

What Do You Fear?

Proverbs 28:1; 1 John 4:17-18

April 7, 2002

Rev. Greg L. Price

When did fear in the heart of man first raise its ugly head in human history? When Adam sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, for we read, “And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:9-10). Adam’s conscience tormented him with guilt which caused him to hide from the presence of God, who came to commune with him in the cool of the evening. What should have been a time of precious communion with the living God took a terrible turn and became a time of guilt-inspired dread of the living God.

A guilty conscience even makes men a terror to themselves. When you are living in a guilt-ridden state, the last person (very often) with whom you want to be alone is yourself. For then you have time to replay in your mind the sins that make you run from the Lord and flee from your own conscience. Can you not see that sin and the guilt of sin make men cowards?

What are your fears today? From what are you running? Are you trying to escape a guilty conscience, an overpowering individual or group of individuals? Do you fear the loss of work, family, or home? Or perhaps you fear the ruin of your health, prestige, or freedom. You may fear the consequences of being wrong or even the consequences of being right. Maybe you are overcome with a fear of war or death. Regardless of what your fears may be, today the Lord calls you to face your fears eyeball to eyeball and learn the divine way to cease being cowards.

The main points from our text this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) The Wicked Are Overcome by Fear (Proverbs 28:1a); (2) The Righteous Are Overcomers by Faith (Proverbs 28:1b).

I. The Wicked Are Overcome by Fear (Proverbs 28:1a).

A. When King Solomon states that “the wicked” flee when no man pursueth, we are to understand this to be a character trait of those who are the enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of us by nature are like Adam who hid in fear before receiving the promise of grace through Jesus Christ. It is part and parcel of a fallen nature to run in fear (Revelation 21:8). Try as man will to disguise his fear by laughter, anger, wealth, drunkenness, pleasure, body-building, martial arts, or hypnosis, God states that fear (due to the fall of man into sin) is bred into the very fabric of man’s nature. For the wicked cannot ultimately deal with the root of fear: sin and the guilt of sin.

B. I should point out that fear (like sin in general) is not eradicated altogether from the heart of the righteous who trust alone in Jesus Christ alone for their eternal salvation. A sinful fear, dread, terror, worry, and anxiety yet plague the Christian in various ways throughout his/her life. Out of fear, Peter and the other disciples fled to save their own necks when Christ was betrayed by Judas. Peter even shamefully denied knowing His Savior three times out of fear of what man might do to him. The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian (as it relates to fear) is that the Christian has been delivered from the bondage of fear as a vital characteristic of who he is. The Christian is no longer bound or obligated to be afraid, for he/she is united to a risen and victorious Jesus Christ who overcame fear for you just as He overcame all sin, Satan, and death for you. The torment of a guilty conscience has been remedied for the Christian (Romans 8:1,33-39). The work of justification and sanctification has as one of its benefits to replace the torment of fear with an ever increasing enjoyment of Christ’s love (1 John 4:17-18). Dear ones, the more you grow to rest securely as the adopted children of God in the love of God for you, the more you will see that fear has no strangle-hold

upon you. It is one of the tools Satan will use against the believer in his/her weakness. He will lead you to fear the God of your with a slavish sinful fear and will accuse you of sin (that was once and for all paid for by Jesus Christ) so that you even find yourself running from the very one who loves you with a perfect love and who alone can remove from him a guilty conscience and the torment of fear.

C. What sinful fear is not.

1. A due respect for lawful authority is not sinful fear (Proverbs 24:21). This applies to all lawful authority (whether in the family, or in the church, or at work, or in the civil realm), for it is founded upon the Fifth Commandment ("Honor thy father and thy mother").

2. A cautious determination to avoid danger, sin, or temptation is not sinful fear. This is actually a keeping of the Sixth Commandment wherein we are taught to endeavor by all lawful means to preserve our own life and the life of others. Therefore, fleeing persecution in order to preserve one's life is not sinful in itself as long the testimony for Christ is not abandoned or forsaken in the process (Matthew 10:23). Consider the Nicodemites at the time of John Calvin.

3. A serious concern or burden for oneself or others is not sinful fear (Galatians 6:2). God places such burdens upon your heart not that you might plunge yourself into fear, but rather cast yourself and others upon the strong arm of the Lord. It is when you do not cast these burdens upon the Lord that you are led into sinful worry and anxiety (1 Peter 5:7).

4. A holy reverence for the Triune God is not a sinful fear (Psalm 19:9; Proverbs 9:10). This holy fear is an awe and wonder of God's greatness, God's holiness, God's mercy—the absolute perfection of His attributes. This fear is a holy fear wherein you take God seriously. You treat Him not with disrespect or irreverence by your thoughts, words, or deeds. To the contrary, you hold Him in awe and wonder and seek to preserve the infinite dignity of His name and everything by which He reveals Himself.

D. What sinful fear is.

1. Sinful fear is an overwhelming terror of Satan, man, sin, judgment, death, or any other circumstance in life or death. It is to be controlled by your fears, led by your fears, tormented by your fears. Consider how Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19).

2. Sinful fear is a worry or anxiety that you cannot cast upon the Lord. It is a preoccupation with a person, event, or circumstance that leads you to trust in the arm of flesh (in the gifts and graces of man) and to find your help and comfort in the weak and changeable people or things of this world.

