

Antidote to Fear

Psalm 27:1

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Preface

I invite you at this time to open with me to the Old Testament and the book of Psalms, turning to Psalm 27:1. We're only going to read and focus upon the first verse, but before I read it I want to avoid ripping it out of context and summarize what this psalm, or ancient song of praise, covers. It's said to be "of David," Israel's king. He would know his share of enemies, evil adversaries and opposing armies, and he mentions these in vv. 2-3. It drives him to pray, starting in v. 4, that he would stay connected to the LORD God and even the meeting place he would establish back then and there with his people, in the tabernacle and later on the temple - which points in our time and place to the importance of the church and its gatherings in the flesh, as something rather essential and hardly non-essential. Anyway, he looks to the LORD to shelter him, to lift him up and above his foes, that he might celebrate it as God's worshipper, giving him the glory. He expresses his desire for the LORD, to know his gracious favor, to fellowship with him. And he knows God will hear and answer, you see, that even though father and mother have forsaken David the LORD does not, but instead takes David in. He asks that God would teach him his way, that David would be stabilized, even when beset by so many out to get him, who tell lies, who breathe out violence. Finally, in vv. 13-14, he writes of his determination - and exhortation, to people like us - to wait upon the LORD. He thus expresses confidence, as he does throughout these verses, which brings us back to v. 1, where the tone is set, where David discloses something, namely the key to how he can be so assured, so certain, and where he simultaneously provides guidance for you and me living thousands of years later, on the other side of the globe. Let's give our strict and undivided attention to it, then, to the reading of God's holy, life-giving Word, inspired, infallible, and inerrant—again, Psalm 27:1.

Scripture Reading

[Psalm 27:1] The LORD is my light and my salvation;

whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;

of whom shall I be afraid?

Amen! Let the one who has ears to hear, hear what the Holy Spirit is saying.

Introduction

Brothers and sisters in Christ, one famous American president, FDR, is known for a statement from his inaugural address in 1933: "There is nothing to fear but fear itself. Well, I suppose we can give him the benefit of the doubt, that he meant well, desiring to quell the panic over the continuing economic Depression. There are fears, after all, that can be a bit irrational. Any fear found in this category may, in fact, arise from a legitimate cause for concern but sometimes it can be excessive, overblown, part and parcel of an overreaction. Some such fears

get a hold of us, such that they control and manipulate us. But I'm not sure we should completely agree with Roosevelt's words. Some fear, you see, does make sense. You burn your finger on the hot stove, and you become afraid to touch it again. There are some things we should be afraid of and keep our distance from.

Lots of people in our society are fearful as the year of 2020 unfolds - whether it stems from the Coronavirus, the thought that things might not return to "normal" anytime soon, the civil unrest plaguing our land, the divisive political climate, or just the general uncertainty with regard to the future - not to mention all kinds of uniquely personal fears - and so what I'd like to do is apply God's Word to the topic of fear. The Scriptures do treat fear as a reality. Oftentimes, the LORD addresses his people, his servants, along the lines of, "Fear not" - with Jesus and the New Testament authors continuing this pattern. God knows that people like us tend to be afraid (it belongs to the human condition in a fallen world), and he wishes to minister to us, to meet us where we're at.

Thesis

In short, Covenant Presbyterian Church, dear friends, David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, unveils the answer when it comes to the question of fear: Because the LORD's *Antidote to Fear* is the LORD himself, we must turn to him, as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, his Son and our Savior. And, aiming to make it practical, I'm breaking it all down into two major points.

I. First, the Presupposed Fear that Is Non-negotiable....

Brothers and sisters, I say "presupposed" because David doesn't explicitly mention it, by name, but he does repeatedly refer to the LORD, and thus hints at it, what ought to be our greatest fear that governs all others - which brings me to the first of two things under this heading.

#1: The Primacy of the Fear of the LORD....

The book of Proverbs speaks again and again of the fear of the LORD, calling it the beginning of wisdom. What is this referring to? Well, it's probably not referring to a so-called "slavish fear" of God, in which we fear his punishment for sin - his holy, righteous wrath.

However, I would still have us begin there, because while it is not where we finally want to end up it is a proper starting point. So I ask you, as I ask myself, "Do you fear God in this way, reckoning with your Maker, the God whose Law you have broken, who holds you accountable, who sees your sin (in thought, word, and deed, flowing from a corrupt heart) and does not just sweep it under the rug, whose standards are high and inflexible and uncompromising?" You might respond with a shrug. You might even form a certain counter-argument in your mind, saying silently if not out loud, "Huh - that doesn't sound like Christianity to me, like something Jesus would stand for - I mean doesn't all this talk of judgment have to do with the Old Testament - and hasn't Jesus done away with that in the New Testament, where God just loves and accepts everybody?"

