

Bless You, Mister Fearing, for Your Faith, Courage, and Strength

by Bruce T. Forbes, 2008

“Have you helped the struggling?” was a question, said President Henry B. Eyring at the funeral of President Gordon B. Hinkley, that President Hinkley asked him several times. As President Eyring spoke, I was in the middle of rereading one of my favorite books in all of English literature, and this question reminded me of one of my favorite characters in the book.

One of the single great books in English literature, *THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS* by John Bunyan was written in 1678 and has been in continual publication ever since. It has never been out of print, yet most of us have never read this amazing book. It is a story told through simile and allegory about a pilgrim named Christian as he journeys from his home in the City of Destruction to the great Celestial City where the Great King and the Heavenly Prince reside. Along the pilgrim's route, known as the Strait and Narrow, he meets and associates with others whose names gives us clues as to what sort of person they are: a goodly man named Evangelist meets him several times along the path to guide and teach him, while others, such as Mr. Worldly Wiseman from the city of Carnal Policy seek to deter him in his pilgrimage. He travels through the Slough of Despond, over the Hill Difficulty, through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and even survives Vanity Fair before finally reaching the Delectable Mountains, where the Celestial City sits atop Zion's Hill, a welcome reward for all faithful pilgrims.

So successful was this novel that many writers of the day attempted to write sequels, but none could equal Bunyan's gift for similes and allegory. Finally Bunyan himself wrote *Book Two* to his *Pilgrim's Progress* and published it in 1684 – it tells of the pilgrimage of Christian's wife Christiana and their four sons, who meet many of the same people as their husband and father as well as additional characters.

Since Bunyan's time the great as well as the small in the world of literature have tried to utilize this pilgrimage theme in their writing. Charles Dickens, who as a youth was a great fan of Bunyan's work, subtitled his 1838 *OLIVER TWIST* as “The Parish Boy's Progress”. William Thackeray's 1847 *VANITY FAIR* was a direct borrow of location and theme from Bunyan's work. The American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1843 *THE CELESTIAL RAILROAD* was written as a sequel to Bunyan's work and is a criticism of those who call themselves Christians but sit back and think they can simply cruise through life without any of the toil and trouble of a real pilgrimage. Even C. S. Lewis, himself a master of simile and allegory, wrote a pilgrimage book – *THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS* is a firm warning that even the most stalwart of pilgrims can regress in their pilgrimage and loose the eternal prize if they give in to the wrong influences. (There are those who claim that his *GREAT DIVORCE* and *CHRONICLES OF NARNIA* are also pilgrimage books, but that is another story.)

While writing my own Pilgrim sequel (yes, even the small in literature give it a try), I took great pains to study each character and location in Bunyan's book in order to discover the purpose and place each had in a Christian pilgrim's journey. I purposely pushed aside the many scholarly books commentating *PILGRIM'S PROGRESS*, deciding instead to let the scriptures and the Holy Spirit - and an 1828 Webster's Dictionary that could define the old words Bunyan used - be my commentator.

What I discovered in my study is what I consider the single most remarkable book ever written,

second only to the scriptures; a volume every Latter-day Saint home should own. My favorite edition is the Barnes and Noble Classics edition (www.bn.com/classics), which contains footnotes to define old words and phrases in modern terms. Although Latter-day Saint readers would not agree with Bunyan's preaching of a Trinity as opposed to the Godhead, they will certainly appreciate him on the topic of Faith, Grace, and Works – although he put more emphasis on the concept of Grace than most Latter-day Saints are used to, he also taught with equal force that Faith and Works (Actions) are required to prove ourselves worthy of entering God's presence – a fulfilling of the Book of Mormon teaching that “it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.” (2 Nephi 25:23)

Having written my PILGRIM sequel nearly fifteen years ago, when I was just thinking I could make a go at writing, I have recently dusted off that manuscript and have been working it over with a bit more writing experience and additional gospel knowledge. In doing so I have come to discover and appreciate one character in particular; one most readers would smile at and move on to something more interesting. That character is known as Mister Fearing.

