

'For God so Loved the World' – Part 7*'Fear Not'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our last message we took a closer look at the Apostle Paul's amazing words in Ephesians 1:3-14. This passage contains some foundational truths which impact everything we think about God, His love and our relationship with Him and others. The Apostle John also gives us some powerful words in the fourth chapter of his first letter when he simply states that: *God is Love*. So at the very core of Who God is, you will find love and at the core of what true love is, you will find God.

Therefore, **when God comes to us, He always comes to us in love**. This is so important for us to grasp. It's that simple and that clear. But I'd suggest there are millions of sincere believers in the Church worldwide today who have not yet fully embraced this foundational truth. They may affirm God's love in their minds, but in practice, many Christians still feel accused or judged and like they don't measure up before God.

We can read all the Bible verses which proclaim our salvation and our freedom in Christ; we can sing the victory songs on Sunday; we can preach and proclaim God's forgiveness, grace, mercy and love, but we can still live like it's all about our performance; we can still feel like we just don't make the grade. So where does that guilt and condemnation come from?

Well, in the first instance, it comes from our failure to hear or accept the true gospel of God's saving grace, but in the spiritual realm the Bible tells us that all accusation against God's much-loved, forgiven children comes from 'the accuser' - Satan. If you ever feel accused in your spiritual walk, it is never God who accuses you. It is always the lies of the accuser and your tortured conscience which prevent God's love and grace from being fully effective in your life. But that accuser has no authority in God's kingdom and the law of God against which he accuses us has already been fulfilled completely by Christ, and we now stand in Christ, in His perfect performance before the Holy law of God. Satan still accuses, that's his job – we simply need to ignore those accusations. Jesus has overcome the accuser once and for all time:

Revelation 12:10 *"Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down."*

Because of the finished work of Christ, there is no longer any basis upon which the devil can accuse us. Jesus fulfilled the law of God and gave that fulfilment to us as a free gift. So now we stand in Christ: in His perfect life; in His atoning death; in His powerful resurrection; in His victory over sin and death and Satan - once and for all. That's where you and I live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). That's our reality before God. We are in Christ and this all comes to us in love:

1 John 4:10 *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."*

Now when we allow this outrageous love, this outrageous grace, this outrageous God, full access to our heart, our mind, our schedule, our imagination; when we give God access to all the 'rooms' in our spiritual, emotional and relational 'house,' then amazing things happen! The first and most important thing this God, Who is love, does is drive out fear because, as John tells us:

1 John 4:18 *“There is no fear in love ... perfect love drives out fear ...”*

So what fear am I talking about here? Well, some fears we will be conscious of, but many of them we probably don't even know are there and yet they can still control our actions, our inaction, our faith and the degree of freedom which we enjoy in Christ. So let me give you a 'top ten' list of fears which from my experience are the most common fears that consciously or sub-consciously lurk in the hearts and minds of believers. Some people are victims of all these fears, some only have one or two that come against them, but any one of these can prevent us from experiencing being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. So in no particular order, here are the top ten fears:

1. Fear of not being saved or losing my salvation
2. Fear of the unknown
3. Fear of punishment from God
4. Fear of failure
5. Fear of being outside of God's will
6. Fear of people (being hurt again)
7. Fear of Satan (demons - spiritual warfare etc.)
8. Fear of the supernatural (miracles, charismatic gifts etc.)
9. Fear of losing control
10. Fear of death
- 11.

Now I'm sure there are many other fears which impact us in our journey, but if we could overcome these top ten, then I think we would see millions of people set free in their walk with God and the Church would explode in joy, hope and spiritual power! Just think about this for a moment. Imagine how your life would change if you were 100% assured of your salvation and equally sure that nothing you can do or fail to do will ever jeopardise your eternal security in Christ? How would your life be changed if you were assured that God's punishment for sin, all sin, all your sin, past, present and future, has actually been dealt with by Jesus and God will never punish you – not ever?

How would your life be changed if you no longer worried about failure? What risks would you take? What adventures would you embark upon? What bold steps would you take for God and for others if you thought that as far as God was concerned, you can never fail – you can only learn and grow? How would your attitude to life change; how would your prayers change; how would your whole life be transformed if you stopped trying to work out what God's specific will was for your life, your family or your Church? Can you even imagine how many millions of prayers seeking God's will on a myriad of issues would cease in an instant if we were to discover God's will for us? Can your mind even comprehend how the Christian Church would be transformed and empowered when the fear of being 'outside' God's will was driven out forever? Could that happen? Of course it could.

