

I will fear no evil, for you are with me

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[0 : 00] in the Old Testament, first of all, in Isaiah chapter 43. Isaiah chapter 43, and we're reading there verses 1 to 13.

You'll find this on page 728 in the Bible that's there in front of you. But now this is what the Lord says.

He who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.

The flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead, since you are precious and honored in my sight.

[1 : 05] And because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you and people in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.

I will say to the north, give them up, and to the south, do not hold them back. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf. All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things?

Let them bring in their witness to prove they are right, so that others may hear and say it is true. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no God was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no Savior.

[2 : 20] I have revealed and saved and proclaimed, I am not some foreign God among you. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God.

Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it? And then we'll read a short passage in the New Testament in Matthew's Gospel, and we're reading there in chapter 14.

Matthew chapter 14 from verse 22, page 981, chapter 14, verse 22.

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

[3 : 32] When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. It's a ghost, they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them, Take courage, it is I.

Don't be afraid. Lord, if it's you, Peter replied, tell me to come to you on the water. Come, he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water, and came towards Jesus.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out, Lord, save me.

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

You of little faith, he said. Why did you doubt? And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly, you are the Son of God.

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

[4 : 48] May God bless those readings of his own word to us. That psalm that we've just been singing from, but turning to it in the Old Testament, in the book of Psalms, you'll find this on page 555.

And particularly words that we'll find in verse 4. Psalm 23, verse 4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And especially the words there, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

One of the most beautiful and powerful lines in some of the carols we've been singing over past weeks is the line in O little town of Bethlehem, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

As we stand at the beginning of a new year and a new decade, these words resonate with us. We may have high hopes for the coming year, but we may also have crushing fears.

[6 : 05] There were certainly hopes and fears in Israel that night that Jesus was born. Hopes based on promises of a glorious future with the coming of the Messiah, but fears that the evil powers of the world, of Herod and of Rome, would crush these hopes.

And today it seems so often that fears outweigh hopes. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was president of the USA, in his message to Congress in January 1941, spoke of four essential human freedoms.

Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. All of them seem just as far off now as they were in 1941, but particularly freedom from fear.

We're beset with fear in the political world. What will Brexit do to our economy? Is there a new war brewing in the Middle East with renewed tensions between the USA and Iran?

We're beset with fear about the environment. Greta Thunberg, the 17-year-old Swedish activist, has said, people are suffering, people are dying, entire ecosystems are collapsing.

[7 : 28] We hear statements like, we have 10 years to save the planet, or the earth is burning. And seeing what is happening in Australia, it's easy to believe that.

But of course, there is a certain hysteria around about it. Now, no doubt, fear can be a motivating factor to make necessary change, but it can also be an overwhelming and enervating thing.

The prophecies of doom can too easily become self-fulfilling. The task can seem too massive, the obstacles too great, human attitudes too intractable.

I remember a similar kind of fear in the 1960s about nuclear destruction, particularly at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

The Soviet Union was going to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, threatening the USA. People felt that the world was teetering on the brink of nuclear catastrophe. Bob Dylan wrote his famous song, A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall, each line of which he said was the title of a new song, but he felt he had no time to write them.

[8 : 41] Around the same time, he wrote Masters of War. You've thrown the worst fear that can ever be hurled, fear to bring children into the world. For threatening my baby, unborn and unnamed, you ain't worth the blood that runs in your veins.

Martin Luther King in 1963 said, we have genuflected before the god of science, only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate.

The word that sums up all this today is the word angst, a feeling of dread. It's a Danish word, and also found, I believe, in Norwegian, Dutch, and German.

And it came to prominence first in the writings of the 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard. He used it of the terrifying anxiety in the face of human freedom of choice.

And it was developed in various ways by existentialist philosophers after him. Of course, in addition to fears about the future of society and the world, we also have more personal fears.

[9 : 56] Fears about the consequences of choices we have made in the past or we may make in the future. And fears about the impact of other people's choices on us.

We have hopes for the future for ourselves and our families, but these can be blighted by our fears. Fears that what we have said or done in the past may come back to haunt us or fears that we will

not be able to cope with what life throws at us in the future.

We may make New Year's resolutions to drink less or eat less or exercise more or overcome some form of addictive behavior or turn over some new leaf in some way.

But we fear we may not be able to overcome temptation. As Christians, we may have fears that we may not be able to live up to our Christian profession or that the troubles we may face may undermine our faith.

We can also have faith about evil in the world around us for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren, increasing levels of violence and sexual crime, gender confusion, poverty, and homelessness, the general loss of morality and integrity in public life.

