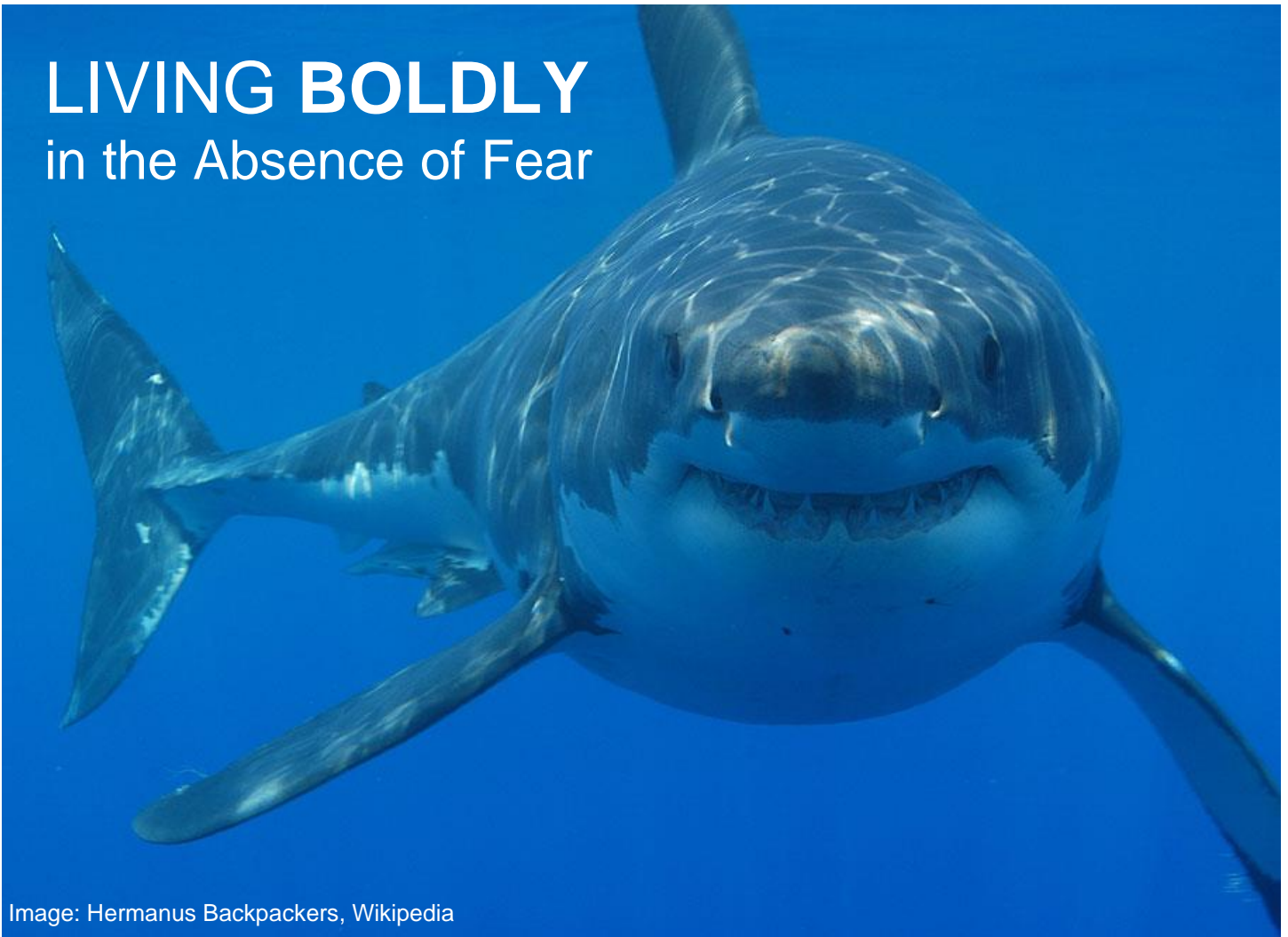


Image: Hermanus Backpackers, Wikipedia

Nothing quite instills fear in the hearts of many humans as the thought of being attacked by a shark. Sharks are rated among the top fifty fears held by Americans and approximately 30% of Americans indicate that they are afraid or very afraid of sharks.¹ Anyone who engages in more than a cursory study of sharks knows that such fear is unfounded. There are numerous things that we encounter daily much more dangerous than sharks. For example, a person is more likely to be killed in a car or plane accident or a slip and fall incident than a shark attack. Even some more absurd activities such as tripping over your own feet, a falling coconut hitting you on the head or shaking a vending machine offer greater chance of death than swimming with sharks. Yet despite the high unlikelihood of being killed by a shark, it is a fear closely held by many people. Some people are so afraid of sharks that they refuse to venture into the ocean. And in allowing this fear to hold them captive, they are missing out on enjoying Creation in the way that the Lord intended.

For those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ, the shark should represent something much different than a source of fear. As outlined in Romans 1:20, all of Creation testifies of the nature of its Creator, displaying evidence of what He is like. One of the overarching features of God is His mercy and as expected, we see evidence of His mercy displayed in Creation, even in animals such as sharks.

¹ Source: Sheth, Shreya, Chapman University. America's Top Fears 2019. Accessed online December 24, 2020. (https://www.chapman.edu/wilkinson/research-centers/babbie-center/_files/americas-top-fears-2019.pdf)

Instead of being indiscriminate predators terrorizing the ocean, many species of sharks are intentional in selecting their prey, often seeking out weak, injured or dying animals. Instead of suffering, the prey animal, many times, is quickly killed, avoiding the pain that it would endure had it lived longer. While this does not apply to every instance of shark predation, it does apply to many situations. Our God's mercy extends to all aspects of His Creation.

