

Fear Not
Revelation 1:17-20
9/28/2014

There is a scene in C.S. Lewis's book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where the four children are talking with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan the lion, who is a representation of Jesus Christ. One of the children asks if Aslan is safe, since she would feel quite nervous about meeting a lion. Mr. Beaver says, "Safe? Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good." The world and all too many Christians put their fear in the wrong place. They usually fear mankind, other people, or what Satan can do. Fear is a devastating thing. It can even kill us. But the Lord Jesus Christ is the one to fear. And when we fear Him, it is not the same thing as terror. It is reverence and awe. Our passage teaches us that we need not experience terror, but instead we should look to the One Who has the keys of death and Hades, Jesus Christ.

What John saw in his vision was the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. It was an awe-inspiring sight, too magnificent to put into words. John stretches the boundaries of human language to try to describe what he saw. When John saw that blessed vision, he fell at the ground as though dead. This is the normal reaction of a human being when he sees God. The reason for that is simple. As one commentator puts it, "Behind (this fear) stands the knowledge that sinful human beings must perish before the holiness and purity of God." When Isaiah saw the vision of the glorious Lord in the temple, his response was to prostrate himself and cry out that he had unclean lips and dwelt in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Oftentimes we do not realize how sinful we are until we are brought face to face with Almighty God. If we are dirty and live among other dirty people, we do not notice our own dirtiness quite so much, do we? However, if we come into the presence of someone who is very clean, we notice right away our own dirtiness, and we want to cover it up, or deflect attention away from ourselves. This illustrates well for us how foolish it is to judge our own level of holiness by our neighbors. If we say that we are better than our neighbors because "at least I don't do THAT..." we will fail to realize something very important, and that is this: the only thing we gain by comparing ourselves to our neighbors is more sin. It is a form of the fear of man, and even in terms of sinful gain, the only thing it does is makes us look better to other people. But before God, all such manipulation is futile. As it says in verse 14, Jesus' eyes are like a flame of fire. They burn through all such lies that we tell ourselves in order to deflect attention away from our own sin. No, if we want to compare ourselves to anyone, then we need to compare ourselves to the God of glory. Only then will we have a realistic picture of ourselves.

Now, John understood this, which was why he fell down as though he were

dead. He knew that sin brings death, which is why his position here closely imitates the state of death. However, look at the grace that Jesus extends to John. He tells John not to fear, and lays His right hand on him. The words “Fear not” are the key words of the passage, and they are the words that God has for us today. When the Lord lays His hands on us, there is no reason to fear. The reason for that is obvious: Jesus cleanses us from all our uncleanness. Most of the time, uncleanness is contagious. It spreads from one person to another. But with Jesus, it is the exact opposite: His holiness is contagious. All He has to do is to touch us with His right hand and we are clean. That cleansing is a resurrection. John's comment about lying as though dead is not just some kind of exaggeration just to prove a point. No, John is actually talking here about a kind of figurative, or literary, death and resurrection. It is a close-up illustration of the fact that Jesus really does have the keys to death and Hades in His hand. Just as Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also He made John “alive” when John was lying “as though dead.”

And this resurrection gets at the reason why we should not fear. Verse 18 explains the reasoning behind Jesus' comforting command not to fear. What Jesus is saying is that all the holiness of God that is present in Jesus Christ offers no threat whatsoever to the believer. Why is that? Because Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death. He is the living One. Yes, He died in order to take on Himself the punishment for our sins, but He was raised from the dead. As one black preacher put it on Easter morning (and he was imagining what Satan said on Easter morning): “He got away! He got away! And He took the keys with Him!” To understand just what this would have meant to first-century Christians, we have to look at two things. The first thing is that there were many gods and goddesses who were worshiped in the first century, and many of them claimed to have the keys of death and the Hades. Hades here means simply “the grave,” by the way. Almost every religion of the day that believed in many gods and goddesses had one god who was responsible for keeping the place of the dead. The goddess that the Christians in Asia Minor would have known about the most was Hecate. Hecate was a goddess of many things, but one of her nicknames was the “keyholder.” The keys were the keys of Hades. So John has here an apologetic in mind against the worship of Hecate. The other thing to keep in mind was the fear that the Asian Christians had of the Roman empire. The Roman empire was persecuting Christians to the point of killing them. Fear and worry about whether they would be seized and tortured and killed could easily prevent them from seeing beyond that to the Person who held the keys of life and death in His own hands. How comforting it would be for them to know that their lives were not in the control of the Roman Empire, but were instead in the hands of their loving, and all-powerful Lord! As one writer puts it, Rome's greatest power is its ability to put Christians to death. John mitigates that power with his declaration, made in the vision by Christ

himself, that Christ has the keys that will release persons from death into eternal life.

