

Coping with Fear

A MEDITATION ON 1 JOHN 4:18

by Rev. Lance Armstrong O'Donnell

INTRODUCTION

I. MEDITATION

For this study we're going to meditate on a single verse: 1 John 4:18. We'll look at other verses along the way, but our focus will be on that single verse. In doing this meditation we're using an ancient Christian practice. As we begin, consider what Dr. John Kleinig writes about *Christian* meditation:

Christian meditation focuses on Christ and His Word. It starts with Jesus and ends with Him. He is the be-all and end-all of Christian meditation and determines what happens in it. His Word brings life and light, comfort and health to the soul. We who belong to Him meditate on Him.¹

II. FEAR AND LOVE

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love" (1 John 4:18).

1. What's your first reaction to this passage?

2. Are your first reactions always right?

Our initial reactions to something are often wrong. So also with the things that cause us fear. But if we can get past our first reactions, if we dig in to this passage from 1 John 4, we have a lot of help to face our fears.

“THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE...” (1 John 4:18a)

FEAR

Sometimes in the Bible “fear” has a more positive sense of “awe” and “faith” (e.g., “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge ...*” Proverbs 1:7a), but that’s not the sense of “fear” in 1 John 4:18, and that’s not the way we typically use the word “fear.”

3. How do you define “fear”?

Here's a dictionary definition that might be helpful:

Fear: (from Greek *phobos*) A state of severe distress, aroused by intense concern for impending pain, danger, evil, etc., or possibly by the illusion of such circumstances.²

4. What is your fear? What are you afraid of? Now is the time to be specific.

5. Can you think of people in the Bible who had fear?

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 315.

LOVE

We use the word “love” for a lot of things. We say “I love pizza” and “I love you” — same word, “love” — but hopefully we mean very different things.

6. When you hear St. John say, “there is no fear in *love*” (1 John 4:18a) what does “love” mean there? (Consider the definition below, and read 1 John 4:9–10, 19.)

“Love [Greek *agape*] can be known only from the actions it prompts. God’s love is seen in the gift of His Son, 1 John 4:9, 10.”³

7. Now, when you hear “there is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18a), how do you understand it?

“There is no fear in love, BUT PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR...” (1 John 4:18a–b)

Perfect: (from Greek *teleios*) having attained the end or purpose, complete, perfect.⁴

8. Whose love is “perfect” in the sense above? (Read 1 John 4:9; 1 Cor. 13; John 19:28–30.)

9. How does the love of Jesus help us understand the clause, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18a–b)?

¹ W.E. Vine and F.F. Bruce, *Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan NJ: Revell, 1981), 21.

² William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 809.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. FOR FEAR HAS TO DO WITH PUNISHMENT, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).

10. What does fear have to do with? How does that relate to your fears?

11. In Christ, do you have to fear “ultimate punishment” (i.e., God’s wrath or sin, death, hell)?
(Read 1 Peter 2:24; Rom. 3:21–26; 1 John 4:10.)

12. For the Christian, what is the difference between “ultimate punishment” and “discipline”?
(Read Heb. 12:7–11.) How does this help us understand our fears and the difficulties we endure?

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, AND WHOEVER FEARS HAS NOT BEEN PERFECTED IN LOVE” (1 John 4:18).

13. We’ve been reminded of the perfect love of Christ and what our own fears often are, deep down. Look back at when we meditated on “perfect” earlier. Since “perfected” means “completed/finished” — considering all that we’ve meditated on thus far — how do you *now* receive the clause “whoever fears has not been perfect in love”? (Read Rom. 8:1–2; 2 Cor. 4:7–11.)

14. Dealing with fear is to face our own sins and weaknesses. Jesus' disciples faced this after they'd all run away during His trial and crucifixion. How do the resurrected Jesus' words to them also apply to you? How does a more mature understanding of the Christian faith receive these words? (Read John 20:19.)
