

Series:

Meditations



Episode:

No Fear in Love

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No Fear in Love

A reflection on 1 John 4:18–19

1 John 4:18-19

New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE)

¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love [God] because he first loved us.

Most of us carry more anxiety about God than we would readily admit. Not dramatic, crisis-level fear – just a low, persistent hum. A sense that we are not quite measuring up, that prayer is an audience we haven't fully earned, that love must be achieved before it can be received. It can feel almost devotional, this vigilance. As if staying a little afraid keeps us honest.

Then you sit with a passage like this one, and something quietly shifts.

Other Blogs in this Series

Short, uplifting meditations to pass on to friends. *Series link ...* <https://laikosblog.org/category/by-tony-macelli/meditazzjoni/>

1. Il-Qrubija Perikoluża t'Alla – **The Dangerous Nearness of God**
2. Meta s-Smewwwiet Jisktu – **When Heaven Falls Silent**
3. Grattudni illum
4. Il-Kuntlarjetà Oħt il-Għerf / **Adversity, Sister of Wisdom**
5. Għaraf Lilek Innifsek u Sir Šhih f'Alla
6. Is-Silenzju Frangiskan bhala Faqar fl-Għarfien – **Silence as Franciscan Poverty of Knowing**
7. Nghixu “lejn” il-Mulej – **Living “to” the Lord: How, and Why?**

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:18–19)

It does not say fear is wicked, or that you are failing for feeling it. It says something more interesting: that fear and perfect love cannot finally occupy the same room. And it ends with a reversal so simple it can slip past us – *we love because he first loved us*. Not the other way around.



The morning bell is not the dawn (*Fear Has Its Role, But Not Its Home, page 3*)

If we want to know what that love actually looks like – not as an idea, but as a life – we only have to look at Jesus. He moved consistently toward the frightened, the guilty, the people most convinced they were beyond welcome, never waiting for them to sort themselves out first.

Again and again, mercy arrives before repentance, presence is offered where rejection might reasonably have been expected. But what is perhaps even more striking, reading the Gospels unhurriedly, is the direction of that movement – always earlier than anyone thought the welcome would come, always into the fear rather than around it. He does not stand at a safe distance and invite the fearful to cross over. He draws near precisely into the fear, and transforms it from within.

Fear Has Its Role, But Not Its Home

Fear is not the enemy of faith. There is a long tradition of honest thinking about this, and it comes to a surprisingly gentle conclusion: fear may begin the journey, but it was never meant to stay.

One way of putting it is this. Fear may awaken the conscience – it names the wound, turns the soul away from what damages it. Think of it as the bell at dawn. It rouses the sleeper, and for that we can be grateful. But the bell is not the daylight. Once something warmer enters, fear's work is largely done.

But what about the "fear of God" in Scripture?

A fair question – and the Bible does not sidestep it. "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*" (Proverbs 1:7) appears not once but many times across the Hebrew scriptures, and Jesus himself tells his disciples, "*Fear him who can destroy both soul and body*" (Luke 12:5). This is not language the New Testament quietly drops.

So how does it sit alongside "*perfect love casts out fear*"?

The key is in the Hebrew and Greek words themselves. The primary word for this scriptural fear – *yirah* in Hebrew, *phobos* in Greek – carries the weight of **awe, reverence, and wonder** before a reality far greater than oneself. It is closer to what we feel standing at the edge of the ocean at night than to what we feel before a judge awaiting sentence. It is the trembling of someone who has glimpsed something enormous and holy, not the cowering of someone expecting punishment.

Augustine already pointed us toward this distinction – between servile fear, which dreads punishment, and *chaste fear*, which simply cannot bear to lose the Beloved. Scripture's "fear of the Lord" belongs to the second kind. It is, in fact, another name for the awe that lives inside deep love. The Psalms call it the foundation of wisdom; Isaiah describes Jesus himself as *delighting* in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:3) – which is enough to tell us that this fear and love are not opposites. They are companions.

John is not contradicting Proverbs. He is showing us where the journey leads. Fear – even holy fear – is the beginning. Love is the destination. And the remarkable thing is that as love deepens, what remains of fear is transfigured: no longer dread, but an ever more tender, attentive reverence before the One who loved us first.

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Dawn is coming... *(page 3)*

There is also a useful distinction worth sitting with: there is a fear that dreads punishment, and there is a subtler, more tender fear – the fear of losing God. Not *what will he do to me?* but *I cannot bear to be without him*.

The first kind of fear imagines God primarily as threat. The second belongs to love, the way attentiveness belongs to friendship. If you have ever felt, in a quiet moment, an unwillingness to turn away from something good and close and true – you have known that second kind of fear. John is not condemning reverence or awe. He is freeing us from the first kind: the servile, self-protecting crouch before a God imagined chiefly as judge.

Perfect love does not make the soul careless. It makes it intimate.

Love Makes You Bold

Here is where things become genuinely surprising. Once love matures, it does something unexpected: it makes the soul *daring*.

One medieval voice puts it strikingly – the soul that has been deeply loved by God can forget, in a sense, even the divine majesty, because love has made her bold. Does that seem presumptuous? It is worth sitting with rather than dismissing. It is actually the courage of intimacy. We have all seen it in human relationships: the person who stands on ceremony with an acquaintance but speaks freely with a close friend. Formality keeps its distance. Love draws near.

The soul loved first by God no longer approaches him like a defendant awaiting sentence, but like someone already welcomed – arriving, not applying. Majesty does not disappear; it is revealed as radiant mercy rather than cold splendour. The boldness is not presumption. It is the response of someone who has genuinely heard the invitation and taken it seriously.

