

F E A R I N G
O T H E R S

PUTTING
GOD FIRST

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

ZACH SCHLEGEL

In bite-size pieces, Zach invites us to examine our identity as followers of Jesus and to find that identity not in the opinion or fear of others but in the opinion and fear of the One who loves us and gave his life for us. Zach pushes us to look at our motives and concerns and to ask why we feel or believe the things about ourselves that we do. When those things are wrong and are rooted in the fear of others, we are either believing something about God that is not true or not believing something about God that we need to. I look forward to recommending this devotional to the folks in our church.

—**Jackson Crum**, Lead Pastor, Park Community Church, Chicago

Zach Schlegel is one of my favorite people and pastors. I've known him for over a decade and have had the joy of serving with him for years. Meet him, and what will strike you is his strength—his grip, his physical thickness, and how unbelievably deep his voice is! But once you get to know him, what will strike you is his weakness—which you will know only because, in his humility, he lets you know. If you fear others, this book can serve as a GPS that God will use to get you out of that person-fearing country, with Zach as a wonderful guide. I've read every word, and it all sounds like Zach—a man who seems to know the Bible as well as he knows his own heart. Profit your soul with this book.

—**Mark Dever**, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; President, 9Marks

Fearing other people is a dreadful, paralyzing condition. It is a snare, a source of anguish, a root of unbelief, a killer of joy. In *Fearing Others*, Zach Schlegel helps us to see the true anatomy of this condition and the only remedy for it: the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. These careful reflections on Scripture will call you to a holy fear that puts all other fears to death.

—**John Henderson**, Council Member, Biblical Counseling Coalition; Executive Director, Center for Church Equipping

The fear of men is the root of frustration's fruit in our lives. Zach helps us to remember that this is a malady that needs to not only be erased but also displaced with the fear of God. And he does more than just tell us that we need to do this; he takes us by the hand and shows us how. This is insightful, careful, enjoyable, and warm counsel from a seasoned pastor. Experience the freedom that comes when we give our hearts, hopes, and fears to the only One who is strong enough to carry them.

—**John Onwuchekwa**, Lead Pastor, Cornerstone Church, Atlanta; Author, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*

Pastor Zach Schlegel has done us all a great favor by writing this book about fear and how to deal with it. His insights are biblical, and his counsel is practical. I wish I had read a book like this while I was still a seminary student beginning my pastoral ministry. It would have made me much more effective in my home and in the church.

—**Warren W. Wiersbe**, Author, Be Series Bible Commentaries; Former Pastor, Moody Church, Chicago

FEARING OTHERS

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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Contents

Tips for Reading This Devotional 7

Introduction 9

Understand and Identify Your Fear of Others

Day 1: We Obey What We Fear 15

Day 2: Monument Building 17

Day 3: Watch Out! It's a Trap! 19

Day 4: The Difficulty of Waiting 21

Day 5: Busy, Busy, Busy 23

Day 6: The Fear of Falling 25

Day 7: The Surprising Source of Confidence 27

Day 8: Confidence in Your Insufficiency 29

Day 9: The Grasshopper Syndrome 31

Day 10: Keeping People at a Distance 33

Day 11: Don't Take It Personally 35

Day 12: You Shall Not Covet 37

Overcome Your Fear of Others

Day 13: Overcome Your Fear of Others by Fearing God 41

Day 14: Fan the Flame 43

Day 15: Remember That God Is Mindful of You 45

Day 16: Relax; You're Not the Expert on You 47

Day 17: Take the Leap of Obedience 49

Day 18: Redefine True Greatness	51
Day 19: Know God's Purpose for Your Life	53
Day 20: Embrace the Accusations	55
Day 21: Fight Fear with Prayer	57
Day 22: Look to Your Future Hope	59
Day 23: Compete to Love, Not to Be Loved	61
Day 24: Know Who You Are	63
Day 25: Fight Fear with Thankfulness	65
Day 26: Rejoice—God Is for You!	67
Day 27: Learn True Contentment	69
Day 28: Face the What-Ifs of Life	71
Day 29: Walk in the Light	73
Day 30: Serve Your Father Who Sees in Secret	75
Day 31: Pray for a United Heart	77
Conclusion	79
Acknowledgments	81
Notes	83
Suggested Resources for the Fight	87

Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

This devotional is just like rain filling up a bucket. It's slow, and it builds over time. Just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Just a few drops of Scripture daily to satiate your parched soul.

