

## TESTIFY: Romans 8.14-17

(By: Seminarian Adam Lambrecht)

If you'd like to take a rather strange journey, try visiting the website *The Phobia List*. It is exactly what it claims to be—a list of all sorts of different fears, all of them officially recognized and meticulously researched. Here is where you will find out that Arachnophobia is a fear of spiders, even though you probably learned that all the way back in 1990 when the movie was released. At *The Phobia List*, you'll find out that the fear of the number 13 is referred to as Triskaidekaphobia. And you'll also learn that there is such a thing as Panophobia—the fear of everything, which makes you wonder how helpful a website like *The Phobia List* is for someone with that condition.

It's might be tempting for us to laugh a little bit at this list of phobias, because... well...why would that be exactly? Is it because we think that the legitimate fears that some people might have aren't real or difficult? Are we tempted to have a sort of moral superiority when we see fears that we don't have, but others do? Or do we simply think that fear is really “no big deal”?

But it is. And we know this. Ask any father who watches his 16-year-old daughter take the car keys and drive to a friend's house all by herself. Ask any school graduate, who suddenly faces the prospect of moving on to a different school, a new job, or an unknown future. Ask any security officer who has to prepare for the reality of a gunman walking into a high school and opening fire. And even if these examples are too specific or too easy to dismiss, think of other more general but equally paralyzing fears: fear of failure; fear of anonymity; fear of abandonment; fear of being all alone. Fear is a big deal. And we *all* have to deal with it.

Paul brings out the universality of fear in our reading this morning. Yes, he is writing to a group of Christians in the city of Rome, but his words here are just as applicable to us today as they were to the Romans. Because Paul is talking about the fear that is an inherent part of our sinful nature. In fact, Paul uses even stronger words. **“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear...”** (v. 14).

Paul has spent a fair amount of time in the previous chapters here in Romans describing this ongoing struggle between the sinful nature and the new spirit in a Christian. He describes that struggle even in his own life with those familiar words, **“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do”** (Ro. 7:15). So on the one hand, Paul says, “I have this new spirit that God has given me that makes me a Christian and makes me want to live my life accordingly.” But on the other hand, fighting against this new spirit God has given me, is my old, deadly, fear-driven sinful nature. And Paul makes absolutely clear just how hopeless and corrupt that sinful nature is. **“The sinful**

**mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (Ro. 8:7-8).**

Are you connecting the dots here? Because it's an important part of Paul's argument. That sinful nature is totally corrupt and it made us slaves to sin. And because we were slaves to sin, we were also then, as Paul says, **"slaves to fear"** (v. 15). It's not as if our fear was simply an innocent little emotion, a minor inconvenience. It's not as if we occasionally felt a little anxious and we simply chalked it up to another phobia on the list. We were slaves—bound, shackled, totally tied up and controlled by fear.

And that can be a hard thing to hear. It's not easy to admit and recognize that the fears we all know and experience every day are the result of that sinful nature that still lives in us, fighting against God. Because we like to think that fear is simply a product of external circumstances that happen to us. And there certainly is truth to that. We can't dismiss the sin and evil we face. Parents fear for their children because they love them and care for them and because the world is a cruel, mean, and unpredictable place. But sometimes parents also fear for their children because they doubt God's control and care. Graduates fear and worry about their futures because there are seemingly limitless possibilities and opportunities, but also unknown difficulties and disasters that lay ahead. But sometimes graduates also fear and worry because they desire to rip control away from God and selfishly pursue their own interests rather than God-pleasing ones. Security guards fear because there is evil in the world that results in robbery, murder, and school shootings. But sometimes, they also fear because, just like the rest of us, they struggle to trust God's guidance and protection. And that's a sin against the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment God gives.

Go down your list of fears. Fear of failure; fear of anonymity; fear of abandonment; fear of being all alone. Which of those holds up as legitimate in the face of God's often repeated words in Scripture: **"DO NOT FEAR"**? Do we think this is only a pat on the back and not a command from the Almighty God? Do we still think that our fear is no big deal?

How wrong we are! How wicked and cruel that sinful nature! How deadly that fear! And how beautiful, then, when Paul says that **"you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship"** (v. 14). A fearful, cowering, slave no more. Because you have received the Spirit of sonship. Step back and see how your Triune God testifies to your status and your salvation.