[11 : 14] Plus, we may have fears concerning the church. There's a spectacular decline going on at the present time in the large denominations. The decline is such that it is even worrying atheists.

Some atheists are beginning to call themselves Christian atheists. It reminds me of the story that's told about Northern Ireland where a man said he was an atheist and he was immediately asked, are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist?

But the reason why they're doing this is because they see the effect of the loss of Christianity in our society on morality. But there is such a decline going on.

And although the Lord Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church that he established on the rock, there is no guarantee that the church in any particular area will continue to survive.

There once was a thriving church in the area that's now called Turkey, used to be called Asia Minor. The Apostle John was instructed by Jesus to write letters to the seven churches there.

[12 : 25] And in some of these letters he warned that if they did not repent, if they did not turn around and set right the things that were wrong, he would come and remove the candlestick or the lamp that symbolized the church.

And indeed in the history of that area since then that happened. There once was a thriving church there, there's hardly anything there now. North Africa was the same.

St. Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the church came from North Africa. It completely disappeared. So there are real fears concerning the future of the church in our society.

And hanging over all there is the specter of death. This has been brought home to many of us in the past few weeks by several deaths of friends and loved ones.

Of course some people just try to ignore the reality of death or make light of it. Filmmaker Woody Allen famously said it's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.

[13 : 35] But of course underneath that kind of light jocular response there is a real fear of death. Sam Cooke in the well-known song A Change Is Gonna Come said it's been too hard living but I'm afraid to die I don't know what's up there beyond the sky.

Or John Dryden a 17th century poet put it like this death in itself is nothing but we fear to be we know not what we know not where.

There's a general pessimism in the face of death resulting coming from the kind of atheism and agnosticism we've been talking about. Bertrand Russell one of the great atheist philosophers of the 20th century said brief and powerless is man's life on him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark.

So in light of all of that how can David have this confidence in the face of the fear of evil? He said he will fear no evil but first of all we want to ask the question what kind of confidence is that that he's expressing there?

First thing I want to say is this that it's a realistic confidence. Now what do I mean by that? Well some people seem to think that Christians have a kind of blind optimism in the face of reality.

[15 : 02] It's as if we just ignore the harsh realities of life pretend that they're not there. Of course that is the kind of hope that many people have. You know people say things are not quite as bad as all that and everything will turn out all right somehow in the end.

That is not the hope of the Christian. The quality of our hope is perfectly illustrated by David here. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.

Now we don't know exactly when David wrote this psalm. Some of the psalms we do know because there's a heading that tells us but Psalm 23 doesn't tell us. But it seems to me likely that he wrote this about his experiences as an outlaw when he was being hunted by King Saul and he drew on his memories of his early shepherding life.

He felt like the sheep passing through a deep dark valley being hunted by lions and wolves. He was facing up to the reality of danger. And it's only when we face up to the reality of danger and the real basis of our fears that we can find real hope.

Of course we need to be able to distinguish between real fears and what we might call a general anxious frame of mind that's afraid of everything. But we have to recognize that we have real fears based on reality.

[16:29] Fears about our world, fears about our country, fears about our church, and about our own personal future. There are real enemies of the grace and truth of the gospel, both human and satanic.

In the coming year and decade we may have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. The long shadow of death may fall on our culture, our church, and our own lives.

As the hymn that we're going to sing at the end of this service says, God may call us to go through deep waters, our pathway may lie through fiery trials.

It's only against the background of this bleak reality that we can have real hope. The second thing I want to notice is the wide-ranging confidence that David expresses here.

I will fear no evil. David was saying that there was no evil, no kind of evil that would destroy his faith or undermine his hope and his confidence.

[17:31] For David, there was the obvious fear of King Saul, who had all the machinery of state at his disposal. For us, too, there are the fears caused by the takeover of all the machinery of state and much more by those who are either indifferent to the word of God or actively opposed to it.

For David, there was also a constant fear of betrayal. This morning, James mentioned Doeg the Edomite in connection with one of the psalms that we sung this morning.

He betrayed David and particularly the priests that had helped him so that Saul then had them all murdered. David was in fear of betrayal by the people of Keilah who were about to hand him over to Saul.

And later in life, he was betrayed by his own son Absalom, his counselor Ahithophel, and his general Joab. We, too, can have a sense of betrayal when we're let down by family or by friends or by fellow Christians who compromise with the spirit of the age.

David was also no doubt conscious of the evil in his own heart. David is one of the characters in the Bible that we can identify with most. He was a man after God's own heart.