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. In fact, it's the most powerful force in the entire universe.¹ It turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Zach speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. Fear of your fellow man can rule your life. It leads you to worship the wrong things: other people's opinions and affirmation, and especially success in others' eyes. "What does he think?" "What if I don't fit in?" "What if I don't get this done? Will my boss be mad at me?" "What if they don't like me?" You can't let these fears rule your life.

Fundamentally, any struggle with fearing others is a worship problem. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (see Prov. 1:7), but sadly, it often doesn't come first. We lose ourselves in the sea of other people's opinions, and fear of others overwhelms us. I often try to survive on my own rather than depending on others. I build monuments to myself. I walk around scared of rejection from others. I fight back a sense of failure over my life or something I did. My parents or my boss or my spouse says something that rules my heart more than it should. Fearing others, and its debris, like shrapnel on a war-torn field, are spread out all over my life. The Lord calls out to us, "Fear *me*. Put *me* first. Seek first *my* kingdom. Why would you fear *others* more than *me*?" The goal of our lives is to fear God, not fear others.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself how to overcome your fear of others.

This devotional is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide to fighting your fear of others. Good volumes are already written for that purpose. Buy them and make good use of them. You'll see several resources listed at the end of the book.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

I wonder what they think of me.

Did they notice when I left? Did they care?

Do they think I'm pretty?

Do they think I'm smart?

Do they think I'm important?

What if I try this and fail?

What if I don't meet their expectations? What if I let them down?

Have you ever asked yourself a question like that? Often, such a question has a heart problem underneath it—a problem called the *fear of man*. Fear isn't *just* being frightened of someone; it can involve being desperate to gain something that we think we need (respect, attention, love, approval) or the frantic concern that we'll lose it once we have it. In that sense, what we fear controls us, drives our agenda, determines our mood, and enslaves us. Ed Welch describes fear of others happening when “we replace God with people. Instead of biblically guided fear of the Lord, we fear others.”¹

Recognizing fear of others in our lives can be difficult. Some of us have lived under its rule for so long that the fear of man has become background noise—as unnoticed as breathing. But just because we can't see it doesn't mean it's not there. I remember, during my first year of marriage, coming back early to our one-bedroom apartment in Chicago to do some housecleaning. As I disinfected the toilets and vacuumed the living room, I remember thinking, *Katie's going to love this. She's going to walk in and be overcome with gratitude. She'll probably start thinking about how lucky she is to have married a guy like me who would do stuff like this.* (You don't realize how ridiculous your thoughts are until you write them down like this).

But when Katie walked in the door that night, she didn't say a word. *Maybe she didn't notice the bathroom yet. I just need to give it a little time.* We started making supper, but still no comment. *Maybe she had a long day and is distracted. Or maybe she's so stunned, she doesn't know what to say. I'll give her a little more time.* When we sat down to dinner, I pulled up my chair, ready to receive her praise. But instead, all I got was, "How was your day, honey?" *How was my day? How ungrateful can she be?* It was the last straw. "How was my day?! Did you notice how clean the place is? Thanks a lot!"

She didn't know what was going on in my head; all *she* experienced was my frustrated words rushing into the room after the dam of my heart broke loose. Her eyes looked stunned—*What just happened here?* She was the unfortunate victim of my fear of man. I *needed* her to praise me. I *needed* her to think that I was a great husband—and when she didn't, my pride lashed out like a cornered animal trying to survive.

To better understand the fear of man, we need to understand its origin. God created mankind in his image (see Gen. 1:26–27), which means that we were created to be in a relationship with God—to be a son or daughter of God—and to show the rest of creation what God is like as a Servant King. In the beginning, we found our identity, value, and significance in our relationship with God and in service to others. But when our first parents sinned in the garden, everything changed. The seriousness of their offense did not simply involve eating a piece of fruit; it involved a decision to reject God's rule over their lives out of a belief that things would be better if *they* were in charge. In effect, they replaced God with themselves at the center of creation. Thus, we have each inherited a nature that wants to put itself at the center—to seek *our* glory before God's.

But this self-centered worldview leaves us dependent on the opinions of others. Our value and identity no longer rest in the grace of being a child of God. Instead, they are based on how well we perform in comparison to others. A performance-based value

system means that our value and significance are determined by what others think of us. No wonder our fear of others runs rampant in our relationships at home, school, work, and church. Now we *need* other people's approval to validate our identity and significance. We've become slaves to their opinions. So, how can we get back to paradise? How can we find the rest that comes from being children of God and the freedom that comes from serving others instead of using them to feel good about ourselves?

