

# REDEEMING FEAR

A CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY  
FOR LIVING INTO HOPE



JASON C. WHITEHEAD

Fortress Press  
Minneapolis

## REDEEMING FEAR

A Constructive Theology for Living into Hope

Copyright © 2013 Fortress Press. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Visit <http://www.augsburgfortress.org/copyrights/> or write to Permissions, Augsburg Fortress, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

Cover image © iStockphoto.com / Eveline Kooijman

Cover design: Tory Herman

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available*

Print ISBN: 978-0-8006-9914-7

eBook ISBN: 978-1-4514-3858-1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

This book was produced using PressBooks.com, and PDF rendering was done by PrinceXML.

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1

## **Part I. Why Fear? Why Now?**

1. This Emotional Life	13
2. A Culture of Fear	27

## **Part II. What Does It Mean to Be Afraid?**

3. Our Frightened Brains	43
4. Communities of Faith, Communities of Fear	59

## **Part III. A Pastoral Theology of Fear and Hope**

5. A Process Perspective	73
6. Fear and Hope	91

## **Part IV. Responding to Our Fears**

7. Telling Ourselves a More Complex Story	101
8. Fear in the Public Sphere	111
9. Perfect Love Drives Out Fear	123
10. Conclusion: Finding Hope	141

Index	147
-------	-----

# Introduction

We are emotional creatures. Our memories, our beliefs, our imaginations are all impacted by the emotions we experience on a daily basis. Emotions shape and color our world in truly fantastic and meaningful ways. However, our theologies and ideas about humanity often lack careful attention to our embodied emotional experiences. Moreover, the way we approach particular sources of knowledge, like scripture, often leads us to denigrate certain emotional experiences, rather than incorporate them as part of a complex relational sense of humanity and our relationship to God.

What we are learning through social psychology, the neurosciences, and other disciplines challenges many of our preconceived notions about humanity. These alternative sources of knowledge add to our theological ideas about what it means to be human. They complicate our traditional theologies and beckon us into understanding humanity with new eyes. What these scientists and psychologists have to teach us can feel threatening to the common beliefs we have held. At the same time, there is something truly hopeful about what we are learning. Each of these disciplines gives us new ways of understanding individual and group behavior. They help us understand how our communities of faith act and react to the world. They give us new ways of talking about human beings and reclaiming much of our embodied existence. This is a time for great ferment for theologians and people of faith, if we can be open to incorporating some of this new knowledge into our theological lives together.

Fear, in particular, is one of the emotional whipping posts of theologians and pastors. Sermons and books on fear often claim that the Bible is clear that fear is detrimental to humanity. Frequently, the thrust of these traditional arguments is that fear is never your friend, never your ally. Like many strong emotional states (anger, ecstasy, grief, etc.), fear is a suspicious state of being. Moreover, since it often co-opts our more rational ways of interpreting the world, it is often seen as dangerous to a well-thought-out faith; or alternatively, it is thought of as revealing a weakness of faith or a dependency on God.

What we fail to see is that fear can be an ally; it is the emotion that ensures our survival in the face of traumatic experiences or threats to our being. Fear is the emotion that helps us navigate a sometimes hostile and often unpredictable world. However, the ways that we—evangelical and mainline theologians—talk about fear lack the appropriate complexity to understand its

theological importance for our lives. My work here is to help you understand the positive and adaptive qualities of fear. Most importantly, it is to help you see how God remains present in those moments of fear, calling us into a greater life and greater awareness of the possibilities of hope in this world.

This is a book about God and the emotions of fear and hope. It is about the stories we create and tell concerning the world and our experiences of it. Some of this material is personally and theologically challenging. It describes a novel way of theologically experiencing the world, as well as how that new view impacts our relationships with communities, people, and objects all around us. As this book progresses, I will help you understand fear from theological, neurological, sociological, evolutionary, and psychological perspectives. Taken together, these disciplines provide a complex picture of the emotion of fear and its relationship to hope.