If that's you, I'm going to have to burst your bubble. That's not true Christianity - not even close. For God is unchanging - unchangeable in fact. And he is both a God of mercy, grace, and covenant love - and a holy, righteous God of wrath - across both Testaments, for all time. So God is love, according to the New Testament and the first letter of John the Apostle. And yet, as with me, if you don't repent, he will cast you into everlasting fires. Jesus himself, in fact,

declares as much in Matthew 10:28: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” And, despite the many ways we, with our culture’s help will attempt to ignore or even laugh off and ridicule it, seeking to suppress it, it is still the inconvenient truth. And we know it deep down, what the Bible confronts us with.

But, beyond cornering us with relentless reminders of this dilemma, it offers a resolution. This is what the message of the cross is all about, God giving, sending his eternal Son, come to earth, taking on a human nature, complete with a human body, that he as the God-man might live the life we owe the Father, and that he might die our death. Taking our sin, our death penalty, so that, clothed in Jesus’ perfection, his righteousness, we might live forever, absolved, cleansed, reconciled to God, made his children. All in such a way that divine holiness and justice are satisfied *and* the longings of God’s love in redemption are realized. This is the gospel, which means good news. On this we take our stand, proclaims the Apostle Paul, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 15, not only that Christ has died and been buried but has risen again, bodily (that’s how we know God has accepted his sacrifice for sinners like us), to give us eternal life, to ensure us of our own resurrection at the end of time, when the Lord Jesus returns and makes all things new, ushering in the fullness of a new creation.

Now this is where slavish fear dissolves, melting into so-called “filial fear,” which is mainly what God’s Word is speaking of when it points to “the fear of the LORD” as so critical. This is when you wrestle with God, the God of holy, righteous love, and you find yourself in awe before him, mesmerized, in adoring, reverential wonder. This, I say, following the Bible and everything David is assuming in Psalm 27, is the fear we must cultivate, which isn’t abject terror over the possibility of retribution, of getting our just desserts, which we are rescued from in Christ, but more like the respect you give to your father, the one you look up to - only, in this case, it’s the Father above

Now what does this lead to? Well, that’s where we head next.

#2: The Subordination of Every, Other, Lesser Fear....

Isn’t this how David reasons? With the LORD in his corner, “whom shall I fear?,” he asks, in Psalm 27:1 - asking it rhetorically a second time, as well - “of whom shall I be afraid?”

If it’s settled, and I’m made right with the God of the universe, if the supreme Lord has thus made me his own, as the apple of his eye, it relativizes the importance of anything and everything else. Including all those other fears, which become secondary, which don’t carry us much weight.

Paul echoes these things in Romans 8, moving from the greater to the lesser: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” If God is for us, whoever might be against us can’t hold a candle to him. If God is for us, securing our salvation though it would cost him, dearly, unspeakably, though it would mean not sparing his Son - and if, then, he will with Christ graciously give us all things, everything we might possibly need to trust and obey him - then all grounds for anxiety and insecurity and worry are taken away! For what can man do to me? And what can my spiritual enemies do to me, including the dark forces of Satan?

It means so much. For instance, I need not fear death (as awful as it is, in and of itself), whether it comes COVID-related or not. For Jesus turns the tables on it, making death safe,

making the grave a door, a portal, into his arms, into more of him. For, though I am then absent from the body until the day of resurrection, I am present with the Lord, as Paul again writes, in 2 Corinthians 5. I need not fear the judgment throne of God, for Christ prepares me, sheltering me in his merits, his righteousness, so that I'm ready, so that then, as well as now, when the Father sees me he sees Christ and his record of law-keeping, his record of flawless obedience. I need not fear whatever hardship or affliction comes my way. I may not like it - but I've got something, Someone, to steady me, as knowing the LORD offsets these things with his joy and peace. I have so much in the LORD that I am even freed to stop living for myself, to live to love and please God, to love and lay it down in service to my neighbor....

II. Second, the LORD as My Light, Salvation, and Stronghold....

Brothers, sisters, this is the direction this healthy, robust fear of the LORD takes us in. It's not just deliverance *from* disaster, from hell, you see. It's something positive. It's deliverance *unto* something, or, again, Someone. The Apostle Peter elaborates on it like this, in his first letter, chapter 3: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit," Among other things, what he says amounts to a purpose statement. All this, so that Christ "might bring us to God," to the spiritual wealth of a right relationship with God.

And David, meanwhile, touches on three of the benefits and riches that come with being brought into communion with God, with all the barriers broken down, thanks to what he has done, in Jesus: The LORD as my light; the LORD as my salvation; and the LORD as my stronghold. Notice how David asserts that he is "mine"! It's very personal. It's not just a matter of being raised in a godly family, or being in church, or being loosely affiliated with Christian. It's not just a matter of believing certain things. Please, as I warn myself, I warn you. Don't kid yourself. These things are your treasure if, and only if, you make a commitment to the LORD, repenting and taking your need to God, as we now know him in Jesus Christ.