I wish I could tell you that I no longer struggle with the fear of man. The reality is that it's still a daily fight for me. But, after many years, I can say I have learned how to fight better. The fear that once screamed in my ear has become quieter and quieter. To overcome our fear of others, we must *understand* what it is, *identify* where it is in our lives, and *equip ourselves* with the tools God provides us for overcoming it.

If possible, read this book with a trusted friend, counselor, or pastor. Taking the time to reflect on and unpack what you're learning about God and your own heart is crucial to the process. So don't rush. Read, discuss, and pray that God would transform your heart and mind. David prays in Psalm 34:4, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears." My prayer for you, as you read this book, is that God would deliver *you* from all your fears.

UNDERSTAND AND IDENTIFY YOUR FEAR OF OTHERS

One of the purposes of surgery is to get rid of the disease that's attacking the body. When a doctor performs surgery, he or she must know *what* to look for and *where* the problem is. Our fight against fear of others involves "spiritual surgery" under the steady hands of Jesus, our Great Physician (see Mark 2:17). The aim of this first section is to help us understand how Scripture defines the fear of man and to help us identify it in our own lives. Once we know what it is and where to look for it, we can focus in the next session on overcoming our fear of others and rooting it out of our lives.

DAY 1

We Obey What We Fear

“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.” . . . Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.” (1 Sam. 15:22, 24)

SAUL WAS ISRAEL’S first king. His inauguration marked a key transition in the nation’s history—even though he was reluctant to accept the responsibility and even tried to hide from it! But God gave Saul his Spirit and promised him everything he needed in order to rule well. All Saul had to do was to fear God and obey his commands. If he did, God promised that “it will be well” (1 Sam. 12:14). Not too far into his rule, God called Saul to war against the Amalekites and told him to destroy everything. But Saul kept the best of the livestock for himself and destroyed only that which was worthless or of poor quality. This partial obedience was disobedience.

Saul’s confession in 1 Samuel 15:24 shows us how the fear of man works. Why did he disobey God? Because he “feared the *people* and obeyed *their* voice.” According to the Bible, fear is more than feeling terrified. Our fear of man certainly includes that, but it also means revering people, needing them, or valuing their opinion *so much* that our decisions end up being controlled by them. We obey what we fear. As a result, our fear of others is a worship issue. Every human heart is always worshipping something; we were made for worship (see Isa. 43:7; John 4:20–24)! The question is, *who* we are worshipping—God or people?

Sprite’s slogan tells us, “Obey your thirst.” This soft-drink advertisement ends up being pretty theologically accurate. What

we value indicates what we fear losing or never achieving. We can't imagine living without it, so this fear directs our decisions and motivates us to act. Isn't this what happens when the sports enthusiast prioritizes watching his team above attending church? Don't we refuse to share the gospel with a friend because we fear how she'll respond? Aren't we reluctant to take risks for good things because we can't bear the thought of being a failure? We thirst for and value something more than God in these moments. We obey what we fear.

Reflect: What are the ways you are tempted to disobey God in order to gain or keep the favor of people?

Reflect: Jesus taught that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Think about what you fear losing or never achieving. What do your fears reveal about what you value or worship?

Act: There are no tricks or shortcuts to overcoming our fear of others—it's hard work! We need the Spirit of God to help us taste and see the goodness and glory of God so that we desire him more. We see God in the pages of Scripture; we rely upon him by pouring our hearts out to him in prayer. All of God's Word shows us who he is, but if you're looking for a place to start, take some time to reflect on passages like Psalm 103, Isaiah 40:6–31, or Colossians 1:15–23. Then pray! Ask God to open your eyes. Ask him to help you taste and see his goodness and to change your heart to value him more.

DAY 2

Monument Building

Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal.” . . . Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel.” (1 Sam. 15:12, 17)

SAUL HAD A “little big man” complex. He was Israel’s newly appointed king—the hopes of the nation were on him, and he wanted to deliver. Problem is, the work was more than Saul could handle. When he looked to his *own* ability, he was “little” in his own eyes. What if people found out that he didn’t have what it took? What if people were disappointed? He couldn’t bear the thought of being seen as a failure or exposed as being in over his head. He was desperate for people to see him as *big*—as a king they could rely on, who was wise, strong, successful, and impressive.