How would your life change if you no longer let past hurts, grief or the memory of people's actions towards you hold you back from trusting people again, believing people again, opening up to people again, being vulnerable again? So many people who are disappointed or hurt by others, withdraw more each time until they end up with a wall around them which nobody can penetrate – not even God. How awesome would it be if that wall was destroyed forever?

How would your life and your church be transformed if you knew that Satan, the most powerful created being in the universe, the arch-enemy of God, the tormentor of the saints, the accuser of the brethren - has actually been defeated? If you no longer had to wait until the end of time for the power of the evil one to be rendered void in your life; if you could actually live a life which was substantially free from the attacks of the enemy? Can you even imagine the freedom, the courage, the confidence and the abundance you would then enjoy as a believer in Christ?

What if God were to reveal to you that His supernatural power, gifts and miracle-working grace were never meant to be confined to Jesus and the original Apostles, nor are they the exclusive possession of what we have wrongly called the 'Pentecostal' arm of the Church? What if you were to discover that the same power which raised Jesus from the dead was actually flowing into you as a believer, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and that power can flow through you to those around you anytime you decide to believe it and embrace God's empowering presence in your life? What if you were to really accept that there is only one Lord, one faith, one hope, one baptism, one Holy Spirit working in all and through all and that all the gifts of the Spirit and all the fruit of the Spirit are actually in Christ and you are also now in Christ? Wow! Maybe that's why Jesus said the truth will set you free! Maybe that's why they call this the gospel – the GOOD NEWS!!

How would your life change if you were no longer afraid of losing control; if you no longer needed to understand everything about God before stepping out; if you no longer feared things you have not experienced before? What if pressing into the heart of God and seeing His kingdom plan and purpose fulfilled through your life, your Church and your community became far more important to you than your reputation, your image, your appearance or your composure? Can you imagine what God could do with that level of trust and submission?

And what about the biggest fear of all – death? You might say you don't fear death, until it stares you in the face and then your heart is revealed. But how would your life change if you not only didn't fear dying at the end of a long and fruitful life, for we all die some day, but what would life be like if you didn't fear death at any time – even if it came tomorrow? Can you imagine what the Church would look like, sound like and act like if nobody feared death, no matter how old or young we are? Perhaps it would look like the Church in the book of Acts. Perhaps it would look like the Church Jesus promised to build. Perhaps it would look like the Church was always supposed to look.

Well I'm not sure any of us have an imagination that big - to ponder how we and the Church would be if all these fears could actually be removed, now – right now - and the reason we don't ponder that scenario is because we don't believe that such a possibility exists this side of the grave. Did you hear those simple, but confronting words? I hope so, because this is the key to this whole sermon; it's the key this whole series; it's the key to our abundant life in Christ; it's the key to everything in the Kingdom of God. These three simple words explain why all these fears (and hundreds more) will continue to haunt us and hold us back: **We don't believe.**

Now I don't want to minimise the very real issues people struggle with in their lives. I don't want to demean the work of counsellors or therapists or mentors or anyone who, in Jesus' name, are sitting with people day after day trying to help them overcome their fears and the things which hold them back in life. That is not my intention at all. Nor was it Jesus' intention to personally attack or ridicule the well-meaning spiritual leaders of His day when He called them *white-washed tombs* and a *brood of vipers* when they failed to set God's children free by the truth! Like Jesus, I just want to proclaim the truth - God's truth – no matter how uncomfortable that makes some people. Simply put, there's one underlying issue which provides the fertile soil for all those fears to germinate, grow and flourish as they squeeze the life out of us, sometimes literally. I am referring to the sin of unbelief.

We simply don't believe God. We don't take Him at His word and live according to what He has already revealed to us and effected for us in Christ. It really is simple: if you fear, then you don't believe God - you don't fully trust God. In the final analysis, the sin of unbelief is the cause of all the fears I have just mentioned. Every week there are millions of dollars and millions of hours spent in therapy and counselling across the world by people who are trying to break free from the things which rob them of the life God intended them to have. I can save them all that money and time right here and now and say, "*Just believe God! Just believe what God has said and done already.*"

Now many years ago I probably would have criticised someone for being so simplistic and reducing something so complicated and personal to a basic statement like, *“Just believe God.”* But after decades of ministry among God’s people and decades of seeking the heart of God myself, I realise that we Christians have become experts in taking what is profoundly simple and complicating it beyond recognition! Why do we do that? I believe it’s because we don’t like the simple answer. There is a legalistic, religious inclination in our fallen nature which refuses to accept that the Christian life could ever be that simple.