MEET MISTER FEARING

We all know Mister Fearing – or, should I say Brother and Sister Fearing. Every congregation has several, and most of us try not to associate with them any more than we have to in fear that some of their attitude might rub off on us – or, because we feel they are not worthy of our attention. And, we certainly don't try to help them – after all, they *have* to have a tremendous lack of Faith and Courage – or a huge load of sins! - to be such fearing people!

My reading of Bunyan's book slowed right down when the story of Mister Fearing came up, mostly because I too am one of the world's many Mister Fearings. Many has been the time that I've been told it's because of a lack of Faith or a lack of testimony that I am a Mister Fearing. The real reason for my membership in the Fearing Family, however, was not diagnosed until I was forty-three years old, when the doctors diagnosed me with chronic depression; something I had suffered with all my life without understanding what was wrong and why I felt that way. The level to which my mind was worn down by stress and worry and the inability to cope with life in general would make anyone fear life! Finally I could work with the root cause instead of the symptoms, and now I have the goal of someday trading in my Mister Fearing name badge for one that reads a little more cheerful.

One of the first things I appreciate about Bunyan's characterization of my new-found hero is that the author does not condemn him, as so many “worthy” Christians tend to do with the Brother and Sister Fearings they encounter. Instead, he commends him for his courage, his long suffering, and even for his Faith. Yes, John Bunyan believed that Mister Fearing had more faith and courage than even Mister Confidence! That gem of knowledge was like water to a dry well when I read it – finally someone recognized what we Mister Fearings go through to walk the same path as those who claim there's nothing to fear!

Let's join Bunyan's narration and discover what it takes to be a proper Brother or Sister Fearing.

MISTER FEARING'S WEAKNESSES

Mister Great-Heart, who is acting as guide and bodyguard to Christina and her sons (an allegory of what all ministers of the Gospel should be doing for their flock) meets up with an old man named

Honest, and they discuss other pilgrims they have met and helped along the Strait and Narrow:

“Now, as they walked along together, the guide [Great-Heart] asked the old gentleman [Honest] if he did not know one Mr. Fearing, that came on pilgrimage out of his parts.

“HONEST: Yes, very well, said he. He was a man that had the root of the matter in him; but he was one of the most troublesome pilgrims that ever I met with in all my days.

“GREAT-HEART: I perceive you knew him, for you have given a very right character of him [you have described him accurately].

“HONEST: Knew him! I was a great companion of his; I was with him most an end; when he first began to think upon what would come upon us hereafter, I was with him.

“GREAT-HEART: I was his guide from my Master’s house to the gates of the Celestial City.

“HONEST: Then you knew him to be a troublesome one.

“GREAT-HEART: I did so; but I could very well bear it; for men of my calling are oftentimes intrusted with the conduct of such as he was.”

(THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS, John Bunyan (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005); all quotations are from pages 273-278; information in brackets is for clarification; italics and underlining added for emphasis. Spelling is the original spelling.)

As both a priesthood leader and a fellow Mister Fearing, this last sentence caught my eye – as a minister of the Gospel, the Lord has entrusted into my keeping the Brother and Sister Fearings within the scope of my church calling! The thought came to me that we are not called just to shepherd the strong and mighty – we are also called to extend a hand to those who appear weak and in need.

“HONEST: Well then, pray let us hear a little of him, and how he managed himself under your conduct.

“GREAT-HEART: Why, he was always afraid that he should come short of whither he had a desire to go. Every thing frightened him that he heard any body speak of, if it had but the least appearance of opposition in it. I heard that he lay roaring at the Slough of Despond for above a month together; nor durst he, for all he saw several go over before him, venture, though they many of them offered to lend him their hands. He would not go back again, neither.”