As I think about how education and truth can change a person's perspective about sharks, it also brought to mind how many of us are held captive by fears, some justified, many unfounded. It is no wonder that God repeatedly commands us in the Bible to be bold in the face of fear.

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9



I once saw this question on the back of a college student's t-shirt along with the Bible reference Joshua 1:9. Its powerful implications deeply resonated with me as I considered what it would be like to be free from all fear. Each one of us has his or her own fears and insecurities. No one is immune to this weapon often effectively employed by the enemy. Sometimes, our fears might be obvious and readily shared with others such as a fear of sharks, flying or speaking in public. Oftentimes they are hidden in the deep recesses of our heart and only uncovered gently by our loving God through the truth of Scripture.

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." 2 Timothy 1:7

"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment." 1 John 4:18

WHEN the prophet Isaiah talks about God's thoughts being so much higher than our thoughts, it is specifically in reference to His mercy (Isaiah 55:7-9). God's mercy is seen in His willingness to forgive sins (Micah 7:18), His patience with the wicked and His choice to delay deserved judgment so that all men have a chance to repent and be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

"Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy." Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

Notice that this passage of Scripture says that God delights in mercy. According to dictionary.com, delight means "something that gives great pleasure." It invokes a mental picture of a child's excitement on Christmas morning. This is how God feels about being able to show mercy to His Creation.

"In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you." Isaiah 54:14

A review of the scriptures provides us with the following characteristics of fear.

- Fear is not from the Lord. 2 Timothy 1:7
- Fear involves torment. 1 John 4:18
- Fear results in oppression and terror. Isaiah 54:14

These scriptures also indicate that the antithesis of fear is love. Fear holds us captive and keeps us in bondage. Fear is a prison with invisible walls that steals our joy, limits our ministry, and undermines our relationships. The good news is that Jesus Christ declared that He came to set the captives free (Luke 4:18).

"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." 2 Corinthians 5:21

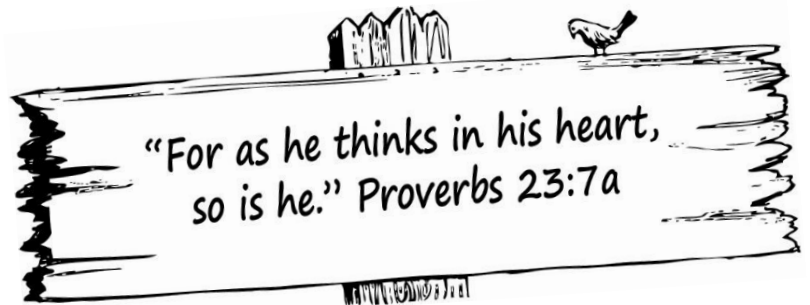


"Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free...Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.'" John 8:31-32; 36

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we will be established righteousness, not fear, because Jesus Christ has set us free. So if you have been made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ, why do you continue to allow fear to control you? We find the solution in John 8:32: it is truth that sets us free. According to the Scriptures, the battle between fear and truth takes place in our minds.

The Scriptures indicate that a fearful mind, an example of a carnal mind, leads to destruction. Instead, we are to be spiritually minded so that we can enjoy life and peace (Romans 8:6).

When we are carnally minded, our thinking is so polluted by our own fleshly attitudes that we do not even recognize when the Lord is doing something good in our lives (Jeremiah 17:5-6).



Ivan the gorilla enjoys his new habitat

Image: The New York Times

This scripture reminds me of the life of Ivan the Gorilla. Ivan was captured in Africa as an infant and brought to the United States for sale. He was ultimately purchased by a shop-owner who kept him in a relatively small, entirely concrete enclosure at a shopping mall in Tacoma, Washington for nearly 30 years. Due to public pressure and financial issues, the store owners finally donated Ivan to a zoo in 1994.² There is a video taken by Zoo Atlanta that shows Ivan being released into his a new, much larger enclosure designed to more closely imitate his natural habitat in Africa.

It was filled with leafy vegetation and gave him the opportunity to socialize with other gorillas. As he felt grass for probably the first time in nearly three decades, he was confused, hesitant and unsure at the unfamiliar setting.³ By judging his new environment in light of his life experience, he was initially unable to recognize the large enclosure and natural foliage as something good. Just like Ivan the Gorilla, if we choose to judge our circumstances based on our life experiences rather than the truth of Scripture, we too might miss when the Lord is doing something good in our lives. We must make the conscious choice to believe the truth of Scripture so that we can be set free from the

² Source: Zoo Atlanta. Accessed online January 26, 2015. (<http://www.zooatlanta.org/ivan>)

³ Source: Watch. Connect. Read. *A Trifecta for Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of a Shopping Mall Gorilla*. Posted October 7, 2014. Accessed online January 26, 2015. (<http://mrschureads.blogspot.com/2014/10/a-trifecta-for-ivan-remarkable-true.html>)

burden and oppression of fear to enjoy the blessings that the Lord has for us. We must control our thoughts and attitudes to battle the fears that the enemy ignites in our hearts with the truth of Scripture.

Thankfully, the Apostle Paul provides us with instruction on how to practically combat fear and apply the truth of Scripture.

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.”

Philippians 6:6-8

Do you allow fearful thoughts to reign in your mind? You can be victorious over your fears by offering these anxieties to the Lord through prayer and replacing these thoughts with the truth of Scripture.

In closing, I ask the question again: what would you do if you were not afraid? Would you be free from other's opinions of you? Would you love without boundaries? Worship God with abandon? Boldly move forward in a new direction of ministry? Would you tackle a new problem? Seek restoration in a relationship? Forgive a person's wrong? Try something new? Enjoy the Lord's Creation without reservations? Trust the Lord with your future?

I encourage you to identify those fears that keep you from the blessings the Lord has in store for you and allow the Lord to use His truth to set you free!

