

November 15, 2009  
 Isaiah 8:11-17 / Hebrews 2:5-15 / Luke 12:4-7  
 He Who Fears God Has Nothing To Fear

Today we come across a mere 4 verses of Scripture that are so jam packed with substance that I could easily preach two or three messages on these 4 verses alone!

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For instance, I could have preached another message on what it means to be a friend of Jesus, because in verse 4 we come across the only place in any of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark or Luke), where Jesus calls His disciples "friends." The only place!

And here the term "friend" is an expression of endearment, compassion and appreciation, because Jesus knew that every single one of them (except the Apostle John) would end up losing their life because of their faith and devotion to Him. They would all offer their lives for Jesus as their ultimate sacrifice for Him who would give His life for them.

Stephen would be stoned to death within just a couple years. / James would be beheaded soon after. / James the brother of Jesus would be hurled down from the tower of the temple in Jerusalem and then clubbed to death. / Paul would be beheaded in Rome under Nero.

Peter and his wife would be hung on a cross upside down along with 700 other Christians all killed the same way along the main road (the Appian Way) leading into the city of Rome. / Andrew would be crucified in what is modern day Russia / And Phillip would be crucified close to Laodicea.

Bartholomew would be flayed or skinned alive in Iran. / Matthew, after extensive missionary work in Persia and Ethiopia, would be run through with the sword in Egypt. / Jude was shot through with arrows and speared in modern day Turkey. / John-Mark was dragged behind a horse with a rope tied around his neck until he expired.

Barnabas was killed by his own relatives in his native town of Salamis on the island of Cyprus. / And Thomas after establishing many churches in modern day India was killed there by a mob using darts, swords and a lance.

*"I tell you, my friends"* says Jesus (that is, you who will one day have to die for me) ***"do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more."*** Friendship in this case signifying a relationship of devotion and commitment that was so strong that it would cause them to willingly lay down their lives for Him who would lay down His life for them.

Just a couple weeks ago I challenged the youth group along these same lines, to consider if they would be willing to do the same. And of course some would say, "Isn't that kind of extreme or fanatical, pastor?" And my answer to that concern is always: "No, it's not." In fact, it's a question we all need to consider, and not just the youth. "Would I (would you) be willing to die for Jesus?" (Not kill for Jesus, which is so repugnant and contrary to the Gospel, but be killed for Jesus.)

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And you know why I believe we need to resolve that question? Because the truth I've discovered is this: ***"A faith that is not worth dying for is also not worth living for either."***

A person who is not willing to die for their faith is not really willing to live for it either, because as anyone can tell you, its a lot harder to be a living sacrifice (day in and day out, year after year, through all the temptations and struggles and often mundane periods of life), than it is to die a quick and glorious martyrs death.

You want to know if a person is REALLY willing to live for Jesus? Then just ask them this one simple question: "Would you be willing to die for Him?"

That's essentially what Jesus does here. It's almost as if He says: "My friends, you need to resolve this issue right here and now. You will run into people who will WANT to kill you or WILL kill you because of Me." In fact, the closer He came to going to the cross (as we see in John's Gospel) the more He warned them of the martyrdom they would all have to experience if they continued living for Him.

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Which brings us to our **FIRST** point. It's because Jesus knows they will all (except the Apostle John) have to wrestle with the fears that well up within anyone when they confront the possibility of being killed, that He graciously prepares them with the truth they will need to work through those fears and thus face death boldly and courageously.

And what is the truth they need to hear in order to resolve their fear of death before they're confronted by the reality of martyrdom? He tells them in verse 5 where He says: ***"I will show you whom you should fear."*** (And of course, it's NOT the people He just mentioned who can kill the body yet do no more than that.)

No! Who are they to fear? ***"Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has the power (or more accurately exousia, 'the authority') to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him."***

And I know full well, this does not sit well with most people today. Some have said: "It seems so un-Jesus-like." Others have said, "The thought of God casting people into hell is abhorrent and unworthy of even being associated with a loving and merciful God." And still others, for that same reason, don't even believe its God that Jesus is speaking about here.

The imagery is so contrary to what we just looked at less than a chapter ago, where Jesus told us to pray to God envisioning and addressing Him as "Abba" or "Dearest Father" or better yet, "Daddy," that some would say He can't possibly be referring to the same Being!

In fact, the two images seem so incompatible and irreconcilable to the modern mind, that some commentators have actually suggested that the one Jesus is referring to is not GOD but SATAN! Although, as Leon Morris points out, "This should be rejected."