“Just believe God” is a statement which gets right up our religious noses, just like Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:30 got up the religious leaders noses when He said, *“Take my yoke upon you ... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* I could take you into any Christian bookshop tomorrow and point you to a hundred books which will try to convince you that living as God intended in this hostile world is actually the hardest thing imaginable. But in Christ, living an abundant, powerful, effective life, free from fear and anxiety is not only possible, it is guaranteed.

Have you ever wondered why throughout the Old Testament, we hear God saying through His prophets and spokespeople the same thing over and over and over and over and over and over again? *“Do not be anxious” ... “Do not fear” ... “Do not be afraid.”* In the New Testament we see the same appeals from Jesus and Paul and the other Apostles to not fear and not be anxious. Why are there so many exhortations from God to not fear and not be anxious? Well the first obvious reason is because that’s what fallen humans are inclined to do all the time. We are anxious and fearful by nature and that nature is fallen, fallible, corrupted and sinful. We were not created to be anxious or fearful which is why God has continually pleaded with us to not fear.

However we can miss the second and most liberating fact about all these appeals from God to us to not be anxious or fearful about anything. They are not just commands, they are actually promises from a loving Father! Do you think our God would ask us to do something that was not possible? Would this loving God, who gave His only Son to secure our salvation, actually exhort us to be something which we cannot be? How cruel would that be? How unloving would that be? How out of character would that be for a God Who is love? We must understand that God’s bidding is God’s enabling. He will never call us to be what He will not empower us to be. God only comes to us in love, and this God, Who is love, says to us today, what He has been saying to us all our lives:

Matthew 11:28-30 *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

If we take Him at His word and come to Him, not just once, not just at special times in our journey, but every moment of every day, then we will find rest and we will finally understand that in Christ, the yoke is actually easy and the burden is actually light. Jesus was not tricking us or lying to us or talking in cryptic language which needs to be interpreted by some scholar. This God, Who is love, appeals to us every day of our lives to not be anxious, not be fearful, not be afraid - but to throw ourselves upon Him afresh and learn from Him and trust Him.

So regardless of what we think causes fear or anxiety in our lives, at the base of it all is the sin of unbelief. We just don’t want to accept responsibility for something which we can blame on others. But until we do, we will never be free. If we don’t take responsibility for everything in our life, nothing will change. Our focus should never be on our fears – that only empowers them. Fear is not the problem – our unbelief is the problem - and that, we can fix, with help from the Holy Spirit. We simply need to join the father of that demon-possessed boy in Mark 9:24 who stood before Jesus and said, *“Lord, I believe – help me in my unbelief.”*

God longs to hear that prayer from us because God knows how amazing our lives will be when we actually believe Him, trust Him and allow Him to fill us to the measure of all His fullness. But as long as we see ourselves as a victim; as long as it's somebody else's fault we feel this way or act this way or have to live this way; as long as we blame somebody else for what ultimately is our problem; as long as we point the finger of accusation and say, *"You made me feel this way ..."* then we will never know, this side of the grave, what it is to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

God's love drives out all fear, but those are just words on a page and hot air from a preacher until you actually BELIEVE them and receive them as a promise from God. God loves you. God cares for you, and when you fear or doubt you are saying to God, *"I don't trust you. I don't believe You have really done what You say or will do what You've promised to do."* That's why unbelief is a sin and that's why we need to confess it, repent of it and embrace the Truth. That Truth is Jesus, given to us, given for us and in Him we now live and in Him we can and we will be free from all guilt, free from all shame, free from the sting of accusation, free from all punishment, free from the penalty and power of sin, free from anxiety, free from a victim mentality - free from all fear!

I invite you to pray a prayer with me now and perhaps many more times in the days ahead. I have based this prayer on that amazing Psalm 23 which I hope some of you read every night this past week as suggested. I encourage you to really believe these words and expect God to answer this prayer in your life. Let's pray:

Lord, I believe . . . You really are my shepherd and I shall not want for anything.

Lord, I believe . . . You will make me lie down in green pastures,
and lead me beside quiet waters, and restore my soul.

Lord, I believe . . . You will guide me in paths of righteousness
for Your name's sake.

Lord, I believe . . . that even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for I believe
You are with me; Your rod and your staff,
will comfort me.

Lord, I believe . . . You are preparing a table before me in the
presence of my enemies and You will anoint
my head with oil.

Lord, I believe . . . You when You promise that my cup will overflow.

Lord, I believe . . . that goodness and love (not fear and anxiety)
will follow me all the days of my life,

Lord, I believe . . . I will dwell in Your house forever.

Lord, I believe . . . now help me in my unbelief.

In Jesus' mighty name I pray, Amen