

Surprised by Fear

We've said that stones are pockets of sin in our hearts that hinder root development. Let's get practical now, and look at some examples of stones. Let's start with the stone of fear.

Fear is a stone of compromise, and it can really surprise you in the way it suddenly shows up in your heart. When you're strong and secure, you might think to yourself, *Fear? Thanks be to God, I have no problem with fear. I know what God's word says about anxiety. He hasn't given me a spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and of a sound mind. My heart is fearless!*

And then along comes a seasonal disruption. Our world is shaken, and everything changes. In the swirl, it's possible to find ourselves suddenly looking at a stone of fear in our heart.

You may wonder, *Where did that stone come from? I can't even remember the last time I struggled with fear. Why has fear suddenly surfaced in my emotions?*

Answer: *change of seasons.*

As seasons change over a farmer's field, stones that were buried can work their way toward the surface and suddenly appear. The same can happen with our hearts. When our personal season changes, stones of compromise can surface in our hearts we didn't even know were there.

When I think about fear, I'm reminded of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit our world with fear in 2020. If you weren't old enough to remember 2020, let me explain what it was like. The pandemic suddenly burst upon the consciousness of the world in March of 2020. It was a *global* change of seasons. Businesses closed, people were hospitalized, several million died, churches were shuttered for months, students studied online, almost everybody wore masks, the whole world

practiced social distancing, airports turned into ghost towns, political leaders were shaken by uncertainty and controversy, grocery stores were emptied, the supply of goods was interrupted, and the income stream of many was strangled. As though carried by the jet stream, a wave of disruption swept across the nations and gripped hearts everywhere with fear.

It was an international pandemic of fear, and in the maelstrom of the hysteria, many Christians suddenly found themselves looking at a stone of fear in their hearts they didn't even know was there. We were surprised by fear and anxiety.

Anxiety

Fear, worry, and anxiety are stones that hinder fruitfulness.

Let me qualify that by saying *anxiety attacks* might be in a slightly different category. Sometimes they seem to be more than just a stone—more like a stone with negative spiritual energy on it. For now, I'm not talking about the negative demonic energy that can sometimes attach to a stone. For now, I'm simply writing about old-fashioned, all-American, Adamic-nature anxiety. See anxiety as a stone in your garden.

Even though 2020 is well behind us, it seems we're still living in a global pandemic of anxiety. Millions are anxious about their health, finances, relationships, or jobs.

Let's be blunt. If you're anxious about something in your present circumstances, you've got yourself a stone.

Anxiety is illegal in the kingdom of God. Never make peace with your anxieties. Philippians 4:6 says, "Be anxious for nothing." *Nothing* means *nothing*. Anxiety is sin, and when we're anxious, it means we have a stone in our hearts that is hindering our fruitfulness.

Okay, full disclosure. I was tempted with anxiety during COVID-19. Let me explain.

My Struggle with Anxiety

When everyone suddenly realized, on March 15, 2020, that COVID was a global threat, the whole world shut down overnight. Thousands of airline flights were abruptly cancelled. Conferences worldwide were cancelled, and group gatherings—such as church services—were prohibited or strictly regulated.

This affected me in a personal way because, as an author and traveling speaker, I make my living from itinerant ministry and book sales. But many churches temporarily suspended all their weekly gatherings, and nobody knew how long the lockdown would last. In the uncertainty of it all, *every* ministry engagement in my calendar cancelled. Nobody knew from day to day what the future might hold. Pastors didn't know, from week to week, whether they could open their church doors or what new regulations the government might impose.

When my schedule erased, my income stream tanked. And as my income deflated, something else began to inflate in my heart: anxiety.

I was really surprised by this stone. I couldn't remember the last time I struggled with anxiety. I wondered, *Why am I suddenly feeling anxious?* The answer, of course, was *change of seasons*. COVID had brought a crazy, unforeseen season to the world, and it surfaced a stone in my heart that I didn't know was there. The global upheaval was enough of a season changer to bring my stone of anxiety to the surface.

Once I identified that stone, I went after it. It had to go! I found some of my favorite Scriptures related to anxiety, and I clung to them in prayer. My strongest verse was, “Be anxious for nothing” (Phil 4:6), with emphasis on the word *nothing*.

As I prayed and quoted God's word regarding anxiety, I made some headway in my soul, but a full release was slow

in coming. If you're up for the story, I'll tell you what evicted that stone from my heart on that occasion.

