

“Braner nails it with *No Fear in Love*. No simple platitudes here; just real-life stories soaked in truth that will set you free.”

—Carl Medearis, author of *Adventures in Saying Yes: A Journey from Fear to Faith*

“Because we’re both passionate about Jesus and about the Middle East, Andy Braner and I frequently cross paths. I’ve always resonated with Andy’s spirit; after reading *No Fear in Love*, I understand why. The pathway of authentic love has led Andy past fear and into that wonderful, adventurous place where ‘the other’ becomes a friend. Like Andy, I’m learning that’s often where Jesus does his best work in and through us.”

—Lynne Hybels, advocate for global engagement,  
Willow Creek Community Church

“This is a critical and timely book that demands serious attention and reflection. Not only is our society tearing at its very fabric, but our faith has become caught up in that, and it’s become a kind of ‘nationalistic religious response’ to the world versus a Jesus-life in the world. There isn’t a subject more important yet more avoided than how we relate to others in the public square. It’s amazing how we can categorize people as ‘religious,’ thereby invalidating the very thing Jesus told us to be: salt and light. Andy deals with this issue in a thoughtful, loving, and proactive way. He isn’t merely writing ideas; he’s sharing how he’s lived out those ideas. When I read things like this from the emerging generation, I get really excited. Excellent read—thought provoking and challenging, with practical stories of engaging with others.”

—Bob Roberts Jr., author of *Bold as Love* and senior pastor of Northwood Church

# NO FEAR *in* Love

*Loving Others  
the Way  
God Loves Us*

# ANDY BRANER



BakerBooks

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# Contents

- Acknowledgments 7
- Introduction: No Fear in Love 9

## Section 1 What Are We So Afraid Of?

- 1. The Most Fearful Time in My Life 23
- 2. As I Watched Fear Take Over 35
- 3. A Fearless Heart of Understanding 57
- 4. Learning to Love from a Place of Common Thought 71
- 5. Eliminating Fear by Following Jesus 89

## Section 2 When Worldviews Collide

- 6. On One Side There's a Mormon and on the Other Side There's a Jehovah's Witness . . . 101
- 7. Dinner with Ronald McDonald and a Sunni Muslim 113

*Contents*

- 8. My Prayer in the Mosque 123
- 9. Inviting Muslim Teenagers to My Home 137

**Section 3 Overcoming Fear of Culture**

- 10. Christians, Abortion, and Fear 149
  - 11. Fear of the “Other” 161
  - 12. Fear in a “New Normal” 173
- Conclusion 183
- About the Author 189

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# Introduction

## No Fear in Love

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18

I grew up in a fundamental, legalistic, Bible-believing family. They were wonderful and well-intentioned, and I'm thankful for the way they pursued God with all their hearts. I attended a Christian high school where teachers and coaches were committed to trying their best to give students a Christian worldview. And I ended up at a Christian college where my faith was developed even more. After my undergraduate work I even went to seminary to polish off my Christian education. I have worked for a church and for a parachurch organization, and currently I'm the president of an organization that helps teenagers to begin to understand their own faith journey in the real world.

For the last fifteen years, I've been working with high school and college students in Colorado. Our company helps students create high-adventure memories while wrestling with questions in their own faith. We ask "those" questions. Questions such as:

How do we know God is real?

Is the Bible even relevant for today?

Did Jesus really walk the earth?

Why does it all matter?

My whole life I've been taught how to be right and how to point out someone else's wrongs. I was trained to argue apologetics, to "wow" others with my worldview knowledge, and to discuss the tenets of the Christian faith so others would believe like I do. "Defend the faith at all cost!" was my battle cry. My entire educational life was spent working on what I believed to be true, and how others or "those people" thought differently than I did. I remember teachers and coaches who would use the example of counterfeit money and say things like, "You never know what's counterfeit until you study the real thing." And they held up a crisp dollar bill to somehow convince students of some metaphor of money and faith. So I studied, and studied, and even ventured into a philosophy of religion discipline where I learned how to argue with "those people" and solidify my own belief system as real, right, and true.

But when I actually met and spent time with "those people," everything changed.

