

Be Not Afraid

Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2007
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Various

This month of January I'm doing "sermons by request." I'm gathering up the things that people said to me over the last year, such as, "Bruce, I'd like to hear a sermon on ..." or "Can you preach on this Bible passage? I've never understood it."

One of those requests was on all the Bible passages which say "Do not be afraid." So I went and looked up that phrase and similar phrases, like "Fear not" and "Have courage." I knew there were a lot of these in the Bible. Would you believe more than three hundred?

If anyone needs to go to the bathroom during this message, it's right ... No, I'm not going to go through all of them!

1) Do not fear your enemies

When Jehoshaphat was king over Israel, several nations joined together against Israel. A vast army descended upon them, intent on completely destroying them. The king and the people turned to God in prayer for help. God's answer was given through a prophet:

2 Chronicles 20:15-21, New Living Translation:

"This is what the Lord says: **Do not be afraid!** Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow, march out against them. You will find them coming up through the ascent of Ziz at the end of the valley that opens into the wilderness of Jeruel. But you will not even need to fight. Take your positions; then stand still and watch the Lord's victory. He is with you, O people of Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid or discouraged. Go out there tomorrow, for the Lord is with you!"

Then King Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground. And all the people of Judah and Jerusalem did the same, worshipping the Lord. Then the Levites from the clans of Kohath and Korah stood to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud shout.

Early the next morning the army of Judah went out into the wilderness of Tekoa. On the way Jehoshaphat stopped and said, "Listen to me, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be able to stand firm. Believe in his prophets, and you will succeed." After consulting the leaders of the people, the king appointed singers to walk ahead of the army, singing to the Lord and

praising him for his holy splendour. This is what they sang:

"Give thanks to the Lord;
his faithful love endures forever!"

The passage goes on to tell how the invading armies started fighting among themselves. When the army of Israel went out for battle in the morning, there was no one left to stand against them.

What I find interesting about this passage is the response of the people *before* they knew of this outcome. The king bowed down in worship. The Levites – they were the leaders of worship in the Temple – began shouting praise to God. The next morning when the army went out, the singers led the way! They marched out, without any weapon, without any armour, without any shield, having only one thing to hang onto: God's promise, "Do not be afraid... The battle is not yours, but God's."

They did not march out timidly, but boldly. They did not march out quietly, hoping to sneak up on the enemy. Instead they were singing out loud, "Give thanks to the Lord; his faithful love endures forever!"

Again, remember: this was *before* they knew the outcome of the battle.

I should add a caution here. Just because someone is your enemy, doesn't mean that person or that group is God's enemy. A lot of fighting and war in the world is caused by people confusing those two things.

God says, "Do not be afraid. I am with you. The battle is not yours, but God's."

Psalms 23 contains one of the best known verses about fear.

Psalms 23:4, New International Version:

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.

It is a prayer of quiet calm and confidence. As long as I am walking in God's paths, I have no fear of enemies or danger.

This next Psalm has a similar theme of confidence in God.

Psalms 56:3-4, New Revised Standard Version:

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;

what can flesh do to me?

Isn't that interesting? This verse begins, "When I am afraid..." But a moment later, the person says, "I am not afraid." What made the difference? – "I put my trust in you."

The person praying has a sober, but realistic thought: "What can flesh do to me?" This person realizes, "I am not invincible. Even innocent people get hurt sometimes. But really, what can they do to me? They can hurt me, even kill my body. But they cannot touch my soul. That is kept safe with God, where nothing can harm me."

Let me give you a real-life example of this truth in action.

John Chrysostom was one of the main leaders of the church around 400 A.D. Even though he was very bold when it came to condemning sin, he was much loved by the people. They trusted him because they knew he would speak only the truth. Chrysostom even spoke against the Emperor for some things he or his wife had done. He was called before the Emperor, who threatened him with exile unless he apologized.

Chrysostom replied, "You cannot exile me because the entire world is my Father's house."

"I will kill you," said the Emperor.

"No, you cannot, because my life is hid with Christ in God."

"I will take away your treasures."

"No, you cannot, for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there."

The Emperor was furious at this point. "I will drive you away from man and you shall have no friend left."

"No, you cannot, for I have a friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me... I defy you; for there is nothing that you can do to hurt me!"

Say this with me: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you."

2) Do not be afraid of what others think or say

Fear of what people think can be even more crippling than fear of physical danger. Most of us have seen a TV show or a movie about life in high school. There is the popular girls who have their own little clique, and they dominate the school culture. I used to think this was just in the movies, that real teenagers aren't like that. Then I

saw that very thing happening in our church youth group a few years ago.

It's not just about teenagers, though. You face this issue at work, with neighbours – wherever people gather. Hear what God's word says to us.

Isaiah 51:7-8, New Living Translation:

"Listen to me, you who know right from wrong and cherish my law in your hearts. Do not be afraid of people's scorn or their slanderous talk. For the moth will destroy them as it destroys clothing. The worm will eat away at them as it eats wool. But my righteousness will last forever. My salvation will continue from generation to generation."

Our number one goal is to please God, to follow Jesus and mold our lives to be like him. Jesus tells us, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you" [Matthew 6:33].

This fear of others leads right into the next topic.

3) Do not be afraid to talk about Jesus

When was the last time you had a conversation with someone about Jesus? I mean with someone who is not active in church, someone who shows no sign of being a follower of Jesus. If it has been a while, ask yourself "Why?"

The usual answer is something like, "That's a personal matter. I don't want to be nosy." But I'm not talking about interrogating the other person about their faith. I'm talking simply about you telling someone else what Jesus means in your life. It could go something like, "I've had a terrific day today. I'm so happy! Can I tell you about it?"

Why don't we do that? I suggest a large part of it is that we're afraid.

2 Timothy 1:7-8, New Living Translation:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So you must never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. And don't be ashamed of me, either, even though I'm in prison for Christ. With the strength God gives you, be ready to suffer with me for the proclamation of the Good News.

Just think: suppose your friend buys lottery tickets and always uses the same number, but one week never got around to checking the winning numbers. You happen to hear the winning number for that week, and it's your

friend's number! Now tell me, would it be rude of you to tell your friend the good news? Not at all!

Now the good news of Jesus Christ is better than any lottery prize. That money will all be gone – sometimes very soon and with much heartache. But the love and peace that Jesus gives us lasts forever.

Don't be afraid, don't be ashamed to tell others about Jesus.

4) Do be afraid of God

Among the hundreds of passages about fear, one of the largest categories are the Bible verses which talk about fearing God. But they do *not* say, "Do not be afraid of God." Rather they say the opposite: "Fear God"! This verse is typical:

Proverbs 9:10, New International Version:

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

Isn't this interesting! We are not to be afraid of anything or anyone else; but we are to be afraid of God. Some kinds of fear lead to hatred, bitterness and terror, such as the fear between groups at war with each other. The fear of God, however, leads to awe, respect, reverence and obedience. This list of God's commands is an example:

Leviticus 19:13-14, God's Word:

"Never oppress or rob your neighbour. Never keep the pay you owe a hired worker overnight. Never curse deaf people or put anything in the way of blind people to make them stumble. Instead, fear your God. I am the Lord."

It is the fear of God which keeps one honest. This is a good fear.

Oswald Chambers wrote about the connection between fear and faith in his book *The Highest Good*:

"The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."

I'll close with that verse again from Paul's letter to Timothy.

2 Timothy 1:7, New Living Translation:

**For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity,
but of power, love, and self-discipline.**

Let's pray, and ask for God to give us a proper kind of fear, and fearlessness.