

DREAD

By:
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Imagine yourself sitting home alone in your living room and you hear an urgent warning on the television announcing a ferociously large tornado rapidly heading toward your city. A twinge of fear passes through you. *I thought the forecast said it was going to be sunny today*, you ask yourself. You glance out the front window and notice the sky turning dark. Swirling clouds form before your very eyes. Branches on your trees begin shaking violently. Your fear grows but so does your helplessness. You have nowhere to go. This house has no basement. You search the room, almost expecting an answer to fall from heaven. Suddenly you hear your neighborhood alarm sounding. Your fear grows and your heart races. You breathe rapidly, palms become sweaty and your mind floods with pictures of tornados and their devastation. You contemplate what to do next but can think of nothing. You feel helpless. Your stomach squeezes into a knot, you swallow hard.

Suddenly the phone rings, jerking you from your trance and disrupting your mind. Your body is energized and shaky. You quickly leap to answer the phone before the second ring. You recognize your neighbor yelling and screaming jumbled words about a tornado approaching your house. Suddenly the phone goes dead. Time is running out. You can't reach help. You can't escape. A sense of hopeless despair floods in converting your terror into DREAD. You throw the phone down and clutch your head. Panic overwhelms you. Terror surges! You want to call your loved ones and warn them what is happening but you can't. Hopelessness swells. You want people to pray, you want help. There is no basement to run to, or shelter to hide in. More hopelessness makes you want to collapse. Time is not on your side. You feel frozen. The door shakes, the windows make a cracking sound and you hear what sounds like thunder getting louder and louder. Terror rushes through your veins. Like water slipping away down the drain, the sense of imminent danger (terror) and seeing no way out (hopeless despair) locks you up in dread.

Your right hemisphere is busy locating how it is like you to act, and what it is like you to do in such a critical situation. Your brain searches for past experience with tornados. You remember the well known movie you watched a while ago about a twister. Your thoughts race, you say to yourself, "*What do I do?*" You shudder. Your body revs up but your mind has no answer or solution to the problem. Dread consumes you.

Though this scenario is fictional, we easily picture and imagine our words, actions and responses. We estimate how we would respond. We visualize the events and anticipate our decisions. We think about our options, how we would act under such a stressful situation. Most of us recognize this familiar pain and feel despair and fear, even as we ponder the above situation. We cringe as we imagine feeling this way for an extended

period of time. The internal agony of so much turmoil leaves us bewildered and disoriented.

Who wants to feel absolute terror and hopeless despair at the same time? Are there any volunteers? Probably not. Dread is an unwanted foe and oftentimes our uninvited guest. Dread intrudes our thoughts and disrupts our peace. Dread is a suffocating cloak, easy to put on and hard to remove. Dread envelops our outlook and easily transforms our perspective. We squirm at the notion of being wrapped in its folds. Dread takes a toll on our health, work, family and relationships. Unless we grew up with plenty of practice returning to joy from fear and hopelessness, we will not fare well with dread and would rather avoid the feeling altogether.

Though we may not recognize dread when it hits, we are familiar with its horrible sensations. Dread assails our nervous system. We battle endlessly with dread unless we regularly exercise returning to joy from this disturbing blend of terror and hopeless despair. Dread leaves us weary, restless and irritable. The parasympathetic response of hopeless despair drains us of energy while terror, a sympathetic response energizes us. This toxic combination causes a physical response similar to the engine of a car that has the accelerator and brake pressed simultaneously. The consequence, if not immediate, will be a wear and tear on our nervous system. Terror produces a decrease in serotonin and raises our dopamine levels. The means our ability to self quiet and calm diminish. Our state becomes attentive and watchful. A steady flow of adrenaline into our bloodstream gives us energy. Our heart races, we breathe short, quick breaths, our pupils dilate and we begin to problem solve.

Next the ingredient of hopeless despair is added to the equation. Hopeless despair is our inability to see a way out or answer to a situation or circumstance. We lack hope. We lose our motivation. We want to hide, shrink and sleep. Depression sucks the life out of us. Dopamine levels drop and serotonin levels rise. A constant release of adrenaline and cortisol without a change in our environment or a release by our body causes trouble to our well being. Even the thought of a dreadful scenario that replays in our mind can produce a physical reaction, as if it were happening at that very moment. Psychological distress generates body signals, urgent warnings of problems and disturbances. How much endurance does an engine sustain when we press the accelerator and brake? Imagine if the above tornado illustration was going to happen the next week, and then the following weeks after. Would we be able to rest, be still and have peace knowing we are a few days away from another disaster? How would we cope? Hopefully, we would have plenty of practice and training to be ourselves and suffer well rather than become traumatized. Hopefully we would rely on a large God for such a great problem. Unless we practice, train and utilize our resources distressing situations prove challenging and debilitating.

Let's open a page in Biblical history and imagine the gripping scene where Saul and his army stood in battle array before the Philistines. Unexpectedly a sizeable, powerful giant-man named Goliath appears sporting a hefty shield, sword and spear. He arrogantly confronts and mocks the Israelites. This overwhelmingly potent adversary triggers

enormous panic among the army of Israel. They frantically problem solve and flee.¹ Next, the soldiers regroup and strategize. We almost feel their alarm and fright upon Goliath's appearance then their gloom and despair at the bleak circumstances. The army strives with despair. What will happen next? We imagine their racing thoughts, "*Who will go out and face this giant? Who is the brave soul to fix and put an end to this mess?*" Dread consumes them and they helplessly wait. Thankfully one young shepherd named David had some experience (and faith) in this area. David, acting like himself, quickly volunteers and overcomes with the help of Israel's God. David had plenty of experience fighting lions and bears.² We hypothesize David had much training tackling his terror, overcoming his hopeless despair and returning to joy. God's faithfulness brings about a victory through David as he conquers the giant and returns Israel to joy.

We handle dread like a winner when we practice and train with those who are experienced. We triumph over dread when we grow up with parents who know who they are and act like themselves when they feel afraid or hopeless. Capable trainers are those who stay relational while they experience the specific emotion. We learn to avoid emotions when mom and dad forget who they are when afraid or hopeless. Possibly we sidetrack to other emotions. This occurs when we jump to another emotion rather than stay in the specific emotion of terror or despair. Men usually experience intense anger and rage when afraid while women may experience sadness. If we can't handle one emotion, surely two of them simultaneously disable us at the most and hinder us at the least. We hit our desired target when we return to joy from dread.

We resolve the dread dilemma when we find an experienced partner. A qualified companion is one who is available to spend time with and teach us how to act like ourselves amidst distress. Practice and training allows us to become capable "sufferers" who can handle fear and despair among other emotions and not be traumatized. We find hope and relief when dread no longer consumes us. This means we do not panic and fret when a tornado approaches or a giant stands before us. Rather, we find ourselves actively on our knees praying or putting stones in our pouch rather than reacting. We find liberation when we stay relational during distress and act like ourselves. Maybe we will even hear God speak, as He spoke to a man named Job out from the whirlwind!

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¹ 1 Samuel 17:24

² 1 Samuel 17:34 +