

**BARF ON THE BEACH**  
**Gutting It Out: How to Deal with Fear**  
A Study of Jonah 2:1-9

Characteristic of Completeness: Faith

Big Idea: Fear calls for a reality check.

Related Scriptures: Joshua 1:9; Psalm 27:1; 118:6; Luke 12:22-31;

Romans 8:31; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:7; 1 John 4:4

### Introduction

1. (Reading of text by Candace Phillips)

Today's sermon is based on Jonah 2:1-9. If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to turn there. The biblical text we're studying is Jonah 2:1-9. It ► says:

<sup>NRJ</sup> Jonah 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. ►  
2 And he said: "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, *And* You heard my voice. ► 3 For You cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me. ► 4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' ► 5 The waters surrounded me, *even* to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head. ► 6 I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars *closed* behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God. ► 7 "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; And my prayer went *up* to You, Into Your holy temple. ► 8 "Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. ► 9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation *is* of the LORD."

2. ► (Testimony of Candace Phillips)

Two weeks ago, in preparing for today, I called my father to ask him what the theme of this morning's message would be. He told me it would be about fear. I was struck instantly by this, because as it happens, I have been feeling like a fearful person recently. I've always had fears—fears of dying, fears of natural disasters, fears of having to get up and sing in front of people—but they haven't affected my life much. In recent weeks, though, I have been dealing with fears that I believe stem from several medical experiences that I've had to go through. For me, these fears come in the form of anxiety and panic attacks. They have felt like overwhelming monsters that have come out from a closet I have managed to keep closed since I was a kid. Apparently, I've stuffed quite a few fears into that closet over the years, and now they're all coming out at once. At first, I felt really ashamed. I felt like if I had enough faith, I wouldn't struggle while dealing with these monsters, because I would be at peace knowing

without a doubt that God would take care of them...and me. Now, after being encouraged by a number of people, I know that fear isn't something I should be ashamed of. It's something I need to acknowledge, and it's something that God allows me to go through to help strengthen me. I'm not alone in this, I never will be, and I still have faith.

J.J. Heller is one of my favorite musicians, and she was encouraged by someone close to her to write about her own experiences with anxiety. She did, and her music has really spoken to me. To help introduce this morning's message, I would like to share this song with you.

3. (Song lyrics)

▶ *I'm tired of being afraid.  
I'm wondering how I got this way.  
I'm trying to remember what life was like before  
Panic moved in without even knocking on the door.*

▶ *Have mercy on me.  
I'm not who I used to be.  
Have mercy on me.  
Jesus, please...*

▶ *I've been praying and asking You to take it all away;  
You never do exactly what I say.  
You see me from the outside, a lover looking in,  
But all I see is danger moving underneath my skin.*

▶ *Have mercy on me.  
I'm not who I used to be.  
Have mercy on me.  
Jesus, please...*

▶ *I know it's not because  
I don't love You enough.  
It's not because I'm weak—  
It's how You choose to speak to me.*

▶ *Have mercy on me.  
I'm not who I used to be.  
Have mercy on me.  
Jesus, please...<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> J.J. Heller, "Have Mercy On Me," from the *The Pretty and the Plain* album, 2007.

4. ► This morning, I want to address a simple question. Simple, but not easy. How do you deal with fear? When panic moves in without even knocking on the door, what do you do? When all you see is danger moving underneath your skin, how do you cope?
5. First, let's take a shot at defining fear.
  - a. Fear involves a sense of impending adversity or danger associated with a person, object, or event. You're afraid something is going to happen that you're not going to like. You're afraid that your needs are not going to get met.
  - b. Sometimes—not always, but sometimes—it involves a choice between doing something God's way, which is a little scary, or doing it your way, which seems a whole lot safer.
6. The list of fears we have is seemingly endless. Let me just highlight a few.
  - a. There is the fear of physical harm or death.
 

Some years ago, I experienced some shortness of breath, and some occasional chest pain. Frankly, I was scared. I figured my heart was going bad, and I was dying. The doctor said I was fine. He said it was stress-related. Don't worry, it's just worry!
  - b. There is also the fear of failure.
 

I know what this is like, too. All through high school, I avoided participation in sports. Not because I was unathletic, or didn't like sports. It was because I was afraid to fail.
  - c. There is also relational fear. A fear of people, of social situations, of making a mistake in public, of being rejected, of conflict, even a fear of love relationships.
7. Whatever the fear, the effects or symptoms can include . . .
  - a. Avoidance of people or circumstances.
  - b. They can include feelings of inferiority or inadequacy or guilt.
  - c. They can include defensiveness and rationalization, particularly when a choice is involved.
  - d. They can include escapism involving drugs, or alcohol, or food.

