

Saved faithfully to serve fearlessly

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[0 : 00] I want to talk a bit this morning about fear. I wonder what it is that makes you afraid.

! Some of us have one of those common phobias that other people don't understand. You're afraid of heights or paper cuts or mice or flying or bridges or spiders or dentists or crowds.

Maybe in the cold light of day if you sat down and really thought about it you might think those things that's okay. But you've got a phobia. There are other fears that can grip us.

You can fear for your safety and the safety of those you love. I'm sure you heard a teenage boy was stabbed to death on Logan's Meadow by the river just a month ago and Cambridge residents say we're scared now, we're scared.

You can be afraid of being insignificant. A nobody whom nobody notices and you're left all alone and ignores at you. Or you're afraid of failing in your job or your relationships.

[1 : 10] You're afraid of making a bad decision and getting things wrong and not being able to cope. You can be afraid of losing what you have. Your money, your health, your reputation.

You can be desperately afraid of suffering. The day they mention serious illness. The day you start forgetting and don't even realise it.

And deep down you can be afraid of the day of your death. I read a newspaper interview a while back. What I've learnt by Alex James, bass player with Blur.

Growing your own food is fantastic. Therapy can really work for men, etc. Last comment. I am terrified of dying. And to add on top of those fears, maybe fears to do with God.

Even though you say it's all true or you've been told that, you fear there's no one there. Or you fear he won't care for you in a hostile world.

[2 : 15] That's why you're so scared of mentioning that you're a Christian. It could be you're someone who's dabbled in the occult. And you worry whether God has the power to protect you.

Maybe you're secretly afraid that when you see him face to face, who you are and what you've done will disappoint him. I don't know what it is for you.

You know, pretty much all of us, some of the time, are tangled balls of worry and fear. The tension in our shoulders and the pressure in our dreams give the game away.

There are enemies out there, up there, in here. And we're afraid. When we feel afraid, how do we respond? What do you do?

At one end, you can be someone who stands up and fights hard to beat your fear. At the other end, maybe you curl up and give in and get engulfed.

[3 : 13] Say you're afraid of failing in your job or your relationships. You're afraid of getting things wrong and being shown up. What do you do? At this end, failure is not an option.

So I'll work harder and better and more frantically. And I'll try desperately harder to be more excellent and secure my reputation because I'm afraid.

Or just go limp. I'm such a loser and a failure, I give up. Say you're afraid of suffering and dying. It scares you stiff.

What do you do? At this end, stand up and fight. I'm going to grab life. I'm going to live it to the max. I'm going to beat my illness and laugh manically in the face of death.

Because I'm afraid. Or at this end, fall into despair. Every ache or pain, you're petrified. You just sit and fret. Or say you're afraid that God will be disappointed with you or condemn you even.

[4 : 18] What do you do? At this end, try harder. I'll forget about the shameful things I've done and push myself frantically to be better and purer and more and more upright.

Because I'm afraid. Or at this end, sink into gloom. I am such a worthless, hopeless worm. There is no help for me. I wonder what it is that makes you afraid.

I wonder how you respond. Why am I starting like this? We've just read from the end of Luke chapter 1. It's just before the birth of Jesus. And at this point in history, the people of Israel are living in darkness. Their beloved city, Jerusalem, is held by the Romans, a powerful occupying force. And 400 years have passed since these people last heard their God's voice speaking to them. They're alone, seemingly forgotten, in a corner of a vast empire with every reason to be afraid. [5 : 20] When the living God breaks in. Appearing to Zechariah further back in chapter 1, an angel promises, your barren wife will have a son, John, and this John will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

And six months later, the same angel visits Mary and promises, back in verse 31, if you can see this, you will conceive and give birth to a son and you're to call him Jesus. He'll come and reign as son of the Most High. And in Luke chapter 1, this promised coming of Jesus starts to bring joy in people. Mary, verse 46 onwards, bursts into a song of praise. And now this morning we've read Zechariah's song. He sings. In verse 57 do you see John the Baptist is born and Zechariah's tongue is set free. And in verse 67, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. So verse 68 onwards then is a Holy Spirit given song of praise. [6 : 27] It's a song of praise about the coming of Jesus. And it is a song of praise that is meant to speak to our fears. Let me read again verses 68 to 75. Follow along with me.