This is not a disposition we manufacture through willpower. It ripens, slowly, in those who have spent time in the presence of that love.

The Steady Ground Beneath the Storm

Most of us have prayed during fear and felt the prayer bounce back. The storm is real, the words are real, and yet something in us suspects that the fear has not actually been addressed – only temporarily managed.

There is a prayer, very short and very hard-won, that comes from a woman who knew illness, institutional opposition, spiritual dryness, and enormous responsibility. She didn't offer it as a slogan. She arrived at it through experience: *Let nothing frighten you... God alone suffices*.

Notice what Teresa of Avila does not say. It does not say that nothing frightening exists. It

does not promise smooth weather. What she names is a depth below the weather – a place in the soul that the storm cannot reach, because it has found a centre more stable than its own alarm.

This is faith as inner steadiness, not emotional performance. We are still human, still capable of trembling, still genuinely affected by what life brings. But there is a difference between a soul whose deepest ground is fear and a soul whose deepest ground is the sufficiency of God. One contracts under pressure. The other holds.

That holding came from beyond our will. But from our side reaching it may not be automatic. It usually requires a certain practice – though not a complicated one. It is basically the practice of returning, again and again, to what is most real.

Before You Loved, You Were Already Loved

Perhaps the most quietly revolutionary thing in this passage is how it ends. *We love because he first loved us*. Not: work harder at loving, and God will respond. Not: love God enough, and fear will leave. The direction of movement runs the other way entirely.

There is a woman in fourteenth-century England – no theologian, no institutional figure – who received a series of visions during a severe illness, and spent the rest of her long life turning them over



Love makes you bold (page 5)

in her mind. The most famous conclusion of Julian of Norwich was also her simplest: *Love was his meaning*. Not judgement, not punishment, not divine disappointment with human failure. Beneath everything – beneath sin, suffering, bewilderment and grief – she kept finding the same thing: a love that had never loosened its hold.

She puts it plainly: *before God made us, he loved us*. Before any striving, before any achievement or failure, before we knew how to answer – the love was already there.

This is not sentiment. It is a rereading of reality. The starting point is not our effort toward God but God's movement toward us. A beloved child rests not because the world is safe, but because the father is known to be good. Trust grows from that knowledge before it ever becomes one's own effort. We do not have to produce fearlessness.

We are invited to receive the relationship that makes fearlessness possible.

When we begin to grasp this, something changes in the way we pray, the way we fail, the way we begin again. Obedience stops feeling like servitude and starts feeling like something closer to coming home. The frightened servant acts to avoid punishment. The beloved child acts from trust, from gratitude, from a sense of

belonging that goes deeper than some role he may choose to perform.

A Different Kind of Presence

Fear says: *I must protect myself from God*.
Love says: *God has already moved toward me*.

Fear asks: *What punishment is coming?*
Love hears: *I loved you first*.

Fear contracts the soul. Love gives it room to breathe.

The perfection of love John describes is not an emotional achievement to be unlocked. It is a slow ripening of trust – the soul gradually ceasing to stand before God as one awaiting sentence, and beginning to rest before him as one already held. The centre of gravity shifts, quietly and over time, from our performance to God's initiative, from religious anxiety to received mercy.

What would it feel like to bring that shift of trust to a few minutes of quiet today? Not a technique, not an exercise – just a willingness to sit with the possibility that the love was there before you arrived, and has not moved.

That is where prayer begins to feel less like an audit and more like a homecoming.

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Meet These People...

Augustine of Hippo (354– 430) was a North African bishop and one of the most influential thinkers in Christian history. Before his conversion, he led a restless, searching life – an intellectual and moral journey he later described in his *Confessions*, one of the first great spiritual autobiographies. His sermons on the Letters of John remain among the most psychologically astute Christian writings on love and fear.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) was a French monk and founder of the Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux. A man of extraordinary energy and passionate spirituality, he wrote extensively on the soul's journey toward God, particularly through his sermons on the Song of Songs. His treatise *On the Love of God* remains a classic of Christian mystical writing.

Julian of Norwich (c. 1343 – after 1416) was an English anchoress – a woman who lived in a small cell attached to a church in Norwich – who received a series of sixteen visions, which she called *Showings*, during a near-fatal illness at age thirty. She spent decades contemplating them, producing one of the most luminous works of Christian mysticism in any language. Her most famous phrase – *"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"* – comes from a vision of divine love that refused to see sin as having the final word.

Contact: chat, comment, ask, suggest, correct: magnetony@gmail.com

Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) was a Spanish Carmelite nun, reformer, and mystical theologian who became the first woman declared a Doctor of the Church. Her major works, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*, map the soul's journey toward union with God with unusual clarity and psychological honesty. Her famous prayer – "Let nothing trouble you, let nothing frighten you... God alone suffices" – was found written in her breviary after her death.

Matthew Henry (1662–1714) was a Welsh Nonconformist minister whose six-volume *Commentary on the Whole Bible* became one of the most widely used and quoted biblical commentaries in the English-speaking world. Warm, pastoral, and deeply practical, his writing has shaped Protestant preaching for three centuries.

Alexander Maclaren (1826–1910) was a Scottish Baptist preacher and expositor, widely regarded as one of the finest preachers of the Victorian era. His thirty-two-volume *Expositions of Holy Scripture* are still read today for their clarity, rhetorical beauty, and spiritual depth.

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"Let nothing frighten you... God alone suffices." (The Ground Beneath the Storm, page 5)



A Different Kind of Presence *(page 7)*