- e. And, they can include physical reactions such as ulcers, headaches, skin rashes, back and neck aches, muscle tension, stomach disorders, lack of sleep, shortness of breath, panic attacks . . . and the list goes on.
8. A slice in the life of Jonah gives us four important helps in dealing with fear. Our text for today, Jonah 2:1-9, gives us some useful guidelines in working through our apprehension.

I want to be careful not to oversell these four helps as some kind of tidy recipe that will instantly and completely calm all your fears. I'm afraid it's not that easy. My goal is more modest. I simply want to glean from our biblical text some things that can be helpful in the process of working through fear. The four helps generally fall under the category of a reality check. And so, the ► big idea of my sermon is this: Fear calls for a reality check. When we're afraid, it's good to distinguish what is true from what is false. Anxiety requires a fresh look at what is real. As I ► unpack the four helps, I think you'll understand more and more what I mean by a reality check.

9. Jonah 2:1-9 contains the prayer of Jonah in the belly of a fish. Let me briefly provide some background.

You may recall that Jonah is a prophet who lives in northern Israel over 700 years before Christ. He is a man whose job it is to warn people about the danger of turning their back on God. Jonah receives this ► direct order from God:

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 1:2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

But Jonah is afraid. He's afraid to obey God's command. And so, he runs in the opposite direction, hopping a ship in Joppa, and heading for far-away Tarshish. The ship encounters a very bad storm and everybody on the ship knows that God is behind it.

Eventually, Jonah is thrown overboard and the sea becomes calm. And a big fish comes and swallows Jonah. It's there, in the fish's belly, where Jonah's reality check comes together. It involves four things that help us.

- I. Here's the ► first help: Recognize your fears. Identify your worries. See them for what they are. That's part of the reality check.
  - A. Let's consider Jonah as an example. He faced a number of fears. Let's identify them.
    - 1. I believe one of the fears Jonah experienced is the fear of being tortured or losing his life at the hands of the Ninevites if he were to preach to them as God commanded.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. The city's ruins are still evident today in northern Iraq. Assyrians were the enemies of Israel, known for their extraordinary cruelty. I'd like to read you what some kings of Assyria had to say about their enemies leading up to the time of Jonah. These quotes are contained in ancient, royal records.<sup>2</sup>

- a. One Ninevite king (Ashurnasirpal II) boasted, "The heads of the warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned with fire."<sup>3</sup>

Regarding a captured leader, he also wrote, "I flayed [him], his skin I spread upon the wall of the city . . ."<sup>4</sup>

- b. Another Ninevite king (Shalmaneser II) boasted of his conquest of an enemy city and its leader, saying, "A pyramid of heads I reared in front of his city. Their youths and their maidens I burnt up in the flames."<sup>5</sup>

So, how would you like to be the guy to tell the Ninevites they're doing really bad things and they better stop it? Fear would have been a logical response.

2. Jonah faced yet another fear as he ran from God and his assignment. I suspect he feared the possibility that, if he did preach to the Ninevites as God said, and if the Ninevites did not kill him, they might instead do something almost as bad: They might, in fact, repent and receive God's favor. Remember, the Ninevites were hated arch enemies. This would have been more of a relational fear—a fear that a hated enemy might receive undeserved kindness. Indeed, whenever God announces judgment, it's the last thing He wants to do.<sup>6</sup> If it were otherwise, He'd just skip the warning and get on with the judgment.

So Jonah it stuck between a rock and a hard place. If the Ninevites do not repent at his preaching, he will probably be tortured and killed, and Jonah is afraid of that possibility. On the other hand, if they do repent, they will receive God's favor and blessing. And Jonah is afraid of that possibility, too.

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<sup>2</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1:146-213, quoted by Elliot E. Johnson, "Nahum," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (USA: Victor Books, 1985), 1494.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> This was a point given by Ron Allen in a speech given at the Grace Evangelical Society Conference on February 25, 2004.

3. Fear is reflected in Jonah's behavior. Back in Chapter 1, you may recall the conversation between Jonah and the sailors on the ship in the midst of the storm. Everybody's afraid. Beginning in ► Verse 10, it says,

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 1:10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. ► 11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?"—for the sea was growing more tempestuous.

