

## Lesson 13

# HOW CAN I CONQUER MY FEARS?

### Introduction

The storms of the rainy season in Guadalajara, Mexico, were powerful and breathtakingly intense. The kids loved it when we'd take our Suburban out in the midst of a storm. They'd scream with excitement as the water broke over the hood of the car and splashed on their windows, climbing up the sides of the car. Smaller cars would start to float around the roads, out of control. The sensible thing would have been to stay home, but we loved the thrill of being out in the middle of it all, and we had (somewhat groundless) confidence in our Suburban's ability to stay steady no matter what. Our kids liked the rain and the sense of adventure that the storms would bring.

At least that was the case until one particularly crazy storm. We were all at home, enjoying the afternoon, when the rains began. Five-year-old Amy was playing in her bedroom and I was reading in the living room. Bedrooms were on one side of the house, the kitchen on the other, and the two-story, open living room was in the middle with skylights covering most of the ceiling. The rain started calmly enough, but all of sudden, noises began to explode as hail pelted the skylights. There was a crack, and as I looked up to see the skylights shattering and raining down shards of glass everywhere, Amy appeared at the doorway of her bedroom. Terrified, she began to run through the flying glass to get to me.

And I froze.

*I froze.* What kind of a mother *freezes* at a time like that? The same mother who knows the Heimlich maneuver yet froze when her three-year-old was choking on a marble. Thank heavens someone with a cool head was nearby to help. I don't know why on earth that has been my reaction not once, but twice, and thank the Lord our brave babysitter was in the kitchen and ran through the glass to rescue Amy. But fear can do that. It can be utterly paralyzing at the absolute worst times imaginable.

Not surprisingly, Amy wasn't so fond of rain after that. And like clockwork, we could count on a daily storm during the rainy season. My response was to comfort her and hold her, to play music loudly during the storms to drown out the sound of the rain. Her daddy's approach was a little different. When the storm would start, he would scoop her up and take her outside. He'd ask her to look at his face, and then he'd smile and talk about how much he loved the rain. He'd stomp in the puddles and make it all a game. Little by little, as she'd watch his lack of fear and total comfort in the storm, she got to the point where she would stomp in the puddles herself. Fear didn't get the last word.

Jesus desires that peace rule in each of our hearts. Yet many people live paralyzed by fear. Panic attacks are on the rise; in any given year, about one-third of American adults have at least one. Sometimes one can see the effects of fear in people in the form of phobias or fearful behavior. But more often, we hide our fears in our hearts. Sometimes even our best friends don't know our secret fears, but they are there, robbing us of the joy that Jesus wants each of us to experience every day. During this lesson, we'll explore ways we can conquer our fears, allowing them to come under the control of God's loving hand.

## **Day One**

### **AFRAID OF THE STORM**

The emotion of fear is a gift insofar as it alerts us to danger. Our senses become heightened, and we look for a way out. Fear lets us know the storm is coming or has hit, but it's not enough to get us *through* the storm. We need something more than that.

Read Matthew 14:22–32.

1. What shift in focus caused Peter to start sinking in the waves? How was he saved from drowning?
2. What kind of a spirit has God given us? See 2 Timothy 1:7.

A spirit of fear will alert us to danger and sharpen our senses, but it will never provide us with what we need to navigate the storms of life. To make it through those circumstances, we need supernatural power, God's unconditional love, and the self-control that helps us choose to dwell on certain things and not others. The good news is, this is exactly what the indwelling Holy Spirit provides. If we replace our spirit of fear with the Spirit of power, love, and self-control, we can conquer our fears.

3. In what ways have you seen God's power in your life? When have you experienced His unconditional love? Has He ever strengthened you by helping you to have self-control in an area of weakness? Share your experiences here and let God's track record of faithfulness increase your confidence in Him. Whatever you face, His presence within you will make all the difference.

*Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Allow God to dispel your fear.*

*Fear is unavoidable, but what we choose to do with it is up to us. In the very moment that we feel afraid, we can remind ourselves, "God has not given us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7) That is what is inside us.*

*When panic hits, grab hold of Jesus' hand. Lock your eyes on the truth that you are not alone, that He is present, and that His presence makes all the difference. Ask Him to dispel your fear.*

*"You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shade of the Almighty, say to the Lord, 'My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust.'" (Psalm 91:1-2)*

*"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he that doesn't feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." —Nelson Mandela*

## Day Two

### **AFRAID OF WALKING ALONE AT NIGHT**

A survey conducted by Chapman University, in California, discovered that one of Americans' greatest fears is walking alone at night.<sup>1</sup> When people answered the survey, they were probably thinking of the dark alley, the dimly lit parking lot—that sort of thing. I understand this fear. Once the sun goes down, I imagine someone is hiding under my car in the mall parking lot, just waiting to slash my ankles. I start to regret that my hair is always in a ponytail because that's easy for some ne'er-do-well to grab. I walk with my finger over the alarm button on my key fob because you just never know. So I get being freaked out at night.

Night can mean all that—or it can be a metaphor for a general darkness in our circumstances or a darkness in our souls. And we are very afraid of walking through those times alone. That's when walking with your hair down and the key fob in hand just doesn't offer much comfort. So what does Scripture have to say to that fear? Let's dive in. There are lots of verses to look up today, friends. But hang with me. You might end up discovering a couple that you'll carry with you from now on.

1. Did Jesus promise that if we follow Him, He'll remove all challenges from our lives? See John 16:33.
2. What did Saint Teresa of Ávila learn from her experience of trusting God in every circumstance? See CCC 227.
3. Look up the following verses. What does each teach you about walking through darkness?

Deuteronomy 31:6

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<sup>1</sup> Jolie Lee, "Biggest American Fear? Walking Alone at Night, Survey Finds," *USA Today*, October 22, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/10/22/fear-study-chapman-university/17663861/>.

Psalm 27:1 and John 8:12

Isaiah 41:10

Romans 8:28

4. Which of these verses helps you the most in dealing with your fears? Write it down on an index card and carry it with you.

*Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . God does His finest work in the darkness.*

*“God has to work in the soul in secret and in darkness because if we fully knew what was happening and what Mystery, transformation, God and Grace will eventually ask of us, we would either try to take charge or stop the whole process.” —Saint John of the Cross*

*The deepest soul work is done in the darkness, and it isn't a group exercise. There are times when God allows us to go to places that we wouldn't choose to go, because it is only there that we will be transformed in the most beautiful of ways. But we shouldn't be afraid of this, because God accompanies us there. We never walk in darkness alone. True, we may feel alone. But our feelings don't define reality. God does. And He promises never to leave us. He is there in the secret places in a way that our minds don't really comprehend.*

*Take the verse you chose for question 4 and personalize it. Turn it into a prayer of thanksgiving. For example, using Isaiah 41:10, you could pray:*

*Dear Lord,*

*Thank you for making it so that I do not need to be afraid, because you are with me. I don't need to be anxious, because you are my God. Thank you for strengthening me. Thank you for helping me. Thank you for upholding me with your victorious right hand. Thank you for grasping hold of me and never letting me go.*

## Day Three

### AFRAID OF REJECTION

We don't always recognize this as a personal struggle because we don't connect the fear of rejection with its fruits. This fear manifests itself as people pleasing, approval seeking, a heightened sensitivity to criticism, feelings of worthlessness, and a rejection of others so that we turn away before they do. We need to get to the root of this fear if we want to walk in freedom.

1. How does Proverbs 29:25 describe “fear of man” or “fear of others”? Note: The phrase used in the Bible to describe being a people pleaser or caring too much what others think of us is “fear of man.”

A snare is a trap that typically has a noose of wire or a cord. Caring too much what others think is a snare that strangles our freedom. It causes us to crave approval and fear rejection, and puts people in a place meant for God alone.

2. We all experience rejection at some point in our lives. It's unavoidable. But being afraid of it or totally train wrecked by it is actually optional. It all boils down to what our identity is based on. If the way our worth is defined is through people's acceptance of us, then fear of rejection will always be a noose around our necks. But if we can totally embrace the truth that **people's opinions do not determine our worth or identity, that our worth is determined by God and our identity is rooted in being His beloved daughter**, then freedom can be ours.

God's approval is the only one that ultimately matters, and He *adores you*. Yes, *you*. You are not an exception to the rule, no matter what you've done or what you're struggling with today.

What insight do the following verses give as we seek to please God and find our identity in Him?

