

Don't Be Afraid

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23 June 2013: The news on any random day is enough to raise hair on a lizard: a war in the Ukraine, the threat of yet another war in the Middle East, disease outbreaks that might mushroom into pandemics, what seems to be a new shooting rampage every week, possible weather chaos from climate change, the epidemics of diabetes and dementia, and the list goes on. And then there is the personal news we might be confronted with at any time, such as a friend being diagnosed with cancer, someone's husband killed in a car accident, and a child dying of a congenital heart defect. Faced with such reports, we can find ourselves becoming anxious, fearful for the world, fearful for our friends, alarmed that one or more of these terrors may come upon us personally.

Several years ago, I received what I still consider to be the most fear-filled letter I have ever received. I can't recall a single positive or uplifting statement in it. It was simply chock full of dread for the future because, to summarize the writer's view, Christians had let the side down by allowing liberals to win the latest election. The shame of the letter was that it was from a very prominent evangelical leader. The writer had forgotten that Jesus, many times, tells us not to be afraid, fearful, anxious, or troubled.

In this article, I want to point out just a handful of examples of Jesus telling us not to be afraid because I believe these Scriptures can be very comforting in this disturbing world.

A good place to start is Matthew 10, where Jesus says three times to not be afraid. He is sending the twelve apostles out on a missionary journey, and He warns them to "beware of men: for they will deliver you up to councils" (verse 17). He says, "You will be hated by all men for my name's sake" (verse 22). Jesus tells them that because He was persecuted, they will be, too: "It is enough for the disciple that he be like his teacher, and the servant like his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more those of his household!" (verse 25).

You may think it strange, but Jesus intends this information to be comforting. In the next verse, He says, "Therefore don't be afraid of them." Why? Don't be afraid for the very reason that they are

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persecuting you because you are my disciples. The unspoken implication is that He will have victory over His persecutors, and, therefore, so will His disciples. And He elaborates further: "Therefore don't be afraid of them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed; and hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in the ear, proclaim on the housetops" (verses 26-27). The malice of men against the followers of Christ will all be revealed and it will all be vindicated, therefore, speak the Gospel openly without fear.

And Jesus continues: "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna" (verse 28). We are not to fear men who can kill (*apokteinō*) our bodies only. We are to fear God who can destroy or ruin (*apollumi*) both body and soul in hell fire. But, because God values us, we should not be afraid that He will destroy us in hell fire: "Aren't two sparrows sold for an assarion coin? Not one of them falls on the ground apart from your Father's will" (verse 29). This comparing us to sparrows may sound humorous. But Jesus means that if God watches over sparrows, how much more will He take care of us? He knows even the number of hairs we have on our heads (verse 30). "Therefore don't be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows" (verse 31).

So far, we have seen that we are not to be afraid because Jesus has the victory, we are not to be afraid because God will vindicate us, we are not to be afraid because God values us.

In Matthew 17, we read of the transfiguration of Christ. I have already written about this in detail ("This is my beloved Son...hear ye him") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/transfiguration.htm>). But I want to mention that after the vision of seeing Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, the disciples "fell on their faces, and were very afraid" (verse 6). And then, "Jesus came and touched them and said, "Get up, and don't be afraid" (verse 7). Why should they not be afraid? It's in the next verse: "Lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, except Jesus alone" (verse 8). Moses represented the law, and the law is something to fear. Elijah represented the prophets, and those prophecies can sound scary. But when we see that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, then we should see that there is nothing to fear.

This is important to keep in mind because certain ministers, especially televangelists, try to capitalize on their listeners' fears by stressing law-keeping and by interpreting Bible prophecies in such eccentric

ways that they always come out saying that the Great Tribulation, the next world war, the coming famines and epidemics, the coming financial collapse, or whatever, is coming on *you* unless you do your part to support God's Work [which listeners are to interpret to mean to send their tithes—there's the law again—to the televangelist's ministry]. Then God will certainly be there when they need Him. But Jesus tells us not to fear, and His reason has nothing to do with supporting a particular ministry. It has everything to do with God's love for us.

When Jairus, the synagogue ruler, received the news that his daughter was dead, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid, only believe" (Mark 5:36). What was he to believe? He was to trust that Jesus had power over life and death, and that Jesus was on his side. Jesus doesn't always heal our loved ones or raise them from the dead, but He is always doing what He knows is best for us (see "Does God Promise Healing Today?") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/godstillheal.htm>), so we should not be afraid.

In Matthew 14:24-33, Mark 6:47-52, and John 6:16-21, we read the account of the tempest at sea and Jesus walking on the water. Jesus stayed behind to be alone in the hill country while His disciples took a boat to go to Capernaum. A great wind struck them. It was contrary to their heading, caused the sea to rise, and they could make no headway. Mark 6:48 says that Jesus saw them "distressed in rowing, for the wind was contrary to them." Whether they were in normal sight, I don't know, but either naturally or supernaturally, Jesus saw their distress and set off to help them.

The word "distressed" is from the Greek word *basanizō*. It often means "torture." As we saw, Mark uses it of the disciples, and Matthew uses it of the boat, saying that it was tortured with the waves (Matthew 14:24). Jesus, not distressed at all, came walking out to them over the sea. Thinking they were seeing a ghost (*phantasma*—"phantom," "specter"), they were troubled (*tarassō*—"agitated" [Mark 6:50, Matthew 14:26] and afraid (*phobeō* [John 6:19]). Remember, these were grown men, many of whom were old hands at sea. Yet, as the *Contemporary English Version* rightly puts it, "When they saw him, they thought he was a ghost. They were terrified and started screaming" (Matthew 14:26).

It is at this point that Jesus says, "Cheer up! [*tharseō*, "have courage"] It is I! [literally, "I am"] Don't be afraid." Then Peter, characteristically showing both spiritual doubt and human courage, overestimating

himself and underestimating his dependence on Jesus, says, "O Lord, if you are he, bid me to come to you upon the waters!" (Matthew 14:28, *Apostolic Bible Polyglot*). Peter said this in response to Jesus saying, "I am." He wasn't questioning whether Jesus, the man he had been hanging around with lately, was speaking. He was questioning whether Jesus was the Son of God, and, like Satan, challenging Him to do something to prove it (see Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus said, "Come!" Then we read,

Peter stepped down from the boat, and walked on the waters to come to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was strong, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand, took hold of him, and said to him, You of little faith, why did you doubt?

Matthew 14:29-31

Peter was trying to take matters into his own hands. He ordered Jesus to call him, and then he tried to come to Jesus by his own power without faith. When he saw the wind and the waves around him, his fear returned, and he began to sink. It was then that he saw his helplessness and cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" This is a point we must all come to. And notice that Jesus "immediately" took hold of Peter.

Then, when Jesus got into the boat, "the wind ceased" (Mark 6:51), the disciples "worshipped him, saying, 'You are truly the Son of God!'" (Matthew 14:33), and "immediately the boat was at the land where they were going" (John 6:21).

Although this account is true, I believe God also wanted it to serve as an allegory, a sort of living parable. As it does in Revelation, the sea can be understood as standing for the sea of humanity, the world in which we live (see Revelation 17:15). The disciples trying to row against a headwind in a choppy sea picture sinners unable to make spiritual progress in their lives without Jesus. Despite their best efforts, they get nowhere. The storm itself, the wind and the waves, and the disciples' fear are the frightening events we see in the world around us and the sinners' carnal, faithless reaction to them.

Jesus' walking on the water shows His superiority over the world and all of the people in it. The storm doesn't disturb Him because He is in complete control over it. The disciples' thinking of Jesus as a *phantasma* is like the world's reaction to Jesus. The word *phantasma*

at its most basic means "something that appears" but doesn't necessarily have substance. Unbelievers often consider Jesus to be a fake. Yet, although many won't admit it, unbelievers also often fear Jesus (see, for example, Felix's reaction to Paul's preaching in Acts 24:25). Certainly, the Pharisees feared Jesus, and that's why they wanted to get rid of Him.

Peter's reaction to Jesus is like people who, after hearing of Jesus, want to take matters into their own hands. If you're God, they'll say, then you call me and I'll come to you. They try adding their own works to salvation. They don't fully see their sinful inability. It's only after they miserably fail and begin sinking into the world that they cry out in helplessness for Jesus to save them.

Jesus coming into the boat is like Jesus coming into the life of the sinner, who now becomes a believer. The world is no longer frightening, the wind that was contrary ceases, and Jesus miraculously brings them to their destination without any of their own works.

Jesus is not a *phantasma*; the world and all of its troubles are the phantoms. "The world is passing away with its lusts, but he who does God's will remains forever" (1 John 2:17). So, let's obey Jesus and fear not.

For you didn't receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Romans 8:15

For God didn't give us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-control.

2 Timothy 1:7

So that with good courage we say, "The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Hebrews 13:6

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has punishment. He who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18

When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He laid his right hand on me, saying, "Don't be afraid. I am the first and the last.

Revelation 1:17