

Songs of Life

FEAR NOT

What do you fear? Perhaps you are inclined to say: “nothing!” Well a psychologist once said: “There are only two kinds of human being who are exempt from having to deal with fear: dead people and deranged people.”¹ So let me ask you again...what do you fear? Perhaps, in truth there are varying levels of fear. Bill Hybels suggests three levels.² There are some fears he suggests that are what we might call pestering fears. These are seemingly insignificant concerns of life they don't see like a big deal, but they take their toll perhaps more than we think – or admit!

- Is this sermon going to be any good?
- Will the children do OK in their exams?
- Will I be able to afford my new set of golf clubs?
- Will the meal I'm cooking for friends turn out alright?

These kinds of fears can add up if we let them and begin to affect how we live. Do you have any pestering fears right now?

Then at a deeper level there are what we might call pressing fears. These have much more potential to affect how we live. These are the kinds of fears that can really weigh us down and drain our energy, perhaps they even have the power to cause panic in our hearts.

- Rumours of redundancy are out there and it might be me who is affected.
- The credit crunch may affect my ability to live off my pension.
- The relationship I have invested so much in is not good and there seems to be no sense of resolution on the horizon.
- My child is choosing a path I don't think is good, but it's hard to intervene or have influence.

Do you have pressing fears right now?

Perhaps at the deepest level there is another kind of fear that has the power to paralyze us. This is what we might call panic-producing fear. This kind of fear may have the power to immobilize even the strongest of people.

- A diagnosis of a serious, perhaps life threatening illness
- The breakdown of a significant relationship.
- Betrayal by someone close
- Redundancy
- A financial crises
- Revelations of addiction or abuse in the family or friends.
- Suffering a random act of violence.
- The devastating consequences of a natural disaster like the floods we have seen this last week in Cumbria.

Perhaps these kinds of experiences can leave us in fear and feeling like we are fighting a losing battle. Do you have panic-producing fears right now? Truth is none of us live without fear of one kind or another. I wrestle with my fear same as you. I have one that sometimes plagues me – one that I would describe as a panic-producing fear. I live in a lovely house – The Manse. It has a lovely garden – we have plenty of space for football and entertaining ourselves. The only downside is I'm not a gardener so it is a bit of a chore for me, but the benefits outweigh the chore of cutting the hedges and the grass. We have a garage which is great for storing the Easter Team food, and the kids have their own rooms. It's close to the church so I don't have to spend hours travelling to and from work, and Crabtree road is pretty quiet – we have good neighbours and we don't have any problems with finding a parking space. But...it's not my house!!! There are two scenarios:

1. I die before I have to move out.
2. I leave my job and I leave the house.

The first scenario may be better for me, but probably not for the family. The second scenario sometimes leads me to a panic-producing fear. If I look around, I

see others securing their future home – moving to a bigger one, extending the one they have...and I sometimes think...what have I done to my family? I know what its like to live with some of these kinds of fear.

As we go through the landscape of life and have to face fear, what song do we sing? Psalm 91 is a song we can sing in the midst of our fear.

Psalm 91

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the
Almighty.

I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;

His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

Nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at
midday.

A thousand my fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,

But it will not come near you.

You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

If you make the Most High your dwelling – even the Lord, who is my refuge –

Then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;

They will lift you up in all your ways;

They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a
stone.

You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the
serpent.

"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he
acknowledges my name.

He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble,

I will deliver him and honour him.

With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."

Talk to one another about the sorts of fears that Psalm 91 lists particularly in verses 3 -13.

It seems that this Psalm was written to the people in Israel facing lots of different challenging circumstances. Here the writer is trying to capture what life in Israel throws up and how it can be challenging and fear producing. Our life today may not be the same as that of the people of Israel, their particular challenges may not be ours, but the truth of this Psalm is as much for us as it ever was for them.

And what is the truth of this song? It is simply this: Fear Not! This is not a way of saying that your fear or my fear is silly, or irrational, or even unspiritual. But it is a way of saying : here friends, is the best way to overcome your fear – whatever form or depth that fear might take. Friends, the invitation, whatever your fear right now, is to sing this song, and to sing it with confidence. So what is it that you can sing? What is the best way to overcome your fear?

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”” Psalm 91 v 1-2.

The way to overcome your fear, in whatever form it comes is to make God your refuge. The idea of God as a refuge is common in the Psalms. Refuge is a word used to mean God’s care and protection. Here it is used to mean that we should look to the Lord for security from threatening dangers. The use of the words shelter, refuge and fortress all encourage the same thing: to encourage us to think of the Lord as the protector of those who hold to him.