Romans 8:31

Galatians 1:10

Colossians 3:23

3. Do you struggle with a fear of rejection? If so, in what specific way? (Typical manifestations of this fear are people pleasing, approval seeking, sensitivity to criticism, feelings of worthlessness, tendency to reject others.)

*Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Do you want to see God show up in your life in a powerful way? Are you tired of the status quo and ready for more? Would you like to see God, in all His glory, intersect your circumstances?*

*God wants us to experience His glory. He wants to pour out His power on us and to see us living freed, transformed lives. This has always been His desire. When Jesus walked the earth, there was nothing He wanted more—for the people to see His glory and to be changed as a result. But so many of them missed it. Why? The reason is found in the Gospel of John: “For they preferred human praise to the glory of God.” (John 12:43) They wanted something more than God’s power and glory. They wanted human praise.*

*Jesus is turning to you now and asking, “What do you want?” How will you answer Him?*

## **Day Four**

### **AFRAID TO LEAN IN TO JOY**

What if I fall?

Oh, my darling, what if you fly?

## Opening Your Heart

1. Jesus came to set us free from the fears that hold us back from soaring as God's beloved daughters. How is the life He desires for us described in the following verses?

John 10:10

1 Timothy 6:17 (the second part of the verse)

Isaiah 30:18

These verses paint a picture of God wanting us to live deeply satisfying, meaningful, joy-filled lives. These are God's own words, so we can count on them as truth.

But how often do we believe the lies instead? All too often, we don't see God as a gracious, generous father. We believe the lie that He's going to hold out on us (this, of course, was the thought that got things spiraling out of control in the Garden of Eden). Some of us believe the lie that God is a disinterested father. Disaster might be just around the corner, but He's too busy with other things to do anything about it. Believing lies about God really messes with our ability to embrace and live the life we were created for.

Have you ever realized that your life is going pretty well, and instead of resting in the joy of that moment and thanking God for all He's given, you think, "Oh, no! The other shoe is about to drop"? In her vulnerability research, Dr. Brené Brown has found that the most terrifying, difficult emotion we experience is *joy*. We're afraid to lean in to joy, because the thought of it being taken away is so scary. She describes our mental response as "dress-rehearsing tragedy":

Dress-rehearsing tragedy, she explains, is imagining something bad is going to happen when in reality, nothing is wrong. "How many of you have ever stood over your child while they're sleeping and thought, 'Oh . . . I love you'—and then pictured something horrific happening?" Brown asks. "Or woke up in the

morning and thought, ‘Oh my gosh, job’s going great. Parents are good. This can’t last.’<sup>2</sup>

This isn’t how God wants us to live. He wants us to lean in to joy and soar! So how do we do that? How can we break free of our tendency to pull back in fear and miss our lives because we are living in the gray?

2. We spent Lesson 12 learning about the Eucharist. Hidden in its meaning is one of the ways we can lean in to the joy we were created for. *Eucharist* means “thanksgiving.” Practicing gratitude is one of the best ways to live a life of joy.

List an area of life where you fear something that is currently wonderful going awry. What are you afraid of specifically?

Practice gratitude by listing all the things you are grateful for about that very area of life.

It’s up to you. You decide which of those lists you are going to dwell on. One will leave you paralyzed by the fear of “what if.” The other will lead you to joy.

3. Underneath our reluctance to really embrace joy is the fear that we will fall. And consciously or not, we figure that the higher the place we’re falling from, the more it will hurt. So we climb down from the peak of joy and sit in the middle ground of low expectations because it feels safer. And life passes us by.

I can’t promise you that you will never fall or that life will never bring you pain. But God makes us promises in Scripture that should make an enormous difference in the way we live. In Deuteronomy 33:27, He promises, “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” Write that verse below. Think

<sup>2</sup> “Brené Brown: ‘Joy Is the Most Vulnerable Emotion We Can Experience,’” *Huffington Post*, October 27, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/18/brene-brown-joy-numbing-oprah\\_n\\_4116520.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/18/brene-brown-joy-numbing-oprah_n_4116520.html).

about it. Why does this truth matter? What difference does it make to you personally?

*Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . The Lord is your refuge.*

*Have you whispered these questions?*

*“What if I fall?”*

*“What if I fall because of disappointment?”*

*“What if I fall because of tragedy?”*

*“What if I fall because I’m just not good enough?”*

*Lean in and listen, my friend. If you fall, God will catch you. It’s as simple as that. He promises that underneath you, no matter what height you are falling from, He will catch you in His everlasting arms. What do we find at the end of our resources, the end of our dreams, the end of our hopes? We find God’s mercy. We find God’s graciousness. We find shelter from the storm.*

*That shelter is available to you right now. “He will shelter you with his pinions, and under his wings you may take refuge.” (Psalm 91:4) Come under His wings in prayer. Rest in safety.*

*“Because he clings to me I will deliver him; because he knows my name I will set him on high. He will call upon me and I will answer, I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and give him honor. With length of days I will satisfy him, and fill him with my saving power.” (Psalm 97:13–16)*

*Rest in these promises.*

*Don’t miss your life.*

## Day Five

### SAINT STORY

#### Blessed Anne of Saint Bartholomew, Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, and Saint Joan of Arc

What God is asking of us—to cast our fears aside and follow Him, and to become saints and bring His message of hope to everyone around us through word, deed, and example—is too much for us. The funny thing is that He knows we can't do this without His help. He said it a long time ago: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for *cut off from me you can do nothing.*" (John 15:5) When we experience fear in our pursuit of God's purpose for our life, it's because we are forgetting about that. Almost always, our fears are the result of depending too much on ourselves and not trusting enough in God, who is so powerful that He can turn even the most bitter failures (Christ's death on the cross) into the most glorious victories (Easter Sunday). Jesus put it concisely: "For men, it is impossible, but not for God, because everything is possible for God." The more we think about God's omnipotence and love, the more we fill our imagination with His goodness and the wonders He has done in so many lives throughout history, the more easily we will be able to overcome our fears and undertake the Christian adventure in which "the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness." (Romans 8:26)

This was an especially difficult lesson for Blessed Anne of Saint Bartholomew. She came from a poor shepherding family in sixteenth-century Spain. As a Carmelite nun, Blessed Anne was sent to Belgium and France to start Carmelite convents, and to be prioress in some of them. She would often complain to our Lord that she was too ignorant and shy to be given such important responsibilities. In fact, she complained so much that finally He had to appear to her to calm her down. She had just tried to convince Him that He should choose someone else to do the work she was being asked to do, someone more intelligent, better educated, and more outgoing. So our Lord appeared to her and said, "It is with straw that I start my fires." He didn't comfort her by telling her how great she was. He simply wanted to do things in and through her, if she would let Him.

Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, America's first canonized saint, illustrates this truth in a more down-to-earth way. She was born in Northern Italy in the 1800s. Early on, she experienced a strong desire to become a missionary, but no religious order would accept her because she had unstable health. So she gathered a group of companions and started her own religious order under the protection of her bishop. Soon she received approval from the pope and began her tireless apostolate with the poor Italian immigrants throughout the Americas. Her work required extensive travel

between Europe and America. She ended up crossing the Atlantic more than thirty times on those clunky, uncomfortable, old-fashioned ocean liners. To do so, she had to overcome a mortal fear of water that she acquired after falling into a river and almost drowning when she was just a girl. That fear never left her; God never took it away. Even after years of sea travel, she declined an invitation from her sisters to go for a leisurely boat ride one day because she was afraid of the water! She told them: “I admit my weakness: I am afraid of the sea, and if there is no very holy motive in view, I have no courage to go where I fear danger.”

Perhaps the most remarkable example of how trusting in God enables us to overcome fear is found in the truly amazing person of Saint Joan of Arc. A teenage girl, illiterate, of peasant stock, unable to ride horses, and unschooled in war, she received a call from God to liberate a divided and corrupt France from the overpowering and almost complete English invasion toward the end of the Hundred Years’ War in the 1300s. No wonder she at first resisted the imprecations of the voices she heard (i.e. the saints whom God sent to her as His messengers)! They continually brought her God’s message for four years before she finally obeyed when she was eighteen years old. It was only when they told her, “It is God who commands it,” that she complied, entrusting herself completely to God’s power. And the world has never been the same. She led armies, outfoxed evil courtiers, emboldened a cowardly king, revived an entire nation, and befuddled the most learned clerics and lawyers of her day. This illiterate teenager single-handedly reversed the fortunes of France and altered the history of Europe while enduring moral, physical, and psychological tortures of the cruelest kind. Through it all, she suffered profoundly, including confusion, exhaustion, and betrayal, ultimately being burned at the stake, dying with Jesus’ name on her virgin lips.