I had all the knowledge that enabled me to "win" an intellectual argument, but I consistently came off like a jerk to

my friends. Recently, I read the apostle Paul’s admonishment to the church in Corinth and noticed the part where he says “knowledge puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1). Nothing could have been truer in my own life. I had become the bastion of knowing *about* God but failing to know His heart in my day-to-day life as it related to others around me, especially those who didn’t believe what I believed.

On my own journey to help students understand Jesus, at least in the early years, I forgot to look intently in the eyes of the One who can offer forgiveness. I was so proud of what I knew I failed to see God’s heart of compassion beating loud for the world. My knowledge was puffing up. I used my intellect to demean, degrade, and judge people. And I taught others how to do the same.

I could argue the validity of Scripture. I knew how to create a system for why I believed God allowed pain in the world.

I was well-versed in evidential apologetics. I knew how to defend why I believed God was real and why the world should take notice.

I could compare any religious system to Christianity and find its obvious faults. In fact, I got so good at arguing faith I could deconstruct someone else’s faith in seconds, eager to win and prideful of my own understanding.

In my personal life, I learned how to manage my own sin, punch my Christian time clock, and produce a self-righteousness only rivaled by the Pharisees of Jesus’s day.

But when I tried to love others, I was just an empty gong clanging against my own intellect. I became a cold, bitter Christian only interested in converting people to Christianity, and I woke up one day wondering, *If I heard myself preaching, would I even believe in the God I speak of?*

*Do I even believe this anymore?*

*I mean, I can make a good argument for faith, but for what?  
Am I just scared to be wrong?*

Over the last several years, God has used countless unusual encounters to show me how He loves others boldly, without reservation. The clear black and white lines of right and wrong that seemed so simple in my youth have blurred into a beautiful kaleidoscope to include all of the people God has created.

I no longer approach relationships with an attitude of what I can offer, but rather I have started seeing people as valuable creations, all loved by a majestic Creator.

What used to be a clear argument concerning *us* versus *them* has become more of a mystery as I've learned about the power of tradition, the lure of self-preservation, and the lust to be right. I've become well aware of my own prideful need to have the right answer, and I've started to see people through a life's lens of compassion and care.

Now when I'm asked, "How can you love \_\_\_\_\_?" my simple response is, "Well, God first loved them." Jesus even said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 ESV).

I've come to the conclusion that we should love people not based on their performance but on the simple fact that God loves them.

It's easy to love people who look like we do, talk like we do, or even see the world in a similar way, but how many of us are willing to stretch beyond the boundaries of normal and venture into the vast world of God's creation, unsure of what we might find? How many of us are willing to invest relational capital with someone who is a Mormon or

a Muslim, or who simply goes to a different church than we do?

A simple foray into the landscape of believers is a strange place. Sundays are actually some of the most segregated times in America. They're more like spiritual country clubs or rock-and-roll extravaganzas of worship with the goal of wowing others into joining the group. And I get it!

I get that every person wants to feel safe when we expose our most intimate spiritual development. I understand what it means to hide behind the safety of programs to insulate our core fears of the “other.”

*What if they knew who I really am?*

*What if they saw how I really think?*

*What if they try to make me believe something that's not true?*

It's fear. We live in a constant need to be *something* to make sure we matter. We all want to find significance. We all want to be known. We all want to fit in one way or another.

This constant battle between our walls of protection and our true selves is what humanity is really struggling to deal with today.

*Which group am I going to identify with?*

*Who's going to be on the right side of history?*

*What would God think of us if He were to return today?*

We are far too concerned with the outward appearances of daily life without really addressing the core fears brewing deep inside ourselves.

What would happen if we forewent our own safety, security, and sense of normalcy for just a moment and looked into the eyes of another to connect at a deeper level?

Would we find truth?

Would we find humanness?

Would we be able to let down our barriers for even for a moment so we could experience life full of God's creation in relationship?

What would the world look like if we laid down our fear of "those people" to just begin living *with* people, not *at* them?

Would they begin to know us? Would we begin to know them?

Could we find in our collective humanity a place where common bonds are formed, and all the fear, doubt, and insecurity might fade into history?

What might the world look like if we could see people as human beings instead of objects that need to hear our intellectual arguments?



