

The Comforting Hope of the Fear of the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] Father, as we enter into this preparation time before Lent, help us to remember that anything we receive from you is because of your grace and because of your love and your goodness and your kindness towards us.

Lord, that parable reminds us that it does not matter how long we've been a Christian or how short we've been a Christian. We are a part of your family, not because we have labored and toiled, but because you have given us eternal life. Lord, let us humbly come before you and remember who we are in light of who you are. So Lord, we ask your blessing on this text. Help us to hear with our spiritual ears by the empowering of your Holy Spirit. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

If you're following along, we will be on page 56 in the Acts Scripture Journals. Just a heads up, but before we get into it, we'll begin by talking about confrontation. Now, don't put up your hand, but answer in your head. How many of you love confrontation? My guess is probably zero. Maybe there's a bit of a crazy person among us that loves confrontation, but my guess is it's no.

Confrontation is something that by and large, again, I don't want to pigeonhole all people that are Canadians, but by and large, Canadians are not known as confrontational people. In many ways, I mean, we have opinions, but we like to be passive aggressive about it, subtle about it. We want people to get the hint. We don't want to confront people. And yet, confrontation can be a very good thing.

Confrontation can be a source of growth for many of us. Nobody has the corner on right living. We make mistakes. Oftentimes, there's an ignorance about some of the mistakes and the erroneous ways we live, and being confronted on something can open our eyes and begin the process of right living, of correcting what is wrong, ideally so that we can then live in the truth. Now, there's obviously right ways to confront people and wrong ways to confront people. That's not so much what I'm going to refer to here, but just to say that we oftentimes have, we have confused civility with a politeness.

[2 : 5 2] We're not willing, in a sense, to confront people, to be a thorn in the side, so to speak, because we are more concerned about politeness, and we've confused politeness with civility. So now, this isn't my idea.

I picked this up from Alexandra Hudson. She wrote a book on civility, interestingly. I didn't end up reading it, but read a few articles around it, and she talks about how civility is the recognition of the full personhood of an individual, and I would extend that to say that a part of that full personhood is understanding people as image bearers of God, and as such, to confront somebody on something that is wrong, or erroneous, or wrong-headed in some kind of way, is to respect their personhood, to respect that they are made in the image of God, and that they are made to walk in the truth, engaging in a mode of conduct that is befitting of a member of civil society. It's a part of the civis, a part of being a part of society. So civil disobedience, at its best, ideally, is to, not to, not to, to start some kind of riot, but to open the eyes of a segment of society to a wrong way of thinking. So the civil rights movement in America is a great example of that.

In its best form, it's to not crush or shame the, the, the, the population that is for segregation in the south, but it's to open their eyes to the truth so that they would correct their ways and walk in the truth. That's the, the idea of civil disobedience, but it's confrontation.

Jesus heals not simply to undo evil, but to give hope that the brokenness will not stay broken forever. In many ways, when Jesus heals, when he casts out demons, when he commands nature, when he does any miracle, what we see is a confrontation between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of evil, or of Satan, or of sin, or of death, that has ruled over mankind for far too long, for centuries upon centuries, and has, in a, in a very real way, looked to spoil and destroy God's good creation.

And this ministry, in a sense of confrontation, the kingdom of heaven versus the kingdom of the earth, we've seen that it doesn't end with Christ ascending into heaven in Acts 1, but it becomes the very ministry of his church, and we've seen this from Acts 1 all the way to Acts chapter 9, that the church continues on, and in a sense, even, I don't want to say adds to Christ's ministry, but it certainly expands it.

[5 : 57] So that the ministry of Christ doesn't remain in the Galilee and then in Jerusalem, but goes to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The ministry of reconciliation is what it's called, but it can also be the ministry of confrontation.

So the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to confront the forces of evil and sin and death by proclaiming the gospel, the wonderful good news that through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, people from all nations and backgrounds will become citizens of heaven, the kingdom of God forever.

So in our text, we're going to look primarily actually at verse 31 of the previous week's reading, and then that will be our first point, so to speak, and our second point will be looking at the rest of the text to verse 43.

Really, we're going to look at how the gospel exposes and confronts our brokenness and fears. First, by confronting our obsession with distraction and pleasure.

