Faces of Anxiety

Stage Fright and Speaking Up

One of the major growth steps for a lot of people in the corporate world, in civic society and even in churches, is learning how to speak up. Many people were raised in households where they were told children must be seen not heard. In psychology there's what's called transference; very often the experiences we have in childhood with our primary caregivers are transferred on to our current relationships as adults.

I've seen people who are raised in this way now sitting on Mancos and Excos and they just have a blank look on their face. People will fill in the blank and they often don't tell you what they are filling it in with. They just walk away saying she's three years away from that promotion she's so desperate for. For some of you, the nature of your blank look is that you've just got a frown on your face when you don't understand something or when you're listening it's your thinking-face. Unfortunately, if you don't say anything people will make judgments based on what they see your face looks like. One of the people who I have coached said to me, "Paul can you please help me with my body language." She went on to explain to me that when she doesn't understand something she's got an angry look. I said to her, "Don't just leave it as an angry look, say something about it." If you don't tell your own story someone else will tell it for you and the scary thing is, you might not like their version. I like to ask people the question, "have you lost your voice?", and some people will say to me, "Yes Paul, I've lost my voice. Paul, I used to be very outspoken when I was at university and at school but something happened to me in the workplace, and to be honest with you, I've lost my voice." Then I say to them, "I'll help you to find it again." That's what this sermon is about. We're going to tackle the issue of stage fright and speaking up. Many companies have what they call a "speak up" culture but unfortunately what's emphasized is speaking up anonymously. Anyone can do that. You don't have to be courageous to speak up anonymously. What I'm talking to you about today is finding the courage to overcome the anxiety associated with speaking up whether it's a difficult conversation or standing in front of people. **Courageous leaders speak out what everyone else is whispering**. I was saying to someone who I was coaching the other day, "you've just established yourself as a leader amongst your peers because your peers heard you having an altercation with your boss and you spoke out; you were assertive and now they want to work through you to communicate things to your boss."

1. The Nature of Stage Fright

Stage fright, which is a form of performance anxiety, is one of the most widespread phobias; up to 75–95% of people experience it at some point. This is concerning because many competent people miss out on opportunities to influence because they can't speak in front of people. Someone I was coaching recently said to me, "If someone sees themselves as a thought leader, then they need to share their thoughts."

The symptoms of stage fright are physical, behavioural and mental. At the physical level it may include a racing heart, trembling, sweating, dry mouth, nausea, tunnel vision. At the mental level it involves fear of mistakes, negative self-talk, and spotlight effect. At the behavioural level it includes avoidance, rushing, freezing.

The root causes of stage fright are instinctive fight-flight-freeze response triggered by social evaluation. The core underlying factors tend to be fear of failure, judgment, uncertainty, or lack of preparation together with perceived threat (internal self-talk) rather than actual danger. The deeper issue for some people is the fear of being the centre of attention. This is why some people are comfortable speaking to a group when they are sitting down, the moment they stand up in front of the very same people, they feel like all eyes are on them and they start to panic.

Stage fright is fuelled less by external reality and more by internal misbeliefs and distortions.

2. **People in the Bible who had challenges with Stage Fright**

When I examine these biblical examples of people who struggled with speaking, one of my observations is that their weakness did not disqualify them from the calling. I also believe that after they obeyed, God gave them the ability and the anointing to communicate. They didn't stay at the same level. You will see with a number of these individuals that they had defined their abilities based on their past and not what God could do to transform them. It's therefore important for us not to have a fixed mindset about what we can or cannot achieve.

1. Moses – "I am slow of speech and tongue"

Exodus 4:10–12 *Moses said to the Lord, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." The Lord said to him, "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? … Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."*

God reminds Moses that ability comes from Him and promises His presence and coaching.

2. Jeremiah – "I do not know how to speak; I am too young"

Jeremiah 1:6–9 *"Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."*
But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth."

God directly counters Jeremiah's self-doubt with His presence, protection, and the promise to supply the words.

Where did Jeremiah get the idea or belief that saying "I am too young" was a valid reason? **What are the debilitating rules you have created that are keeping you from speaking up?** We see a similar thing in the New Testament where Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about what they'll say for the Holy Spirit will teach them what to say at the right time. It seems to me that this is God's modus operandi.