Jonah's response reflects fear. Verse ► 12 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 1:12 And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest *is* because of me."

Interesting. Why doesn't Jonah just throw himself overboard? Why is he asking the sailors to do the dirty work? Probably because he is afraid—so afraid of drowning that he just can't throw himself overboard.

4. Ultimately ► Jonah is thrown overboard, and, eventually, he's swallowed by a huge fish. I don't know about you, but this would tend to create more than a little anxiety for me! Can you imagine the feeling of terror at being swallowed by an enormous fish, maybe a whale shark about the size of a school bus? I'm a little claustrophobic, and it gives me the willies just to imagine it.

So we have the fear of physical harm and death. The fear of the Ninevites getting off easy if they repent. The fear of drowning. And the fear of having been swallowed by a huge fish.

- B. What fears do you face this morning? Can you identify them? Recognizing your fears is the first step in dealing with them. It's the first part of the reality check. Recognize your fears.

Maybe it would be good to set aside some time this week to pray and reflect and record your list of answers to the question: What exactly am I afraid of? This may take some time. Sometimes I feel a sense of generalized fear or anxiety and I don't really know why. And I don't slow down long enough find out. Take some time. Ask God to show you. Write down what comes to you. Maybe ask a trusted friend or counselor to help you sort them out.

Now, let's move on to the second help.

II. The second help in dealing with fear is to ► remember God. That is, to recall what God is really like. To think deeply about the character and attributes of God as they relate to your situation.

A. Chapter 2 of the book of Jonah marks a significant change in the man. He's learned some lessons below the larynx of this fish. Verse ► 1 says,

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly.

Indeed, Verses 2 through 9 record the prayer of Jonah.

B. But something happened *before* Jonah prayed—something that constitutes the second help in the process of dealing with fear. Let's look closely at ► Verse 7 which is a pivotal verse in Jonah's process of dealing with fear. Jonah says,

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 2:7 "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; And my prayer went *up* to You, Into Your holy temple."

Look what came *before* prayer: "I ► *remembered* the Lord."

That's the second help—the second aspect of our reality check: Remember God.

C. Well, what did Jonah remember?

1. Certainly, Jonah had not forgotten that God exists. After all, the guy's a prophet. But, I think he forgot what God is really like. Fear does that. Fear gets God mixed up with humans we know—humans who fail us. Fear obscures the reality of God's character.

We're going to see that Jonah's prayer is one of remembrance; but, even in Jonah's remembrance, I see glimpses of fearful confusion and exaggeration. Look at ► Verses 3 and 4. Jonah says,

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 2:3 ". . . All Your billows and Your waves passed over me. 4 Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight . . .'"

Do Jonah's words reflect reality? Had he been cast out of God's sight? Does God cast any of His children out of His sight? Can we ever be in a place where God does not see our plight? Where God does not notice? Where God isn't paying attention?

No. Of course not. But, it can certainly feel like it.

Now look at ► Verse 6, where Jonah says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:6 I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars *closed* behind me forever

Again, do Jonah's words reflect reality? Had the earth closed its bars behind Jonah *forever*? Does God allow any of his children to be in the depths *forever*? Can children of God be in a situation that is forever bad?

Again, no. But, it can certainly feel like it. Jonah is "awfulizing," making things worse in his mind that they are in reality. Fear does that.

2. Despite ► the glimpses of fearful confusion and exaggeration, Jonah's prayer also reflects a preponderance of healthy remembering. The presence of both confusion and remembering reflects a significant reality: Remembering is a process—a process of refinement in which impurities of confusion rise to the surface and are skimmed off gradually over time. Faith is gradually refined. Note some of the things about God Jonah remembers.

- a. Jonah remembers that God listens and He answers when we call on Him. In ► Verse 2, Jonah says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:2 . . . "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, *And* You heard my voice."

- b. Jonah also remembers that God is in control of all our circumstances. Notice the personal pronouns, "You" and "Your" in ► Verse 3, where Jonah says to God,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:3 For You cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.

God never says, "Whoops, sorry you're having a tough time, I was busy with somebody else and didn't notice." Everything that happens to you is either prescribed or permitted by God. God is involved, and no experience is ever wasted.

- c. Jonah also remembers that God saves, that He is gracious, that He is merciful. Beginning in ► Verse 6, Jonah says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:6 . . . You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God. . . . 8 Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. 9 . . . Salvation *is* of the LORD."