This is a theological text, written by a Christian practical theologian. My approach is to create a collaborative conversation between a number of disciplines in order to tease out a complete picture of fear. I believe theology needs to critically engage a variety of disciplines in a way that challenges the presuppositions of each discipline. For example, neurophysiological data help us understand the brain and body's reaction to fear; sociological data help us see how fear impacts relationships, society, and community; psychological data help us grasp the ways fears are constructed in our memories and how that impacts our beliefs; evolutionary data help us understand the conservation and importance of specific areas of the brain and their associated behaviors; finally, theology helps us put all of these disciplines together in ways that discern the impact and meaning of fear. This allows us to explore our relationship with a God who obviously sees a need for us to be afraid at certain points in our lives. The value of this approach is that each discipline teaches us something about what it means to be afraid, making fear more complex and helping us understand it better.

Over the course of this book, this complex view of fear—an embodied emotion we all experience—will challenge many of our traditionally held beliefs about emotions. Fear most often arises in situations of threat or trauma. When we experience a threat, whether firsthand or vicariously, our memories encode specific emotions onto the stories we tell about that moment in time. Fear can sweep through communities and impact the way we relate to one another. It can form and shape a worldview that causes us to retreat from things we perceive as hostile. However, it can also be a great source of hope. Reflecting on the times we are afraid can also reveal some of the things we hope for most.

I imagine one initial reaction might be, “Wait, I haven’t been threatened or traumatized.” You might also think, “Hey, the Bible tells me over and over again to not be afraid.” Those are certainly valid reactions to reading these first few paragraphs. Furthermore, based on your experiences and the sources you use to define your faith, it may be hard to create the space needed to reframe and redeem what it means to be afraid. Yet, it is my hope that you will try. The emotion of fear is a vital and inescapable part of human life. If we can find ways to understand this emotional state, using all of the tools at our disposal, then we may come to see the life-giving qualities of fear. In addition, we can be more intentional about the hopes that run underneath and parallel with our experiences of fear.

Neuropsychologist Joseph LeDoux says that the emotion of fear is conserved “to a large extent across human cultures.”<sup>1</sup> This means that we all possess a neuropsychological capability for experiencing the emotion of fear. For me, our journey begins with this simple statement—one that reveals an innate physiological ability to feel the emotion of fear. However, to lean our entire understanding of fear on our physiology would be remiss. We are meaning-making creatures, and understanding fear as inescapable deserves some interpretation, especially from theological circles. Therefore, while our first steps on this journey are to understand our capacity for fear, our final steps will allow us to see the implicit hopes we carry with us at all times; and, by the last page I think you will discover how the hopes of our lives, born in the stories we tell, are especially present in our experiences of fear.

### THE IMPACT OF FEAR

Imagine sitting in your office when Sandra walks through the door. She seems tired, and a bit forlorn. She sits, actually collapses may be a better way of describing it, into the chair across from your desk. With great effort she tells you of being mugged outside of her apartment while walking home from work. She tells you how she cannot be out after dark; how she is afraid of every shadow; how she no longer goes out with friends and has moved into the safe basement of her parents’ house. Sandra tells you that she jumps every time a man appears at her office door at work. She is exhausted from always being “on” or “aware.” She wonders where God was, why this happened to her, and what to do with this fear she constantly lives with now.

You meet Jim for coffee one day. A longtime friend, something has changed recently with him. He seems more angry and bitter about the world. He wears his hostility to anything different on his sleeve. You listen as he disparages others who don’t believe the same thing he does. He spits out

the names of politicians and terrorists. You are surprised to hear that he has purchased several guns, and that he is stockpiling food and survival gear. Jim has cut off a lot of the relationships that were previously meaningful to him, preferring to live in an isolated rather than interactive world.

