

Fear no evil

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[0 : 00] Now, I'd like to turn with you to Psalm 23. Some particular words there, but first of all, we'll read the whole of the Psalm. Psalm 23, from the beginning.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And especially the words I'd like us to think about this morning are in verse 4. I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

[1 : 10] One of the most beautiful and powerful words in one of the carols we've no doubt been singing over the past few weeks is a line in O Little Town of Bethlehem.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight. As we stand at the beginning of a new year, these words resonate with us.

We may have high hopes for the coming year, but we also may have crushing fears. There were certainly hopes and fears in Israel that night that Jesus was born.

Hopes based on promises of a glorious future with the coming of the Messiah, but fears that the evil powers in the world of King Herod and of the Romans would crush these hopes.

And today it seems so often that fears outweigh hopes. Franklin D Roosevelt, who was president of the USA during the Second World War, in his message to Congress in January 1941, spoke of four essential human freedoms.

[2 : 23] Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Freedom from fear. But all of them seem just as far off now as in 1941.

Particularly freedom from fear. At the moment, the world is rife with fears over the coronavirus pandemic. At the individual level, we wonder, will I catch it?

What will happen if I do? And at the more national level, how will the NHS cope if numbers keep going up? Will the vaccines really be effective at stopping the spread as well as protecting the individual?

And of course, those who follow the media avidly, there are all kinds of pessimistic news that you can hear. We are beset with fear for the economy.

Hundreds of thousands of people thrown out of work. Businesses going to the wall. And how are we going to pay for the cost of the pandemic in the end? And on top of all that, what will Brexit do to our economy?

[3 : 32] We are also beset with fear about the environment. Greta Thunberg, the teenage Swedish activist, said, People are suffering. People are dying.

Entire ecosystems are collapsing. And we hear statements like, We have ten years to save the planet. Or, The earth is burning. There's a certain hysteria around.

Now, no doubt, fear can be a motivating factor to make necessary change. But it can also become overwhelming and enervating.

The prophecies of doom can become self-fulfilling. The task can seem too massive. The obstacles too great. Human attitudes too intractable.

I'm actually old enough to remember a similar kind of fear in the 1960s about nuclear destruction. Particularly at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

[4 : 35] The Soviet Union was going to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, threatening the USA. People felt the world was teetering on the brink of nuclear catastrophe.

Bob Dylan wrote the famous song, A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall. Each line of which he said was the title of a new song, But he felt he didn't have time to write them all. Around the same time he wrote, Masters of War, You've thrown the worst fear that can ever be hurled, Fear to bring children into the world.

For threatening my baby unborn and unnamed, You ain't worth the blood that runs in your veins. Martin Luther King, again back in the 60s in 1963, said, We have genuflected before the god of science, Only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, Producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate.

The word that sums all this up today is the word angst, A feeling of dread. It's a Danish word originally, And also found, I believe, in Norwegian, Dutch and German. And it came to prominence in the writings of the 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard. He used it of the terrifying anxiety in the face of the human freedom of choice.

[6 : 01] And it has been developed in various ways by existentialist philosophers. Of course, in addition to fears about the future of society and the world, We also have more personal fears.

Fears about the consequences of choices we made in the past, Or may make in the future. And fears about the impact of other people's choices on us.

We have hopes for the future, for ourselves and our families. But these can be blighted by our fears. Fears that what we have said or done in the past may come back to haunt us.

Or fears that we will not be able to cope with what life throws at us in the future. We may make New Year's resolutions. To drink less, or eat less, or exercise more, Or overcome some form of addictive behaviour, Or to turn over a new leaf in some area.

But we fear that we may not be able to overcome temptation. As Christians, we may have fears that we may not be able to live up to our Christian profession, Or that the troubles we may face may undermine our faith.

[7 : 15] We can also have fears about evil in the world around us. For ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren. Increasing levels of violent and sexual crimes.

Gender confusion. Poverty and homelessness. And the general loss of morality and integrity in public life. Plus, we may have fears concerning the Church.