"The evil one can operate only within the limitations God assigns him and there is no indication that God ever gave him this power. Moreover we are not to fear Satan but resist him (James 4:7 / I Peter 5:9). It is God who has power over eternal issues and Jesus repeats, 'Yes, I tell you, fear him!'"

Darrell Bock says the same: "*Jesus reminds the disciples that they should fear God.*" "*The one who has the power to cast into hell,*" says I. Howard Marshall, "*is God,*" referring us to Luke 9:45-47 and James 4:12 where James, speaking of God, writes: "*There is only one Law-giver and one Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy.*"

We are to be aware of Satan's schemes / and know he is always seeking to take us down / or get us to dishonor God or destroy our testimony through sin. But he cannot touch a hair on our heads (each of which God as counted according to Jesus) unless the Sovereign and Omnipotent God we call "our Father" (our intimate Father) gives him permission to do so, as we saw so clearly in the first few chapters of the Book of Job.

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We couldn't proceed any further into this text until we had that fact firmly established:

It is GOD that Jesus calls us to fear. It is GOD (as both Lawgiver and Judge) who after the killing of the body, has the power (or better yet, the divine authority) to cast people into hell.

That IS what Jesus tells us — though nothing is more offensive to post-modern sensibilities. As a pastor I have taken more flack from unbelievers on this one issue than any other. "*Evangelists who speak of it are not loved,*" says John Blanchard.

In fact, so violent is the modern antipathy to it that J. I Packer can say: *"To announce the reality of hell is a testing and grueling task."* *"Contempt for hell-talk"* he says, *"has become part of our culture."*

I discovered that after I spoke at the Memorial Service at the U.S. Embassy in Honduras, right after 911, when in passing (and not as a big part but only as one sentence in a 25 minute message) I suggested that the terrorists who flew those planes into the twin towers, and killed all those innocent people, far from getting a free ticket to paradise (as radical Islam does teach), were being tormented in hell even as I spoke on that day.

I heard the gasps and saw the unbelief on many American faces (though nearly all the Hondurans nodded in agreement). And afterward one soldier and one American diplomat came up to me and said, "You must be a Baptist, huh?" / "No," I said, "I'm a Christian." Belief in hell is not a Baptist belief, it's a Christian belief. Anyone who even faintly takes the Bible seriously has to believe there is either a place, or a dimension, or a state of ethereal existence which the Bible calls hell or Gehenna or Hades — you find it everywhere, from beginning to end.

Not a cavernous place "under the surface of the earth," with pools of lava, and a red tailed devil with horns and a pitch fork! That's a concoction of the medieval imagination! But a place where divine justice will be meted out on all who have not taken refuge in Jesus, the One, as Paul tells us in I Thess. 1:10: *"who saves us from the wrath to come."*

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THAT is what "salvation" consists of—being saved from sin and its consequences and death and hell or the exercise of God's just and holy wrath against all unforgiven human evil.

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And I emphasize all that, because one of the things that one has to grapple with is the fact that the Lord Jesus spoke of hell MORE than anyone else in the whole Bible! The most loving person in all of Scripture spoke of hell far more than anyone else in all of Scripture!

Though in today's society (and I say this from experience) merely mentioning the concept (other than as a swear word), never mind actually believing it exists and that God has and will send people there, is seen as something only the most "cruel" or "unloving" of people try to scare people with.

And its not just in society, it's also in the church. I've had "professing Christians" leave churches I pastured, and take their children elsewhere, because I preached that hell was real and God

actually does send unrepentant, unbelieving evildoers there for eternity. Yet my word to you is this: It's NOT unloving to warn people of the potential danger of ending up in hell. "It is not unloving," as the great evangelist Jonathan Edwards said in his own defense, "to frighten people, if need be, out of a house on fire."

Is it not an act of love to warn people of impending disaster? If I see a bomb sitting in a deserted back pack on a bench in a park filled with children playing with their parents, is it not an act of love to warn everyone in that park of the disaster that awaits if they remain there?

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Now, of course, if there is no bomb and I run around scaring people, then yes indeed I am guilty of being "cruel" and "unloving." And THAT is societies point! They DON'T believe hell exists, and therefore they believe it is cruel and unloving for us to go around scaring people with talk of its reality. I understand that. As unbelievers that's where they're coming from!