Calvary Church, the community of faith you were called to help, seems resigned to its fate. Made up of mostly older members, half of them seem despondent at their chances of survival. The other half are afraid that what they worked so hard to build will die with them. The mixture of resignation and bitterness runs deep in the story of the community. They worry that changing things will dissolve the bonds of their community, but the alternative of a slow death is equally dissatisfying. So they are resolute in their choice to do nothing. Their fear paralyzes them and they turn their focus to a world that they believe misunderstands them and attacks their community. With little hope, they meet week after week, to worship, to bury their dead, and to insulate themselves from the changes that go on around them.

In each of our lives, fear will impact the ways we relate to one another and to the world around us. Seemingly random events will be interpreted as traumatic. Communities will develop stories of feeling threatened by the outside world or even their own finitude. Events like these shape our worldview, our faith, and our ability to imagine hopeful futures. I am not under the impression that everyone has experienced something so traumatic firsthand. However, we all experience tragedy and trauma on a daily basis.

In the past, when a significant tragedy occurred, its greatest impact was on those who witnessed it. To be sure, information got around, but it took days or months. The comfort of being removed from tragedies changed with the onset of radio and television. We no longer had to wait to know what was happening in and around the country and the world. As technology improved, twenty-four-hour news channels and instantaneous reporting on the Internet proliferated, bringing tragedies to our living rooms as they unfold. Rather than having to seek out information on tragic events, today we have to seek out places where the tragedies cannot find us.

Sandra's story encapsulates some of our reactions to tragic and traumatic events. She runs from the world and significant relationships, fearing another trauma. As we continue to bear witness to events like 9/11, the unfolding economic breakdown, natural disasters, war, riots, crime, and terrorism, a basic level of fear permeates the culture and our relationships. Jim's anger and bitterness, his insistence on survival and fighting the world, is a natural reaction to an overwhelming fear. He begins to live suspiciously, wary that someone or something is out to get him. For Calvary Church, the fear has permeated

the community and a mixture of resignation and suspicion governs their life together. In all of these cases, fear has taken root and we have little to no theology that understands the complexities of the emotion of fear, and how we might continue to live faithfully with hope in a sometimes hostile and unpredictable world.

### A REMEDY IN PROCESS

Providing a remedy for Sandra's experiences following her mugging could take shape in a number of ways. Most often, people of faith have looked to scripture to provide the antidote to our fear-based narratives. We might scan a concordance and seek out some of the four hundred plus verses where the word *fear* is used in the Bible. In doing so, we might become a little confused. There are several ways to think about fear. Certainly, the human experience of fear is well represented throughout the Bible, confirming that fear is an oft-experienced emotion. In other places, the word *fear* expresses the feeling of awe that one has when approaching God. While adding some complexity, this interpretation is of little use to those who have encountered threatening images, people, ideas, or events. It might even serve to remind us how awesome or terrible the power of God can be, turning God into a deity that we wouldn't want to come and lay our burdens before. In the end though, most people focus on the passages that admonish us not to have fear. They might close in on Jesus' words in the Gospels that exhort us to take risks for faith; words that remind us that God is with us when we confess our faith and live boldly, even at the risk of alienation from those who do not understand the faith in God that strengthens our resolve. The ramifications of these words are many, and admonishments such as these, repeated by human mouths, can affect us in myriad ways. Depending on the tone used to express the sentiment, I can imagine the reaction of a fearful person running the gamut from relief to shame. That presents a problem when talking about the emotion of fear.

A strictly biblical approach can oversimplify the importance of the emotion of fear to human survival and coping, as well as its essential embodiment in our created selves. Furthermore, it is important to remember that throughout the biblical text when we are told not to have fear, we are also given a reason for the truth of this claim. In most instances where the phrase "do not fear" is used, it is accompanied by God's response "for I am with you." We cannot underestimate the importance and power these words of comfort might hold as we continue to work with our fear-based stories. God's immanence is a vital part of any theological interpretation of the emotion of fear. Moreover, remembering that



God is with us can provide a powerful metaphor for the stories of threat and trauma that we create and share with the world. The biblical account of God's co-creative presence in the world provides an important starting point for understanding the need to explore fear faithfully. At the same time, we cannot ignore the large body of research in the world that helps us further understand what happens when individuals and cultures live through a worldview of fear.