[18:54] He was one of the greatest military leaders in the history of the world, but he was also frail and fallible and foolish at times. His weakness where the opposite sex was concerned and his indulgence of his sons are two things that stand out.

We may also have fears concerning the temptations we are prone to, that we will act foolishly or shamefully. So the fears that are being considered here are wide-ranging and comprehensive. David says he fears or will fear no evil, no kind of evil. How can he say that? And how can we face up to all the troubles and challenges that may confront us with courage and say, I'm not afraid. I fear no evil. David had a reason for his confidence. It was a reasonable confidence that he was expressing.

His is a reasonable faith and hope. He doesn't just say, I'll fear no evil. He doesn't just say, no matter what happens, I'm not afraid. It's not some kind of boast.

[20:05] He says, I will fear no evil for you are with me. His confidence is not a blind optimism. It's not just saying, it'll be fine. Everything will turn out all right.

Nor is it a faith in himself and his own abilities. David had many gifts and abilities, more than most. But his confidence was not based there. Nor was his confidence based on others.

He knew that others might let him down and disappoint him. No, his confidence was based on the Lord, his shepherd, who was with him and would surely defend and protect him.

Even as David himself, as a shepherd boy, had protected his sheep with his rod and his staff.

Notice his faith is not in things that he knew about God, but in God himself and in God's relationship with him.

his experience of God's presence with him. I will not be afraid for you are with me. This is the only reason that we can ultimately have hope in the face of our fears.

[21:16] Personal hope. Hope for the church and hope for the world if God is with us. And if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is our Emmanuel.

How often we were singing that word over past weeks, Emmanuel. It means God with us. That's the central reality of our faith.

In Isaiah 43, in the passage that we read, verse 1 says, Fear not, I have redeemed you. Verse 5, Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

And constantly in the Bible we are being told, don't be afraid, fear not. And especially by Jesus. In Mark chapter 14, verse 27, Jesus said to the disciples when they saw him walking on the water and were terrified, thinking it was a ghost, he said, Take courage, it's I, don't be afraid.

Or in Matthew chapter 10, verse 31, he said to his disciples, Don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows. These are just some of the examples from Jesus and in other parts of Scripture where we're told not to be afraid because God is with us, because God values us.

[22 : 32] The antidote to our fears is the identity of the one who has promised to be with us. The creator who made us in his own image. We are precious to him.

The savior who redeemed us by giving his own life to ransom us from the curse of the law. The friend who has promised to be with us, never to leave us nor forsake us.

This psalm speaks of some of the consequences of God being with you, of being your shepherd. Verses 1 to 3, he'll give you satisfaction, peace of mind, and refreshment of soul.

Verses 3 and 4, he'll guide you in doing what is right, being beside you every step of the way. Verse 4, he will be with you to comfort you in danger and in trouble and even in death itself.

Verse 5, instead of being shamed and defeated before your enemies, he will grant you honor and glory. Verse 6, he'll love you and be good to you in all the ups and downs of life, and in the end, he'll take you to be with him forever.

[23 : 50] So, as you contemplate the future, whatever the future may hold for you, we don't know, but you need fear no evil if your faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

So often, the Christian faith is misrepresented. Some people think that if you're a Christian, it's all about fear, fear of breaking rules, fear of what other people will think, and so on.

Well, the Christian does have one fear, and that is the fear of God. This is not abject terror or enervating dread, but it's the awe and reverence due to a mighty God, creator of the universe and judge of all the earth.

If you truly fear God in that right way, that drives out all other fears. James Douglas, the Earl of Morton, said at the funeral of John Knox in 1572, Here lies he who neither feared nor flattered any flesh.

He feared the face of no man because he feared God. There are so many fears today because there is no fear of God. Bob Dylan said, we live in a political world in the cities of lonesome fear.

[25 : 13] Or as he put it in an earlier song, I pity the poor immigrant who passionately hates his life and likewise fears his death. These words still resonate today in so much of our lives.

What David is telling us here is that the fear and love of God casts out all other fears. In a minute, we're going to sing the hymn How Firm a Foundation, which expresses all this better than I can.

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word. What more can he say than to you he has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled.

Fear not, I am with you. Oh, be not dismayed, for I am your God and will still give you aid. I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand, upheld by my gracious, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call you to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be with you your trouble to bless and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

[26 : 25] When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace all-sufficient shall be your supply. The flame shall not harm you, I only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

The soul that on Jesus now leans for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes. That soul, though all hell, should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake.