

Christmas and the End of Fear

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to read scripture together now, the passage that David's going to speak to us from. Mary's going to come up and read for us from Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 14.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth, and she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. Well, we are continuing this morning our series on Jesus, the wonderful counsellor. We've been examining a number of different negative feelings and emotions that as human beings we all have to grapple with. These various emotions are not, of course, to be viewed as being entirely separate from each other. They're in fact all connected and interlinked in different ways.

But we've been thinking about the way in which Jesus, the wonderful counsellor, is able to meet us in our need and bring real transformation and change. And over the past couple of weeks, Corey has looked at shame and disappointment, how Jesus is able to minister to our hearts when we feel crushed and broken by our experience of life. And this morning we're turning to consider, I suppose, yet another negative and often destructive emotion, that of fear. Now, in the season of Advent, it's common enough to associate the coming of Christmas with hope and with joy and with peace and with love, but probably not fear. And yet in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, fear is mentioned certainly on more than one occasion. When Mary, for example, is confronted by the angel Gabriel in Luke chapter 1 and verse 30, we read,

And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And in a similar fashion, when Joseph in Matthew chapter 1 is wrestling with what he should do on learning of Mary's pregnancy, we read there in verse 21, As he considered these things, Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

And this morning, I want us to turn to look at fear through the lens of yet another famous passage in the Christmas story. Because in Luke chapter 2, we once again read about fear. This time, it's shepherds out keeping watch over their flock by night. And so, in Luke 2 and verse 9 and following, we read this, An angel of the Lord appeared to them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

[4 : 1 0] And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And what I want to do for a moment or two this morning is to look at fear not so much psychologically as theologically. And I want us to consider the problem of fear, or the root of fear, and then the answer to fear, because that is what I think that we see in our text this morning. So, that's Luke chapter 2, verses 9 through 11. We're going to look at fear through the lens of this

particular text. And so, the first thing I want you to notice is the root of fear. And we have that in chapter 2, verse 9. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

So, at the heart of this passage in Luke chapter 2 are some terrified people. Shepherds, I think the authorized version has the lovely description, it says that they were sore afraid. They were quietly minding their own business. They were keeping watch over their flock on the hillside at night, and they were doing all right, until suddenly someone switched the lights on, and we're told that the glory of the Lord shone around them. That word for glory here, one used extensively, for example, in the Greek Old Testament, to convey something of the manifest, visible presence of God. God's glory, luminous and overpowering. Sometimes in their experiences in life that can bring us to an end of ourselves, an accident maybe that shakes us, or the loss of someone close to us, maybe the results of a biopsy, a medical examination that kind of changes things for us. We're suddenly, we're dramatically reminded really of the transience of this world. Things that formerly seemed so important to us become utterly inconsequential. Our whole perspective is altered, and there's something of that here in the experience of the shepherds. The light of God's glory appears. The shepherds are terrified. They're scared because of the presence of God's glory. Now, in a way, that may appear strange to us. After all, usually, we're more likely to be scared in the dark. That's when the lights come on that we're relieved and our fears depart. But that is not true in a spiritual sense. Theologically, as human beings, we are happy in the dark and scared to death in the light. John, in his gospel says this, this is the judgment.

The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. Spiritually, as men and women, we love the darkness because we can hide away there.

But when God comes near with the light of his glory, we, like these shepherds, can often be terrified and traumatized. Because according to the Bible, that is the essence of the human condition. We are, as human beings, in bondage to fear. All of our lives, we're fearful of the light, what it reveals about God and what it reveals about ourselves. And I think to understand what is happening here, we need to think a little bit about another biblical event. I think the one that contains some striking similarities. Back in the Old Testament, in the first book of the Old Testament, in the book of Genesis, in Genesis chapter 3, and at verse 8, the experience of Adam and Eve is recounted with these words, they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

[8 : 45] And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord among the trees of the garden. Of course, the language of Genesis 3 there is anthropomorphic, but that kind of language is used for a reason, is designed to communicate something of God's tangible presence, the profound reality of it.

But of course, on that occasion, everything was different. Something drastic had happened to Adam and Eve. Something had changed. They had decided to be their own masters, that they would live for themselves. They would decide for themselves what was right and wrong. And so, when the Lord God came to Adam and Eve, and if I can put it this way, the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were so afraid. They jumped into the bushes, and they hid themselves. The Lord God called to the man and said to him, where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself. Adam says, I was afraid, I was naked, and I hid. Sin brings fear, because human beings are now living lives in which we desire to be our own masters. When God's glory, truth, and light come, our instinct is to hide. Fear is hiding. And we think of perhaps when children have done something wrong that they know to be wrong in the house, what do they do? They hide. And that's what we do. We hide from God. When God's presence comes near, it brings fear. Fear of being discovered, of being undone, of being exposed for who and what we are. Adam hides. He withdraws, because that's what sin does to us.

It wraps us up in fear. We try hard to insulate ourselves from the truth, but that truth is always trying to break through. We push it away, but it comes back. The Bible says that our fundamental fear as human beings is actually a terror of God and His truth. This taproot of fear manifests itself in a whole host of different ways. The symptoms emerge in all sorts of other fears. So, for some people, it's the fear of rejection in personal relationships. They will never open up. Their fears make them either cold and unemotional or shy and retiring. Still others deal with those fears by being extrovert and gregarious. But often it's all a mask. A mask worn to gain acceptance with others, to fit in, to be liked. But all the time they are hiding themselves away. And there's a fear of failure.

Those of you who are perfectionists or workaholics, driven. And that drivenness is fear. It's fear that drives you. Those inner voices that say that you've got to do better, that you can't fall short of your standards. That fear of looking bad in the eyes of other people. And the fear of guilt, a bad conscience, a bad conscience, a bad conscience, you have to prove your goodness, your moral rectitude to others and even to yourself. Anything to hide away from any sense of shame and guilt. Fear of the future. Some who are always worrying, always full of anxiety. Worry about everything. Worry about worrying. Children, spouse, money, job, tomorrow. Always worrying, distracted, anxious, difficult to concentrate. And the fear of death. Fears dog our lives lying behind them all. It's that great fear of death.

[13:22] Our own mortality. Because the reality of death makes us all realize that we are not captains of our own destiny after all. Long, long ago, when I was a teenager at school, our English teacher introduced us to a whole range of different types of poetry. And one poem that made a deep impression on me, which I've never forgotten, was from the pen of the Scottish poet William Dunbar. Written, this is not a recent piece of poetry, written in 1505. It comprises 24 stanzas. And it's entitled, Lament for the Makers. A maker is an old Scots word for a poet. And one of the distinguishing features of the poem, as though that it's written in Middle Scots, is that the last line of every stanza is in Latin. Let me read not 24 stanzas, just to...

This is Middle Scots, so bear with me. Timur Mortis, conturbate me.

Timur Mortis, conturbate me. Sin he is all my brother tain. He will not let me live a lane. And forc' I man his next prey be. Timur Mortis, conturbate me.

The fear of death troubles me. Human beings, we're a race of fearful people. Afraid of all sorts of things, not just spiders and creepy crawlies.

And underneath all those fears, the fear of death. Timur Mortis, conturbate me. And it's that fear that so often people seek to be distracted from in our contemporary culture of entertainment and celebrity.

[15:36] We're constantly trying to take our minds off the big questions of life. The unavoidable reality of death and judgment.

Some years ago, there was a... When the new show, it was called The Grand Tour. It was launched on Amazon Prime.

It was a kind of post-BBC Top Gear. With Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond. And the Times journalist, Hugo Rifkin, wrote a review of the first episode.

This is what he said. The presenters of The Grand Tour are not normal. They are three florid multimillionaires in wallpaper shirts.

Who only leave the Cotswolds for work. And who wouldn't recognize a flat-roofed pub if they woke up drunk on top of it. And yes, they're anti-PC, instinctively sexist, and inclined to laugh at people for things like being French.

[16:38] But none of that is ever the point. They don't talk like this because they mean it. They talk like this because life and existence is a gaping void of nothingness.

And we're all cold and lonely and going to die. All male conversation. Cars, football, politics, woodwork, the merits of the M6 toll, How you work a tank is basically the same conversation.

It's white noise. It blots out the fear. I found that a very perceptive piece of writing. If only we can turn the volume up high enough.

We can drown out all those feelings of fear. And yet all of those fears are symptoms. Bad as they are.

The root problem underneath them all. Is our fear and terror of God. You know, Adam was not the only person in the Bible to be afraid when he met with God.

[17:50] We can think of Isaiah or Job or Peter. When they encountered God, they too were afraid. Not in the sense that they thought they were going to be, You know, have their eyeballs seared with the brightness of his glory and be burnt to a crisp.

But, you know, Isaiah, woe is me. I am undone. A man of unclean lips. Job, I see you now and I despise myself. Peter saying to Jesus, depart from me, Lord.

I'm a sinful man. What happened to these men was that when they encountered the living God, their whole self-image was destroyed. It collapsed like a house of cards before the glorious presence of the Lord God.

All that was false, all that was a pretense, was simply stripped away. For friends, as long as you want to be your own, in charge of your own life, your own master, you have to build an image that is nothing but a house of cards.

In order to like yourself and hide your faults, you have to build something that's a lie. And we all do this. We devise a way of liking ourselves by hiding ourselves.

[19 : 04] Often by projecting a kind of distorted image. We're trying to hide the truth from ourselves and from others. Sometimes you come across those fascinating polls and questionnaires.

And people are asked to evaluate, you know, their own skills and abilities. And, you know, leadership skills. Do you rate yourself above or below average and all that stuff? There was one some years ago in which only 2% rated themselves below our average.

When asked about how they related to others, 0% rated themselves below average. We just can't believe it. We cannot accept that we might be below average.

At least not in areas where it's important for us to excel. But you see, when you get near the truth of God, all that self-delusion just evaporates.

Because in the presence of God, no one has ever felt above average. In the presence, His presence, we see ourselves as we really are.

[20 : 17] Our sin, our weakness, our shame. It's not a pretty sight. Because God's presence shatters any self-image that is not rooted in the Christian gospel.

It's when we come into His presence that we come to see what previously had been hidden from us.

The root of fear. And then secondly here, what I've called the end of fear. In verses 10 and 11. The angel said to them, Fear not.

Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord. And so the message you see of the angel to the shepherds is, Do not be afraid.

Because God has sent a solution to this problem of fear. And that solution is the one who is born. In the city of David, a Savior, Christ the Lord.

[21 : 27] Here is a message about the end of fear. Here is good news for a world often wrapped up in fear. Here is a gospel that can set us free from fear.

And the good news centers on the birth of a child. What's so special about him? Well, the angel ascribes three titles to this child, proclaims three things about him.

He's the anointed one. The greatly anticipated Messiah, Christ. The one promised from of old by the prophets. A descendant of David who's come to rule and reign.

His kingdom shall have no end. The kingdoms of men will rise and fall. But this king's kingdom will be an everlasting one. He's the anointed one.

He's the powerful one. He is Lord. Luke has already used that term some 20 times to refer to the God of Israel. Now he uses it of Jesus. This child is no less than deity.

[22 : 30] An explicit claim that the baby born in Bethlehem is none other than God himself. Jesus is fully and completely God. Fully human and fully divine.

The life of God that resided in Jesus was not something temporary. It wasn't something partial. It was something permanent and complete. Jesus is not just part of God.

He is fully God. All of God. The fullness of God dwells in Jesus Christ. And that's not a kind of abstract, obtuse theological point.

It's utterly central and fundamental to the Christian faith and the Christian gospel. There is no gospel to proclaim or to believe without it. Tom Torrance writes, the main burden of the New Testament witness is that Jesus is the Lord, the Christ sent of God.

It's the unanimous claim of the New Testament. That the very form, image, and glory of God belong to Jesus in exactly the same degree as they do to God the Father.

[23 : 37] In Jesus, the living God has made his dwelling amongst us. His presence has come to be with us. That's the mystery of the incarnation. What C.S. Lewis called the grand miracle.

John, in his gospel, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He is the powerful one. He is God. Later in this gospel, Jesus will reveal that power in many different ways.

Think of the fearful disciples in the storm-tossed boat. Jesus rises and says, Peace, be still. And the waters and the waves and the winds become calm.

The anointed one, the powerful one, the one in whom we encounter the very presence of God and the needed one because he is Savior.

And that's a title that presupposes there's something that we need to be rescued from, doesn't it? It's a kind of an offensive title in that regard because it proclaims a need as well as offering a solution.

[24 : 56] You'll never find God without a sense of your need. And we need to be saved. We need to be rescued. You shall give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

This child has come to deal with the deep stain of our sin and guilt. He is the one through his death on the cross provides a powerful detergent.

There is nothing he cannot clean up or wipe away. And he has come to deal with our deepest and most profound fear. The fear that lies at the root of everything else.

We know that we don't even measure up to our own standards, let alone God's. We all at times feel and sense anxiety and unworthiness.

And we might put our, put the blame on our parents or our teachers or on society or on the government. None of that explains anything. Some people don't even, don't believe in sin, but they still feel like sinners.

[26 : 07] We, we feel like we don't measure up. We don't like ourselves deep down and we perceive that others don't either. We're uncomfortable creatures.

You ever notice how people can tell you something positive and good about yourself a hundred times and you never believe them? They can say one thing, one thing that's negative, that's disparaging.

Oh yes, and you believe it immediately. We're fragile creatures. I think as we get older, we sense that fragility more acutely.

We know there's something wrong with us. And the Bible tells us we are guilty sinners before a holy and righteous God and we need rescued.

we need forgiveness. We need to be cleansed. We need to be brought into a right relationship with our Creator. And this is why Jesus has come.

[27 : 12] Into the darkness of this world, God sent His Son to pursue us, to seek us, to find us. We who are so frequently hiding ourselves away.

into the darkness, Jesus comes as the light of the world to bring glory to God and peace to human beings, to seek and to save the lost and the hiding.

He's come to rescue men and women from sin and fear and from where that sin inevitably and inexorably leads us.

And that is to judgment. judgment. Here in the events of that first Christmas, God is punching His way into our world to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Here is God coming near, Emmanuel, God with us. The gospel is a message of God's love. The apostle John tells us that His perfect love casts out fear.

[28 : 22] He comes to bring us rest from our fears. He comes to display His love and mercy and compassion to us.

He comes to bring us God's acceptance and welcome into His family. We deserve none of it. And yet He comes in His mercy and grace and offers it to us as a free gift to be received by faith.

And so when Jesus Christ comes into someone's life, He can take away that fear of death, judgment, shame, exposure, of what others say or others think.

because of course this child would travel from Bethlehem's manger to Calvary's cross. And there He would take our judgment and die our death and bear our guilt and shame.

He's come that we might no longer be afraid. He'd come to be our hiding place. Back in 1965, a TV special premiered based on the Peanuts comic strip by Charles M. Schultz.

[29 : 53] It was entitled A Charlie Brown's Christmas. And in the cartoons, some of you of a certain vintage will remember them, Charlie Brown is best known for his uniquely striped shirt, Linus is most associated with his ever-present security blanket.

And throughout the stories, the various characters, Lucy, Snoopy, Sally, others, all try without success to separate Linus from his little blanket.

And even though this security blanket remains a major source of ridicule, Linus simply refuses to give it up.

He holds on to it all the way through. But in the Christmas special, Charlie Brown bemoans the fact that he doesn't understand Christmas.

And he asks if anyone knows what it's all about. And Linus takes to the stage, asks for the spotlight, and then proceeds to read from Luke chapter 2, verses 8 through 14.

[31 : 07] And he just reads it. And as he finishes, he turns to Charlie Brown and says, that is what Christmas is all about. one of the interesting details is that as Linus reads that passage in Luke, and as he comes to the words of the angels saying, fear not, he lets go of his security blanket and it falls to the ground.

And it's as if Charles Schultz, the writer, wants us to understand that the gospel message enables us to drop and cast away the false security that we have been holding on to so tightly and to trust and cling to Jesus instead.

What scares you? Death, God, his truth, his judgment, they should. What is your security blanket? What are you holding on to that you can't let go of? If you really want to know peace with God, if you really want your fears to be dealt with, there is only one answer.

You must come and trust this man, Jesus, a Savior and Lord. Because for those fears and insecurities that so often drive our lives, there is an answer.

[32 : 45] And the answer is the opposite of fear. It's faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's what the angel of the Lord is saying to these shepherds.

Fear not. Here is the gospel. Here is the good news. Here is Jesus, the Savior. because rightly understood, Christmas spells the end of fear and the beginning of faith.

Because in Jesus Christ, we do not need to be afraid anymore. Let's pray. Almighty God, we thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ.

We thank you that it is news that brings transformation and change as we rest our faith and confidence in Jesus.

Lord, you know us, you know our circumstances, you know our hearts this morning. Lord, by your Holy Spirit, open our hearts that we might receive the message of the gospel, that we might believe it, that we might trust in Jesus, and that we might not be afraid anymore.

[34 : 14] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.