

Introduction

The strangest week of my life began with the worst marital fight of twenty-three years. As he ranted at me, all I could get in edgewise was, “You’re totally misunderstanding what I said!” His wild behavior was so weird and unlike him, in fact, that I dismissed it as a midlife issue, even while residual tension hung in the house.

The next day I got a letter from a former high school boyfriend (now married with children) who proclaimed his tender, eternal love for me and told me that he drives by my mother’s house on holidays, trying to get a glimpse of me when he knows I’ll be in town. He listed the names of several movies he watches when he remembers me. Bizarre, I thought, especially the timing. I started to grow uneasy.

The day after that, my husband’s formerly abusive stepfather died of a sudden heart attack. He slumped over in a lawn chair after lighting a cigarette, keeling over while sitting in the yard watching my teenager mow his grass. All three onlookers—my son, his cousin with Down syndrome, and his grandmother—thought the man had fallen asleep. It was my son who discovered the truth, called the ambulance, and managed the crisis.

Although the man’s relationship with my husband and the other adults was, shall we say, difficult, his grandchildren adored him. Both of my kids grieved deeply, along with my husband who was obviously

conflicted in his own emotions. My household was alternately weeping and angry, and took their grief out on me as the safest and closest target. I was afraid of emotional and spiritual depletion, exhausted by intervals of consoling and then suddenly being required to absorb and deflect provocations from every direction without reacting. I was scared I would do something insensitive or damaging.

The day after that funeral my own stepdad had a massive heart attack. Because he's a father to me and my husband's best friend (in his own words), our family's fear was like one of Tolkien's Balrogs raging up from the pit and whipping all around us. There was the shadow of death and immediate out-of-state travel to my parents', during which I heard of my paternal grandmother's death.

The day after her memorial, my son was attacked. I couldn't believe it. What was going *on*?

I felt as though I were standing in the center of a tornado while one shrieking wind of crisis after another flew around and around me (literally, in the case of my marital conflict). I envisioned myself standing in the center, being battered and buffeted, while my arms were flung upward to God and I repeated over and over, "Jesus, I trust in you."

Late in the quagmire when my predominant fault was finally provoked,¹ I remember asking God, "What in the *hell* is going on?" And that was the point at which I reached perfect clarity. I went straight to Confession and Mass for extra fortitude and insight, and my spiritual director confirmed my suspicion: there was a definite spiritual component to all that was going on.

Before I became Catholic, when fear, conflict, or difficult circumstances occurred, I was taught to automatically attribute them to attacks of the devil. I grew

paranoid that he was lurking around every corner. I spent a lot of time “rebuking him in the name of Jesus,” but crappy stuff still happened, so I felt silly, realizing all my huffing and puffing was simply an attempt to gin up a sense of control and power rather than a rebuke with any real authority or power in it.

In the sense that the enemy’s abiding desire is to seek out our points of weakness and exploit them, it is true that he is always present. But paranoia and fascination with spiritualism is also a temptation that can trap us in paralyzing fear, especially since pervasive personal sin and serious psychological disturbances do account for much of the sorry state of affairs around us. Oddly enough, discovering the history and ancient insights on spiritual warfare in the Church not only anchored me in the absolute reality and danger of a spiritual enemy, but also helped balance my paranoia and steeped me in determination.

The temptations of my super-tumultuous week came through people—my husband, my children, my own thoughts and fears, and a former romantic interest. But I knew not to turn on those people or to take any of the provocation personally. How did I know that?

What kept me steady during my exceptionally turbulent week was the absolute knowledge that I was being tempted. I was being tempted to sins of the mouth, sins of gluttonous self-medication, sins of impatience and feelings of discouragement, and sins of rebellion, fear, and emotional infidelity to my husband.

But *most importantly*, I understood (and my spiritual director confirmed) that I was being systematically worn down spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically so I would be vulnerable and more easily lured into giving up altogether—whether out of fear, discouragement or distraction—my plans for writing and teaching

a powerful study on spiritual warfare that was scheduled to begin the next week.

Fearless . . . Are You Ready?

Often the mention of spiritual warfare provokes thoughts of the more scary and even seductive aspects of what is typically considered in the realm of evil: exorcism; witchcraft; Satanism; séances; demonic attachment, oppression, and possession; and so on. The Church is full of two thousand years of wisdom, instruction, and resources on these more serious degrees of spiritual warfare, also called extraordinary demonic activity. I have left that approach and depth to her theologians and the ordained.