And second, confronting disease and death. And we'll see actually that the confrontation of distraction and pleasure is actually the bigger confrontation in a way than the confrontation with disease and death.

[7 : 26] So look with me, verse 31. This is the previous week. Susan did not read this. It was read last week, but I'll read it again right now. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

This is the third summary statement in Acts. We've seen it, if you remember, in Acts chapter 2, and I believe it's in Acts chapter 3. It kind of sums up the state of affairs in the church thus far.

If you remember last week, Saul of Tarsus, the zealous Pharisee who is persecuting the church, is miraculously confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he comes to faith.

He is converted. And then he becomes an evangelist. He is on his way to persecute, and by the end of the chapter, he's the one being persecuted.

And it would make sense then that this summary statement speaks of peace in the church, because their chief persecutor seems to be now on their side. But there's more to it than that, because it also doesn't just sum up what just happened, but looks ahead of what is to come.

[8 : 44] The text again. So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was being built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Wouldn't it be wonderful that in a hundred years they could say, whoever they are, they, could say, instead of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, they could say, so the church throughout all of Ottawa, and especially Church of the Messiah West, they had peace.

They were being built up, and they walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. It would be a wonderful thing. I mean, whoever the youngest child is, is, you know, dies with their huge family around them at 95 years old.

Nobody who founded the church or launched the church or who's here this morning would be around in a hundred years, but they'd still say that about our church. It would be a wonderful thing. But the question then would be, how did they have peace?

So for us, how do we have peace? How were they being built up? How did they enjoy a church that multiplied or grew?

[9 : 59] So the answer seems to be two things that seem on the surface to be contradictory, but are deeply intertwined, and that is the second part of verse 31, the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

So looking first at the fear of the Lord, it seems by and large in Scripture there's two ways, and this is like really general comments about the fear of the Lord, but there's two ways to understand the fear of the Lord.

The first is actual fear. We see it with not even interactions with God himself, but with an angel of the Lord. People, they turn white as a ghost.

They fear God. It is to encounter the all-powerful, completely holy, awesome God of light is a terrifying thing for sinful, finite human beings.

If you remember, when Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to receive the law from God, he comes down and the people, I mean, it was always God's purpose to see all the people interact with God, but the people were too afraid, and they said, Moses, you go as our representative.

[11 : 13] We can't, it's too scary for us. It's terrifying. And God actually told Moses that they were right in that assessment. The uncreated triune God is in no way in anyone's debt.

He has never compromised his character or his identity or his purity, nor does he get squeamish or does he lose courage in the face of sin and death.

To cross this God is a fearful thing. He is completely holy, completely other, completely all-powerful. To fear God is to fear God in a very real way.

The second way that it talks about the fear of the Lord is connected to the first bit, but in this way, it's more of a deep and awe-inspired reverence in terms of a relationship or a relational connection to God in that way.

And we'll talk about that shortly. But the fear of God is little talked about in general, and even in some ways even less talked about in the church, and it's dangerous to be overly simplistic in determining why this is, but I want to suggest the reason is that we live in an age of pleasure and distraction.

[12 : 38] So here's where we get into this confrontation. But first, a bit about the pleasure and distraction. We engage in pleasures to distract ourselves, and we distract ourselves with pleasure.

Oftentimes for the purpose of not feeling the acute reality of our reality, the nature of sin and fallenness. I'm not suggesting that any form of pleasure is wrong, or that engaging in some kind of respite from just very busy or difficult seasons or situations, to have mental breaks from the monotony and the routine of life, that somehow that is sinful.

I'm not somehow suggesting that. I'm suggesting that we have a problem with the very age, the very ethos that informs the way we live, that our age is an age of pleasure and distraction.

It's the very thing in some ways that defines us. It has become our telos, our reason to be, our guiding North Star, the thing that we live for.

Whether we know it or not, we look for pleasure. But this guiding principle, it is not true solve for our souls. It is not the very thing that we need, even though we look to it.

[14 : 03] Because the problem with pleasure and distraction is that the pleasure oftentimes loses its pleasurable-ness. And distraction does not make the problem go away.