Webster's 1828 English Dictionary defines 'despond' as “To be cast down; to be depressed or dejected in mind; to fail in spirits; to lose all courage, spirit or resolution; to sink by loss of hope”. I find it remarkable that even though Mister Fearing wallowed through the Slough of Despond for over a month, he refused to go back to the City of Destruction; the starting place of all Pilgrims as they journey to the great Celestial City – he would not turn his back on his pilgrimage as he knew it was the right thing to do, no matter how impossibly hard it appeared to be. He would not give up. Right then and there Mister Fearing became my hero – no matter how hard his desonding mind made the journey, he kept his face toward Mount Zion and the Celestial City. Now *that's* heroism!

Great-Heart continues:

“The Celestial City - he said he should die if he came not to it; and yet he was dejected at every difficulty, and stumbled at every straw that any body cast in his way. Well, after he had lain at the Slough of Despond a great while, as I have told you, one sunshiny morning, I do not know how, he ventured, and so got over; but when he was over, he would scarce believe it. He had, I think, a Slough of Despond in his mind, a slough that he carried every where with him, or else he could never have been as he was.”

Hmm – it was a sunshiny day on which Mister Fearing finally crawled out of the Slough of Despond – could it be he suffered from seasonal depression brought on my too many dark days? Could it have been a *spiritual* seasonal depression brought on my too many days without *spiritual* light? Whichever it was, Mister Fearing made it through and came to stand at the gate through which the pilgrim enters into the Good Shepherd's sheepfold; a gate with no handle – the pilgrim must call out for the gate to be opened:

“So he came up to the gate . . . that stands at the head of this way [the Strait and Narrow], and there also he stood a good while before he would venture to knock. When the gate was opened, he would give back, and give place to others, and say that he was not worthy. For, all he got before some to the gate, yet many of them went in before him. There the poor man would stand shaking and shrinking; I dare say it would have pitied one's heart to have seen him. Nor would he go back again.”

How many of us know someone who is too shy or too scared to stand and offer a prayer or give a talk? They willingly stand back and let others do precisely that when they don't think they have the courage to do it. How many of us simply rush past them instead of stopping, taking them by the hand, and literally bringing them into the fold? Speaking as a lifetime member of the Mister Fearing Association, I know that often a smile and an extended hand is all that is needed to give courage to the average Brother or Sister Fearing.

“At last he took the hammer that hanged on the gate in his hand, and gave a small rap or two; then one opened to him, but he shrunk back as before. He that opened stepped out after him, and said, Thou trembling one, what wantest thou? With that he fell down to the ground. He that spoke to him wondered to see him so faint, so he said to him, Peace be to thee; up, for I have set open the door to thee; come in, for thou art blessed. With that he got up, and went in trembling; and when he was in, he was ashamed to show his face. Well, after he had been entertained there a while, as you know how the manner is, he was bid go on his way, and also told the way he should take. So he went on till he came out to our house [Interpreter's House, where Great-Heart normally served]; but as he behaved himself at the gate, so he did at my Master the Interpreter's door. He lay there about in the cold a good while, before he would adventure to call; yet he would not go back. . . .”

Mister Fearing got up the courage to knock for himself, but then he shrank back when the Good Shepherd opened the gate – and we *know* it was the Good Shepherd Himself as He employs no servants at that particular gate (2 Nephi 9:41). We would all like to picture ourselves as strong and brave enough to look the Good Shepherd in the eye and take his hand like a fellow shepherd and march proudly through the gate – how comforting it is to know that the Good Shepherd is willing to reach out and help the Fearings among us step through into His sheepfold. Without the Brother and Sister Fearings of the world, we would never learn that the Fearing Family is as valued and prized by the Good Shepherd as the Confident Family.

“NEVER GIVE UP”

By the time I got this far in Great-Heart's account of Mister Fearing's pilgrimage, the thing I noticed most was that however afraid he got, Mister Fearing refused to “go back”; he refused to give up. However afraid he may have been, he continued on despite a fear that often crippled him. Let's think for a moment of the Fearing members of our own congregations – the rest of us naturally ignore them or don't even notice them to begin with, yet they continue to come to church Sunday after Sunday and are the first to put their names on a list for a service project – they refuse to “go back” because they know what they are doing is right and true. Oh, how we could all learn from these faithful, courageous men and women; how many of us have missed out on possibly-great lessons on faith and courage because we don't notice or offer to help these silent members?