3. In ► the face of fear, remembering God boils down to this: God will take care of your needs if you'll just do what He asks because that's what God is like. It's a matter of faith. In fact, ► faith is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. The idea is not so much that we need to conjure up more faith, but that our faith can be refined in the midst fearful circumstances when we do a reality check, and that includes remembering God.

Read through the gospels and you'll see that Jesus trained His disciples, He built up His followers, He refined the faith of His apostles using fear.<sup>7</sup> Not by instilling fear. But by leading them through circumstances in which they had to face and deal the fears they already had.

D. How do you remember God when you're faced with fear?

1. First, we can remember God by recording and recalling what is said about Him in the Bible.
- a. Again, Jonah's prayer gives us a clue. There is a close affinity between Jonah's prayer and the Psalms of the Bible written much earlier. Both are written in poetic form. The correlation demonstrates how well-versed in the Scriptures this prophet was. Jonah had God's Word stored in his memory banks and he retrieves it. Just listen to the parallels between what Jonah writes and what he remembers in the Psalms.

(1) Jonah ► 2:2 says:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:2 . . . "I cried out to the LORD . . . And He answered me.

Psalm ► 3:4 says:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Psalm 3:4 I cried to the LORD . . . And He heard me . . .

(2) Jonah ► 2:3 says:

<sup>ESV</sup> Jonah 2:3 For you cast me into the deep

Psalm ► 88:6 says:

<sup>ESV</sup> Psalm 88:6 You have put me in the depths . . .

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<sup>7</sup> Examples: Matthew 14:22-33; 17:1-7; 25:25; 28:1-5; Mark 5:15; 6:45-50; Luke 1:30; 8:22-25

(3) Jonah ► 2:3 says:

<sup>NKJ</sup>Jonah 2:3 . . . All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.

Psalm ► 42:7 says:

<sup>NKJ</sup>Psalm 42:7 . . . All Your waves and billows have gone over me.

Jonah remembers God's Word and brings it to his fearful circumstances.

b. Let ► me show you how that might work in your life.

Say you've done the work to recognize your fears. And say you're like Jonah in that you're afraid that God is done with you, that He has turned away from you, and is no longer paying attention to your plight. You feel as though you have been cast out of His sight.

Part of the reality check is to remember—remember that this is not true. It's a lie. That's not what God is like. You could remember that by memorizing a verse like ► Joshua 1:9:

<sup>NKJ</sup>Joshua 1:9 “. . . Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God *is* with you wherever you go.”

Or ► say you're like Jonah in that you're afraid your present condition is going to last forever. The bars of illness or depression or anxiety feel like they have closed behind your forever.

Part of the reality check is to remember that this is not true. It's a lie. God doesn't treat His children like that. You could remember that by memorizing ► 2 Corinthians 4:17:

<sup>NLT</sup>2 Corinthians 4:17 For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!

See how that can work? It's not a magic pill that makes fear go away immediately, but it's a helpful part of the process.

2. A ► second way we can remember God is to reflect on our experiences with God—to recall the times when He has demonstrated His faithfulness to us.

- a. I am constantly surprised at my own propensity to forget what God has done for me. This kind of remembrance alone would be an encouragement in times of fear.
- b. Remember what God has done. Keep a journal, establish traditions, create memorials in your home, be involved in church—do whatever it takes to remember what God has done for you.

Fear calls for a reality check, and that involves recognizing your fears and remembering God.

- III. Jonah's remembrance of God triggers the third help in the process of dealing with fear. Jonah ► reconnects with God through prayer. Fear prompts Jonah to call out to God. He quits running from the perceived danger and runs to God. In ► Verse 7, Jonah says,

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:7 "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; And my prayer went *up* to You, Into Your holy temple.

- A. I don't imagine Jonah's prayer was some plastic, perfunctory fulfillment of an obligation. It was gut-level, not skin-deep. It was a white flag hoisted with white knuckles—a surrendering appeal to God. It was headlong, not hesitant. It was desperate, not discriminating. It was a sobbing, runaway child returning to the arms of his Father. It's part of the reality check because the reality is: In the arms of our Father is the safest place to be.
- B. Perhaps this morning you have identified a troublesome fear in your life. You have tried to avoid it, to deal with it in your own way, but it is taking its toll on you. You have avoided a closer relationship with God because you're afraid He'll ask you to do something that would be devastating to you. I urge you to reconnect with God with the same abandon as Jonah. The lyrics of the song sung earlier will be a part of the sermon transcript. Perhaps you could use them as your own prayer.

