

Do Not Fear

Psalm 91:1-10, Matthew 10:26-42

When the night comes and the darkness surrounds us, when the wind whispers and the rain drops ever so slowly, when the limbs tap against the window and your imagination runs wild, it is hard not to be scared. When the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is almost over, it is hard not to be afraid. And when the dawn comes and the sun rises full for all to see who we are and what we are about, what we have done and what we have left undone, where we have failed and what we have forgotten, it is hard not to be afraid. And yet, in the face of life and death, in the face of contempt, hatred, and persecution, in the very face of rejection and crucifixion, Jesus says to us three times, “Have no fear....Do not fear....Fear not....”

How can this be? What can this possibly mean? How can he say this? What strange good news this is, spoken into our fearful lives in this fearful world: “Have no fear....Do not fear....Fear not....”

First of all, Jesus is telling us by these to fear no one but God alone. He is calling us to a deep, radical, and powerful faith in God. Anything less will not do. “Fear” has a double meaning. On the one hand it means simply to be afraid. On the other hand, it means also to believe, to trust, to obey, and to worship. The point is that true faith in God, including the fear of God, excludes fear of all lesser beings. God made us for himself. God cares for us. God never abandons us. God is the only one who has power over body and soul. When this truth sinks down into our bones, we realize that we have no reason to fear anyone else. We do not need to be afraid of them. We especially do not owe them our worship. This sets us free from the lesser powers of the world.

How can Jesus tell us not to be afraid of them? He has been through it all himself. At first glance, this passage presents a harsh and rigorous view of Christian faith and life. It talks about those who kill the body, about taking up the cross, and about losing one’s life. Then we realize that everything about which Jesus talks happened to him. Jesus does not ask us to do anything that he has not done. We have to look ahead in the gospel to understand this. Only his life and death and resurrection at the end of Matthew make sense of this teaching. Why should we not be afraid of those who kill the body? Because they killed Jesus, but through the power of God, he lives again, and so shall we. Why should we take up the cross—the instrument of our own execution—and follow Jesus? Because he took that path of

humiliation and death, and it led him to life and glory, as it shall us. Why should we deny ourselves instead of promoting ourselves? Because those who were consumed with selfishness are dead, gone, and vanished, but Jesus Christ, who poured himself out for others, now lives eternally, as shall we. It all seems backward. It makes no sense at all apart from Jesus Christ. But with him, it makes the most sense of all. Because of Jesus, we dare to believe. Because of Jesus, we dare to have confidence. Jesus assures us that God alone is worthy of our fear, our trust, our faith, our hope, and our obedience. He opens the way for us to believe. He opens the way for us to be both fearless of all others and faithful to God alone. Are we ready for this?

Why does Jesus call us to faith that is so radical, so exclusive, so demanding? Because life is hard! Jesus knows that. In many ways, life is harder for Christians than for non-Christians. In addition to the normal difficulties of life, Christians are subject to being ridiculed for their faith in God who is invisible, mocked for their loyalty to Christ who was mocked at the cross, despised for being led by the Spirit into acts of selflessness, hated for their love of the unlovable, rejected for their acceptance of the unacceptable, belittled for their concern for the little people of the world, and persecuted for their insistence on justice for the oppressed. So life is hard, and Christian life is harder. That is why Jesus is calling us to a deep, radical, and powerful faith in God. Jesus never preached a gospel of prosperity and comfort. He never preached a gospel of ease. The Christian faith is not a faith of convenience. It is not a fair-weather faith, something to name our confidence on the days when it is easy to be confident. The Christian faith is for facing the absolutes of life and death, good and evil, self and other. So we must know that the God and father of Jesus Christ is a jealous God. We cannot believe in God and hedge our bets by believing in fate, luck, money, status, intelligence, race, blood, position, strength, military might, or anything else. With God, it is all or nothing. And so, Jesus says, Have no fear for any of the others. Fear God alone. Fear God alone, for God alone has shown himself worthy of fear, faith, and worship. God alone has shown his goodness and power in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God alone promises the same to those who fear and believe him. God sustains our lives and carries us safe through every moment of the day and the night. And when we reach the end of this life, God carries us safe to the other side, too. This is how Jesus leads us into that deep and abiding confidence in God which we know as faith. Fear no one but God alone, and then you need fear no other. In words that tell us of the rigors of the Christian life, he tells us about the only basis of trust upon which we can live that life.

