

How the Fear of Death Keeps Us Slaves to Sin

Heb 2:14-15

¹⁴ [Jesus died] that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil ¹⁵ and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

The author of Hebrews isn't talking about physical death (at least not ours), and he's not writing about human slavery – he has more crucial issues in mind. He's referring to spiritual death, the kind of death that tears apart our innermost beings; he's focusing on spiritual slavery, a slavery to sin. And when he says fear he's pointing to the fear that makes us willing to disobey God.

I've pondered these words from Hebrews for some time because I (just like Paul in Romans 7) keep acting like sin's slave. What trips me up? It's my fear of death. Let me explain.

Fear of Death ... Fear of Loss

Death is simply the loss of life. "Fear of death" and "fear of loss of life" are essentially equivalent phrases ... but not quite. "Loss of life" seems a more impactful term: it gets in our face. It's a broader term: It intrudes on our psyche many times a day and in multiple situations. It happens in little incidents as well as in life-changing events. Everybody deals with the fear of loss because nobody wants to lose whatever makes them feel alive. The fear of loss is what motivates us to disobey God.

Our fear of losing what makes us feel alive fuels our willingness to sin.

Let's make this personal. What makes *you* feel alive? Perhaps it's a relationship that lets you feel valued or at least less alone. Maybe it's a pleasure you use to distract you from worry. Possibly it's food or a chemical or a purchase or achieving success or getting approval or fulfilling a dream. All of these can make us feel alive (or at least ease some of life's pain). What would be on your list?

Fear, Sin, and Death

Now – and here's where the “fear of loss” comes in – I want you to think about your reaction when you suspect you might lose something on your list. What if something that makes you feel alive threatens to disappear? What then? How do you respond? The same way I do – you get scared; you worry; you may panic; you fear loss. And that fear triggers a very predictable series of events.

Fear is a highly effective motivator. It skews our judgment and makes us willing to do all sorts of things to get the fear to go away. (Moral issues tend to pale when we fear losing something we deem essential.) Fear leads to sinful choices, and sinful choices lead to death - the very thing we were trying to avoid. It's ironic. The sin we use to avoid death actually produces the death we fear. How do we escape this futile pattern?

The Way of Escape

We make three errors in our attempts to escape from sin and its deadly impact: we focus on our **sin** (instead of identifying what we're afraid to lose); we focus on our **fear**, and we ignore the basic problem: the **lies** responsible for our fear.

How do we escape this death trap? We shift our focus. First we identify the lies we've bought into; then we immerse ourselves in specific truths that contradict those lies. We get familiar with what God says. We open our hearts to people with maturity and wisdom. We pray, contemplate, ask hard questions and wrestle with the answers – all these help. But there's another way to escape those unreal lies that we often miss: we learn to be receptive.

Receptivity seems less related to solving the "fear of loss" problem, but it's an essential. God tells us He surrounds us with abundance; the Evil One whispers to us that God does no such thing. And that's where receptivity comes in. Receptivity opens our eyes to the abundance around us and so undermines Satan's lie. Receptivity replaces our fear of loss with a certainty of the truth.

Gestalt theorists (and the more current mindfulness therapists) with their "here and now" language understand the importance of a receptive focus: they tell us to "stay present." The Bible calls this behavior "being thankful." Being thankful reveals to us what we haven't noticed. It calms our fears of loss by making us aware of God's gifts. It shifts our attention from what's absent to what's present. It focuses us on reality.

Being thankful is a huge part of setting us free. Free to live.

A Few Questions

- What makes you feel alive?
- What are you afraid to lose? (Noticing when you're tempted to sin will give you some great clues.)
- How do you respond when things that have given your life richness and meaning look like they may disappear?
- What lies support your fear of loss?

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