THE LORD LOVES BROTHER AND SISTER FEARING!

In Great-Heart's narration, Mister Fearing made his way along the Strait and Narrow to Interpreter's House, where pilgrims pause in their journey to begin to learn what we might call the 'mysteries of godliness'. Here again he was too afraid to knock – but he was courageous enough to not turn back. Great-Heart continues:

“At last, I think I looked out of the window, and perceiving a man to be up and down about the door, I went out to him, and asked what he was: but, poor man, the water stood in his eyes [he was frightened to tears]; so I perceived what he wanted. I went therefore in, and told it in the house, and we showed the thing to our Lord: so he sent me out again, to entreat him to come in; but I dare say, I had hard work to do it. At last he came in; and I will say that for my Lord, he carried it wonderful lovingly to him. . . . For my Master, you must know, is one of very tender bowels, especially to them that are afraid; wherefore he carried it so towards him as might tend most to his encouragement.”

The Lord of the house sent his servants out into the cold, dark world to retrieve a single soul too afraid to knock to gain entrance, and then He tended the pilgrim Himself! How many of us, as servants of a Lord who, as Bunyan expressed, has a special love and tenderness for Brother and Sister Fearing, feel justified in staying inside the house and expect the weak and the frightened to come to us before we decide whether they are worthy of our ministrations? Instead, we should be watching the actions of our

Lord and listen when he says to “Go, and do thou likewise.” (Luke 10:37)

“Well, when he had had a sight of the things of the place, and was ready to take his journey to go to the city, my Lord, as he did to Christian before, gave him a bottle of spirits, and some comfortable things to eat. Thus we set forward, and I went before him . . .”

Each of us, strong or weak; confident or scared, have shepherds assigned to us by the Good Shepherd to help us along the Strait and Narrow; He has never at any time expected us to trod that path alone! Home and Visiting Teachers, quorum leaders, bishops, and stake presidents all act as guides and bodyguards along this path. (Notice that we have shepherds to guide us while at the same time we act as shepherds for others.) Additionally, it is worthy of note that we do not get to pick and choose which pilgrims we will in turn assist, for the Good Shepherd has commanded that we assist *each* and *every* pilgrim we meet along the way.

WHAT MISTER FEARING KNOWS WHAT YOU MIGHT NOT

With Great-Heart as his guide and guard, Mister Fearing continued up the Strait and Narrow. There are, spaced along the path, various scenes for the pilgrim to view and understand. Great-Heart reported that -

“. . . he seemed glad when he saw the cross and the sepulchre. There I confess he desired to stay a little to look; and he seemed for a while after to be a little cheery.”

Mister Fearing found cheer at the sight of the small hill with both a cross and a sepulcher; symbols of Christ's sacrifice for us. But while Brother and Sister State-the-Obvious are busy explaining in Sunday School that this of course represents Christ's sacrifice for our sins, Brother and Sister Fearing know this is only a part of the story, for as Isaiah explained,

“He is despised and rejected of men;
 a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief:
 and we hid as it were our faces from him;
 he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows:
 yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.
 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
 he was bruised for our iniquities:
 the chastisement of our peace was upon him;
 and with his stripes we are healed.”

(Isaiah 53:4-5)

As surely as He suffered for our sins and transgressions, the Good Shepherd's atonement also covers for and lifts from our shoulders our griefs, our sorrows, our secret fears, and all other things that

keep us from the Peace of His pastures. This is what Mister Fearing understood and rejoiced at as he gained cheer at that sight of the cross and the sepulcher.

THE ROOT OF HIS WORRY

“When he came to the Hill Difficulty, he made no stick at that, nor did he much fear the lions: for you must know, that his troubles were not about such things as these; his fear was about his acceptance at last.”

