

NOTES FROM JOHN PHENIX'S SERMON 10th September 2023 am

TEXT: Psalm 118 verses 1-14 TITLE: "Free from fear"
Scripture references from the ESV

Psalm 118:1-14 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! ² Let Israel say,

"His steadfast love endures forever." ³ Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever." ⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say, "His steadfast love endures forever." ⁵ Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. ⁶ The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? ⁷ The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. ⁸ It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. ⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes. ¹⁰ All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! ¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! ¹² They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a fire among thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! ¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. ¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

We are seeing an epidemic of fear in our society. The British Journal of Psychiatry reports that anxiety in general has increased substantially in recent years, and among young people, particularly young women, it has trebled over the past 20 years. Some of this increase may just reflect a more general willingness for people to be open about the challenges that they face, but in the UK, one in 10 people are living with an anxiety disorder at any given time – over 8 million people.

That willingness to talk about anxiety issues is a good thing, and we need to treat people with any kind of mental illness with compassion. It is easy to think that they just need to pull themselves together, but we wouldn't do that with someone who had broken a leg! Fear can be paralysing and confusing, wreaking havoc on our body and mind. If you have ever suffered from a panic attack or suffered from an anxiety disorder, you will understand.

What has happened to cause this increase?

- As a country, we have stopped trusting in God. Atheism has increased at the same pace as anxiety. We have moved from relying on God to relying on ourselves and other people. Instead of decreasing anxiety, this has led to more fear and anxiety

- Young people are now living with the pressure of 'always-on' technology (mobile phones, tablets etc), and are subject to constant comparisons of their life and bodies on social media, leading to poor self-esteem.
- FOMO (fear of missing out) is another common cause of anxiety, when young people see photos on social media of friends having a good time without them. This is not something that happened in previous generations.
- Whatever your age, bad and stressful news is now available to you twenty-four hours a day, rather than the once a day programme that used to be how we found out what was happening in the world.

We are constantly bombarded with things that can make us anxious.

What is the answer?

Social media is clearly here to stay, but spending less time on it would help. Good use of it means you can stay in touch with family and friends more easily. However, doing away with social media engagement and stopping listening to the news won't solve your anxiety problem. Of course, potential medical reasons for anxiety should be investigated. Even if it doesn't fix it, medication may help you to get to a place where you can deal with the underlying causes.

For Christians there is a much more effective way of dealing with anxiety.

A proper fear of God will replace our other fears.

That may sound contradictory, but the first part of **Psalm 118** (above) will help us to understand that it is true.

David was in distress (v5). He was afraid of men and those who hated him (vv6-7), and he was physically threatened (vv10-11,13). David was expressing a common fear – fear of man. You might feel threatened by people bullying you, or just be afraid of what people think of you. You might be afraid of powerful people – leaders of countries or even your manager at work.

How did David deal with his fear? We can see three ways that David dealt with fear and anxiety.

1. **David knew that God is more powerful than man (v6).** David really knew this to be true. God is more powerful than the people who surrounded him and hated him. The same is true for you.

Whatever situation you are in, God is more powerful than the people who cause you anxiety.

David had a right sense of perspective. It was true that the people who troubled him were dangerous and powerful. He was not ignoring the danger he was in, but God is so much more powerful than them. A right understanding of the awesome power of God puts other fears into perspective.

However, although you might agree that God is powerful, it is possible that you doubt whether he cares for you personally. We might see that God is great but still have that question.

As Christians, we can have confidence that he cares for each one of us, and he has a good plan for our life.

This does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to you, but it really helps to know that God is in control and he is for you.

God is more powerful than anyone who is causing you anxiety and he cares for you personally.

2. **David put his trust in God (v8).** When we are anxious, we often reach for man-made solutions such talking to friends, reading self-help books, or relaxation techniques. Whole industries have been set up to give you advice on coping with anxiety. These are not all bad, and can have a place, but as a Christian, those are not the first place to go.

- The only person who will never let you down is God, and he is the first place to go to for help.

Though talking to family and friends may help, even they will let you down at some point, but God is completely trustworthy. He is definitely for you and has a plan for your good.

God may use other means to help you but it is God in whom we need to trust.

3. **David feared God (v4).** We have already seen different types of fear in this passage (**v2,7,10,11**), but there is another fear mentioned in v4. Those who fear the Lord are followers of God – that means you, if you are a believer. This may raise some questions for you.

a) Do we really need to fear God? The fear of God is mentioned many times in the Bible. Here are a few examples:

If you will fear the LORD and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well. 1 Samuel 12:14

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever! Psalm 111:10

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 2 Corinthians 5:11

We need to take the issue of fearing God seriously.

b) What does fear of the Lord mean? We might struggle with the concept of fearing someone we love, and try to substitute a word like respect, instead. However, respect does not encapsulate the full meaning of the word fear in the Bible. We can see this in the words of Jesus in Luke 12:4-5: **“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”**

Mirroring Psalm 118, Jesus tells us not to fear man, who can kill the body, but rather to fear the one who has authority

to cast into hell – that is God himself. For unbelievers, this should be terrifying.

God has ultimate authority and power over the life and death of everyone

We are to fear God’s awesome power

For believers, though we need to fear God’s awesome power, we should be overwhelmed with thankfulness that he provided a way for us to avoid his just condemnation through the death and resurrection of his sinless son, Jesus.

It would be terrifying:

- if we recognised God as having this awesome power but he was not at the same time just.
- if God had this awesome power but he did not provide a way for us to be reconciled to him.

We believe that God wields his awesome power justly.

We may not understand why bad things happen but we trust that God is sovereign and good.

How should we respond? Fear of God changes our perspective and should lead to us being more concerned with obeying God than man. We should not obey God out of terror, however. If we do that, then we are just living our religious lives out of duty, trying to appease a terrifying God, rather than out of joy and love for God.

This passage from **Isaiah 11: 1-3** demonstrates what our response should be:

**There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.**

**² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.**

³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

We do not serve God in fear of punishment, but rather we 'delight in the fear of the Lord'.

When we are physically in danger (and in some other circumstances), it is natural for us to have fear, but what matters is our response to it.

- Do we turn away from God, as Adam and Eve did after they had sinned? **And he (Adam) said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself. (Gen 3:10)**
- Do we turn towards God as David did in Psalm 118? David saw the awesome power of God, and his response was to worship him and put his trust in him.

God is worthy of our fear – he is awesome, all powerful and just.

We serve him because we love him, and we love him because he first loved us.

A proper fear of God replaces other fears.

- We do not need to be afraid of men – God is on our side and more powerful than any man
- We do not need to be afraid of death – God has ultimate control over life and death
- We do not need to be anxious about our self-image – God knows everything about us and loves us.

If you are a Christian, you do not need to be afraid of judgement – the second death - because God has saved us from the penalty of death that we deserve through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus.

If you are not a Christian, you should be afraid of God’s righteous judgment. God is the only one of whom you need to be afraid.

- Take this opportunity to get right with God.

The solution to the explosion of fear and anxiety that is gripping our country is to get right with God, put your trust in him instead of yourself or other people and to have a proper fear of God.

What does the fear of God look like?

- It is demonstrated by our reverence, respect, awe, confidence, trust, faith and obedience to God

To walk in the fear of God is to live as Jesus lived, obeying God and completely trusting him. We can trust God completely because:

- God is trustworthy
- God is sovereign and rules over all
- God is righteous, just, loving, kind and truthful.

There is no one else like the Lord.

A proper understanding of God’s authority and our relationship with him puts everything else into perspective.