

Hebrews 4:1-16

Utilizing Fear in the Right Way

Let us therefore fear... v. 1

Fear can be a good emotion if it's exercised the right way under the right circumstances. Perhaps you've heard stories of spectacular feats that have been accomplished because of fear. I heard once of a young man working under a car when the jack holding the car up suddenly broke. The young man's Father was on hand to see the car fall on top of his son and in the fear of the moment the adrenalin that was released in his system enabled him to lift the car off his son.

I've never been in the military and have never had to fight in a war but I can't help but wonder if courage amounts to utilizing the energy that is released by fear in order to go forward into battle. To a lesser degree you find the same thing in a musician who has to perform for the first time in front of an audience. There's something dreadful in such a circumstance that triggers fear but that fear can be good if the energy it unleashes can be harnessed and utilized in the performance.

By the same token fear can be a terrible emotion if it gets the best of us and instead of enabling us it paralyzes us instead. When that happens to a performer then the audience grows uneasy and sympathizes with the one who has been hindered by his fear and is not able to overcome it.

Now in Scripture there is a fear that we're to avoid and there's also a fear that we're to utilize. Both of these ideas come together in Lk. 12:4,5 where Christ says *And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.*

John Brown has an insightful comment on the fears of unbelievers and believers. He writes: *Both believers and unbelievers have their fears; but they arise from different sources, and have quite opposite effects. The fear of unbelievers and the unbelieving fears of believers arise from unworthy thoughts of God – a distrust of His power, faithfulness, and goodness – a prevailing love of 'the present evil world' and its enjoyments, which makes them more afraid of worldly losses and sufferings for righteousness' sake than of forfeiting the divine favour. Such fears not only indispose the mind for obedience, but lead directly to sin. But that godly fear, which is peculiar to believers, which arises from a just view, reverence, and esteem of the divine character – a supreme desire of His favour as their chief happiness, - is a fear lest they should offend Him, and incur His just displeasure, - such a fear of Him as outweighs all the allurements of sin on the one hand, and all the terrors of suffering for righteousness' sake on the other. This is that fear which Christ inculcates on His disciples in Lk. 12:4,5.*

I believe this is the fear that the author of Hebrews is calling for when he exhorts his readers in 4:1 *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left [us] of entering into his rest,*

any of you should seem to come short of it. The Hebrews were in danger of caving in to the wrong kind of fear – the fear of man which bringeth a snare. And so the Apostle endeavors to motivate them to persevere in their faith by utilizing the right kind of fear. I want us to look at the right kind of fear this morning. This fear is what's called godly fear in Heb 12:28 *Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:* In preparation for our time around the Lord's table I want you to think with me on:

Utilizing Fear in the Right Way

There are a number of things in this chapter that show us either by a direct statement or by implication what things we should fear. Consider with me first all:

I. We Must Fear Coming Short of a Promise

This the thing that is directly stated in the text – Heb 4:1 *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left [us] of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.*

There is an ultimate and a practical sense that may be drawn from this text which teaches us plainly that if unbelief rules our hearts then we come short of the promise of His rest. We come short of the promises of the gospel in other words. We come short of the peace of God that passes understanding. We come short of that joy that is unspeakable and full of glory. We come short of heaven and the rest that accompanies everlasting life.

It's important to understand the real meaning of the text. John Brown again notes: *These words are not to be understood as an exhortation to believers to be fearful in reference to their ultimate salvation. To all believers it is distinctly promised that "they shall never perish, but have everlasting life." To all believers the words of our Lord to His disciples may be considered as addressed: "Fear not, little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "I give unto My sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My Father, who gave them Me, is greater than all; and none can pluck them out of my Father's hand." It never can be the duty of a believer to doubt the fulfilment of the promises which God has made to believers; and the more firmly he believes them, the more active will he be in the discharge of every duty, "the joy of the Lord will be his strength."*

But believers ought to fear and guard against the "evil heart of unbelief;" knowing that he who is completely under its influence cannot at all "enter into God's rest" – must be a stranger, both in time and through eternity, to that holy happiness in reference to which "a promise has been left us;" and knowing also, that just in proportion to the degree in which we are influenced by it (i.e. unbelief) we "come short" of the enjoyment of that rest into which men enter believing, and into which, from the very nature of the case, it is impossible for them to enter in any other way.