Ah! The truth about Mister Fearing's fear may at last be coming to light! He was afraid that the Great King of the Celestial City may not accept one so low and unworthy as himself; he feared that anything he did will never be good enough for him to be welcomed into the Heavenly Courts – especially while he is busy comparing himself to Brother Confidence, Brother Self-Assured, Brother Never-Fear, and Brother Painted-On-Smile! Well, doesn't that just destroy all our assumptions and judgments?

We must remember that such fear keeps all honest pilgrims on the Strait and Narrow and busy serving their fellow travelers:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”
(Psalms 111:10)

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge:
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”
(Proverbs 1:7; see also Proverbs 9:10)

“The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom;
and before honour is humility.”
(Proverbs 15:33)

“Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding.”
(Job 28:28)

“And wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times,
and strength of salvation:
the fear of the LORD is his treasure.”
(Isaiah 33:6)

Where does such a fear lead the honest pilgrim?

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart;
and lean not unto thine own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him,
and he shall direct thy paths.
Be not wise in thine own eyes:
fear the LORD, and depart from evil.
It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones.”
(Proverbs 3:5-8)

FINDING JOY IN THE PLAIN AND SIMPLE THINGS

Great-Heart went on to tell old Mister Honest about how easily Mister Fearing found beauty in the plain and simple places along the Strait and Narrow and how well he reacted to them:

“I got him in at the house Beautiful . . . Also, when he was in, I brought him acquainted with the damsels of the place; but he was ashamed to make himself much in company. He desired much to be alone; yet he always loved good talk. . . . He also loved much to see ancient things [allegorical items representing gospel principles], and to be pondering them in his mind. He told me afterward, that he loved to be in those two houses from which he came last, to wit, at the gate, and that of the Interpreter, but that he durst not be so bold as to ask.

“When we went also from the house Beautiful, down the hill, into the Valley of Humiliation [today we would simply call it 'Humility'; a place where only the humble could enter], he went down as well as ever I saw a man in my life; for he cared not how mean [lowly; humble] he was, so he might be happy at last. Yea, I think there was a kind of sympathy betwixt that Valley and him; for I never saw him better in all his pilgrimage than he was in that Valley.

“Here he would lie down, embrace the ground, and kiss the very flowers that grew in this valley. He would now be up every morning by break of day, tracing [roaming] and walking to and fro in the valley.”

Each and every one of us should be able to find and appreciate the plain, simply, and humble beauties of the Valley of Humility as well as the 'ancient things' of the house called Beautiful, yet often it is only those who have struggled through or feared so much of life that are truly able to do so.

MISTER FEARING'S TRIALS ARE DIFFERENT THAN YOURS

Next in the journey came the Valley of the Shadow of Death, perhaps the most dreaded, horrifying of all places along the pilgrim's path. It is full of monsters, hobgoblins, demons, and even false and wicked priests. Yet, let's read Great-Heart's report of just how empty the valley was as he guided Mister Fearing through its depths:

“But when he was come to the entrance of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I thought I should have lost my man: not for that he had any inclination to go back; that he always abhorred; but he was ready to die for fear. Oh, the hobgoblins will have me! the

hobgoblins will have me! cried he; and I could not beat him out of it. He made such a noise, and such an outcry here, that had they but heard him, it was enough to encourage them to come and fall upon us.

“But this I took very great notice of, that this valley was as quiet when we went through it, as ever I knew it before or since. I suppose those enemies here had now a special check from our Lord, and a command not to meddle until Mr. Fearing had passed over it.”

How perfectly this illustrates Paul's teaching in the New Testament:

“God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

The Heavenly King and his Son knew that the trials going on in Mister Fearing's mind were so severe that he did not need the added trials of those evil beings inhabiting that valley, so he was one of the few pilgrims for which the Lord, in His wisdom and infinite grace, cleared the path before him so he could pass unhindered.

As a second witness to how the Lord lessens some trials when our minds are such a great trial in and of themselves, Great-Heart described Mister Fearing's final mortal moments as he prepared to cross over the “river where was no bridge” (death):

“ . . . there again he was in a heavy case [sad; fearful]. Now, now, he said, he should be drowned forever, and so never see that face with comfort that he had come so many miles to behold.