There's been a spectacular decline in the large denominations. The decline is such that it's even worrying atheists. Some are even beginning to call themselves Christian atheists.

Because they see the benefits of our Christian heritage. Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church.

But there were once thriving churches in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey. Jesus wrote letters to the seven churches of Asia.

[8 : 14] You'll find them in the book of Revelation. Jesus said that if they did not repent, he would come and remove the candlestick. Remove the light of the Gospel.

And in fact, that happened. Because for a long, long time, that area, the churches had totally declined. And now there are perhaps only handfuls of Christians here and there.

Of course, Jesus promises that the Church will thrive throughout the world. But there's no particular promise for any particular place if we are unfaithful. And of course, hanging over all, there is the spectre of death.

This has been brought home to us powerfully by the pandemic. Some of us, of course, just try to ignore the reality of death or make light of it. The filmmaker Woody Allen famously said, It's not that I'm afraid to die.

I just don't want to be there when it happens. But underneath the humour, of course, there is the fear of death. Sam Cooke sang, A change is going to come.

[9 : 28] It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die. I don't know what's up there beyond the sky. Or John Dryden, the 17th century poet, said, Death in itself is nothing, But we fear to be we know not what, we know not where.

And so today there's a general pessimism in the face of death. Bertrand Russell, the great atheist philosopher, Summed it up perhaps better than most. Brief and powerless is man's life.

On him and all his race, The sure, slow doom falls, pitiless and dark. So, how can King David have confidence in the face of the fear of all kinds of evil?

And first, what kind of confidence is it? Well, I believe we can see from our text that it is a realistic confidence. Some people, of course, think that Christians have a kind of blind optimism in the face of reality, as if we just ignore the harsh realities of life.

Of course, that is the kind of hope that many people have. Things are not quite that bad, and everything will turn out all right somehow in the end. That is not the hope of the Christian.

[10:51] The quality of our hope is perfectly illustrated here by King David. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

We don't know when exactly David wrote this psalm, but it seems to me likely that he wrote it about his experiences as an outlaw when he was being hunted by King Saul, and he drew on his memories of his early shepherding life.

He felt like the sheep passing through the deep dark valley being hunted by lions and wolves. He was facing up to the reality of danger. And it is only when we face up to the reality of danger and the real basis of our fears that we can find real hope.

Of course, we need to be able to distinguish between real fears and a general anxious frame of mind. But we have to recognize that we have real fears based in reality.

Fears about our world, fears about our country, about our church, about our own personal futures, that are real enemies of the grace and truth of the gospel, both human and satanic.

[12:06] In the coming year and decade, we may have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. The long shadow of death may fall on our culture, our church, and our own lives.

As the hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*, says, God may call us to go through deep waters. Our pathway may lie through fiery trials.

It's only against the background of this bleak reality that we can have real hope. The second thing I want to notice about David's confidence here is that it was a wide-ranging confidence.

And that's the confidence that we can have as Christians. He says, I will fear no evil. David was saying that there was no evil, no kind of evil, that would destroy his faith, his hope, his confidence.

For David, there was the obvious fear of King Saul, who had all the machinery of state at his disposal. For us, too, there are the fears caused by the takeover of all the machinery of state by those who are either indifferent to the word of God or actively opposed to it.

[13:24] For David, there was also the constant fear of betrayal. Doeg the Edomite, the people of Keilah, and later in life, he was betrayed by his own son, Absalom, his counselor, Ahitophel, and his general, Joab.

We, too, can have a sense of betrayal when we're let down by family or friends or by fellow Christians who compromise with the spirit of the age. David was also no doubt conscious of the evil of his own heart.

David is one of the characters in the Bible that we can identify with most. He was a man after God's own heart and one of the greatest military leaders in the history of the world.

But he was also frail and fallible and foolish at times. For example, his weakness, where the opposite sex was concerned, and his indulgence of his sons.

We may also have fears concerning the temptations that we are prone to, that we will act foolishly and shamefully. So the fears that are being considered here are wide-ranging and comprehensive.