But **LISTEN**: *If hell IS real (as Jesus and the rest of Scripture declare it is) then it would be most unloving of us NOT to warn people of the potential danger of ending up there.*

Yet, like Jesus, we must do it because we care, and they are "friends." We must be wise and discreet and compassionate and tactful and speak the truth in love (as Paul commands us). What R. W. Dale once said about D. L. Moody should be true of us: "***He had the right to preach about hell because he so clearly did so with a weeping heart.***" And genuine love for people.

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Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. After warning His disciples to "fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to cast them into hell," so that they won't fear those who can merely kill the body (Hence the theme of my sermon – He Who Fears God Has Nothing to Fear from Anyone or Anything Else) He goes on to tell them another reason not to be afraid, because, "you," as he says, "are worth more than many sparrows!"

Now, I have to tell you I was tempted to preach an entire sermon on this one statement alone! Because here we come to the closest approximation of human worth found anywhere in the Bible!

And I zero in on it because although we're always hearing people say: "Jesus came to die for us because we were of infinite worth to God." Or "Every human soul is of infinite worth in the sight of God," the Bible itself NEVER says that, nor EVER comes close to even suggesting it!

That idea did not come from the Bible. It was actually a rather recent development where-by people were attempting to understand from a purely human standpoint, what it was that moved the heart of God to send Jesus to suffer and die on the cross.

The infinite sufferings of the Son of God for us, they reasoned, must mean we're of infinite worth to God. (Forgetting it was our infinite sin debt is what called forth His infinite sacrifice.)

And in more recent years it was given even greater acceptance by our therapy-saturated culture which desires to make everyone feel good about themselves and boost their self-esteem (fueled as it is by the underlying belief that self-esteem and not the grace of God, is the key to all true healing and life-transformation)!

Yet notice that Jesus, though He could have gone in that direction, chose not to. His point is not, "Don't be afraid because you have infinite worth in the sight of God." Not even close! What does He say? "Do not be afraid, because you are worth more than many sparrows."

What are sparrows? They're the smallest and most insignificant of all birds. In fact, in verse 6 Jesus says their worth amounts to: "Five sparrows for two pennies?" A "penny" being the Greek word "assarion" — the smallest of all Roman coins. Which makes our "worth" before God, NOT infinite in measure, as so many assert! But rather, at least monetarily speaking closer to a few bucks – or more than the value of many sparrows.

So, if 5 sparrows cost 2 cents, that means 250 would cost a dollar, 500 would be two dollars, and 1000 would be four dollars! And even if we ventured to use the largest Hebrew number (which was 10,000) as the "many," it would still only come to a value of a mere \$40!

Which means C. S. Lewis went a bit too far when he suggested that human value (biblically speaking) was "less than zero." After all, Jesus says we were at least worth a few bucks — 50 or 60 anyway! Though I'll add that Lewis is closer to the truth than those who suggest our worth is infinite.

The only other reference to human value comes in verse 24 of this same chapter where Jesus speaks of ravens (or crow-like birds) and says, "how much more valuable you are than birds." (Birds in this case being a generic reference to the ravens, who like crows were considered by everyone (as all farmers know) to be irritating, scavenging pests!)

It was Jesus way of saying: "You don't need to have "worth" to have God love you. / It's a human fallacy that you must be "valuable" in order to be loved by God. / You don't have to be significant, or valuable, or worthy, or a somebody or any of that! / That's Jesus whole point in telling us God even cares for the insignificant sparrow and the irritating crow or raven! / God loves because He chooses to love and it has nothing at all to do with some infinite value in us! / The fact that we even feel the need to believe that shows how far we are from truly understanding the infinite depths of the love of God!

It's just another human attempt to try and say there was something in us or something about us that made us "worthy" or "deserving" of the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, thus nullifying the Gospel of God's grace.

We actually nullify the grace of God, which He gives to ungodly and undeserving sinners, when we suggest that it was something of infinite worth / or something deserving in us / or something valuable in us / or wonderful about us, that caused the God of grace to love and redeem and show us favor.

We turn the Gospel on end and make it about our amazing worth instead of the amazing grace. The mind-boggling, incomprehensible and unfathomable nature of the riches of His grace when we suggest He saved us because of some infinite worth or value in us.

In fact, the thought that we have infinite worth before God has come to do three things:

1<sup>st</sup>) It has taken the sense of "amazing" out of "grace." Why? Because if I'm of infinite worth, then there's a sense in which I begin to feel God should save me! "I'm worth it," as the commercial states! My worth makes me deserving. It would be an insult to me if He didn't! My inherent value demands it!