To be a human being is to experience the world through multiple lenses, including our faiths, emotions, thoughts, and senses. The emotion of fear is an integral part of these experiences and vital to the ways we adapt to the world meaningfully. To really understand the emotion of fear, what it means to be afraid, we must engage the different sources of knowledge that seek to understand this important emotional state. This is not learning for learning's sake. I want you to see this as an opportunity to live into our God-gifted emotional capacities.

Furthermore, this is a chance to explore the idea that we cannot be afraid without also being hopeful that something in our lives is worth living for. Fear does not just protect us *from* a threat or trauma; it protects us *for* something as well. You will not find any admonitions on my part to be fearless; I think, even with the best of intentions, that is a naïve position to take. Instead, you will find me taking an integrative approach to understanding fear. My approach to the emotion of fear takes the evidence from multiple sources of knowledge seriously. I use this information to construct meaningful theological statements about fear and hope, which then guide the practices examined at the end of this book.

#### REDEEMING FEAR, PIECE BY PIECE

This book is divided into four parts, with each part introducing a new aspect of fear and/or its redemption. Taken as a whole, the book creates an argument for a particular understanding of the emotion of fear and how it relates to hope. The first part examines the difference between fear and anxiety, as well as the sociological evidence for a "Culture of Fear." In the first chapter, I explore two things. The first is a general examination of emotions, theology, and God. The second deals with the ways we define fear and anxiety, teasing out how they differ from one another. In order to build a meaningful framework to understand fear, we must be able to recognize its specific hallmarks apart from other emotions. This chapter provides an early framework and definition of fear that guides the remainder of the book. This enables us later to understand how fear and hope are intertwined with one another.

In the second chapter, I introduce some research from sociologists around the world. Through their research and theories, we begin to see how a culture of fear permeates the social fabric in the United States. So often, we live and move through our worlds uncritically. We sometimes find ourselves tacitly accepting the messages we are handed and the accompanying emotions the narratives engender. The constant bombardment of political, religious, and social messages can feed our innate ability to experience the emotion of fear. The rise of the emotion of fear elicits particular actions and reactions to the world in which we live and move and have our being.

The second part of this book is concerned with the embodied genesis of the emotion of fear and how that impacts the ways we relate to the world and one another. In chapter three, I share one of my own fears and how we might understand the embodied and embedded reaction I have to spiders. This chapter looks at the neurophysiological characteristics of fear, the conservation of fear in our evolutionary history, and how our memories are affected by the emotion of fear. The importance of this research cannot be understated. If we are truly going to understand our capacity to experience the emotion of fear and how it is an essential part of our createdness, then we need to have a rudimentary understanding of how our brain is wired to feel fear.

Chapter four takes shape around the notion that the emotion of fear can be shared in communities and relationships. This chapter explores how fear is transmitted socially by looking at several illustrations as well as asking you to draw from your own experiences. From these brief illustrations, we will move into a more in-depth look at Calvary Church and examine how fear-based narratives can permeate the stories of communities. When coupled with the emotion of fear, the stories we tell are lived out through the ways we behave around one another. After a brief analysis of the case, we will turn to a broader theological examination of fear.

The third part of this book begins to make a theological turn in interpreting the emotion of fear and its relationship to hope. While I believe that a theology of fear is present throughout this book, this third section makes an explicit turn to developing a theological understanding of the emotion of fear. In the two chapters in the section, I work with process theology to achieve a number of goals to help you understand fear and hope as intertwined with one another.

Chapter five introduces process theology as the primary theological interpretive lens for this project. I introduce a process view of God's relational power and presence with the world. Then, utilizing a process-relational framework, I create an understanding of fear as a faith-filled emotional response

to particular experiences. If we truly understand ourselves as creative co-creators of reality, then it is important that we begin to think of fear as something that is adaptive to the world live in, as well as revealing of our relationship with God.