I've wanted to write this book for a long time. Mainly, I want to shout from the mountaintop and declare, "We need not fear people, because God made them!" I also want to create a space where our fear of others' ideas, belief systems, and religious ideologies might be put to rest in the history of peace. And I hope that we might all find a place where God's Spirit of love, care, concern, and compassion might be the core out of which we live.

I have traveled and taught people all over the world. I've been to churches and conferences from all different denominations. And you know what I've found?

Much of the Christian subculture is consumed with fear.

Fear keeps others away.

Fear creates ideological arguments.

Fear encourages the drumbeat of pride.

Fear forces us to hide in our maze of rightness.

Fear makes people run.

Fear isolates and encourages individuals to mistrust, misplace, and misuse the gifts they have in life.

We fear people living out on the street instead of in a house, so we warn our kids to steer clear of them. We fear people who speak of God in a different way than we do, so we create educational institutions to reinforce our way of thinking. We fear other religions instead of trying to engage in meaningful conversations with their adherents. We fear other cultures invading what we think is normal, so we ostracize certain groups and present a mantra of “we’re right and you’re wrong.” We fear the sexual revolution in America today, so we attack instead of trying to learn and understand where people are coming from.

And while we create the barriers of *us* versus *them*, we find nuanced places to hide and proudly pat ourselves on the back—because, after all, we’re right and they’re wrong. It’s almost as if we categorize people like we do sports teams. “They” wear red shirts. “We” wear blue shirts. We see the world like the Super Bowl, where the winner takes all and the loser is forgotten forever.

We protect and defend a certain way of thinking. We demand our worldview be acknowledged as right rather than engaging in the fluidity of human relationships. Anything that gets in the way of the blue shirts winning the game is considered treason.

And when fear starts to control us, we spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out strategies of protectionism, basically striving to act like we are normal while containing and protecting our fear deep inside us.

Think about it. At the office, a young man is afraid others are climbing the ladder faster than he is. So his relationships with the people at the office turn into illusions of friendship because “God loves all people,” but deep in his heart he knows he would step over them in a heartbeat. And he may even say “God blessed me so much in my job, look how He’s promoted me” all the way to the CEO’s office.

At her children’s school, a young mother smiles and projects her view of the world according to how she believes God has called her to act. She thinks quietly inside, *Everyone else has it together. Smile big. Everything is okay. I can do this.* But inside she struggles with feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. She sees the other moms as a threat to her own value as a mother to her kids, so she hides her struggles for fear she may be “found out.”

At church, a young pastor develops new evangelism methods to meet certain people groups or designs new and exciting church programs to draw people to a particular event. He believes in his heart that if his church doesn’t match the growth patterns of the church down the street, he’ll be a failure. After all, God is a God of growth, not a God of stagnation. So instead of pouring into the relationships he has at his fingertips, he pushes himself and his staff to the brink of exhaustion.

It’s all *fear*.

Fear we won’t measure up. Fear we might be rejected by others. In the middle of fear, we think we don’t matter. Or still worse, we think, *What would happen if God ever looked down from heaven and was disappointed with me?*

I find the energy and resources people spend on taming and managing fear unbelievably taxing.

What if instead we took a long look into the heart of Jesus's love for people? What if we understood the counter-cultural approach Jesus and the disciples employed to show God's ultimate plan for the earth? What if we stopped cowering in fear? We could stand up to the voices in our heads and cry, "Enough!"

There would be no more hiding in the shadows, wondering if someone else is confusing the gospel. Instead we might be able to obediently follow the One, to be confident in His love, to be sure of His compassion, and to live inside His grace. No matter the circumstance, no matter the relationship, no matter the seeming indifference, we would be encouraged to heed our call as ambassadors of the faith instead of salespeople or protectors of the gospel.

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This book is a journey told through stories of my own meetings with "those people," unusual counterparts in the world who long for the same destination as I do. I believe humanity is a collection of individual people with very similar needs. We carry our experiences through life as they shape us and mold us, but much of who we are is warped inside this same awful cloud of fear.