2<sup>nd</sup>) It's one of the reasons people no longer believe God sends people to hell. After all, infinitely valuable objects must be treated with utmost care! God wouldn't and couldn't send people of infinite worth to Himself to hell. It just wouldn't make sense! If everyone is of infinite worth to God, then obviously no one can be in hell. He not only will not send people there, hell itself cannot exist – which is what most people today believe and the reason they believe it..

3<sup>rd</sup>) It goes a long way to explain why so few people are reduced to tears anymore, simply by contemplating Jesus death on the cross. It's the people who know they're NOT of infinite worth and that it was nothing in them that caused God to send His Son to redeem them, that can sing the song "AMAZING Grace," or "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," or "When I Survey the

Wondrous Cross," with tears of gratitude filling their eyes / and tears of joy streaming down their cheeks.

**LISTEN**: God loves us, because He chose to love us — period! That's the Good News! I don't have to have immense value or be worthy or significant or anything else to be loved, because as Jesus tells us, God cares for even insignificant things worth less than a penny — like sparrows. Incomprehensible as it is (and it does boggle the mind) we must simply rejoice in the fact that it is true.

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Which brings me to the **LAST** thing I need to draw your attention to in this text. How the fear of God helps us overcome all other fears. A paradox I've seen worked out in the lives of one believer after another.

We've already seen it worked out in the Apostles, whose fear of God enabled each one (save John) to endure unspeakably painful deaths. Men liberated from their fear of men or the fear of rejection, or the fear of persecution, or the fear of death, because they "feared Him who had the power and the authority to cast them into hell. Yes, they feared Him."

And here, the term "fear" means "fear," and not just "awe." It is contrasted with the fear one would obviously sense when confronted by someone trying to kill them (as we see in verse 4).

We don't stand in AWE of God because He has the power to cast us into hell, we stand in reverent FEAR of God – **FEAR** meaning **FEAR**!

Yet, what we need to see is that such a fear of God strengthens the heart to have courage to overcome all other fears! Which means that for Jesus at least, the fear of God is a liberating fear! It's the beginning of wisdom. It's a healthy fear. It's a fear we should want to have (and should even seek to nurture). It's a fear that makes us bold and courageous and heals and delivers us from our slavery to all other fears!!! That's obviously what it's intended to do here in this passage!

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You see, we all have fears! Some are healthy, and others are not. And what unhealthy fears do is paralyze us, enslave us, imprison us, keep us bound, keep us from taking necessary risks or keep us from stepping out in faith to do what we sense God is calling us to do. In many ways they can even keep us from growing as Christian people.

Thus, what we need is something stronger than them all to help us move beyond them! And Jesus says that one of those things is the knowledge that God knows and cares / and the other is a healthy, holy, reverent FEAR of God!

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Martin Luther is a perfect example here. At the outset of the reformation Luther posted his 95 thesis' on the door of the church in Wittenburg, demanding that the Catholic Church rid itself of many unbiblical practices.

He was called to appear at the Diet of Worms, where many of the greatest minds and powers in all Europe had gathered with the intention of hearing him, condemning him as a heretic and having him burned at the stake (which would have happened if Prince Fredrick of Germany hadn't been sympathetic to his cause and had him secretly kidnapped and hidden in the tower of a castle for 8 months)!

You see, Luther wasn't simply taking on the Catholic Church folks. He was taking on all of Europe! One man! Europe was the "Holy Roman Empire." All the kings and princes, their nations and armies were sided with the church! The pressure on Luther was immense! And fear did fill Martin's heart — fear of death and fear that he might be wrong.

To onlookers Luther appeared amazingly fearless, bold and courageous! But honest as he was he didn't want them to misunderstand. "Courage," he said, speaking of his own inner state at the time, "is not the absence of fear (he had many). Rather it is the refusal to capitulate to your fears." It's the refusal to allow your fears to keep you from doing what you know you should do and need to do, or what you know God is calling you to do!

Courage is the determination to move beyond your fears, spurred on by something more powerful than them all — which in his case was the fear of not being true to the voice of God in Scripture and his conscience. His fear of God enabled him to move beyond His fear of people & death.

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So, my friends, hear the words of Jesus. Are you stuck? Are you captive to any fears? Does the fear of rejection, or failure, or risk, or people, or doing something new, or speak-ing in public, or persecution, or death, or anything else keep you from doing what you want to do, sense you need to do or even stop you from doing what God calls you to do?

Because LISTEN: *Until you overcome your fears (and especially your fear of death) you will never be truly free to live life, never mind live for Jesus! That's His point: Fear God so much that all other fears become insignificant.*