My son Michael swung by our place on an errand, and I said to him, "Michael, you're going to be my confessor. I'm going to confess my sin to you, and in the spirit of James 5:16, you're going to pray for me so that I can be healed." As a reminder, James 5:16 says, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

I told Michael that I was being tempted with anxiety. I gave him the whole story, explained how I was being tempted, and repented in his presence. Then he prayed for me. His prayer was short and simple—I think less than a minute in duration—but that stone of anxiety was *immediately* uprooted and gone! To be honest, I was a bit surprised at the suddenness of my victory. Simply by obeying James 5:16, I was healed of the stone of anxiety and instantly experienced a release of joy in the Holy Spirit.

I discovered just how eager the Lord is to help us with stone removal.

James 5:16 is not necessarily the key to overcoming *every* struggle with anxiety. The Lord has different keys for different situations, but it was the key for me on that occasion.

No Worries

Anxiety engages in a battle for which there is no grace. Let me explain.

Jesus said, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matt 6:34). Worry and anxiety are always concerned about tomorrow and rarely about today. When we look at today, things seem okay because we have clothes to wear, food to eat, and a place to sleep. But when we look at tomorrow (the future) and imagine a threat to our

future security, we can be tempted to become anxious.

But Jesus made it clear in Matthew 6:34 that we're to engage only with today's troubles. Furthermore, He taught us to pray only for today's daily bread, not tomorrow's (Matt 6:11). When we pray regarding today's troubles, He releases grace and lifts us to overcoming faith. But when we engage with tomorrow's troubles—that is, the difficulties that might possibly surface tomorrow—the Lord offers no help. He doesn't help us process tomorrow's troubles because we don't know what tomorrow will hold.

There's tremendous freedom in following Jesus' advice and refusing anxiety. When we become anxious about tomorrow, realize it's sin, repent, and resolve to engage with tomorrow's troubles tomorrow, His peace floods our hearts and we're assured of His care *right now*. Jesus wants us to live in this freedom and joy every day.

At the cross, Jesus showed us how to engage with life's troubles. He knew, long before the cross happened, about the horrors that awaited Him. And yet, as it drew closer, He refused to agonize in prayer over Calvary's troubles. Instead, He waited until the day of His arrest and crucifixion to pray for grace. When that day finally came, He entered Gethsemane and gave Himself fully to prayer over His impending sufferings. Because He waited to the day of His sufferings to agonize in prayer, He received strength from the Father to step forward and face His crucifixion with holy resolve.

Follow that example, and refuse to worry about tomorrow's troubles. Why exhaust yourself by fighting a battle that heaven isn't helping you with? Instead, concern yourself only with today's troubles. When you see something troubling about today, go to the throne and receive grace and mercy to help in your time of need (Heb 4:16).

Refuse anxiety. And if it should ever appear, dig it up and remove it from your heart.

Family Health History

I'll share another personal story about the stone of fear.

I was with my friends Chris and Joan Wood, and during our visit Joan reminded me that her mother had suffered a premature death from a heart attack. Consequently, Joan had feared that she might have inherited a congenital vulnerability to heart attacks. The fear of a heart attack and premature death had quietly nagged her for years.

She decided to go after that stone of fear, so she asked some friends to pray with her. As they prayed together, the fear lifted. Later, when she went to her doctor for a routine physical checkup, the doctor exclaimed that her EKG was *perfect!* Not only was the stone of fear removed from her heart, but Joan believed that the Lord had rejuvenated and renewed her body at the same time.

Later, as I reflected on her story, I asked myself, *I wonder if I have any fears or apprehensions related to the health history of my parents and family.* At first I thought the answer was *no*, but as I pondered it, I was surprised that the answer became *yes*. The apprehension was so small that I hadn't identified it until that moment. Upon close examination, I realized I had a small apprehension that I might lose my strength of mind in my final years like my father did. He suffered from dementia in his final years. I've inherited many of his qualities, and now I realized I had a quiet fear of also experiencing dementia in my sunset years.

It didn't feel like a huge boulder. It felt more like a pebble, but still, I clearly had a stone of fear in my heart. I decided to get out my shovel and go after it. I returned to Chris and Joan, and explained that I had identified a similar apprehension in my heart related to the health history of my family. I confessed my sin and asked them to pray for me. They prayed for me in a beautiful way, and I sensed that the pebble of fear

was removed from the garden of my heart. Immediately, I rejoiced in 2 Timothy 1:7, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

How about you? Do you have any apprehensions in your soul related to the health history of your family? If the Lord shows you a stone of fear in your heart, ask Him to show you how to dig it up and remove it. Only a fearless heart can be hundredfold fruitful.

When removing a stone of compromise from your heart, replace it with its corresponding virtue. Replace fear with faith, fornication with chastity, addictions with self-control, anger with meekness, sloth with diligence, gluttony with temperance.

I hope these examples give you a practical grip on the kinds of stones that can hinder our pursuit of hundredfold fruitfulness. And there are even more examples to mention. In the next chapter, we’ll look at a few more examples of stones.