My hope is that by reading this you will become a gentler, more caring, and more compassionate follower of Jesus. My heart's longing is to encourage my tribe of Christian brothers and sisters to take a deep look inside their own souls so that we won't be characterized by hate and fear but rather celebrated for our willingness to love others generously.

In the first section of this book I will dissect fear, share my own fear, and show how I've witnessed fear turn to triumph.

I've been blessed to meet the most incredible people who have mentored me through my fear to a place where I can see many different types of people as friends and not enemies. And in my own journey of figuring out how to love people, I've been encouraged to deal with my own "big" fears—the fear of rejection, the fear of insignificance, and the fear of failure. I hope, as I retell some of these candid stories of times when I was fearful, that you will join me by identifying people, places, or even certain events in your own life where you are most fearful. Maybe together we can overcome this paralyzing cloud.

I'm open and willing to share when I have felt afraid, and I hope you'll find the safety and security to be vulnerable and do the same as you laugh at some of my mistakes—or maybe just empathize with similar feelings. I'm not trying to elevate myself but simply to relate as best I can with people just like you who find that fear keeps us bound to the same old life, a life far from what God has outlined for us.

In the second section of this book, I'll share how I've learned to implement life lessons and knowledge into real relationships with people who don't think like I do. For a long time, I lived at arm's length from people who didn't match up with how I thought they should live—according to Scripture, of course. I want to share some significant points in my life where encounters with people of other faiths or cultures trumped my own pride in being right and helped me see people with a high need of care and compassion no matter what they believe.

Lastly, in the third section of this book, I'll share how I've been more than a little discouraged about how our culture handles current events. It seems like the media has become

more about who can yell the loudest and win an argument rather than truly listening to both sides of an issue.

For me, this is all about fear. It's the fear inside that tells us, *I don't want to allow anyone to think differently than I do because that may mean I need to change the way I think*, or, *If I validate some point they have that is contrary to my own worldview, I might have to rethink my own position*. It's easy to see the fear of being wrong dictating much of the media's discussions. But if we truly want to get down to solutions to some of our culture's hottest topics, we need to stop approaching issues like a sporting event with winners and losers and start learning how to listen well to someone else's position.

This isn't easy. Listening to someone else's pain and being willing to see their position as valid can feel like giving in or condoning lifestyles and choices we don't agree with.

Humbly, I would suggest that this way of thinking is uninteresting.

Like an explorer searching for new lands, I want to understand issues on all sides and see why some people think like they do. This doesn't mean I don't have my own opinion, but it does allow me to invest my energy in truly knowing someone who is outside of my own paradigm. I'm simply trying to understand in a "stream of consciousness" way that may invite a new approach to thinking and understanding.

By no means can we figure out these issues in the pages of a book, but we can begin to forge ahead in a way of thinking that allows for relationships to be the centerpiece of arguments instead of always seeing others as potential conquests. I hope this book will raise questions that may incite further exploration into specific issues. I've found that engaging with

the topics of abortion, homosexuality, and immigration in particular help raise our level of interest and bring us to a place where we can honestly ask questions about our own fear, and investigate those places where we might be able to find comfort.

Bottom line, I want us to try to develop a closer life in tandem with Jesus. I hope you'll journey with me as we learn what it looks like to love without fear.

## *Section 1*

# WHAT ARE WE SO Afraid Of?

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# 1

## The Most Fearful Time in My Life

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6–7

Sitting in the one-prop airplane, my skydiving partner looked at me and said, “What are you so afraid of?” As if this wasn’t one of the most intensely fearful moments I’d ever experienced.

My wife had bought me a skydiving trip for my birthday, and somehow I found myself at 10,000 feet, getting ready to jump out of a perfectly good airplane.

*What in the world am I doing here? Would they just land the plane and let me out if I cry loud enough? What if I just decide I don't want to go?*

I was so scared that the blood left my face, and I sat there in the back of the plane looking more like Casper the ghost than a twenty-five-year-old adventure seeker.

The instructor, attached to my harness to guide me through this tandem experience, told me to start moving toward the door. He pushed me from behind and my fear was paralyzing. My instructor opened the door—and the noise one hears when a perfectly good door of an airplane is open at 10,000 feet is terrifying. I felt a rush of wind enter the cabin, and my body abruptly tensed as I heard the noisy whiz of the prop and sensed an incredible pressure change.

