

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Coping with Life: How to deal with fear

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgement; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us”, 1 John 4:17-19.

Last year the family and I watched a scary movie on TV. We were on holiday and it was cold and wet outside, so instead of going out for an invigorating walk we just slouched in the armchairs and watched a film that had been left in our cottage. It struck me as we watched that I was glad we were all watching it together. It might have been a bit much if I had been on my own in a dark and unfamiliar place. But something else struck me. The reality was in no way as bad as the suspense! Once all the spine tingling music had stopped, and the dastardly deed had actually taken place, the fear factor rapidly dropped. In fact, there were a few times when we just laughed! I'm not sure the director would have been impressed.

As we come this morning to the concluding talk in the series about dealing with real life issues, we will look at the subject of fear, and how to deal with it as a Christian. I propose to do this by asking a series of simple questions, but firstly I want to explore what we mean by fear. The Bible speaks about fear in two main ways.

1. Fear is a reverential awe.

The psalmist had this thought in mind as he wrote in Psalm 111:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever.” We will come back to this kind of fear later on this morning.

2. Fear is an irrational dislike or an abject terror of something.

It is more this aspect of fear that we shall focus on today. I like the acrostic that says that fear is **False Evidence Against Reason**. As we shall hopefully come to see this morning, fear is our response to people, or events or situations where we allow our sinful minds to accumulate false logic that tries to overcome the divinely renewed mind and the sane reason that should be brought to bear on that same situation.

Where does fear come from?

Perhaps the greatest battle that is being waged is the battle for the mind. Far more important than that between East and West, or Jew and Arab, is the battle for the human mind. Paul sums this up nicely for us as he wrote to Timothy: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7). As those who have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin, we have been given a renewed mind. It enables us to see things the way that God sees things, and to think about issues the way that He does. However, until we are taken to be with Him, we still retain the old mind that we had before conversion. It sought only to serve self. Now on a day by day basis, these two minds war against one another as they are diametrically opposed. The former seeking to please God, the latter seeking to please self. These thoughts do not occur in a vacuum gradually coming to a decision without interference. The devil is constantly trying to corrupt our thought processes, and one of the ways he does this is by feeding us false evidence which we then evaluate and upon which we base our daily choices. What lies behind all the information the devil feeds us is a questioning of God. It started right at the beginning with the infamous words, “Has God said...?” (Genesis 3:1). We are made to doubt that God has our best interests at heart, or that if He has, in some way He is not able to work them out in the reality of our everyday lives. We started off this morning by reading those words from 1 John 4:17-19, from where we learn that perfect love does not leave any room for fear. As we come to really appreciate the love that God has for us, and love Him in return, the false evidence that leads us to doubt Him will evaporate, like the early morning mist on a summer's day.

What do we fear?

On one level, we could make a list of things that would take all morning to get through. Many of us would admit to a fear of the future. This may manifest itself in fears for my job and redundancy. It may take the form of health issues