[14:37] David says he fears, or will fear, no evil, no kind of evil. How can he say that? And how can we face up to all the troubles and challenges that may confront us with courage and say, I'm not afraid?

The answer lies in the fact that David had a reasonable confidence. David had a reason for his hope.

His is a reasonable faith. I will fear no evil, for you are with me, he says. His confidence is not a blind optimism.

Oh, it'll be fine in the end. Nor is it a faith in himself and his own abilities. David had many gifts and abilities, but his confidence was not based there.

Nor was his confidence based on others. He knew that others might let him down and disappoint him. No, his confidence was based on the Lord, his shepherd, who was with him and would surely defend and protect him, even as David himself had protected his sheep with his rod and his staff.

[15:55] Notice his faith is not in things that he knew about God, but in God himself, in God's relationship with him, his experience and the obedience of the Lord's presence with him.

This is the only reason we can ultimately have hope in the face of our fears. Personal hope, hope for the church and hope for the world if God is with us.

And if we trust in the Lord Jesus, he is our Emmanuel, which literally means God with us. Think of how many times we're told in the Bible, don't be afraid.

For instance, in Isaiah chapter 43, verse 1, fear not, I have redeemed you. Or in verse 5 of the same chapter, do not be afraid, for I am with you.

And especially, Jesus so often tells us not to be afraid. In Matthew chapter 14, verse 27, take courage, it is I, don't be afraid.

[17:02] Or in Matthew 10, verse 31, don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows. The antidote to our fears is the identity of the one who has promised to be with us.

The creator who made us in his own image. We are precious to him. The savior who redeemed us by giving his own life to ransom us from the curse of the law.

The friend who has promised to be with us, never to leave us or forsake us. This psalm speaks of some of the consequences of God being with you, of being your shepherd.

Verses 1 to 3, he'll give you satisfaction, peace of mind, and refreshment of soul. Verses 3 and 4, he'll guide you in doing what is right, being beside you every step of the way.

verse 4, he will be with you to comfort you in danger and trouble and even in death itself. Verse 5, instead of being shamed and defeated before our enemies, he will grant you honor and glory.

[18:16] Verse 6, he'll love you and be good to you in all the ups and downs of life, and in the end, he'll take you to be with him forever.

So, as you contemplate the future at the beginning of this new year, you need fear no evil if your faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

So often, the Christian faith is misrepresented. Some people think that if you're a Christian, it's all about fear, fear of breaking rules, fear of what others will think, and so on.

Well, the Christian does have one fear, but it is the fear of God. This is not abject terror or enervating dread, but the awe and reverence due to Almighty God, creator of the universe and judge of all the earth.

If you truly fear God, that drives out all other fears. James Douglas, Earl of Morton, famously said at the funeral of John Knox in 1572, Here lies he who neither feared nor flattered any flesh.

[19:33] There are so many fears today because there is so little fear of God. Bob Dylan sang, We live in a political world in the cities of lonesome fear.

Or as he put it in an earlier song, I pity the poor immigrant who passionately hates his life and likewise fears his death. What David is telling us here is that the fear and love of God casts out all other fears.

I mentioned the hymn How Firm a Foundation earlier. It expresses all this better than I can. How firm a foundation you saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in his excellent word.

What more can he say than to you he has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled. Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed, for I am your God and will still give you aid.

I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand, upheld by my gracious, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call you to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be with you your trouble to bless and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

[21:00] When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace all-sufficient shall be your supply. the flame shall not harm you, I only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

The soul that on Jesus now leans for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes. That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I never, no never, no never forsake.

let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we pray that indeed you would give to us that confidence of faith that faces up to all kinds of fears and yet knows that because you are with us, we ultimately have nothing to fear.

O Lord, our gracious God, be with us in all the troubles and challenges of life and enable us to rejoice that we have such a great Savior, that we have such a great hope and a future promised us in Jesus Christ.

Enable us to communicate that to others against the darkness of this world around us. May the light of the gospel shine through us and in us to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22:22] We ask it in his name. Amen.