As my tandem instructor guided me into the open door, I found myself standing on the struts of the fixed-wing aircraft, and at just the right moment he yelled in my ear, “Do you want to go on one or go on three?”

And before I could answer his question, he pushed me out of the door!

Instantly, we went from the safety and security of the airplane to an all-out free fall.

Skydiving is an interesting adventure because once you’re out of the plane, there’s no going back. It’s not like you can just say, “Hey, I’m not up for this; let’s go back.” Nope. Once you’re out, you’re out.

Falling at a crazy speed, we were flying through the air and whisking through the clouds like a bird without a care in the world. The fear I had felt in the plane was quickly replaced with an adrenaline rush I’ve not felt since.

“Do you want to fly this thing?” my instructor asked.

“Yeah, THAT WOULD BE GREAT!” I yelled through the loud rush of wind in my ears.

“Pull the cord!”

I obeyed. The parachute ejected from the backpack, and the rush of wind turned to serenity and peace as we slowly floated to the ground.

The instructor helped me to guide the parachute to the landing pad. “When I tell you to pull, pull down on these two handles,” he said.

100 feet.

50 feet.

30 feet.

20 feet.

“Now,” he commanded.

I was so full of adrenaline I yanked down hard on the two handles meant for an easy landing. For some reason our parachute took more air than either of us thought, and we started floating back upward.

“No, no, no . . .” he shouted.

And I let go.

I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a parachute lose all the air guiding it to the ground in one instant, but when it does it loses all its fullness and flaps like a plastic bag caught in the wind.

We tumbled to the ground in a mass of parachute and humanity.

Tangled in the parachute cord, I jumped up to hug my instructor. “This is the most AWESOME feeling I’ve ever felt in my life!” I screamed. “Let’s do it again!”

He laughed, knowing I’d just about conjured up the limit of my own courage.

## From Skydiving to Love

Since my skydiving trip, I've started looking at different issues in life as if they were potential skydiving expeditions. Life is full of fearful events, and we have to take a long look into the depths of our beings to find out how much fear is really just a survival technique and how much is substantiated by a real sense of danger.

Sometimes fear can be useful. Fear keeps us safe. It warns us of impending danger.

And it drives us to certain conclusions in life.

We call it "normal," or "real life," or something "everyone else is doing," but in reality sometimes it becomes a safety net we use to feel comfortable.

From my skydiving experience, I began to wonder, *I was afraid of jumping out of the plane at first, but in reality I just experienced the biggest adventure in my life. What else am I scared of that's keeping me from experiencing life-giving adventures?*

In that moment I started to be honest about those "hot" issues in my life. I took the challenge to be vulnerable, to examine my own fear deep in my soul, and to try to identify it so instead of it controlling me, I could begin to manage it.

## So What Are You Afraid Of?

Fear is such an interesting emotion.

According to a survey by the National Institute of Mental Health, the top ten human fears are:

1. Public speaking
2. Death

3. Spiders
4. Darkness
5. Heights
6. People or social situations
7. Flying
8. Confined spaces
9. Open spaces
10. Thunder and lightning<sup>1</sup>

Go figure. We are more scared of presenting something to a group than we are of *being dead*? On one of his *Tonight Show* monologues Jay Leno lightly joked, “I guess we’d rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy.”

Fear is a natural biological emotion we use to warn ourselves of impending danger or to shape our behavior to stay alive. It’s one of the most integrated of human reactions to ensure our survival. It forces us to revert back to the safety of tribalism and connect with people who think the very same things we do. Its motivating factor is self-preservation, and it often clouds our judgment and influences our actions to the point of defining who we are.

Just think about the things you’re most afraid of. Think about the things you avoid that directly affect the way you move in the rhythm of your day-to-day existence.

- Are you afraid of the food you’re going to eat for lunch?
- Are you afraid of getting sick?
- Are you afraid of wrecking your car on the drive home?
- Are you afraid of the storms coming?

1. “Fear/Phobia Statistics,” Statistic Brain, accessed October 31, 2014, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/fear-phobia-statistics/>.