Our feelings of meaninglessness or loneliness or sin and fears, they persist. And this is Satan's great trick, to distract us with good and pleasurable things, to draw our attention and affections away from God and his Son.

We value the kingdom of whatever far more than the kingdom of heaven. I say whatever because it can be whatever. So a very interesting thing with temptation, that it's not just the evil, dark, or terribly sensual things that are temptations, although those things certainly do exist.

They need to be dealt with, of course. But the temptation, in a sense, is anything that is good, where we put our ultimate hope in, that distracts us from our ultimate end, that we see as a source of strength or courage or delight in, more than God.

In many ways, this is idolatry. And it's Satan's great trick. It certainly is. We have an enemy that seeks not to create, in a sense, an army of atheists, but an army of distracted pleasure seekers.

[15 : 31] I mean, he'll take the atheists too, by the way. I mean, he'll do whatever it takes to distract us. And it's interesting. I mean, I talked to somebody earlier this week about the Screwtape Letters, and this is a bit of a longer quote.

So, the Screwtape Letters, if you haven't read it, it's by C.S. Lewis, and it's a clever little way, in a sense, to look at temptation and the way that Satan's plans and temptations aren't organized in any other way apart from just drawing us away from God.

So, it is written in a series of letters back and forth from an uncle, demon, who is like a high-up-there demon. It's a weird book, but it's very clever.

To his nephew novice son. Or, sorry, his nephew novice. He's like a junior officer, so to speak, in hell.

And he's giving him advice on how to tempt this one client he has. And this is how it goes. As this condition becomes more fully established, you will be gradually freed from the tiresome business of providing pleasures as temptations.

[16 : 48] As uneasiness and his reluctance to face it cut him off more and more from all real happiness, and as habit renders the pleasures of vanity and excitement and flippancy at once less pleasant and harder to forego.

For that is what habit fortunately does to a pleasure. You will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him away from his prayers or his work or his sleep.

A column of advertisement in yesterday's paper will do. You can make him waste his time not only in conversation he enjoys with people whom he likes, but in conversations with those he cares nothing about on subjects that bore him.

You can make him do nothing at all for long periods. You can keep him up late at night, not roistering, but staring at a dead fire in a cold room.

All the healthy and outgoing activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and nothing given in return so that at last he may say, as some of my own patients said on his arrival down here, that's hell, I now see that I spent most of my life in doing neither what I ought nor what I liked.

[18 : 09] The Christians describe the enemy, whenever the enemy is there, he's talking about God. Everything's backwards, remember. The Christians describe the enemy as one, quote, without whom nothing is strong, end quote, and nothing is very strong, strong enough to steal away a man's best years, not in sweet sins, but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it, knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosity so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long, dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish, but which one's chance associations has started them, the creature is too weak and fuddled to shake off.

You will say that these are very small sins, and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness, but do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the enemy.

It does not matter how small the sins are provided, that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the light and out into the nothing. Murder is no better than cards, if cards can do the trick.

Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. Your affectionate Uncle Screwtape.

If anything can be weaponized to distract us from God, where is the hope? Friends, the hope is in Christ Jesus and his gospel.

[19 : 59] The gospel confronts our obsessive and pervasive pleasure-seeking by helping us to see what the fear of the Lord, that the fear of the Lord is a good and gracious thing.

It is not a scary thing, but actually a blessing for us. So what does that mean? How is it a blessing for us? To know that there is a good and perfect and holy God and that this God is the source of all goodness and beauty and truth, and in him we can find eternal, true eternal satisfaction, and that he has provided to us a way that we would be made right with him and enjoy him forever in an eternal relationship.

This is the gospel message. This is the very thing that in a very real way we long for, but we look everywhere else for except from him, and we take wonderful, beautiful, good things and we muddy them and ruin them because we try to use them to achieve something that they were never designed to, namely, eternal satisfaction with the one true God.

God doesn't cease to be holy, but through the cross he allows us into this right relationship with him because of what Christ has done.

He doesn't lower his standards, but he descends himself paying the penalty for our sin so that we could have access to him, not on our own merit, our own righteousness, our own, in a sense, clothing, but by Christ.