If Jesus has this much power over our greatest enemies, then how much more power does He have over smaller enemies! Charles Allen relates the story of a 5 year old boy named Johnny: 5-year old Johnny was in the kitchen as his mother made supper. She asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but he didn't want to go in alone. "It's dark in there and I'm scared." She asked again, and he persisted. Finally she said, "It's OK--Jesus will be in there with you." Johnny walked hesitantly to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and started to leave when all at once an idea came, and he said: "Jesus, if you're in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?" The Puritan James Durham said that if we are plagued by excessive fear of things in this world, it is because we are mistaken somewhere in our view of who Jesus is. In other words, if we have too much fear, then what we are really believing is that Jesus does not have control over our enemies. We are afraid that something will get by Jesus. We are afraid that something will not be controlled by Jesus, and that it will get us. Friends, there is not a single molecule in this entire universe that God does not control. Even Satan is on a leash. He cannot go anything further than what God allows. This might not be what it looks like right now. We look at the world, and we see chaos, and wars, and persecution of Christians, and all sorts of horrible things. So where is God when all these things are happening? Same place He always was: seated on His throne, making sure that all things work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Another reason why we need not fear is the right hand of Jesus. Notice that the right hand is mentioned several times in a short space. The right hand, of course, is the hand of power and authority (with apologies to you south-paws out there!). In this passage, Jesus holds the seven stars in His right hand, and He also touches John with His right hand. The same power that holds the universe in His hands is the same power that touched John, and it is the same power that touches us. Again remember that if Jesus has conquered death and Hades, and has the keys to those things (which means He has authority over them), then what in the universe can possibly hurt us? Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus.

One of the main reasons that Revelation was written was to exhort us not to fear what man can do to us. This is evident in verse 19. The NKJV is missing a word, unfortunately. The second word of the verse in Greek is the word "therefore." Why is John supposed to write these words and send them to the churches? So that people can know who this Jesus is, and why they should not fear. So, in many ways, the book of Revelation as a whole takes us directly to our fears, makes us face them, and then shows us how much more powerful Jesus is than what we fear.

Now, times change, and our fears sometimes change. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University reported that grade school children's greatest fears thirty years ago were: 1) Animals, 2) Being in a dark room, 3) High places, 4) Strangers, 5) Loud noises. Today, kids are afraid of the following: 1) Divorce, 2) Nuclear war, 3) Cancer, 4) Pollution, 5) Being mugged. Our world is a little different than it was thirty years ago. However, our God is no different, which means that He still has our greatest enemies under lock and key. Do we really believe that? Dr. E. Stanley Jones said the following, and it is well worth pondering:

I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath--these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely--these are my native air. A John Hopkins University doctor says, 'We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non-worriers, but that is a fact.' But I, who am simple of mind, think I know; We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality.

There are any number of things that we can become afraid of. If you google "phobia list" you will come across a handy website that has a whole bunch of phobias listed. Here are some of the more amusing: Arachibutyrophobia- Fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of the mouth; Anuptaphobia- Fear of staying single; Anablephobia- Fear of looking up; Bibliophobia- Fear of books; Consecotaleophobia- Fear of chopsticks; Coulrophobia- Fear of clowns; Dentophobia- Fear of dentists; Disposophobia- Fear of throwing stuff out; Ephebiphobia- Fear of teenagers; and, last but not least, Hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia- Fear of long words. We can become afraid of just about anything, and there's a name for it! Not all of them are as silly as the ones I just listed. But we should live by faith, not by fear. We were built for faith. We were made for God. God is the One who has everything in the entire universe in the palm of His hand. Yes, He's got the whole world in His hands. God is not safe; He is not tame; but He is good. Therefore, fear not!