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel. He's singing. Because he's come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago.

Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. To show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham.

To rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear. In holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And two things I want us to see this morning from this first half of Zechariah's song. Firstly, in the coming of Jesus, God saves his people faithfully.

[7 : 42] That's verses 68 to 73. Just notice a few things with me in these verses. Notice first the language of salvation and rescue. Verse 68, praise be to the God, the Lord, the God of Israel, because he's come to his people and redeemed them, brought them back.

Verse 69, he's raised up a horn of salvation for us. Verse 71, salvation from our enemies. Verse 74, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.

Meg and I normally try to find something to watch late at night on iPlayer just to wind down. We're watching Saving Lives at Sea, which is about the lifeboat men and women who risk their lives to rescue and save people in trouble at sea.

One hour per episode, four rescue missions. Jesus here is born into the world to save. He's a saviour. This salvation, second in these verses, is long promised.

Look, in verses 69 and 70, he's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he said through his holy prophets of long ago.

[8 : 59] So 700 years beforehand, God promised to send a son of King David who would establish God's kingdom. But the promise of salvation goes further back even than that.

Because in the coming of Jesus, verse 72, God will remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham. Abraham, what, 1800 years before Jesus came, says to us that God is not like us, you know.

Most of us forget what we said last month, but he does not. He promised to save. He swore an oath. And 1800 years later, he delivers on his word faithfully.

In this soon to be born baby, God brings salvation, long promised salvation. Thirdly, just notice this, it is salvation from our enemies.

Verse 71, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Verse 74, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.

[10 : 16] In the first century, some people thought this meant Jesus would come and save Israel from the Roman occupiers and defeat them and return Israel to Israel. But as you read on in Luke's Gospel, and as you should know in your heart, you realise Jesus comes to bring a much deeper, deeper salvation.

Because he comes to save people from sin and death and Satan and from the effects of life in a world under God's judgment.

And verse 69 talks about God raising up a horn of salvation, a horn. So imagine an ox or a bull with strong horns coming out of its head.

And with one powerful thrust, this ox gores and defeats his enemies. It's what we're being told here, that King Jesus will enter the world as the horn of salvation to battle with and defeat our enemies.

Which is what you see. And at the start of his public ministry, if you know this, Jesus comes across a demon possessed man and commands the demon, come out of him.

[11 : 33] And the demon comes out beaten. Jesus fronts up to illness and leprosy and he heals. A man is stone cold dead.

His mother is heartbroken, her worst fears realised. He says, young man, I say to you, get up. And he does. He meets disciples, petrified in a storm and calms wind and waves.

To the guilty, who will rightly be condemned by God on the day of judgment, he declares your sins are forgiven. And they are. In his ministry in the gospels, going from town to town, every enemy of humanity that causes us to fear is dealt with.

Until he goes finally to the cross. And in the hours beforehand, Jesus sees his coming death and is scared stiff. But with his father's help, he allows himself to be taken and nailed up.

Where he fights for breath and fights for us. And suffering, he bears the weight of our sin and guilt on his shoulders and dies. Before he bursts from the tomb victorious.

[12 : 48] And backtrack to the manger and look in at the nativity play. If I can put it like this, he's not a mild cutie, a little one.

He comes as a warrior and a saviour. Martin Luther once said, This King Jesus is and shall be called sin's devourer and death's strangler.

Who totally destroys sin and knocks death's teeth out. He disembowels the devil and rescues those who believe on him from sin and death.