3. Sinful fear is a slavish dread of a condemning God. This servile fear may result from one actually being under the Covenant of Works wherein one awaits the infinite judgment of God's consuming fire. Or it may result from you (who are redeemed from the curse of the law by Jesus Christ) mentally removing yourself from under the Covenant of Grace (where Christ accomplishes all righteousness and favor with God for you) and you rather cast yourself under the Covenant of Works (where you must accomplish your own righteousness and favor with God for yourself). All that you secure for yourself in such a state of mind is torment and fear of God's condemning wrath and anger. Your conscience becomes guilt-ridden even when you try your hardest to please Him. God in such a state of mind appears to be an avenging Judge whose infinite wrath cannot be satisfied. Here is a state of mind in which you endure the torments of hell. However, there is hope in Christ. For God has not given you a spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7). You can grow in your knowledge of what Christ has already accomplished for all those who lay hold of His righteousness by faith.

E. Fear, worry, and anxiety spring from unbelief and guilt. Dear ones, you fall into the torment of fear because you have like Peter taken your eye of faith off of your almighty, faithful, and merciful Savior and rather have looked at the crashing waves and the tempestuous winds which surround you. You have come to hear and believe the threats of man, events, and circumstances more than you believe the promises of your God who cannot lie.

F. Fear may be manifested in various ways.

1. You may lash out in anger or seek to destroy the person or thing feared. Saul sought to kill David out of fear (1 Samuel 18:12,29). The Pharisees conspired to murder Christ out of fear (Mark 11:18).

2. You may laugh and make fun of the person or thing that is feared. You think that if your fears can become a joke to you, you can rid yourself of your fears. This is a short-lived cure for a terminal problem. Avoid it and it will go away—perhaps for a time, but not for good.

3. You may run from the person or thing feared. Here you think if you can keep yourself occupied and constantly active, you can rid yourself of your fears. This may again provide some temporary relief, but it will not deal with the fear and its cause. It simply treats the symptom but not the root problem, which is unbelief or guilt.

4. You may become paralyzed and immobilized by the person or thing that is feared. At such times, you are like a deer that can't move because it is caught in the headlights of an approaching car. You are afraid to make a decision one way or another, so you say nothing (like a person before an audience with stage fright). You convince yourself that the safest thing to do is to do nothing at all.

5. You may be overcome with unrelenting guilt that will not cease or be abated (Psalm 32:1-4).

G. What God says about sinful fear.

1. He has not given such fear to the Christian who trusts alone in Christ alone for his/her eternal salvation (2 Timothy 1:7; Romans 8:15; Hebrews 2:15).

2. As Christians you are not to fear man or even Satan for they can only kill the body (Luke 12:4-7).

II. The Righteous Are Overcomers by Faith (Proverbs 28:1b).

A. Solomon contrasts the fleeing in fear of the wicked with the boldness of the righteous. This boldness is said to be like that of a lion. The lion of all beasts in the world epitomizes that which is without fear of foe or enemy. The Lord by this contrast encourages you as a Christian that you (regardless of your weakness and fear) have been given the grace of boldness and confidence like that of a lion. The Lion of the tribe of Judah (Jesus Christ) has already purchased true boldness and courage for each and every believer in Christ. This is not a fairy tale, nor the power of positive thinking. This is a grace already deposited into your spiritual bank account. Dear child of God, it belongs to you as your inheritance. Have you by faith and trust in Christ been withdrawing that grace of confidence in the living God which Christ purchased for you?

B. We have seen how fear affects us and manifests itself in our lives, but let us now learn how to overcome our fears by the grace of God. You must first admit your own inability to overcome fear in your life apart from God's grace. Telling yourself, "I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid" will not do it. You must see your own weakness before you can experience the power of Christ. It is an amazing paradox that those who are most courageous and confident in the Lord are those who are most aware of their own inherent weakness and fear.

C. The solution almost seems too easy when you feel as though you are enslaved by your fears like a prisoner within a barricade of barbed wire. The way to overcome fear is twofold: (1) trust the promises of God; and (2) enjoy the forgiveness of God. The one naturally follows the other. For you cannot enjoy the wonders of a guilt-free conscience apart from learning to embrace the promises of Christ made to you in the Covenant of Grace. Since your fears result from unbelief and guilt, confidence and courage result from trust in Christ and forgiveness by Christ. I declare to you, dear ones, with all earnestness and sincerity that to the degree that you cling to the Lord as your righteousness, as your strength, as your health, as your life, as your

joy, as your contentment, as your peace, and as you seek daily to cast upon Him all your sins, all your cares, all your anxieties, all your worries, and all your fears, to that same degree you will overcome fear in your life.

D. It is faith in the promises of a God who cannot lie that brings the grace of confidence, boldness, and courage into the life of the believer (Psalm 27:1-5; Psalm 46:1-3; Isaiah 26:3). Consider Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in Daniel 3:16-18.

E. Dear ones, how does your faith in Christ grow to overcome your fears?

1. Identify and acknowledge your fears.
2. Confess your fears as rooted in your own unbelief and not taking God at His Word.
3. Seek His forgiveness and begin to trust His promise as found in 1 John 1:9.
4. You can't trust someone you do not know. Therefore, it must become a daily part of

your life to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ through study of His Word and fervent prayer. God is truthful and cannot lie. God is faithful and will keep all His promises. God is almighty and cannot be overcome by Satan or man. God is love and desires that you enjoy all of the benefits and graces of salvation. Look to the resurrection of Christ.

5. Cast your fears upon the Lord throughout the day as they appear before you. Do not carry them.

6. Cling to the promises of Christ in the face of your fears. Know them and use them in battle against the enemy of your soul.

7. Learn to rest in the knowledge that you are the justified, beloved, and adopted child of God. Learn to enjoy God's love for you (undeserving as you are). Learn to be humbled by God's amazing love for you rather than to be puffed up with pride.

8. Look in faith to Christ and your heavenly inheritance, for what can Satan or man make you fear in this life when Christ and heaven have become your life (Philippians 1:21; Hebrews 11:24-26). Love His coming.

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