And why? “It is God who commands it.” She was able to do it because she *hoped in God*. She knew that serving God was her only true occupation, and that He would always be faithful to those who serve Him truly. Saint Joan of Arc left us a message: “Hope in God. Put your trust in Him, and He will deliver you from your enemies [fears].” Indeed, only God will never disappoint us; only He is worthy of our unbridled hope. When we feel helpless or fearful of all that Christ is asking of us, that’s what we need to remember.

**What fears are you facing in your life right now? How can Blessed Anne, Saint Frances, and Saint Joan of Arc inspire you to deal with them?**

## Conclusion

Most of my fears have to do with my children. Fear of becoming seriously ill can get the better of me, too. I always want to avoid suffering. What I often forget is that it may be the very thing I need to experience in order to become the woman God wants me to be. Whenever I begin to think, “Surely, I shouldn’t have to suffer since I try to do the right thing and live the way God wants me to,” I think of the cross. It seems like the worst thing that could happen to anyone—defeat, humiliation, pain—but it was the ultimate victory and the accomplishment of our salvation.

So how do I conquer my fears? It’s a journey. Sometimes it feels like two steps forward and one step back. But even then, progress is being made.

Because I’m so prone to fall back into fear, I frequently have to remind myself of the lessons contained in the points that follow. When fear starts to get the better of me, I go back to these lessons to readjust my thinking *and* my feelings:

### 1. Develop a mature view of suffering.

Because I live in a fallen world, I am quickly influenced by the world’s view of the relationship between suffering and joy. We’re told that they are polar opposites, but the truth is, there can be joy in suffering. When we meet God in the dark places and He gets us through, we can feel the joy of His presence. We can also feel joy when we realize that we are progressing spiritually as we face our fears, even when doing so is hard. A mature woman realizes that suffering can’t be avoided, and if we never encountered it, there would be a lot of life lessons missed.

### 2. Grow in faith and trust.

Faith and trust are the antidotes to fear. I’m so glad that we can ask God to give us more faith when we feel we are lacking. When we stay close to the Lord and exercise the little faith we do have, He waters that seed of faith and makes it grow. When I focus on how God has been faithful to me in the past, I grow in trust.

It’s been helpful for me to keep a prayer journal so that I can go back and see the ways God has rescued me and given me what I have needed countless times. When I read the Bible, I get to know God better, which helps me see that He is worthy of my trust. I won’t trust someone I don’t know. If we want to grow in trust, we have to take the time to get to know God personally.

### 3. Remember that I am never alone.

This comforts me most of all. Jesus has suffered more than I ever will, so He knows how I am feeling. The Bible promises that no matter what happens to me, God has made sure I can endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13). But He doesn't say I'll be able to handle anything in my own strength. I will have to cling to Him in order to receive the strength I need, just as a small branch clings to the main vine.

What is it that you most fear? Can you write it here?

Then write a prayer asking for God's help. You might want to affirm your trust in God's goodness and His control over all things, and thank Him for His wise plan for your life.

Dear God,

### My Resolution

**In what specific way will I apply what I learned in this lesson?**

Examples:

1. When my fears are getting the better of me, I will make a Trust List. This is a list of ways in which I know I can trust God. It can contain words describing His character, or descriptions of times when He has proven to be faithful in the midst of my struggles. I'll reread this list (or make a new one) whenever I need a reminder.

2. I'll memorize one of the verses from this week's lesson. This will allow the Holy Spirit to bring it to my mind when I most need it.
3. I'll experience the shelter and safety of God's presence by spending some time this week at adoration.

My Resolution:

## Catechism Clips

**CCC 227** [The implications of Faith in One God:] It means trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity. A prayer of St. Teresa of Jesus wonderfully expresses this trust:

Let nothing trouble you/Let nothing frighten you  
Everything passes/God never changes  
Patience/Obtains all  
Whoever has God/Wants for nothing  
God alone is enough.