And so there is an ultimate application drawn from the text – unbelievers are lost in the end and will never enjoy the rest that God provides. And there is a practical application

that can be drawn from the text. To the degree unbelief holds sway over us we fail to enjoy God's rest and we come short of having the joy of salvation as our strength. This is something we must fear in the sense that we should dread it and carefully watch against it. We should fear losing our spiritual vitality. We should fear having our religion reduced to mere dead orthodoxy. We should fear being unaffected by the glorious truths of Christ's love and Christ's provision for us in His broken body and shed blood. And we should fear because if unbelief rules in the end then we've never been saved we've only been hypocrites.

There's a tragic irony to the words of the text in that it speaks of God leaving us a promise – a glorious promise that pertains to our well-being for time and eternity – a promise of everlasting life given by God who cannot lie. There is nothing subtle in God's promise. There are no hidden clauses in fine print nor is there any insincerity in God who freely offers the promise of rest. The promise comes fully and it comes freely and it has come at a very high price to God and yet sadly and tragically there are those that come short of the promise. There are those that are more fully swayed by the cares of the world and by the deceitfulness of riches whose lives have never been transformed by the promises of God.

If we're going to utilize fear the right way, then, we must aim our fear at the right thing. We must dread the very potential of coming short of the promises of God. But would you notice with me next:

II. We Must Fear Being Passed Over in God's Purpose of Redemption

Notice the words of verse 6: *Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief.* Underscore the clause *some must enter therein.*

The apostle is not only giving us a history lesson in this section in which he refers to the failure of the Israelites to enter Canaan on account of their unbelief. But he's also giving us a theology lesson and the lesson is simply this – God will succeed in advancing His own cause. His kingdom will come – His church will be built. As Christ Himself said in Jn. 6:37 *All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.*

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me – that's tantamount to saying *some must enter therein.* The Lord Jesus, you see, has paid too high a price for His people to lose them. We who believe are His inheritance. That is indeed a marvel of grace that poor, vile, and guilty sinners could somehow become Christ's inheritance but it's true.

The value Christ places on you must be measured by the price He paid for you. And He paid the price of a broken body and His shed blood. What this means therefore is that if unbelief gains such sway as to lead you away from Christ and leave you with the burden of guilt in the city of Destruction, you will not hinder the advancement of Christ's cause –

you will miss out in His purpose of grace but you will not hinder His cause – *some must enter therein*. Christ will see to it – the Holy Spirit will see to it.

It would have been easy, I suppose, for the Hebrew Christians of that day to view their Christian religion as being obscure. It was Judaism, after all, that possessed the temple. It was Judaism that traced its roots into antiquity. It was Judaism that still held sway over Jerusalem. The followers of Christ, although they numbered in the thousands, were still in the minority and the temptation would have been strong among these Hebrew Christians to think that this obscure segment of Judaism would vanish in a short time – perhaps in the span of a single generation.

They would not have known with much clarity what you and I know today – which is that Judaism as they knew it would soon vanish – the temple would be destroyed – the people would be scattered and it would be Judaism that would become obscure while the Kingdom of Christ would advance to all the nations. *Some must enter therein* our text tells us and in fact many would enter in – beginning at Jerusalem but spreading out to Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth – Christ would say to His disciples (Acts 1:8) before ascending into heaven.

Do we not find ourselves facing the same temptation at times – the temptation of thinking that it's the cause of Christ that is obscure and it's the powers of the nations that seem to hold sway? The forces of ungodliness are relentless. They never seem to grow weary of promoting their ungodly ways. And it seems like it's the cause of Christ that is continually in retreat and is becoming more and more obscure. And as this mindset settles over the minds and hearts of believers then they become more and more governed by the fear of man rather than the fear of God.

Here, then, is what we must guard ourselves against. Here is what we must dread – being governed by the fear of man. Those that are governed by the fear of man, you see, have caved in to unbelief. They have failed to realize that there are *some* indeed many *that must enter into the promise of God's rest*. And though we don't see it yet by sight we do know that the story has been told in the Word of God from start to finish and it's Christ's Kingdom that will prevail. On a much grander scale than the destruction of Jerusalem this whole world will give way to Christ at His return.

This is why Peter exhorts us to be *Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat* – 2Peter 3:12.