What was Saul to do? When he became king, God promised to provide him with everything he needed in order to rule well. All Saul had to do was trust God. Sounds simple, right? Israel’s king was designed to be a vassal king—to follow God’s lead and serve God’s people for God’s glory. The problem is that Saul didn’t like that setup. He didn’t want to be in anyone’s shadow (not even God’s)—Saul wanted the glory for himself. But when he pushed God out of the picture, he was left to rule the nation with his own resources. All this led to the “little big man” complex. How would he keep up the facade that he was a big man? By building monuments for himself.

Saul’s problem illustrates what fear of others can look like in our lives. Monument building is a sign that we’ve fallen prey to the fear of man. We may not build physical monuments, but we

have our own way of trying to garner the praise of man. There are times when I finish preaching and feel uncertain how it went. Was it clear? Were people strengthened by God's Word? Or was it a disaster? One Sunday, when I got in the car after church, I remember complaining to my wife, "Well, that was awful, wasn't it?" Why did I ask it *that way*? Because I hoped she would say, "Are you kidding? It was great! Why would you think it was awful, honey?!" Instead of trusting in God, I was fishing for compliments in order to build myself a monument. What about you?

Reflect: What's something God has called you to do that you're inadequate to do in *your* resources? Part of Saul's problem was an issue of identity: "The LORD anointed you king over Israel" (1 Sam. 15:17). When he anointed Saul, God promised to help him. God often calls us to do something that is beyond us, so that we trust him. As we do, our weakness becomes the stage for his strength.

Reflect: Are you guilty of monument building? Setting things up so that people will remember *you* and be impressed with *you*?

Act: Next time you are tempted to fish for compliments, remember that this isn't about you! Do your best, pray fervently, and trust God with the results. Take pleasure in the fact that God delights in using your weakness or inadequacy, for "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

DAY 3

Watch Out! It's a Trap!

*The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts
in the LORD is safe. (Prov. 29:25)*

THE BEST FISHERMEN are good liars. Now, before any fishing enthusiasts put the book down, let me explain. The goal of fishing is to deceive—to convince the fish that we're offering a free meal, not a concealed hook. This past summer I taught my two boys this art of deception. After putting the nightcrawlers on the hook, we dropped the line into the water and waited. One by one, the fish approached the bait and thought, *How convenient! I can skip the hard work of chasing lunch and eat this delicious worm, free of charge* (at least, that's my best attempt at fish thinking). But what *seemed* convenient was a snare. One by one, the deceived fish took the bait and, instead of enjoying a meal, *became* our meal.

We often feel tempted to change our conduct, convictions, or character out of panic. We fear what others may say about us, what they may do to us, or what we might miss out on. Like the fisherman's bait, the fear of man promises one thing but delivers another. The temptation to fear whispers, *Compromising this once won't do any harm. Join your friends in order to fit in; there's plenty of time to do what God wants later. Facing the rejection of these friends would be unbearable. Go ahead—God will forgive you.* But when we cave to the temptation, we take the bait only to realize that we've been deceived! Instead of delivering what it promised, our fear of others leaves us ensnared by sin and suffering its consequences.

What's the alternative to the fear of man? Our proverb provides the answer through contrast. The alternative to "the fear of man" is to "trust in the LORD." The alternative to being caught in the "snare" is to find the freedom in being "safe." The word for

“safe” paints a picture of a person who is lifted above harm’s reach, making him inaccessible to danger.¹ The fear of man makes this *promise* of deliverance, but only to conceal a hook that drags us to death. Only God delivers on every promise that he makes. Only God is worthy of our trust.

Reflect: When have you been ensnared or entangled in a mess because of your fear of others? Perhaps you are in that mess right now. What did your fear of others promise you that made changing your conduct, conviction, or character seem like a good idea in the moment?

Reflect: When have you, by God’s grace, said no to fearing others and enjoyed the safety of trusting in God? How would you describe your experience before and after your decision to trust him?

Act: Once you identify ways that you tend to be ensnared by the fear of man, you may ask, “I’d love to trust God more—but how?” Proverbs 29:6 says, “An evil man is ensnared in his transgression, but a righteous man sings and rejoices.” No one is righteous on his or her own. In that sense, we are all ensnared in our transgressions. But that’s how and why we trust God. Our hope isn’t in our righteousness. It’s in Jesus, who willingly became ensnared in our sin so that we could sing and rejoice in the freedom of his righteousness. Next time you are tempted with the fear of man, remember its empty promises in contrast to the promises that Jesus has fulfilled for your salvation.