We will certainly discuss the more fantastic manifestations of evil, but mostly as they arise in the context of *ordinary* demonic activity: the typical spiritual warfare we all encounter in the trenches of dirty bathrooms, squabbling children, irritable spouses, crazy schedules, and overwhelming workloads that is all the more dangerous for its seeming harmlessness. So if the subject of spiritual warfare threatens to scare you away, I hope you will be at peace.

This practical approach has not been so widely discussed, and it is one the scriptures take and our last three popes have called us to: “Man’s life on Earth is warfare,” says Pope Francis.² John Paul II asserted, “‘Spiritual combat’ is another element of life which needs to be taught anew and proposed once more to all Christians today. It is a secret and interior art, an invisible struggle in which [we] engage every day against the temptations, the evil suggestions that the demon tries to plant in [our] hearts.”³

Satan and the demons may be implicated in all the disasters and woes of human life, as least as far as they are related to sin, but the biblical record makes it perfectly evident that Satan's power exists principally in his supreme ability to hide and deceive.

Sound frightening? It need not; I promise to show you why in the coming chapters. In fact, I am rubbing my hands together in anticipation! I believe these biblical principles are some of the most surprising and important you will ever learn and periodically review in your life with God.

We're going to spend our time together filling our minds and hearts with the power of truth so we can confront Satan's temptations and lies from the get-go, before they become entrenched and destructive: "If you continue in my word . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:31-32), free from sin, anxiety, and fear. I am about to share with you all I have learned in the scriptures about following God from fear to love, and I will connect it all to our Catholic tradition, so you too can travel by this compass if you so choose.

Throughout part 1 we'll learn strategies to help us conquer our demons. First, we'll acknowledge the reality of the battle we are in and establish the root of our fear, depression, and anxiety. We'll investigate how the Bible ordinarily presents evil to us and how it discusses evil, because we want to know how evil comes against us in ways that cause profound fear, anxiety, and depression. Out of necessity, we will discuss it all linearly, but in reality we circle these subjects and approaches over and over throughout the book and throughout our lives, sometimes repeatedly in a single day! So it may be helpful to reread certain sections of *Fearless* several times as you go.

Then we'll start where the Bible begins its undressing of evil: at the beginning of all beginnings. We'll investigate the balance and beauty of God's plan, because without a precise view of perfection we cannot clearly recognize the evil of sin and are tempted to simply live with it and explain it away. We're going to explore the territory where the battles begin and are won: in the mind. We will discover practical strategies for recognizing and resisting temptation at the first opportunity and for wholeheartedly cooperating with God to reorder all that has become disordered through sin, our own and others'. We'll consider God's prescription for renewal and try it for ourselves.

After that, we're going to expose the prevailing after-sin attack on dignity that entrenches our fear, anxiety, and depression. We'll take a look at some of the scriptural designations and descriptions for Satan and how these descriptions are clues to understanding his nature. Through the names he is given throughout the Bible, we learn Satan's motives and surprising limitations. We'll explore our feelings of worthlessness and other deep, personal lies we believe that keep us slaves to fear. More importantly, we will wonder at the miracle of how we "live and move and have our being" in the tender arms of Love (Acts 17:28).

Next, we'll examine what really constitutes "evil" according to the scriptures through a study of Hebrews 3–4 and the wilderness wanderings and difficulties of the children of Israel. We'll connect their experiences to our own economic, religious, and political fears of the future. We'll spend a little time exploring end-times prophecy from the Church's historical perspective in the DVDs that accompany this book, because the scriptures and Fathers and mystics make it clear how and why "all shall be well, and all shall be well, all manner of thing

shall be well.”⁴ For all time, fear will be conquered in truth. Love wins.

In part 2 we’ll begin learning how to love with abandon. We’re going to detail each “piece” of spiritual armor that God has provided to protect us from fear, anxiety, and depression. We’ll explore the prayers of the saints as aids on our own journey. We’ll make a handy list of helps for battling fear, anxiety, and depression.

Then, sometimes in order to get the clearest possible picture of something, one must look at its opposite. Through three mini-portraits, we’re going to contemplate the mysterious coexistence of evil and holiness on earth, and the paradox of sin and grace in the people of God.