Second, Jesus tells us that we are to acknowledge him before other people. We are to let it be known publicly that we are his followers. We are to confess our faith in the God and father of Jesus Christ. We do this not only by deeds—as

important as those are—but also and especially by words. This seems foreign to the modern way of thinking. The world would have us believe that what is in our hearts that really matters, not what is on our lips. Somehow, the church has been duped into going along with this. Of course, the only reason that the world would have us believe this is that it does not want to hear from us about Jesus Christ. It is not true, and we should never have accepted it as true, that it is all right for Christians to believe in God privately in the silent depths of their hearts and so to keep it secret from the world. That is not true. What is true is that we must declare our faith boldly, telling about Jesus Christ even on those dark days when our faith is weak, our confidence is torn, and doubt assails us. Those are what we need to keep private. Not that we cannot talk about them among ourselves—we should, and we need to. But before the world we maintain our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This may not be easy. But we need to find our voices again. We need to acknowledge Jesus before others. He calls us to do this. He promises us that he will acknowledge before his father in heaven all those who acknowledge him before others on earth. And he warns that our denial of him before others will lead to our being denied by him in heaven. So speak a good word for Christ this week. Think of someone in your family, your neighborhood, your school, your workplace, or your favorite hangout, someone whom you can invite here to church to worship God. That is the way it works. More than eighty-five percent of the people who come to church do so because someone invited them. Someone invited them to worship God. Someone invited them to meet Jesus Christ. Someone invited them into the community of faith. That is what evangelism is all about. Are we embarrassed to acknowledge Christ before others? I hope he will not be embarrassed to acknowledge us before his father! Let us be bold to acknowledge Christ before others outside the sanctuary throughout this week, and the next week, and the next week, and on and on.

Third, Jesus tells us to take up the cross and follow him. For most of us, this will not come true in the physical sense. Although more people have been killed in the twentieth century than any other because of their Christian faith, that is mostly in other countries. I pray that we will never be tested that way. We want to be ready for that, but it would be presumptuous to be overconfident about what we would do. So, what does taking up the cross mean for us? It means that we are to love God as he is made known in Jesus Christ even more than we love country, even more than we love family, even more—and this is the sticking point—even more than we love ourselves. And when we do that, we have to be prepared for what happens. It is not that we have to go out and create division to be good Christians. Jesus is warning us that the gospel itself generates resistance and creates division. We should not be surprised by that or caught off guard. And sometimes that resistance is within. We

hold back. We hedge our bets. We cling to life and power and status so tightly, only to find that they slip through our fingers. We have to love God in Jesus Christ more than we love ourselves. That is what God made us for. That is what God saved us for. To love ourselves more than God is to take the path to destruction. But to love God more than self, to renounce our selfishness and self-centeredness, to die to self, is to find the eternal life of Jesus. We can do this every day, denying ourselves personally, being harder on ourselves than we are on others, giving money away instead of spending it on ourselves. Life lived for the self is death. Life lived for God, life poured out and given away, is true life and eternal life.

Fourth, Jesus assures us of God's love and presence and caring in and through all of life. God carried Jesus Christ safe through it all, even the crucifixion. God has carried the church safe through it all for twenty centuries, so the gospel has been preserved for us. And so, Jesus assures us, will God carry us safe through this life of mission and discipleship. The world of the Roman Empire, with its paganism and emphasis on military glory, was a bleak mission field for the first disciples and the early church. Jesus encouraged them to go ahead. The world of the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the third millennium, with its new paganism and its addiction to nuclear weapons is a bleak mission field for us. Jesus encourages us to go ahead. Success is not our responsibility. The conversion of the world is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as clearly and as faithfully as we can with our words and actions. The rest is up to God. Of course, even the preaching and the witnessing is God working in us. We could never do it on our own. Jesus calls us to believe and to obey, even when the world makes it all seem so unlikely. God will not let us down.

When the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is almost over, it is hard not to be afraid. But God gives us courage.

In August of 1991, when the Russian military was trying to overthrow the new government of that nation, Russian women surrounded the building where Yeltsin was, intending to protect him. The women linked their arms together and stood facing soldiers in tanks, pleading to them, "Soldiers, don't shoot Russian mothers!" Given even a brief taste of democracy, those women no longer feared those who could kill only the body but not the soul! It was wonderful sight, and a wonderful event in the long history of the struggle for human freedom! It made me think—we have been given the gospel of Jesus Christ and the foretaste of the kingdom divine—How much more even than the brave women of Russia, how much more should we be brave for Jesus Christ!

In the face of life and death, in the face of contempt, hatred, and persecution, in the very face of rejection and crucifixion, Jesus says to us yet today, "Have no fear.... Do not fear.... Fear not...."

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To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org