Let us therefore, fear, that by caving in to unbelief we'll not only miss the promise of His rest but we'll miss the purpose that is destined to prevail. We must, then, utilize fear in the right way. *Happy is the man that feareth always* we read in Prov. 28:14. That statement is true when we refer to the right kind of fear that is aimed in the right direction. It remains for us to consider that if we would utilize fear in the right way:

III. We Must Fear Our High Priest in Heaven

Would you note the words of verse 14 *Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast [our] profession.*

Up to this point our consideration of the emotion of fear has been to consider it from the perspective of fright or dread. We should be afraid of coming short of a promise that has been left to us by God. We should be afraid of missing out on God's purpose of grace in redemption. It is fear from this perspective of being afraid that should instill in our hearts an attitude of watchfulness. We must, in other words, guard our minds and hearts from unbelief and fear is certainly a legitimate form of motivation to do so.

But this perspective of dread is not the only aspect of fear that must govern our minds and hearts. If all there was to fear was being afraid of certain things then fear would be a form of bondage. We've made reference in an earlier study to 2:15 which speaks of those who through fear of death are all their lifetime subject to bondage.

So our understanding of fear must go a step further. We have a good description of this step in Heb 12:28 *Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*

Reverence and godly fear – that's a good description of fear in its tempered form. It begins with a knowledge of God's majesty and holiness. Indeed the frightening aspect of fear is intensified by what we read in verse 13 *Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things [are] naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.*

It is frightening to think that we are totally exposed to God. He knows what you do and fail to do. He knows your thoughts – He knows your motives – He knows your affections – He knows, in other words, your heart. He can see right through you to the point that He knows you better than you know yourself.

As sinners we manage to fool others and we even manage to fool ourselves. The heart, after all, according to Jeremiah is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can know it? We can't. We can't plumb the depths of our own depraved hearts. But all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of God. We are completely exposed before Him.

But here is where this frightening aspect of fear is tempered into reverence and godly fear - *we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.* We have a mediator between us and God. We have One to represent us – One to intercede for us – One who shed His blood for us – One who has delivered us from the dread of death because He died for us and bore our condemnation.

This is what we're called upon to remember this morning around the Lord's table. We have a great high priest who became one of us – who gave His body to be broken and His blood to be shed. And so now we no longer are dominated by the dread of being exposed to God in our every word, thought, and deed. We have a covering, you see, in the person of Christ Himself. Our lives are hidden in Him and we are joined to Him. And as a result

we not only no longer tremble and fear in a dreadful manner because of our exposure to God but we are actually invited by God to come into His presence – indeed He invites us to come and to come boldly before the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This is what humbles us and moves us to reverence before God. Our great high priest has died for us and is risen and ascended into heaven for us and He represents us before the ruler of all creation.

In our corrupt political climate today it becomes easy to feel that we're not represented by those we elect to represent us. It seems all too clear that they have an agenda of their own and they represent special interests or they represent their own interests. Isn't it good to know that we do have One to represent us before the ruler of all nations. And isn't it good to know that He faithfully represents us.

He pleads His blood on our behalf and petitions His Father that every purchased blessing will be applied to His blood-bought people and that they'll be enabled to press on in their walk and in their service to Him. Here is godly fear, then, functioning as it should. We are aware of our sin and we're aware of our Savior's love and the provision He's made for us because of His love to us.

Our desire is to honor Him. Our desire is to live for Him. We feel that we owe Him all that we have and all that we are. The thing that we most dread is grieving Him or dishonoring Him. We've come to hate the sins that too easily beset us because we know that it was our sins that cost Him His life blood for us. We love Him because of the promise of rest and the reality of that promise that is ours even this very day.

As we partake of these elements this morning, then, let us do so with godly fear – remembering the price He paid to redeem us, pledging our faith in the provision He's made – pleading His precious blood against our unbelief so that we don't come short of the promise of His rest nor do we miss the purpose that is the purpose of all the ages – the plan of redemption – instead we go to the One that apart from His broken body and shed blood we would dread to go before but on account of that broken body and shed blood we now come openly and freely with hearts that our filled with praise and thanksgiving.

May we utilize fear in the right way, then, that we may be set free from all other forms of fear and we may glorify and enjoy our God on account of what He's done for us through Jesus Christ.