

I heard a story recently of a woman in Arkansas who was sitting in her car in a parking lot last summer. She heard a loud bang (imagine her fear after all the shootings in the news!). She heard the bang and then felt a sharp pain in the back of her head. Her hands automatically flew to the painful spot. She felt something gooey and mushy where she touched. She started screaming and kept her hands on that place on the back of her head.

Someone ran over to her car and asked, "Are you okay?"

The woman answered, "I've been shot in the head and I'm holding my brains in."

Well, I'm happy to report it wasn't her brains. It was dough! A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded in the back seat, apparently from the heat, making a loud explosion sound and shooting the dough onto the back of her head.

Can't you see the headlines now? "Pillsbury Doughboy Wanted For Attempted Murder."

Every once in a while our fear can be like that lady's experience. We have all known fears that, thank heaven, we find are unfounded. Of course, sometimes that is not true. But many times it is.

The truth is, though, everyone knows what it is like to be afraid. We all have things that we're afraid of.

Fears start out when we are very young: fear of the dark, fear that mommy or daddy won't come back for you, fear of monsters under the bed or in the closet, fear of bugs - I still have that one! All sorts of things.

Fear continues into our teenage years with fears of things like rejection, humiliation and failure – and these days, let's include social media, death, financial problems, broken relationships, loved ones being hurt, sick or dying, storms, crime, failure, aging – it's a long list of fears. We all know what it's like to be afraid.

And we all also know that life can be risky and, therefore, filled with opportunities or reasons to fear or have anxiety. News and current events don't help us either. Any time we turn on the TV, we're bombarded with all the fear-laden news of our world: terrorists, a new financial crisis or recession, storms of nature, storms of life. There's a lot that can make us feel afraid.

Did you know that there are two kinds of fear?

There is actually a "good" fear. Think about it – "good" fear keeps us from driving 150 mph down Atlantic Avenue. "Good" fear keeps us from picking up a rattlesnake. "Good" fear keeps us from jumping off a tall building or other foolish things that people think of. And yes, I know that some people do that for TV shows or other stupid reasons – but I believe they are foolish! We need to listen to certain God-given fears!

However, there are fears that are harmful. I think this is the "spirit of fear" that is talked about in Paul's instruction to Timothy. This harmful fear can paralyze us, keeping us from doing things we could or should do. This is the fear that keeps us awake at night – or stays with us all day – causing us undue anxiety, depression, or even panic attacks. Fear can make our lives miserable. And it certainly robs us of the joy God intends us to have.

The Psalmist certainly had a lot to say about fear. The Psalm we just read focuses on fear right from the beginning. But there are many other Psalms that deal with anxiety. If the Psalmist was King David (scholars still debate this) we can imagine that he was writing out of experience.

His life was very stressful – some stress caused by others, some by David himself.

For example, David's father-in-law, King Saul, chased him all over Palestine for years, trying to kill him at every turn. Later in life, political intrigues put his life in danger. Enemies threatened his kingdom. Years later, his own son Absalom staged a coup and tried very hard to kill his father David so he could be the king instead of his brother.

But even with all of that, David had a positive outlook. He wrote, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1) In other words, with God on my side, I'm fearless, afraid of no one and nothing.

David's faith kept him from slipping into the valleys of fear, discouragement or a paralyzed state of being. He knew God would empower and enable him and give him the courage he needed to face any situation. He knew God would never let him down.

Remember Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

I recently ran across this great quote: "Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God, but faith puts God between us and our circumstances" (Anonymous).

It seems that David remembered to never let circumstances come between him and God. But can we do that? In a seminary mission class, a man named Herbert Jackson told a story about his early experiences as a missionary.

He was assigned to a mission in the Philippines, and he was given a car that would not start without a push. Reverend Jackson always kept this problem in mind wherever he went visiting. If he went to the mission school, he would get permission to take some children out of class, and have them push his car off to get it started. When he made his rounds of pastoral calls, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious system for over two years.

When a missionary came to take his place, Reverend Jackson proudly explained how he got his car started. He was so proud of the fact that he never needed to ask the Mission Board for another car or cause extra expenses.

After the new missionary heard about the car issues, he excused himself and went to look under the hood of the car. In less than one minute, he said, "Why Reverend Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this cable."

He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, and turned the key. To Reverend Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years, needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Reverend Jackson from putting that power to work.

I think that's a great analogy for us. When our connections to God get loose, we lose power – God's power – to overcome our fears.

Too many people carry burdens that God did not intend them to carry. They sling those burdens over their shoulders and then never put them down – or at least never allow God to take the weight from them.

Now, I'm not saying we will NEVER be afraid. We will. We're human, and life sometimes feels overwhelming. But when we sense fear creeping into our hearts and minds, let it be a warning light on the dashboard of our life. It's a signal to attend to some problem that needs fixing before the engine of our heart overheats. It's also a signal that we need to get in closer contact with God who WANTS to take our burdens.

When we admit that we need help, we have God right there waiting to give us the help we need.

God gave these comforting words to Isaiah for us: "Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my strong right hand." (Isaiah 40:31)

When we look to the strength of our God – the greatness of our God – our anxiety will fade, the burden we're carrying will become much lighter, and our confidence will grow, so that we can feel assured in every situation.

The Psalmist mentioned multiple times that God helped him. Past experience with how God had helped him gave him confidence for the present and the future.

We need the confidence and faith of David.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist denomination and writer of many hymns, once said that whenever he felt afraid, he would just pause to pray.

Wesley wrote, "I have never known more than 15 minutes of fear. Whenever I feel fearful emotions overtaking me, I just close my eyes and thank God that he is still on the throne reigning over everything. I take comfort in God's control over all the affairs of my life."

My friends, we have a strong enough God to take care of anything we have to face. In fact, if God could raise Jesus from the dead – overcome the most terrible evil of this world – God can handle anything.

That's why Paul reminded Timothy that God did not give us a spirit of fear and nervousness. God has given all of us a spirit of power and strength, so that we will have confidence when "life" hits us. When Paul wrote that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus (Romans 8), he meant that we can take confidence in the fact that God can handle anything. God is constantly on our side.

We have a strong enough God for anything we have to face. Let that knowledge give you peace and confidence.

Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Bart, Patricia, Allen and Donna.