Let's take a closer look....

#1: The LORD as My Light....

David says, "The LORD is my light." This is the one and only place in the Old Testament where the LORD is actually equated with light, and not just associated with light. Created light brings clarity. It shines upon our path, guiding our way. It imparts warmth. Well, the LORD is all these things to us, spiritually.

In the New Testament, Jesus identifies himself in the Gospel according to John 8 as "the light of the world." 1 John 1:5 goes so far as to say that "God is light" and "in him is no darkness at all." God is light in that he is holy and pure. So good, so impeccable, to trustworthy that we don't need to wonder if there's some hidden, shady agenda with him. He is true to his Word.

But how can we stand before him, when we are filled with so much darkness, when left to ourselves we are just groping around helplessly, blind and lost?

Well, in Jesus his Son, God comes as the light in such a way that he not only exposes our darkness but takes it away, dispelling it. Dispelling the shame. How wonderful is that!

At the same time, God as light calls us to integrity, to live consistently, to live holy, upright lives of obedience and submission to his Word, as followers of Christ. We are thus to walk in the light.

#2: The LORD as My Salvation....

I appreciate very much how David puts it: “The LORD is...my salvation.” He doesn’t just give salvation. He isn’t just the source of it, as if we can use God, taking his stuff but discarding any sort of meaningful relationship to him. No. He himself *is* “my salvation” if I know him in Christ. He is the goal, the point of it all. He is the end-all, be-all.

I enjoy eating as much as the next guy. I look forward to what’s taking place after worship. I’m sure it’ll be a feast. But such things are but faint glimmers of the highest pleasure, to be found in God- the One who is himself my salvation, and yours. Evidenced as we live to glorify and enjoy him forever....

#3: The LORD as My Stronghold....

David adds, he “is the stronghold,” or “refuge,” “of my life.” Now all along, let me acknowledge, David is probably speaking in military terms - light and salvation in the LORD in terms of victory over the opposition, the latest threat. And that’s certainly the case when he describes the LORD as his stronghold. Whatever political security David enjoys as Israel’s king, it is found in the LORD who sends angelic warriors to his aid, who sends help from on high.

Still, we’re on solid ground by applying these things spiritually. Nothing makes us as secure as we are in Jesus, fortified and strengthened - impregnable. Not that we’re exempt or immune as Christians from the common lot of suffering in this world - in fact, we have warrant to expect an extra dose of trouble, as Jesus teaches in John 16:33. But no one, and no thing, can snatch us out of the Good Shepherd’s hand, as he teaches in John 10, no matter what may befall us. He is our Rock.

He makes us like Linus of the Peanuts cartoon series. You just watch, the next chance you get to see the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. The only time that poor kid loses his security blanket is when he reads the Christmas story, about the coming of the Savior, the good news of great joy, when it slips from his hands.

This year has been apocalyptic. Now don’t misconstrue me. All I’m saying is that a lot has been uncovered, which is what apocalyptic means, having to do with an “uncovering.” So much we took for granted, and thought we could count on, has been blown away - when, in reality, it was a fragile, tottering wall all along.

I urge you, then, as I urge myself. Make Father, Son, and Holy Spirit the stronghold of your life. He will keep you. And he will even redeem the evil, as whatever you must bear up under he will cause to serve your character-building, your refining, your being made a little bit more like Jesus.

Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters, I sometimes hesitate to tell people when asked what I do for a living. Sometimes, if I come right out and say, “I’m a pastor,” it can shut down the conversation, or it can become awkward and suddenly quite artificial, with the other person, as far as I can tell, feeling pressure to act a particular way. Once upon a time, I was tempted to answer the question of what I do by saying, “I’m in the insurance business,” referring to spiritual life insurance. But that’s problematic on so many levels, for Jesus Christ is not some “get-out-of-jail-for-free-card,” or some ticket to heaven and nothing more, but One who calls us to love the God who has first loved us according to 1 John 4:19, making it possible.

Every other fear, whether rational or irrational, is displaced by the fear of him, is displaced by a new obsession with him, the One who is greater than whatever is being talked up in the latest news cycle, and greater than whatever struggle you or I might be contending with, though it may never make the headlines. He is imposing, majestic, but he cares, tenderly, being almighty to save. And he bids you to bring him your fear, even your sin, its guilt, its tyranny, and he will by the blood of his incarnate Son wash it away, and he will by his Spirit begin to break its power over you, setting you free, so that you can say with David of old: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

Amen!

Prayer