and what quality of life and death I may have. Or it may take the form of concern on a global scale - what will happen about the Euro crisis, or about Iran's nuclear capability and Israel's response to it, etc.? Is global warming a reality and what can we do about it? Another major fear is the fear of failure. We worry about how people will respond to us if we do certain things. Others may be image conscious, afraid that others will think less of them if they do not have the perfect shape or should they fail to meet expectations etc. However, when we start to look behind the outer expressions of all these things, what really lies at the heart of fear is a fear of the unknown. It is like the scary film I watched, but in reality. The not knowing what was about to happen was far worse than the eventual reality. If I knew that my job was secure, or that I would live a healthy life right to the end of my life, then I would have no cause for fear, but I just don't know that! And in not knowing lies the danger. Along comes the devil with his false evidence and murmurs redundancy, poverty, memory loss or loss of sight or a hundred and one other things that could happen and so the fears grow. However, a reasonable faith states that "all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). Now I am not for one minute going to suggest that this somehow magics away all of life's problems, or that as Christians we will never face any of the difficulties that afflict humanity. However, what I can say with absolute certainty is that, even in the very worst of circumstances, events too horrible to imagine, God is able to work out a positive outcome. I have heard of those who have endured the very worst of things, things that would have broken me, now using those same experiences to comfort others, or bring the wisdom gained from them, to assist others. And I can also say with absolute certainty that in all the events of life, He has given us the promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Now this really matters. I might flippantly say to you, "Don't worry, I will be with you", but that will be of no help to you as you sit in a wheelchair suffering from some crippling disease, or as our lifetime savings become worthless overnight! I have no idea how these things feel, having never undergone them, and I certainly don't know what the best course of action would be. I only know the present. However, the Man giving us the promise of His presence is One who knows the end of every matter from the beginning. So 19 July 2036 is as much a part of history to Him as 19 July 1157. In short, there is nothing that is unknown to Him. Reason would therefore encourage us to simply trust Him. As a newborn baby, did you check your mother's diet to see if the milk she was producing was suitable? When dad put you down in the cot at night, did you ask to see some form of DIY competence so that the cot would not collapse? Well, those questions are so silly as to raise a smile, but it must be just such an attitude that we foster in our relationship with our heavenly Father when we fail to trust Him. A few weeks ago, I was listening to someone who said something that I thought was quite striking: "We are all immortal until the moment of our homecalling." Now that is not to ignore common sense, or to encourage us to be silly about life. But it should encourage us to rely upon our heavenly Father more. He has every day of our lives planned out, knowing the choices we will make, for good or bad. It is this sure knowledge that we need to bring into every circumstance of our lives.

But for the Christian, I think there is one other generic fear that is a sad reality. There are many who have a fear of losing their salvation. Time does not allow us this morning to give a detailed response to this issue. However, I do just want to say that I think that the Bible is quite clear that once an individual is saved, then they are saved for eternity and that nothing can ever change that. It is possible for a person to have never been saved in the first place, but just to have gone along with the Christian company, saying and doing outwardly the right things. It is also possible for a believer to so backslide that they outwardly are no different from a nonbeliever. However, if an individual has genuinely sought the forgiveness of God in repentance, then their salvation must be eternally secure. They will never be lost, for the sins of that person have been judged and dealt with once and for all at Calvary. To teach otherwise is to wholly misunderstand what happens at conversion.

Let us just leave this issue by reading three verses:

- "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death into life", John 5:24.
- "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand", John 10:28-29.
- "But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end everlasting life", Romans 6:22.

Why should we fear?

Well, we must remember that we are but flesh and blood, quite capable of making mistakes, but really we have no cause for fear, if we ignore the false evidence that so easily trips us up and instead focus on the reasons we have for confidence.

Alfred Smith and Eugene Clarke wrote a well known hymn, whose words are worth repeating in full.

I do not know what lies ahead,

*The way I cannot see;
Yet One stands near to be my guide,
He'll show the way to me:*

*I know who holds the future,
and He'll guide me with His hand;
with God things don't just happen,
everything by Him is planned.
So as I face tomorrow,
with its problems large and small,
I'll trust the God of miracles,
give to Him my all.*

*I do not know how many days
Of life are mine to spend;
But One who knows and cares for me
Will keep me to the end.*

*I do not know the course ahead,
What joys and griefs are there;
But One is near who fully knows,
I'll trust His loving care.*

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There are so many things that we do not know, nor can we have any influence over, even were we to know. However, we do know God and that is sufficient. David knew of this all embracing support in some of the most well known words of the Bible. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want ... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me" Psalm 23:1, 4. I am sure David would have readily admitted to not knowing so many things, but the One he knew was sufficient to allow him not to fear - not even the bear (1 Samuel 17:34-36), the lion (1 Samuel 17:34-36), the giant (1 Samuel 17:37-54) or so many other things that could have been a cause for fear. God has not changed, but we need to learn by experience that God is trustworthy.

The sons of Korah, in Psalm 46, knew God in just the same way: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea", Psalm 46:1-2. Imagine that! I think that the earth disappearing would be reasonable grounds for most of us to at least feel a trifle uneasy, and yet they knew that even were this to happen, God would still bring about good from that situation. How this would happen, I and probably they could not imagine, but that is not the issue. They knew God, and that is all that matters. Do you, do I, know God in this way?