Chapter six explores the relationship between fear and hope. It begins by examining what it means to have hope. By exploring psychological and theological ideas, we come to see that hope is about possibilities and probabilities. This includes taking a look at how fear and hope are intertwined in experiences, as well as how hope provides clues that can mitigate the impact of fear-based stories. In this chapter, resistance and resilience are introduced as primary themes related to the ways human beings experience hope in the midst of threats and trauma.

The final section of this book explores the power individuals have in shaping and creating stories of hope from those that originated out of fear. In the seventh chapter I explore some ideas about reframing and retelling our fear-based stories. Part of overcoming the fears we carry with us is not found in denying them. It is not about repressing the stories that haunt us or believing we are to go through life fearless. Fear is an essential part of our createdness and an inescapable part of our emotional lives. So is hope. As we make meaning and sense of the stories we tell, often the best we can do is to understand our reaction of fear and not be ashamed of feeling it. Furthermore, in moments of reflection when we tell our stories again, we can begin to shine light into the cracks of these narratives. Within each story of fear there are multiple accounts of the ways in which we resist these narratives. These small hopes can be made to shine upon that which threatens us, lessening the impact of fear and placing it within the context of its intended use.

The eighth chapter develops some theological ideas concerning the use of fear in the public sphere. The cultural exploitation of fear by political and religious figures has created a relational divide that exacerbates issues and disrupts our ability to communicate effectively with one another. Looking at the reporting of crime, I explore the need for a more robust relational emphasis. Then, using the process notions of beauty, creativity, novelty, and harmony, I explore how the abuse of fear narrows our choices and isolates us from others. A public theological response to the stories of fear dumped into the cultural milieu centers on creating stories of contrast that protest the manipulations we experience. In conjunction with the call to live out the love ethic, I introduce the prophet Micah's call to kindness, humility, and justice as the acts of faith that can drive out these narratives that call us to live in fear.

In the ninth chapter, I explore what it means to be kind, humble, and just. These three acts of faith provide the kind of response that can transform stories

of fear. Together they protest these stories and provide alternative narratives that speak more to the love we are called to exhibit. Moreover, they provide specific actions we can take that create novel stories of hope that can bring us into greater community. Thus we have the power to find beauty not just in the contrast between these stories, but the capability of creating a more intense harmony that reveals God's intent of an ever-increasing sense of beauty in our lives. At the end of this chapter, we will return to Calvary Church and explore some novel possibilities based on these ideas.

The conclusion of this book seeks to draw together everything we have discussed along the way. As a concluding statement, it provides a final argument for ideas presented throughout the course of the book. Ultimately, I leave it to you to decide if the emotion of fear and what it means to be afraid has been transformed and/or redeemed. All I ask is that you keep an open mind throughout your reading. Take each chapter as it comes and seek to integrate it with how you understand God and faith. Where do you feel comforted? Where do you feel challenged? What questions does an argument call up for you? Which ideas help you see God or your practices of faith through new eyes?

The movement of this book is from explanation to action, from theory to practice. Any text that purports to explain our relationship to the emotion of fear without fully exploring its sociological, evolutionary, and especially its physiological roots, only tells part of the story. Likewise, any text that only sees fear through these same physiological roots without acknowledging the role that interpretation and meaning-making play in our lives is remiss as well. We must begin to acknowledge that fear, indeed all emotions, are a part of a complex interpretive web that helps us understand the world. Emotions drive our passions and remind us of the beauty of the world around us. The emotion of fear is nothing to fear; and, we should not be shamed into thinking that because we experience fear we are weak. Without fear we lose access to part of what gives us a passion for life, and in losing that, we lose the need for hope.

## Notes

1. Joseph E. LeDoux, "Emotion: Cues from the Brain," in *Foundations in Social Neuroscience*, ed. J. T. Cacioppo et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 389.