So in Luke one here in this song, Jesus hasn't yet been born. Hasn't happened yet. But Zechariah, as he sings, full of the Holy Spirit, he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has come to save his people faithfully.

Let me ask this morning, whether you hear this for the first time or a thousandth time. Do you know this? Do you know this about him?

[14 : 03] On Wednesday evenings, saving lives at sea, second of three rescues, a woman on a paddleboard drifted out into the Bristol Channel. She tried to paddle. She got caught by a tide and out she went.

And lost and exhausted, she was found gripping onto the paddleboard in fear. And as the lifeboat pulled alongside, one of the crew reached out a strong hand and pulled her in.

And as he did, she broke down and burst into tears. And through her tears, she said, I was afraid I was going to die. I was going to die. But now I'm safe.

When you are lost in the darkness and drowning in sin and suffering and death, when this mighty King Jesus reaches out his strong hand to you, and you put your trust in him and grab onto him and he pulls you into himself, he saves you.

And you are safe now. And through the death of Jesus, you are given, it's in verse 77 in front of us, you are given the forgiveness of your sins.

[15 : 16] And every screw up, every dirty moral failure that rightly offends God, forgiven and forgotten forever. He saves you from your sins.

He rescues you from Satan's clutches that you might know him. You are safe now with God. And you will be safe on the day you stand before his throne.

You are also safe now in the face of decay and death. And death.

For if and when the doctor finally tells us we have months to live, death will not crush us. It won't. Luke 1 verse 79 says that Jesus came to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

So though the process of dying might be painful, you have a warrior saviour who has defeated death. And he will take you through darkness to light and life.

[16 : 24] You are safe in his hands. You're safe. And it's the lead up to Christmas, the nativity play is coming next week.

Check out the baby in the manger. He is a good king. He is powerful. And he promises and guarantees that he will save us from our enemies.

Point one, in the coming of Jesus, God saves his people faithfully. And he does that so that... Well, so what?

So what for us this week in our lives? One, God saves his people faithfully. And he does it secondly, that we might serve him fearlessly.

And verses 73 to 75 is where I've wanted us to get to. Just as I talked a bit at the beginning about our fears. Look at these three verses with me.

[17:29] Verse 73 speaks of God's promise. The oath he swore to our father Abraham. What did God promise? Back in Genesis 15.

He promised, verse 74, To rescue us from the hand of our enemies and... And to enable us to serve him without fear.

In holiness and righteousness before him all our days. The gift of God is that having been rescued through Jesus Christ, now we can serve him without fear.

It's what he offers us and gives us today. And the word serve takes in all of life. God saves us so that we might devote ourselves to him, which is no burden.

Because it's what he saved me for, to have my every waking moment taken up with serving him in holiness and righteousness. And look, I'm to serve him now without fear.

[18:37] First and foundationally, that means I can be unafraid now as I relate to him. For sure, he's a holy and pure God. I will revere him.

But I do not need to fret. And when you are unmarried and you are going out with someone, you're hooked up in some kind of way.

Do you know this? There is a... There's a kind of stress and tension built into your relationship. And will she stay with me or not? What if I show what I'm really like?

What if he discovers my true personality? Will he walk away? A kind of nagging fear. It can be in a marriage relationship too. A nagging fear that maybe they will leave you.

It is not like that with the living God. He knows us through and through. He's promised to be faithful to us as long as we live and on into eternity.

[19:46] He saved you and forgiven you and wedded himself to you for good, however ugly or ill you become. He will not let you go.

You can serve him free from any fears. Which means secondly, that I can now be increasingly unafraid as I serve my God in a world still full of danger and enemies.

I don't know what you thought. What is it in life that you're afraid of? Are you afraid of failure? Are you afraid of failure? Or insignificance?

Or losing what you have? I thought about this just a little bit myself earlier this week. I have a number of fears going on in my life. Sometimes this fear is quite a small thing, although it affects me.