3. Joshua – Fear of Leading Publicly After Moses

Joshua 1:9 *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."*

Stepping into public leadership after Moses, Joshua hears God's repeated charge to be courageous because of His constant presence.

4. Paul – Trembling as He Preached in Corinth

1 Corinthians 2:3–4 *"I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power."*

Even Paul admitted to nerves and weakness, showing that God's power, not human eloquence, carries the message.

5. Timothy – Young Leader Needing Boldness

2 Timothy 1:6–7 *"For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."*

Paul encourages Timothy to reject timidity and rely on the Spirit's power and self-discipline.

3. Biblical Examples of People who were transformed from timidity to boldness

Here are people who began in fear or hesitation yet became bold through God's presence and empowerment. Each shows a journey from timidity to courage:

1. Peter – From Denial to Bold Preacher

- *Initial Fear: Matthew 26:69–75 – Peter denies Jesus three times, afraid of association with Him.*
- *Transformation: Acts 2:14 – "Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd…"*
- ***Acts 4:13 –** The rulers "saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men… and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."*

Filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4), Peter moves from fear of a servant girl to fearless public proclamation.

2. Gideon – From Hiding to Warrior Leader

- Initial Fear: *Judges 6:11–15* – Gideon threshes wheat in a winepress to hide from the Midianites and protests: "*Pardon me, Lord… how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest… and I am the least in my family."*
- Transformation: *Judges 7:19–22* – Gideon leads 300 men to rout the Midianite army with trumpets and torches.

God repeatedly reassures him: "I will be with you" (Judg. 6:16) and provides signs (fleece, dream).

3. Moses – From Reluctant Speaker to National Leader

- Initial Fear: *Exodus 3:11 – "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh…?"*
- *Exodus 4:10 – "I have never been eloquent… I am slow of speech and tongue."*
- Transformation: Leads Israel out of Egypt, confronts Pharaoh, delivers God's law (Exodus chs. 7–14; 19–20).

God promises, "I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (Ex. 4:12).

4. Jeremiah – From "I'm Too Young" to God's Prophet

- **Initial Fear:** ***Jeremiah 1:6 – "Alas, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am too young."***
- **Transformation: Boldly delivers God's word to kings and nations despite persecution (Jeremiah 26; 37–38).** Early in the reign of King Jehoiakim, Jeremiah delivers a message of judgment regarding Jerusalem, resulting in the priests and the prophets condemning him.

God assures, "Do not be afraid… I am with you" (Jer. 1:8).

Common Threads

- **Divine Presence: "I will be with you" is the most repeated assurance.**
- **Empowerment by the Spirit: God provides strength, words, and courage beyond human capacity.**
- **Small First Steps: Each began with obedience despite trembling—courage grew through action.**

Boldness is not the absence of fear but the decision to trust God's power over fear, turning ordinary, hesitant people into courageous leaders and witnesses.

4. What are some practical strategies for overcoming stage fright?

1. **Be thoroughly prepared**
   One of the strongest antidotes to anxiety is preparation—knowing your material well, rehearsing multiple times, and simulating the performance environment.

2. **Embrace Practice and Exposure**
   Gradual exposure to speaking/performing situations reduces fear; repeated practice builds confidence. The best way to grow in speaking is to speak yet our tendency is to avoid the emotional states we don't like. **If public speaking makes you anxious you tend to avoid it. Ironically, speaking more is what helps you to grow in this area.**

3. **Ensure Physical Grounding**
   Deep breathing, relaxation, feeling feet on the ground, or holding an object help manage physical symptoms.

4. **Visualize how you want to show up**
   As mentioned before, get into a relaxed state and see yourself as powerful, funny, clear and all the other attributes you identify with. From there, get into the emotional state you want to be in when you are presenting. Rehearse this emotional state so that when the anxiety tries to come, you recognize it as a foreign entity.

5. **Reframe your Nerves**
   Nervousness is energy that can be channelled into focus and passion through stress interpretation.

6. **Empathise with the audience**

By reflecting on their perspective, you get to embrace love, and the love casts out fear. Remember that audiences are supportive and want you to succeed. Shift focus from self to your audience's needs. Often the audience wants to be involved in the delivery. When you get them involved by asking them questions or getting them to reflect on themselves it takes pressure off you. It is now "our talk" as opposed to "my talk". They have come to learn not to judge. Often you are the one who is seen to be the most knowledgeable about the subject.