► *I'm tired of being afraid.  
I'm wondering how I got this way.  
I'm trying to remember what life was like before  
Panic moved in without even knocking on the door.*

► *Have mercy on me.  
I'm not who I used to be.  
Have mercy on me.  
Jesus, please...*

Recognize. Remember. Reconnect.

IV. And finally, there is a fourth help in the process of dealing with fear. ► Resolve to obey God, even if it's scary. Determine to follow where God leads, even if it seems dangerous. Make up your mind to do what God says, regardless.

A. Jonah finally did. Listen to the closing words of his prayer in ► Verse 9.

<sup>NKJ</sup> Jonah 2:9 But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation *is* of the LORD.”

Jonah is saying, “I will keep my promise to God and obey Him. I have vowed to follow, and I will pay on that vow.”

B. And as soon as Jonah did this, the process with fear was completed, a harp played, the angels sang, and Jonah never had an anxious moment after that. Wrong! I imagine Jonah's heart was beating wildly when the fish began to gag and dredge him up from its stomach. And, the prospect of going to Nineveh was still not a picnic.

One of my seminary professors said, after you have resolved to obey, as Jonah did, it's best to anticipate an increase in anxiety before you experience a decrease. I think that's wise advice. ► Recognizing, remembering, reconnecting, and resolving help you work through your fear, but they don't immediately eliminate the *feeling* of fear. As you repeatedly overcome fear, as you realize it's unfounded, the feeling of fear eventually diminishes, but it's a learning process that takes time.

And this is not just a self-help recipe to make yourself feel better. This is a training process God uses to refine you, to equip you, to strengthen you for greater things, for bigger assignments, for more Christlikeness.

V. How does this work in real life? Let me push a few buttons and see if a light comes on in your life.

A. The Word of God came directly to Jonah. The Word of God comes directly ► to you husbands:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her

But you say: “Hey, I got things to do, places to go, people to see. It's a competitive world out there. If I serve her I'll fall behind. And after all, she's not all that great at serving me. I'm afraid—I'm afraid my needs aren't going to get met.”

B. The Word of God comes directly ► to you children:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

But you say: “My parents would have a cow if they knew what I did with my friends. But, hey, if I obeyed my parents all the time I’m afraid—I’m afraid I wouldn’t have any friends.”

- C. The Word of God comes directly ► to you who believe in Christ:

<sup>NKJ</sup> John 13:34 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”

But you say: “I don’t really want to get too involved with other people here. I mean, if they really knew what I’m like, if they knew my background, I’m afraid—I’m afraid they’d reject me.”

- D. The Word of God comes directly ► to you who are faced with chronic illness:

<sup>NKJ</sup> James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

But you say: “I’m afraid—I’m afraid I won’t be able to handle the pain. I’ll never be the same again. Is this my punishment? Why can’t I be normal?”

- E. The Word of God comes directly ► to you who don’t believe in Christ:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Acts 16:31 . . . “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved . . .”

But you say: “I’m getting along fine right now. I’m afraid—I’m afraid if I become a Christian, I’ll have to do something ridiculous. I’ll have to quit doing stuff I like. I won’t be me anymore.”

- F. The Word of God comes directly ► to you who have been wronged:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Colossians 3:13 . . . as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*.

But you say: “If I forgive him for what he has done to me, he’d just do it again. If I let him off the hook, I’m afraid—I’m afraid he’ll think it’s easy to walk all over me.”

- G. The Word of God comes directly ► to you who have money:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Luke 6:38 “Give . . .”

But you say: “I can’t afford to give. I can barely make ends meet now. I’m afraid—I’m afraid if I give, I’ll go under.”

- H. The Word of God comes directly ► to you who are focused on chasing all the things that you think will make your daily life more comfortable and secure:

<sup>NKJ</sup> Matthew 6:33 “. . . seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness . . .”

But you say: “If I don’t take care of myself, who will? I’m afraid—I’m afraid if I put God first, if I surrender the controls, I’ll be devastated.”

The ► world is a scary place, full of Ninevites and storms and big fish. Obeying the Lord can be scary. It’s so easy to be fearful. But fear calls for a reality check. And that involves recognizing our fears, remembering God, reconnecting with Him, and resolving to obey.