The word that is translated as "sonship" here is actually the word for adoption. And what a great picture that is. If you are adopted, or if you've even known someone who's gone through the process, you know how much work is involved to take someone and make them a legitimate part of a new family. There is paperwork to be submitted, money to be paid, and approvals to be secured. It's long, difficult, and often pricey work.

And so is our adoption into our Father's family. But what makes it so much more special is that all the work is done by the true son in the family. God's Son, Jesus, lives as a true Son should. He obeys his Father perfectly. He never fears or worries or doubts. He always trusts, even when he knows he is about to be arrested and tried and convicted and killed. And when it all comes down upon him, he says simply, **"May your will be done"** (Mt. 26:42). And **"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"** (Lk. 23:46). The true Son submits himself perfectly to his Father's will. He pays the price willingly for our sin. And through all his perfect work, he secures his Father's approval.

Your adoption is finalized and secured. You are now a member of God's own family. And membership has wonderful privileges. It means that your sins are fully and completely forgiven. It means that you now have the unconditional status of God's own child. It means that when the Father looks at you, he sees his perfect Son.

And it also means that whenever fear strikes you, whenever worry and doubt paralyze and debilitate you, you know precisely where to go. **"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'"** (v. 15). You run straight to the arms of the one who gave up his very own Son to have you. You cry out to "Abba," the same Father that Jesus himself cried out to in his prayers. Because you have the same rights before your adopted Father as Jesus himself has. And you have the reassurance that he watches over you, forgives you, and loves you.

And all of this comfort comes to you because the Holy Spirit has come into your heart and made you God's child. And not only that, the Holy Spirit has created a new spirit within you that battles against your old sinful nature and testifies to your adoption. **"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children"** (v. 16). Should your sins ever lead you to doubt God could ever love you or forgive you, the Holy Spirit himself testifies that you are wrong. "This is who you are," he says, "God's forgiven child." Should you ever feel like you are powerless in that daily struggle against the sinful nature's temptations, the Holy Spirit himself testifies that you are wrong. He gives you a new spirit that cries out, "This is who I am—God's child. And the battle has already been won!"

The Triune God testifies that you are no longer a slave to fear. Through the perfect work of the Savior, through the unconditional acceptance of that work by the Father, through the unflagging witness of the Holy Spirit within you, you can be absolutely certain that you are God's child.

This is a big deal. And there is big power at work behind this big deal. The same power that is able to cut through your fear and testify that you are God's child is also able to testify through you to others about what it means to be God's child. He testifies through you when you grow in the Word, feeding your faith through worship and Bible study. He

testifies through you when you cheer at the cleansing waters of baptism, making another one God's child. He testifies through you when you look around in your church, in your home, and in your community, and you see nothing but souls for whom Christ died. He testifies through you when you recognize and serve your fellow family members—when you pray for each other, when you fix your neighbor's lawnmower, and when you babysit for the couple that just needs a break.

And even though you may not always realize it, the Holy Spirit testifies through you in one other powerful and profound way. **“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”** (v. 17).

Here is the reality of being a co-heir with Christ, an adopted child of God. You will suffer. Nowhere does God promise you that your car won't break down, that you won't lose your job, that you won't have to face open-heart surgery. Nowhere. In fact, Jesus himself said to his disciples the night before he died, **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world”** (Jn. 16:33).

And this is how the Holy Spirit testifies through you. He gives you a different perspective on all the troubles and difficulties you experience. Not only do you realize and acknowledge that these things will happen in this sin-infested world, but you also are able to see that a clunking transmission is an opportunity to remember what a blessing it is to have a car in the first place. You are able to see that losing your job is an opportunity to trust God's promise that he will care for you like he does the birds of the air. You are able to see that not even open-heart surgery can separate you **“from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Ro. 8:39).

And the Holy Spirit will testify through you to others how God uses even trouble and difficulty for your eternal good. And that's really what Paul is reminding you about when he points you ahead to the glory you will share with Christ. Yes, it is an eternal home in heaven, with your room reserved and your name on the door. But it is also a place free of sorrow, pain, fear, and death. It is a place where you will have a glorified body just as Christ did after his resurrection—no more aching joints or weakening muscles. And it is a place that glows with the light of the Lamb of God. You will forever be in the presence of the Triune God who testifies to you and through you that you are his child.

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen.*