“And here also I took notice of what was very remarkable: the water of that river was lower at this time than ever I saw it in all my life; so he went over at last, not much above wetshod. When he was going up to the gate [the entrance into the Celestial City], I began to take leave of him, and to wish him a good reception above. So he said, I shall, I shall. Then parted we asunder, and I saw him no more.”

A CHOICE SPIRIT

When all was said and done, what did Great-Heart think of our Mister Fearing?

“GREAT-HEART: . . . He was a man of a choice spirit, only he was always kept very low [humble], and that made his life so burdensome to himself, and so troublesome to others. He was, above many, tender of [sensitive to] sin: he was so afraid of doing injuries to others, that he often would deny himself of that which was lawful, because he would not offend.

“HONEST: But what should be the reason that such a good man should be all his days so much in the dark?

“GREAT-HEART: There are two sorts of reasons for it. One is, the wise God will have it so: some must pipe, and some must weep. Now Mr. Fearing was one that played upon the bass. He and his fellows sound the sackbut [in Bunyan's day, a trumpet; scripturally, a stringed instrument], whose notes are more doleful than the notes of other music are: though indeed, some say, the bass is the ground [foundation] of music. [Just as fear of the Lord is the beginning or foundation of knowledge and wisdom!] And for my part, I care not at all for that profession which begins not in heaviness of mind. The first string that the musician usually touches is the bass, when he intends to put all in tune. God also plays upon this string first, when he sets the soul in tune for himself. Only there was the imperfection of Mr. Fearing; he could play upon no other music but this till towards his latter end...

“HONEST: He was a very zealous [‘warmly engaged or ardent in the pursuit of an object’, according to Webster] man, as one may see by the relation you have given of him. Difficulties, lions, or Vanity Fair, he feared not at all; it was only sin, death, and hell, that were to him a terror, because he had some doubts about his interest in [‘right to enter’] that celestial country.

“GREAT-HEART: You say right; those were the things that were his troublers; and they, as you have well observed, arose from the weakness of his mind thereabout, not from weakness of spirit as to the practical part of a pilgrim’s life. I dare believe that, as the proverb is, he could have bit a firebrand, had it stood in his way; but the things with which he was oppressed, no man ever yet could shake off with ease.”

Impressed with the faith and courage of Mister Fearing, one of the pilgrims hearing this story sang this praise:

“Well, Master Fearing, thou didst fear
 Thy God, and wast afraid
 Of doing any thing, while here,
 That would have thee betrayed.
 And didst thou fear the lake and pit?
 Would others do so too!
 For, as for them that want [lack] thy wit,
 They do themselves undo.”

CONCLUSION

As I listened intently to President Eyring speak of his association with President Hinkley and of being asked “Have you helped the struggling?”, I was holding PILGRIM'S PROGRESS on my lap, and I realized that if our beloved Mister Fearing was to be written about by a modern writer, his name might have been more accurately recorded as “Mister Struggling.” Or, Brother and Sister Struggling.

Our Heavenly Father gave each of us highly-individual challenges to deal with and overcome during this mortal life; we cannot and should not all be the same person just because we belong to the

same church – no painted-on matching smiles are required by our Heavenly Father! There are those who are naturally full of cheer just as there are those who are naturally full of fear or struggle. One soul is not better than the other; each must lean to temper and utilize each emotion in its proper time and place.

Fear does not have to be a hindrance to our journey through life, but we must choose wisely on how we react to fear – it can either stop all progress and make us turn and flee, or, as in the case of Bunyan's Mister Fearing, it can actually act to make us humble enough to develop the faith, the courage, and the determination to go and do those things the Lord has called us to do. It can teach us to lean upon the Lord and not trust our own understanding.

The next time we are about to pass by the Brother Fearings and the Sister Strugglings of our congregation, let us no longer ignore them or allow them to remain hidden in a side pew; let us take them by the hand and show them through our fellowship how much the Lord loves them – for as the Prince of the Celestial City has so perfectly explained, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25:40)