Those are natural survival fears. But what about those fears that are behavioral motivators? Are you afraid of not fitting in? You may dress a certain way. Are you afraid of not making a difference in the world? You may change your vocation. Are you afraid of not being valuable? You may try to work hard to impress people so you can matter to someone else.

What are the things you fear most in your life?

Think about how many times fear commands your behavior. And then ask yourself this, inside a safe place of honesty: *How often am I willing to try to overcome my fear?*

If you're scared to speak in front of others, when was the last time you presented something publicly to a group?

If you're afraid of heights, when was the last time you climbed to a high place to challenge your fear?

When was the last time you looked a snake right between the eyes to calm your fear of reptiles? (Okay, let's not go overboard, right?)

For most of us, we would probably answer all these questions with one simple word: *never!*

We don't enjoy putting ourselves in places of risk where we fear perceived harm, potential failure, or the ever-present threat of rejection. Do we?

We just don't find those places valuable uses of our time spent here on earth. We would rather keep our lives on the paths of least resistance, keeping comfort as the core value of our existence. We don't naturally want to risk the possibility of failure, so we find ourselves in the same ruts of life, living more out of duty than out of abundance.

I'll never forget one of the most fearful times of my life as this truth stared me in the face.

## **The Fire That Almost Destroyed Me**

It was 2002 and I was twenty-seven years old.

I was the director and manager of a \$1.7 million summer ministry operation in Durango, Colorado. I hired 128 part-time employees. I hosted 260 high school students at our summer camp, now called KIVU.

I thought I was on top of the world with nothing to fear. God was moving through the ministry He had called me to. High school students were learning how to defend their faith, and the university students I hired were finding deep, meaningful relationships. It seemed like everything was going great, and the camp was gaining recognition throughout the country. We were on the verge of the next greatest ministry “thing” in America.

And then the unthinkable happened.

I was teaching a class to high school students about understanding the nature of reading the Bible. I was fed up with the way I, as a student, had been taught to use the Bible, as a “chicken soup for the soul” type of manuscript, and thought it was time somebody took the opportunity to reinvent the way students were approaching their spiritual development. After all, every youth director in the world tells their students how important reading the Bible is, and every student tries to live up to the standard of having productive quiet times in order that they might understand this Christian thing. At least they try.

In my experience, most students use the flip-and-point method. They flip through the Bible, not knowing the historical importance of how and when it was written. They have no idea how to use implications of archeology, geography, sociology, or philosophy. They’ve simply been told, “If you read God’s Word, you’ll be a good Christian.” So they try

to read Nehemiah, Ezekiel, or Haggai, and they have zero reference about what they're reading.

So here I was teaching students how to read the Bible in the most beautiful church on the planet. Surrounded by the giant cottonwood trees nestled on the banks of the Los Pinos River, I was living the dream. I was teaching God's Word in the most beautiful of creation backdrops.

It was a beautiful summer day. The sky was clear blue. Fifteen students were there to learn how to read their Bible. What more could a youth worker ask for?

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my wife walking down the winding trail leading to our little outdoor church. She was holding a digital camera and she had a strange look on her face.

When I found a stopping place I told the kids to take a break and that I would return as soon as I found out what was going on. My wife held the digital camera in her hand and without saying a word she flipped on the playback mode of the small device. The LCD screen lit up with a picture of what looked like a mushroom cloud rising over the mountain ridge directly behind the church.

"What in the world is that?" I asked.

"We've got a problem," she said calmly. "It seems like there is a fire starting about two ridges over from us, and the firefighters say they don't have it anywhere near under control. We've got to start thinking about how to get these kids out of here."

I calmly walked back to my class, told them I had a small emergency I had to attend to, and asked that they please forgive me for cutting our class short. They were gracious, and one of the other leaders chimed in, "No problem. I'll take it from here."

I walked back to the office to see what we needed to start thinking about, but my mind was running out of control. I'd never been part of a natural disaster before and I was both scared and equally intrigued to see how this was all going to play out. I didn't have any formal forest fire training, but we had taken several precautionary measures to be prepared to evacuate if anything like this ever happened.