It is remarkable in the Bible that whenever angels appear, often the first thing they say is, "Do not be afraid" (see Genesis 21:17; Matthew 1:20, 28:5; Luke 1:13, 1:30, 2:10). When we consider their power and ability, then it is not without reason (see 2 Kings 19:35). Yet we trust in One who is infinitely greater than all the heavenly host. He alone is able to keep us in every circumstance that we face. For the Christian, fear is caused by an absence of trust. Though it may be understandable, and entirely human, we need to move on and experience the God of David and Korah, and countless others beside, and know Him as able to keep us from falling, whatever the seemingly impossible circumstances that we face.

What should I do when I fear?

You might remember the occasion when Peter walked to the Lord on the water (Matthew 14:22-33). He is to be commended that he had the faith to get out of the boat and leave behind the illusory safety of the boat that the other disciples clung to (Matthew 14:28-29). While he focused on the Lord, he was fine. It was not until he took his eyes off Jesus that he got himself into difficulty (Matthew 14:30). I am convinced that this is so often the cause for trouble in our lives. While we maintain a close and living daily relationship with the Lord Jesus, all is well. However, it is so easy in the busyness of life to allow a personal daily quiet time, when we read His word and talk to Him in prayer, to get squeezed out. Sometimes because things are going well, we feel we can manage on our own without His help. Inevitably, we find ourselves full of fear about one thing or another, as our eyes have drifted from the Lord and become focused on our surroundings. The key to overcoming fear is not to remove ourselves from the fearful circumstances, for so often we cannot, and even if we could, they are just likely to follow us and reappear sooner or later. No, the cure for fear is to refocus on the Lord Jesus, to fill our minds with sound thoughts that can only come from Him.

One of my favourite parts of the Bible is the book of Philippians. Whenever I find myself struggling with something, I find that just reading and rereading Philippians is a great help. Just slowly, not looking for anything in particular, but just making the time for Him to speak to me and for one verse or another to bring me something fresh of Christ is a sure step on the way back to spiritual health. Now you may well have a completely different favourite part of the Bible. That's fine. Just find a comfy chair, and quietly read over and over again until you hear His voice. For sure, this clearly does not change the circumstances or the things that are causing me to fear. But His word is changing me, and retuning my mind to see things the way that He sees them, without fear. How often have you heard someone say about a baby, "Oh, he has his father's eyes"? Well spiritually, we need to have our Father's eyes. To see our lives as completely under His control, serenely progressing the way that He wants. To see events as fully under His control. To see the future as a well trodden path to Him. A life free from fear is possible, but only as we maintain a close, personal, daily relationship with Jesus.

Whom should we fear?

In one way, the answer to this question is simple - nobody and nothing! However, the Lord's own words in Matthew 10:28 are important for us to consider: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." It is appropriate to conclude this morning by drawing our attention to the greatness of God. He truly is a God to be feared. As our Father in heaven, we do not live in abject terror of Him, though for the unsaved person, this would be an entirely appropriate attitude. It is an awful thing one day to have to stand before God, not having trusted in Jesus as Saviour, and to have to give an answer to Him as to our disobedience in rejecting His Lordship. For the Christian, however, we should never lose sight of the all surpassing mighty supremacy of God. He spoke a word and worlds came into being (see Psalm 33:9). He sustains all things by His mighty power (see Hebrews 1:3). Everything belongs to Him (see Psalm 24:1, Romans 11:36, 1 Corinthians 10:26), and He loses nothing in condescending to allow us to know Him. It is right, therefore, that we remember this as we approach Him in prayer or worship Him in thought, song or action. Because He is so great, we should not be happy with a second rate effort as we serve Him. He deserves our very best, whilst graciously accepting all that is done for Him.

After the queen of Sheba had been to visit Solomon, we read that "there was no more spirit left within her" (1 Kings 10:5). I am convinced that we will all be like this the moment we arrive in His presence in heaven. It would be a good thing if we had something of this attitude now, a reverential awe of His absolute power and authority, that expressed itself in how we spoke to Him, and how we served Him. If we live in a spirit of holy fear of God, then we will be less likely to live with a spirit of fear of all other things that cause mankind to be afraid. Let us then resolve, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, to keep "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

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