I think I am quite often afraid of other people's disapproval. Do you know what that's like? I don't like getting things wrong across the board in life.

[20:55] Because I think it means people will look down on me. And it plays on my mind that. Even though I'm a vicar, I get a bit scared mentioning in a one-to-one conversation that I follow Jesus.

Because I think people won't like me anymore. It kind of sounds, forgive me, it sounds almost childish to say it, but it's not. It's a real fear. And so I'm really pleased that I came across again this week a conversation that took place 1,600 years ago.

I wanted to tell you about it. There was a guy called John Chrysostom, I think. He was a Christian. And he said very boldly that he followed Jesus.

And the Roman emperor disapproved of him and threatened him. And because he was a famous man, the emperor got him in and spoke to him. Listen to this.

Quote, when summoned by Emperor Arcadius and threatened with banishment, John responded, You cannot banish me. For the whole world is my father's kingdom.

[22:04] The emperor said, then I will take away your life. John said, you cannot. Because my life is hidden with Jesus Christ.

I will take away your treasure, roared the emperor. You can't, replied John. For my treasure is in heaven where my heart is. Then I will drive you away from all your friends, the emperor said.

You cannot. For I have one friend from whom you can never separate me. I defy you, said John, because you can do me no harm.

I'd love to have been there to hear that. But don't you love that, what he's saying? Like that's a very, very old conversation. So secure and safe with his God.

So absolutely secure. Though he didn't fear anymore what people thought of him. Or what they could do to him. Or how they might threaten him.

[23 : 04] And I think, there's no emperors coming at me, but I think I want to be like that. And I can be. And so can you. You feel how brilliantly freeing that is actually.

For all of life. I don't need to fear failing. In my job. Or my relationships. I don't need to fear making a bad decision.

Or getting things wrong. Or being shown up. Or disappointing my parents. And so on. I don't need to be afraid of that. Because I have a God in heaven.

A friend from whom I will never be separated. And we're just talking a bit this morning about fears. With this passage in front of us. Are you afraid of the day of your death? Are you afraid of suffering and losing what you have? Are you afraid of spiders or dentists?

[24 : 07] Zachariah's song tells us we do not live exposed in an out of control world with enemies that will defeat us. Because in and through Jesus Christ, this soon to be born child, God has stepped in and saved his people faithfully, as he swore he would, that they might serve him fearlessly.

And so for everyone today who grabs onto Jesus our Saviour. Whatever you are tempted to fear this December, know this.

Your mighty faithful God has got you in his grip. And he is full of tender mercy. And he will be a father to you. And whatever enemies you face, he will take you through ups and downs.

And he will take you through life and death. And he will rescue you from every evil attack. And bring you safely to his heavenly kingdom. You are safe with him.

And that means you don't have to stand up and fight all by yourself. And it means you don't need to flop down and give up in despair. But rather, you can lay all your fears at his feet.

[25 : 28] And this week, without fear, you can trust him. And you can serve him. Because he's your God and your Saviour.

And he's got you. And I think when you know that, the more you know that, would it not be that like Zechariah, you would want to break out into song. And say, I praise you, my Lord and God, for what you've done for me.

And let me lead us in a prayer. Let's pray together. And then we're going to sing.

To rescue us from the hand of our enemies. And to enable us to serve him without fear. Almighty God, thank you.

That in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, we have a mighty Saviour. Thank you that the coming of Jesus is no fairy tale, but recorded, witnessed history.

[26 : 38] Thank you that he did not come out of the blue, but as one who came to fulfil all your promises. Thank you that he took to himself flesh and blood.

That he might die for our sins and rise from the dead and rescue us from sin and Satan and death. Thank you that today you offer all people the freedom to serve you without fear in holiness and righteousness.

Because we have been saved and made secure by your Son. Please make us those who see and sense the power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so serve you, our God, and live without fear, knowing that we are yours. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.