[21 : 39] And the result is the giving of his very spirit. And it says, interestingly, in verse 31, that there's the comfort of the Holy Spirit that also builds the church. So the giving of the Spirit comforts us.

And in a real way, is this not the very thing we're looking for, comfort? comfort, a divine comfort, a comfort that speaks to a deep peace where our future is secure and all our fears are relieved, that our life has meaning and purpose.

We look for such comfort in pleasure and distraction, but are we really comforted by such things? And the gospel, what it does is it confronts that, that pleasure seeking and that distraction for the sake of true comfort.

It confronts it and it tells us in a very real and loud way that that is not comfort at all and that is a blessing from God.

What is interesting about finding deep and eternal comfort in the Lord is that we actually become less concerned about ourselves. A book written a few years back by Timothy Keller who has since passed away, the blessing of self-forgetfulness.

[23 : 05] And we have this blessing of thinking of ourselves less. Not being obsessive about our own pleasure and distraction, we become joyful in the things that bring God joy.

The mission of God becomes our mission where Christ continues on through his church by his spirit to confront disease and death and false gods like pleasure and distraction.

So this leads us to the second confrontation with disease and death and in many ways it seems like this is the easier confrontation. We'll get to that in a minute but let's read verses 32 to 42.

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived in Lydda. Peter likely is consolidating all of these churches churches that popped up with Philip and some other apostles proclaiming the gospel around Samaria where the gospel spread after the stoning of Stephen.

Church order is being brought to all these various house churches or gatherings and this is what Peter is likely doing. Verse 33, there he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years.

[24 : 34] Interestingly, in the original language, it could be bedridden since he was eight years old. Either way, this man has not walked in a very long time. He was bedridden for eight years and he was paralyzed and Peter said to him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you.

Rise and make your bed and immediately he rose and all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and they turned to the Lord. Now there was in Joppa, that is modern day Jaffa, just south of Tel Aviv, a disciple named Tabitha, which translated means Dorcas.

Same, both those names mean gazelle, it's just, one is Aramaic, one is Greek. Tabitha, or Dorcas, was full of good works and acts of charity.

In those days, she became ill and died and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, please come to us without delay.

So Peter arose and went with them and when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them.

[25 : 52] But Peter put them all outside and knelt down and prayed and turning to the body, he said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes and when she saw Peter, she sat up and he gave her his hand and raised her up and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive.

Verse 42, and it became known throughout all Joppa that many believed in the Lord. We have two miracles here, two confrontations, one with disease and ailments and one with death.

They look very similar to two miracles that Jesus performed himself. the first, Aeneas, he's a paralytic. He is raised much like the paralytic of Mark chapter 2 where, if you remember, a paralytic is lowered through the roof and Jesus tells him just like he does Aeneas here to rise, take up your bed and walk.

Very, very similar language. In the second, we have this woman, Tabitha or Dorcas, she's died and she's raised again. Notice that Peter, he prays first, it's different than what Jesus does.

Jesus doesn't pray to himself but he just lifts her up but nevertheless, Peter, in working with the power of Jesus, says to her, Tabitha, rise.

[27 : 10] Interestingly, the only difference in language between what Jesus does with Jairus' daughter in Mark chapter 5 and what Peter does with Tabitha in Acts chapter 9, it's identical, everything's identical about it except for one letter.

With Jesus, he says Talitha, rise. Just a different name. Peter says Tabitha, rise. One letter is different and Luke, writing this, he is making this connection.

It is, there's no doubt about it. He is telling us that Christ, not Peter, but Christ continues to be at work through his church doing the same work of confronting the effects of sin and brokenness in the world, disease and death.

Christ is still active. He's ascended, but he is still the active agent in this story. Peter is a conduit. What does he say to Aeneas?

Jesus Christ heals you. Rise and make your bed. And what does he say to Tabitha? He prays. He's clearly praying to Jesus, Tabitha, rise.

[28 : 26] Jesus is still at work confronting sin and death, disease, and everything that belongs to evil. And in both cases we see a movement up, up to life, up to heaven, and not down towards the grave and to death.

For Aeneas, arise. Interestingly, that Tabitha her body is put in an upper room. If you remember back in Acts chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira drop dead on the spot.