Finally, we’ll watch as Satan pursues, encounters, and tempts Jesus in the wilderness. We’ll discover what Jesus knows about resting fully in God’s goodness and love, and exactly how to live and love with abandon.

Let’s Do This

Whether you are reading *Fearless* on your own or as part of a group, this study is similar in its approach to my last book, *Unleashed*. And yet these meditative studies may be different from the fill-in-the-blank format you have done before.

When it comes to exploring the Bible, I believe there’s room for all of us to feast on the Word. *Fearless* is full of scripture *and* study, so it’s perfect for individuals *and* groups. Yet it is purposely brief out of respect for your time, and it is based on a topic we all struggle with in contemporary life. I’m not sure I know of a more relevant, maybe intimidating, subject for our times than the spiritual warfare of depression, anxiety, and fear. But

I also like to say I hope you find studying the scriptures with me less intimidating than spinach and maybe even as tasty as a cupcake.

I invite you now to consider marking your book as you read and to make notes in a journal of some sort as you go. Perhaps more importantly, I hope you will read with a Bible close by so you can underline or highlight verses that leap off the page at you, if you are amenable to doing so. These verses will be vital weapons in your arsenal from now on, and you will want to have them permanently handy. If you do not have a Bible, I recommend St. Benedict Press's *Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (RSVCE).^{*} Because I reference it quite a bit, you might also read with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (identified as CCC in this book) nearby, especially if you are reading and studying as a group.

Expect each chapter to include the following:

- A Review: “Repetition is the mother of learning,” as they say, so we spend some time revisiting each chapter in a concise way.
- An Invitation: This section applies the scriptures and the chapter to our own lives.
- A God Prompt: Here I offer specific ways to get personally and directly in touch with God.

^{*} When reading and studying the Bible, it is helpful to compare different versions, because differences in translation contribute to our understanding of what the verses mean. Unless otherwise noted, I have relied on the *Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* in this book, but you will also find occasional quotations from the *Douay-Rheims Bible* (DRB), the *Good News Translation* (GNT), the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (NABRE), the *New King James Version* (NKJV), and the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

The Invitation and God Prompt sections in *Fearless* are designed with both individuals and groups in mind, so a leader's guide is included in the back of the book just for you and your book club or Bible study group. A supplementary DVD series, also called *Fearless*, is also available on Amazon or <http://www.biblestudyevangelista.com> with additional information that is helpful for more in-depth personal exploration or group studies.⁵

The Bible promises that we can be free to love with abandon and live as *fearless* children of God! I'm going to share with you the methods that Satan uses to keep us all in slavery to sin, Satan, self, and sloth that I discovered in the Bible, and my own struggle from fear to love, for "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18).

Now, let's begin; take my hand. What comes next are the most important things I can tell you about fear, anxiety, and depression. Together, we're going to look our fears squarely in the face and learn to love with abandon.

Introductory Group Questions

- As you study the cover and title of the book, what are your impressions? What are your thoughts on spiritual warfare? How do you struggle with fear?
- After you have read the introduction together, either think about privately or discuss aloud as a group the following questions. What do you hope to take away from this study? What do you want the Holy Spirit to do in your life?

- If you brought a Bible, thumb through it for a moment or two. Thinking back over your life, try to describe your relationship with scripture in one word.
- What, if anything, bothers you the most about the Bible? What makes you most uncomfortable about it? How do you hope or anticipate your relationship with scripture to change as you work through this book?
- Pray a closing Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be together.

PART 1

CONQUER

YOUR

DEMONS

A Fearless Battle

Acknowledging the Enemy

I remember a time in my life when I lived in total fear. I was unsure of myself and my reality. I functioned in fear of my father, my future, and especially God. I feared being criticized, unseen, unloved, marginalized, and ridiculed. I worried and obsessed about failure, worthlessness, aloneness, disappointment, death, parenting my own children the way my father parented, and getting what I wanted and needed. I was anxious and terrified. I grew so sick of it.

Are you in a season or place of fear and anxiety, Dear One? Does fear of what lies ahead, of the future, hold you back from throwing yourself completely into the arms of God?