7. **Reframe how you see Mistakes**
   Errors are normal and often unnoticed by the audience; move on quickly.

8. **Be comfortable with where you are at**
   Accept your current stage of growth rather than comparing yourself to others. Maybe Joshua was initially comparing himself to Moses. Accept your growth phase.

9. **Challenge filters, inner voices, and misbeliefs**
   Recognize and dismantle lies you believe about God, yourself, others, or the way the world works that amplify fear. Replace these lies with the truth.

10. **Ask: What's the worst that can happen?**
    This reframes fear and often reduces its intensity, especially when you realise that you can survive the worst-case scenario. Often there is nothing to lose.

11. **Beware of perceptual distortions**
    Anxiety can exaggerate threats; learn to see situations more realistically. A common one is catastrophising; exaggerating the negative consequences of a single act.
    These are patterns of thinking that exaggerate risk or misread what's happening in the room:

    Catastrophising
    - Imagining the worst-case scenario ("If I lose my place, everyone will think I'm incompetent").
    - Overestimating how damaging a small slip or technical glitch will be.

    Mind Reading
    - Assuming you know what the audience is thinking ("They must be bored" or "They can tell I'm nervous") without any real evidence.

    All-or-Nothing Thinking
    - Believing the presentation is either a total success or a total failure, with no middle ground.

    Personalisation
    - Taking every yawn, side-conversation, or neutral facial expression as a direct comment on your performance.

    Magnification / Minimisation
    - Magnifying small mistakes ("I stumbled on that word, now the whole talk is ruined") while minimising positive signs ("They're nodding, but that probably means nothing").

    Fortune Telling
    - Predicting failure before you begin ("This is going to flop") and treating that prediction as fact.

    Overgeneralisation
    - Drawing broad conclusions from a single negative event ("I forgot one slide—presentations never go well for me").

Emotional Reasoning

- Believing that feeling anxious means you must be doing poorly ("I feel nervous, so I must look incompetent").

Should Statements

- Pressuring yourself with rigid rules ("I should never look at my notes," "I must keep everyone engaged 100% of the time").

Labeling

- Reducing yourself to a negative identity after a small slip ("I'm such a terrible speaker").

12. **Focus on gratitude**
    Gratitude shifts attention away from fear and onto positive, stabilizing thoughts. You are grateful for the audience and the opportunity.

13. **Focus on giving, not taking**
    Approach your audience with a mindset of contribution rather than seeking approval. **Develop healthy sources of validation – Avoid relying on external praise; cultivate inner security.**

14. **Breathe properly**
    Calm, intentional breathing reduces physical symptoms of anxiety.

15. **Recall recent positive experiences**
    Replace negative mental loops with empowering memories.

16. **Understand your perceived pain**
    Recognize that discomfort is often inflated in your mind. Fear is the anticipation of pain.

17. **Choose authenticity over perfection**
    Being real connects more than being flawless. With authenticity comes true passion.

18. **Focus on mastery, not perfection**
    Growth and skill-building matter more than being error-free.

19. **Take your power back**
    Don't let fear or the audience's perceptions control you.

20. **Start small**
    Build confidence gradually with lower-stakes opportunities.

Conclusion

Friends, the message of this word is clear: fear does not have the final say—God does. From Moses to Jeremiah, from Gideon to Peter, Scripture shows us that the God who calls also equips. Each of these men and women began in weakness and trembling, yet became bold because the Lord Himself was with them.

Stage fright, anxiety, and the inner voices of self-doubt may feel powerful, but they are not the truth. The truth is that "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power, love, and a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). The same Spirit who filled Peter, strengthened Joshua, and emboldened Paul dwells in you.

So today, I invite you to take three steps:

1. Believe His Presence – Trust that when you stand to speak, you never stand alone.
2. Obey in Small Steps – Say yes to the next opportunity, even if your knees shake. Courage grows as you act.
3. Tell Your Story – Refuse to let others write your narrative. Speak the words God has given you, with humility and confidence.

Your voice matters. Your testimony matters. **And when you choose authenticity over perfection, the power of God—not your eloquence—will touch hearts.**

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