Crazy story, but they're buried right away. It is a custom to bury right away. I mean, a part of it has to do with being in a warm climate, but the other part of it is to respect the body, to lay the body to rest right away.

A body that dies, you don't put in an upper room. It's a bit of a bizarre thing to do, although it's bizarre, but it's bizarre unless you believe maybe this person could rise again.

But we see either way a movement not down towards the grave and death, but up towards life and resurrection. In both cases, the product of sin and brokenness are confronted.

[29 : 41] Disease and death are shown in this to be lesser foes. And what's the result? Verse 35 and also verse 42. I'll read verse 35 first. And all the residents of Lydah and Sharon saw him, that is, Aeneas, the former paralytic, and they turned to the Lord.

And in verse 41, sorry, in verse 42, And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. The result of the confrontation of disease and death wasn't simply that the paralytic could walk again and the dead person could rise once again, but it was to declare that death and disease, they were weak enemies.

They were defeated enemies. They were neutered enemies. They were enemies without power. They had a shelf life. The time has come that life and life eternal would be given to all who believed.

It was a sign, in a sense, that pointed up towards Christ. The fact is, I mean, I'm assuming, maybe I shouldn't assume, but I'm assuming Aeneas got some disease later on.

In a year, he could have got tuberculosis. We don't know. Maybe he contracted pneumonia when he was in his old age. Whatever. But he got sick at a certain point and his body failed him and he died.

[31 : 08] Tabitha, maybe she lived another five, ten years. Maybe she had a 30-year mercy ministry after this. It was an incredible thing. We're not sure.

But she died. The point isn't so much to revel in the healing or the resurrection, but to see what that represents and what that points to.

That the kingdom of heaven has come and has confronted the kingdom of darkness and sin forever and has found the kingdom of darkness and sin to be wanting. That's true hope.

That is true hope. A sure and better hope than anything we can put our hope in here. It's a better hope than any pleasure that we could find apart from Christ and any distraction that truly gets our mind off of our problem or problems for a period of time.

If the rejoicing of the disciples in verse 35 and 41 were just with the healings, it would be false hope. But it wasn't. It was eternal hope.

[32 : 19] We need to be hopeful people, but we also need to be hopeful people in the right things, the right person. If we put our hope in medicine, beating disease forever, that's a lesser hope to put our hope into.

Medicine, fantastic. Right living, exercise, doing all the things, very good, but that can't be our eternal hope. Hope in the way we build our lives or raise our children or how we run our business or how we are employees.

If we put our ultimate hope, our ultimate feelings of pleasure in that, that will let us down. All good things, but that can't be our ultimate hope.

Christ will be our ultimate hope because God forbid something happens to our families. It could. God forbid something happens to our job or our reputation.

All of these things are not guaranteed to last forever. Only Christ can last forever. So where is our hope? Only in the gospel do we see the ultimate hope that confronts and defeats the source of all disease and all death and confronts us and wakes us up from our malaise.

[33 : 42] And this is something that we constantly fall into. This is why a season of Lent, of preparation into Easter is helpful for us because it's a season where we once again in a very pointed way recognize our great need for Christ's mercy and we bend our need to him afresh.

That's why confession of sin is a huge part of what we do here at our church and what the Bible talks about is because we often fall into patterns of distraction and pleasure and we fail to put our hope in the ultimate one.

We put our hope in lesser things. So friends, ask yourself, who is your hope in? Is it in the cross of Christ that will never let you down?

That will always satisfy in this life and in the world to come or in a lesser hope that really is no hope at all? Let's put our hope in Christ. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your goodness to us that in times of conviction of sin that it is not to shame us to make us feel rotten forever but to open our eyes to confront us with a wrong path that we are walking down so that by your strength we would go down the right path.

We would repent through ourselves to your grace afresh once again. Lord, if we are people that have fallen into cycles of pleasure and distraction as the means by which we address our feelings of meaninglessness or sin or loneliness or whatever it may be rather than looking to you by your strength will you help us to look to you afresh?

[35 : 47] Lord, help us to always remember that any eternal joy that we might have, any comfort of the Holy Spirit, any divine pleasure that we will experience in this life it is because of the grace of your wonderful Son offered to us on the cross of Calvary.

Amen.