I called the fire department every hour on the hour for the next three days. Every time I called, I got the same answer: "It's heading north and west. There's no way that fire will ever get close to you."

But I wasn't satisfied. We polished our plans to evacuate in the event the fire started to move toward our five-hundred-acre facility. We had charts of drivers, plans for campers to flee, and a neutral spot down the valley that could shield us from any danger. The plans were in place as the fire continued to burn over the ridge, and the staff kept on going as if nothing was wrong.

Then it all changed.

One cool summer evening, I was walking out of our cafeteria and I noticed the smoke had changed directions. Instead of blowing north and west, it was now blowing straight for us. I walked up to the office, and right in front of me saw a flame jump off the top of the hill almost a half mile away, and I knew it was time to go. I raced to implement our evacuation plan, and my wife turned into the hero of the day. She orchestrated every move from that point forward to get everyone to safety as quickly as possible.

After I watched the last staff member drive out of the gates, I hopped in my own car to leave as the sheriff drove in the gates with lights and sirens blazing. "You guys need to get out of here now!" he yelled.

“We’ve got everyone out,” I yelled back. “We’re moving everyone ten miles to the south.”

“Hurry! It’s coming!”

We drove off, and in the rearview mirror I watched the flames of this massive forest fire rage down the mountain. It was incredible! The smell of the burning pine trees combined with the smoke-filled valley was a clear indication that everything I had worked for was about to be lost forever.

I drove down the lonely road to our evacuation spot and just cried.

I was scared.

I was alone.

I was certain this raging flame was now consuming my life’s work.

For the next three weeks the National Guard set up an outpost to keep people from getting too close to the fire. They turned us around every time we tried to enter our facility, and we had to hope and pray everything was okay.

On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the skeleton staff that remained decided to try one more time to enter our facility to assess the damage. We had already canceled our current term and were about to cancel the rest of the summer.

Again I found myself scared, not knowing who to turn to, where to find help, or how to salvage something I had spent so much time and energy working on.

When we turned the last corner, the National Guard vehicles were gone. No one was there to turn us around. No one was blocking the road.

We drove all the way up to the entrance and turned in to the camp to find that all the buildings were intact. All the landscaping was vibrantly green. All the trees were still

there. The only problem we noticed was the grass hadn't been mowed in nearly three weeks.

The whole facility was untouched.

I went on an assessment walk to find out what we needed to do to get up and running quickly, only to find, well . . . everything was okay!

We sent the word out to the staff, "We're back in action; come quickly." And the university staff from all over the nation began to descend on the place they too thought had been burnt to the ground.

The local sheriff came to visit, saying things like, "I hope you know the big man upstairs was looking out for you."

The fire chief came by with a sober look and commented, "God was sure protecting this place. There's absolutely no reason these buildings should still be standing."

And it was then I knew we were called to something great.

We held a de facto worship service and began to pray. We called on the Lord to show us exactly why He had decided to spare us from the devastation felt by so many of our neighbors.

We worshiped that night like I've never worshiped before. It was one of those "Red Sea" experiences you walk through in life and wonder . . . why?

I've spent several long nights reminiscing on the different facets of that experience. So many real factors were in place, and I can't help but recall my fear during the fire.

I was so afraid. I felt so alone. I thought God had left me.

I'm embarrassed to admit my fear was paralyzing. I couldn't think straight, even though I was supposed to be the leader. I couldn't find any good in myself, even though I was supposed to be the encourager to others.

I felt like I'd lost, even though God was at work behind the scenes to save the work He wanted to continue. Even though we'd accomplished great things through the evacuation, I was holding on to this fear that I was losing everything.

If I'm honest, it was in the midst of my fear that God began to help me. He showed me that in the middle of that trial, He was there. He reminded me that amid suffering is exactly the place He always wants to work.

He helped me see my life's work isn't the most important part of who I am. Rather He is interested in growing me and helping me face the fear that often plagues my life like a cancer in my soul.

This was the real point when I decided to look at fear in a totally different way. I wasn't going to allow the fear of what I know to dictate the actions of my future. I wasn't going to allow fear of the unknown to influence my hunger for God's providence in my life. The next step: I needed to identify more places in my life where I was afraid and see how God might show up there.