The person who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, the person who rests in the shadow of the almighty, this person can walk through life and all that it may throw at them, because they will not let fear dominate them. This is the song of the person who refuses to fall into fear in spite of the chaos and uncertainty that surrounds them. God is their refuge, and that is always enough.

Fear can have debilitating effects on us in all sorts of ways. Fear can stop us being the people God created us to be; fear can mean we never use the gifts he’s given us – too risky! Fear can make us disobedient because we simply won’t trust

God to be true to his word. Fear can make us cover up the truth about what is going on in us – we lie. Fear can lead us to be insecure so we hoard our money and possessions and constantly seek more. Fear made the people of Israel want to go back to Egypt after only three days of freedom! It was the fear of suffering that made the disciples run away from Jesus when he most needed them. The fear of not being accepted can sometimes lead us to betray our deepest values.

At the root of most sin is fear. Maybe the biggest challenge of Psalm 91 is that our fear is the one thing that stops us giving ourselves fully to God's protection – because we're not sure he will come through for us. Those who make God their refuge do not need to fear. Perhaps we should ask ourselves the question – who is the God we serve? The kind of God we serve is exceedingly important if we are to walk without fear through the turmoil of this life. If our God is too small, there is a lot in life that could overtake and overwhelm us. How big is your God? The writer of this song serves the Most High God. How about you?

- The Most high God is the God who loves you because he loves you because he loves you.....
- The Most High God is the God who has called you by name and who says of you "You are mine!"
- The Most High God is the God who knows you intimately – even the number of hairs on your head.
- The Most High God is the God who holds you in his hand.
- The Most High God is the God who is closer than you think – he is as close as the air you breathe.
- The Most High God is the God who was there before all things were made.
- The Most High God is the God who asks us : Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Who marked off its dimensions? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 37 v 4-7)

- The Most High God is the God who sent his son to win you back. The Most High God is the God who even now, right this minute is keeping the dream alive!
- The Most High God is the God who longs to walk with you as you walk through life.

In his book “Faith and Doubt”,³ John Ortberg talks about learning to trust God. It is difficult and often involves waiting. He uses the analogy of the trapeze artists at a circus. We get our word trapeze from the Greek word trapeza, meaning table. About the only time it is used in the New Testament is when Jesus gathers the disciples for the last supper around the trapeze – table. This is the moment when Jesus will have to let go of his fears of death and trust himself to the Most High God. When we watch a trapeze act in progress we often remember the flyer – the one who lets go and flies from one trapeze to the other. We would do well though to remember the catcher! In order for the flyer to complete the stunning act, it is the catcher who has to have perfect timing. He has to be in the right place at exactly the right time in order to complete the act! The flyer will only be able to let go of his trapeze and perform, if he has complete trust and confidence in the catcher.

Friends letting go of our fear and not allowing it to dominate our lives is possible only when we have complete trust and confidence in the catcher. And our catcher is the Most High God. What is the most common command in the Bible? “Fear Not” or “Do not be afraid.” Why...because the Most High God is our catcher – the one who is utterly trustworthy and who’s timing is perfect!

Friends, we cannot always see what God sees. There’s a lovely example in 2Kings 6: “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all round Elisha.’

This reminds us that there are things we cannot see around us – angels. (v 11-13) and the truth here is that God is always working for good in all things, whether we

can see it or not. This does not teach us, or encourage us to think that as children of the Most High God we will never have anything to fear in life, and that we will never have to face difficult or challenging situations and circumstances, but it does seek to teach us that no power is out of God's control.

Friends, we must be careful not to misuse this text. It encourages us to trust the Most High God as the one who is with us in all things. It does not, and should not be used to encourage us to test God. Satan quoted Psalm 91 when tempting Jesus. Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and challenged him to jump off – to test God's promise that God would send his angels to protect him (Mathew 4 v 6). Jesus says that his mission was not about testing God's promises, but trusting them. Friends Psalm 91 encourages us to trust the promises of the Most High God, not to test them!

“Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him: I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.” (Psalm 91 v 14-16)

Friends, when I read this Psalm it reminds me of a song that I can sing. I do not need to fear over my house! What kind of house I live in while I am alive doesn't really matter. What matters is that the Most High God will be with me and that is all I need, and one day, I'll get to go to my Father's house, where he has gone ahead to prepare a place for me and even now is getting it ready and one day I will live there and I will fear nothing!

Amen.

1. Quoted in Willow Creek's "Psalms Volume 2," Znodervan 2008, page 39
2. *Ibid*, pages 39-40
3. Ortberg, John: "Faith and Doubt," Zondervan 2008 chapter 11