

Dwell in Light
Revelation 3:20-4:1
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My Dad died when I was sixteen. I held his head and wiped it with a damp cloth while he took his last breaths and received CPR that would not save him. He was 41, which I will be on my next birthday.

I've known since I was a teenager that my likely killer will be the heart disease that took Dad. But that has never scared me. Instead, I've taken comfort in knowing it, because it's something I can take steps to prevent. And in my fortieth year there is no sign of the heart trouble that killed my father.

Watching Dad die didn't make me fear death. Instead it compelled me to try to live fully and well and to not waste time, for life might be short. As a teenager and young adult, this seemed like a virtue.

But then I spent years living in the closet. I came later to marriage and am still endeavoring to have a family—the one thing I've desired most out of life. And so I worry that despite having intended not to, that I did waste time.

At forty, my heart might be healthier than Dad's was, but in the drive to waste no more time I've become more anxious than I ever would have imagined. I may not fear death, but I am afraid of missing out on things that I deeply desire.

What are your deepest fears? How do they affect your thinking and your actions? It seems that our fears, uncertainties, and anxieties affect much of our lives – our relationships, our work, our health. They can prevent us from forming genuine, intimate relationships. Or drive us to get into them too quickly. They can make us defensive, timid, or weak. They can ruin our mental and physical well-being.

But fear is a complicated thing. For one, it is not always bad. It is, in fact, a natural and valuable human emotion. We should be afraid when we are attacked or in a genuinely dangerous situation. We want our children to be a little afraid of crossing the road, because then maybe they will look both ways first. But we don't want them to be so afraid that they never cross the road.

We also shouldn't immediately try to overcome our fear. In fact, I'd argue that one reason our culture is so consumed with anxiety, uncertainty, and fear is that we try to avoid it. We don't talk about it. We try to get past it too quickly. And the result is that we can exist with a lot of denial or without learning important lessons.

Jewish Kabbalah teaches that we should be open to our human brokenness. In our moments of fear, grief, anxiety, and depression, we should take the time to experience these emotions as valuable. When we discover that something scares us, we should spend time with that fear and learn from it, instead of immediately working to get past it.

Even though fear is sometimes good and despite the lessons we can learn from it, fear is not a place we want to remain. We want to overcome it. We want to live into the ancient words “Be not afraid.” How do we do that?

John imagines that Jesus is standing at his own door, knocking, seeking to enter in. The great Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay writes that this image reminds us that God is the one seeking after us; we don’t have to go looking for God. Barclay writes that the author of Revelation drew upon the Song of Solomon here. In the Song of Solomon the lover comes to his beloved’s door at night and knocks upon it, entreating her to invite him in. Barclay says that it is this image of passionate love that Revelation draws upon. God is like the lover entreating us, his beloved, to open up.

And one we let the Light in, marvelous things occur. First, Jesus says that he will share a meal with us. Barclay writes that the particular Greek word here conveys what type of meal is imagined: “This was no hurried meal, no visit in the passing, no hasty, conventional call; it was the meal where people lingered in fellowship together. . . The promise of intimate friendship with Christ.”

Fear can be lonely and isolating. What better way to defeat it than a relaxing, enjoyable meal with close friends?

But that’s not all that happens. After John opens the door to Jesus, he is raised into the empyrean heaven where he now envisions another door, a cosmic door, standing wide open, inviting him into the throne room of God where all creation joins in worship and praise. This is a revelation. By opening his door, by letting the light in, John sees in a new way. He gains understanding of the bigger picture.

Often fear limits our vision, keeping us focused on a narrow range of difficulties. By opening ourselves to the light and dwelling in it, our sight is transformed, and we can see more of the beauty of the world.

God wants to dwell with us, bringing us comfort and salvation. We don’t have to search for this light, because it is seeking us; like a lover unto the beloved, God is standing at our door knocking.

We must first respond to the invitation and open ourselves to God so that we might dwell in the light and be not afraid.