At the time I was a waitress at an upscale restaurant. The owners were tyrannical. One of them watched porn every shift in the office with the sound turned up and the television aimed toward the doorway. Also the executive chef, he roared into our faces with a drill sergeant's spit and rage when any dish returned from the dining

room to the kitchen. Then he docked our hourly pay for the amount of the entrée. His wife skimmed the top from our credit card tips to the tune of hundreds of dollars a night and fired on the spot the two people I ever knew to question her lies, shrieking at the backs of their heads as they hurried out the door. Several times I discovered their young daughter cowering under clothed banquet tables after a parental onslaught.

The maître d' was a bright spot (I thought at the time) because he lived in the loft above the restaurant and threw wild parties for the staff and their friends with free booze and anything else anyone wanted. I experimented around and didn't make it home a couple of nights.

We weren't allowed to smoke while on the clock, but he would let us sneak up the spiral staircase to his apartment, out the back door into the alley, or into the empty ballrooms as long as we promised not to rat him out if we got caught. The night the owner caught me smoking in a darkened ballroom and grabbed me, I thought he was going to hurt me—and I was terrified of just what his porn-soaked brain might provoke him to do. To this day I'm not sure how I escaped.

We all hated the restaurant's owners, and because of my past with my father I was terrified of the chef. I followed the rules to a tee from that night on, mostly—except for the night a coworker and I climbed up to the roof of the Black Angus Pub in the wee hours after midnight and spray painted the G out of the name on the restaurant's sign.

My mom finally kicked me out of the house for repeatedly breaking curfew. I knew I needed to quit that job, but now I needed the money more than ever and I could no longer afford to. Anyway, I liked the work despite the rabid owners, and the money was

spectacular, especially for a teenager. I was also reluctant to give up the parties and other “fun”—despite the fact that I was still attending church regularly, on my own.

As time went on, the partying and other sin I was involved in noodled my conscience, and I grew latently miserable at the constant inner conflict. But I couldn't see a future that wasn't the status quo. How would I support myself without that job? If I went “all in” with God, I'd have to give up all the fun I was having, even my boyfriend. I'd be bored. I'd be *alone*. And how could I find something elsewhere that made that much money?

The intelligent part of me wanted to ask God for help, but emotionally I was too scared. I knew my problems were my own fault and that I deserved where I was. The possible “new” seemed so unimaginable that I decided to stick with the miserable present. That was my *modus operandi* in every area of my life for years.

Perhaps one of the saddest realities in the Church today is the number of Christians who live every day with this type of paralyzing anxiety and fear. While desperately desiring to serve God fully, they are simply unable to move past some overwhelming obstacle. Sometimes the impediment is unidentified. But it is present like a huge weight on the chest that prevents a full, deep breath. Even “seasoned” Christians struggle with the temptation to fear, often because of the severity of their suffering or circumstances. Is this you, Dear One?

Doesn't fear trap us in a kind of agony of aimlessness coupled with a dominant self-interest? Surrounded and bombarded with data and information on every imaginable topic, it seems we have come to consider our depression, anxieties, and fears as issues of heredity, chemistry, biology, culture, psychology, geography, or modernity—but never as spirit. In agreement with Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, Pope Francis said,

“Maybe [Satan’s] greatest achievement in these times has been to make us believe that he does not exist, and that all can be fixed on a purely human level.”¹

Yet spirit is real; in fact, spirit is the basis of all reality. Are we part human, part animal? Are we simply “human animals,” as science tells us? If so, what role does human spirit play, then, in our daily existence?

Try thinking about your own spirit in terms of its moral, fluid, nonstatic, immeasurable existence. Close your eyes and imagine yourself without your body. What does your soul “look” like? Who *are* you?

Here’s another way to look at it: Right this minute, today, can you pinpoint how holy you are? Imagine a scale of 1 to 100 percent. Isn’t our “degree” of holiness in a constant state of movement toward one direction or the other? The realm of the spirit is changeable, intangible, and scientifically unquantifiable, yet it is just as “real” and in some ways even more important than the physical realm, for it is the realm of the intellect and the will that determines both our actions and our eternal destiny.

Fear is rooted in this spiritual realm. We’re about to study the cosmic role that every soul occupies in time and history, but before we do, we’d better establish this firm foundation: at its deepest root, fear is a spiritual battle with a spiritual enemy.

From Fear to Faith

Here’s a promise: “For God did not give us a spirit of *timidity* but a spirit of power and love and self-control” (2 Tm 1:7). I hope you’ll claim this as your own promise from God, write it on a Post-it note and put it somewhere