



The Paralysis of Fear

by Dr. Matthew Lee Smith, PhD

(Names have been changed to protect privacy.)

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Every pastor knows the fear that comes when someone says, “Pastor, I need to speak with you,” in that certain tone of voice. “What did I do now?” often runs through my mind. What is almost impossible to bear is when they say, “Not today, maybe tomorrow.” How many nights have we spent fretting and wondering, paralyzed by the fear of the unknown?

It was late on a Sunday evening, as we were finishing up a full day of ministry, when one of the elders asked to talk to me. “I don’t have time right now. Could we get together this week? I have some concerns I’d like to talk over.” What could I say but, “Sure.”

The darkness of that night was awful. In fitful snatches of sleep, mixed with worry and prayer, I pondered my ministry for the last three months. When first light came, I was up. Scheduling that meeting came as a top priority. Sitting across the restaurant table over a cup of coffee John poured out his heart. “Are you sure you should be a pastor? A lot of people don’t like how you are doing the ministry.”

For an hour or so the conversation went on. Like a root canal, each sentence from John’s mouth brought new damage to my soul. Attempting to get specifics about who had said things was always met with “Well, I wouldn’t want to share their names. However, almost everybody feels this way.”

John had been in the church since his salvation twenty years before. He was well known for causing division and arguments in business meetings as well as among the elders. “Mystery people” were always unhappy and what was the pastor going to do about it. As a young pastor I did what I thought was right: I was humble, contrite and conciliatory. Nothing worked for over a year.

Joshua to the Rescue!

While preparing a leadership lesson from Joshua 1, I found my mistakes as well as solutions to the constant problems John brought. As I applied these principles I found the same results with the church leadership as Joshua found with Israel.

1. God expected Joshua to accept the position of leadership with the courage that had been transferred to him, and act! It was clear as I studied this passage that I had made a few critical mistakes. First, I was in need of some courage from God! The Lord told Joshua, “Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them-- the children of Israel” (Joshua 1:2 NKJ, emphasis mine). God-given courage removes procrastination.

As I pondered this thought that rainy morning, I realized John's constant criticism was a deterrent to our forward progress. John enjoyed what Lloyd Perry, of Trinity Seminary used to call, the "status woe." Changes were necessary if our struggling ministry was to survive. One of the key changes we were trying to implement was ministry-based decision making. Removing "command and control" from the elders would diminish the carefully established power base John and his clique had worked years to establish. Incidentally, that micromanagement was killing the church! No wonder these phantom people were "concerned."

As I cried out to God from on top of the blue carpet on my office floor, I pleaded with God for courage. I needed courage to remove doubt, just as God had given to Joshua so long ago. "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them (Joshua 1:5-6 NKJ).

I so desperately needed God's courage to remove the distractions John and his embedded associates were creating. God had told Joshua, "Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go (Joshua 1:7 NKJ, emphasis mine). It became apparent that each time John would bring up another "concern" I had been chasing after his rabbit trail.

After a few months I was so depressed I wanted to quit the ministry entirely. I commented to my wife, Melodee, "If this is what ministry is all about, I don't want anything to do with it!" Truly the courage I was praying for that morning would have to remove my sense of failure. I so needed to know God was pleased with me and with me in my battle for the hearts and soul of our community.

God was calling me back to Himself each day. "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Joshua 1:8 NKJ, emphasis mine).

With tears unashamedly running down my face I felt so alone. God-given courage promised to remove my loneliness with His presence! "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9 NKJ, emphasis mine).

There, on that plush pile altar, I reaffirmed my need for God's courage to lead His church. As I lay there in prayer a sudden peace came over my soul. I am not sure what exactly happened. Like a pain killing shot, God's courage began to flow through me. Within days the encroaching darkness began to dispel.

A New Power for Ministry

2. When God's courage resides in a leader, action is swift and directions are clear. I began to imitate Joshua's moves almost without intention! I began setting deadlines for ministry operations (Joshua 1:10-11). We pressed forward with changes to our Sunday School program and youth night. God began to respond with added numbers and new faces in the ministry.

As I reminded people of their promises made in becoming a part of the leadership or ministry teams, they began to rise to the challenge (Joshua 1:12-14). When Janet set an appointment with me, I was concerned. She had played the piano for the past several years. In fact, she was our only musician at the time!

In halting words at first, she began to express her God-given call to do more in the music ministry of the church. I could have shouted right there and then. Instead we spent time each week broadening her ministry until she eventually took over all worship ministries in the church.

As each person began to take over ministry aspects, excitement grew. I continued to follow the Joshua model and assured the ministry teams that once the mission was completed, we would all share in the rewards (Joshua 1:15).

Contagious Courage

God began to add to the church slowly and surely. The leadership team became more willing to follow my leadership as they saw God bless. At one meeting Francis told me, "I'm not sure what you're doing Pastor, but keep it up! We sure can see the results of your time alone with God." Joshua was told by his leadership team, "Just as we heeded Moses in all things, so we will heed you. Only the LORD your God be with you, as He was with Moses" (Joshua 1:17 NKJ, emphasis mine). When God is blessing the leader, the team supports and defends his intimacy with God.

One of the unbelievable aspects of this new found courage came one Sunday after church. All through my personal transition from cowering to courageous pastor, John had continued to share his "concerns." In an attempt to blackmail me into submission, he said, "We believe God is moving us to another church."

Would I take the bait? If I did, I would be under John's control for the rest of my ministry. God gave me these words, "Well John, if God has told you to leave, who am I to stand in His way." You could have knocked him over with a feather.

That evening one of the elders and a long-time friend of John asked to speak with me. "Don't you care John is going to leave the church?" he asked. "Do you?" I responded. "Look at the constant animosity and division he causes. We will be better off without them. Remember the words of Solomon, "Cast out the scoffer, and contention will leave; yes, strife and reproach will cease" (Proverbs 22:10 NKJ). Comforted, but not completely assured, Bill trusted my call.

Proof Comes With Time

Time vindicated the movement forward. The “mystery people” who were so upset turned out to be another two couples who left within a year. God continued to bless us as we boldly moved forward. Changes came rapidly in the worship venue. Our youth ministry expanded. Soon we were a curiosity as leaders from our area came to “check us out.”

As our lay leaders taught pastors how to do ministry at seminars we set up, I looked out with a new sense of awe for this God who gave us His Word to guide us in our methods of ministry. Joshua’s experience, recorded in his journal, transformed our ministry. It also changed my life.