

An Advent Prayer

"From our Sins and Fears Release Us"

Hebrews 4:14-16

Mark Vroegop

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-16, ESV)

During the month of December we are using a Christmas hymn written by Charles Wesley as our roadmap for some of the major themes related to the season of Advent.

*Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

Two weeks ago we examined Galatians 4, and we saw the beautiful comfort from the statement "when the fullness of time had come." We marveled at the sovereign plan of God behind the first coming of Jesus and how that related to hope for our lives. Last week we learned about God's plan to set people free, and we used Ephesians 2 to talk about regeneration, the moment when God calls your name. We rejoiced in the power of God to raise the spiritually dead. And I know of at least one person who was crossed the line between life and death last week as a result of our time together.

Next week Joe Bartemus is going to help us understand the connection between Luke 2 and the line "Israel's strength and consolation – hope of all the earth thou art." And the last week of the year is going to be treat.

Part of our vision as church leaders is be a place where we raise up the next generation of church leaders and communicators of God's Word. That is one of the reasons why we have a two-year Pastoral Resident program – to pour our lives into the lives of gifted leaders. Therefore, on Sunday December 29th, all of our services will focus on one text – Revelation 21:9-27 – but each service will have a different speaker. Dustin Crowe, Bob Martin, and Jeff Ballard will preach in each of our services, and I know you are going to be blessed by what God is doing in each of these young men.

What's more, I hope that you will encourage them as they grow in their calling and giftedness. God has already used these men in our church and our staff. And I know that the last Sunday of the year is to be a feast of preaching for us.

Fear, Sin, and Rest

Our theme for today's message comes from Hebrews 4:14-16 and the line "From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee." We are going to look the connection between fear, sin, and rest in Christ. We are going to try to answer this question: *"What does it mean to be released from our fears?"*

Last week our time in the Word was very theological, but this week will be very practical. Fear, after all, is a part of our experience in the world as human beings. It is one of the symptoms of the brokenness of our culture, and fear is something with which we can all identify. We may not all be afraid of the same thing, but we all have fears. It is amazing how much fear is a part of our lives – maybe even more than we realize.

We fear dying, aging, and the loss of vitality. We fear rejection, being hurt (again), and abandonment. We fear not being able to provide for a family, future crises, or a job loss. We fear not getting well, cancer coming back, or losing another family member. We fear what people think of us, what they might say about us, or how we might be treated. We fear for the future of our children, their success, and what our culture will be like. And I could go on and on. The point here is simply that fear is embedded into the fabric of everyone's life. All of us, at times and about different things, are afraid.

So how does the Bible speak into this issue and how does it relate to the Advent of Jesus?

Sin Created Fear

In order to understand fear, you have to see its connection to sin. The first time we see fear in the Bible is in Genesis 2. After Adam and Eve listened to the temptation of Satan via the serpent (Gen. 3:1-5), they violated the command of God and ate of the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:6-7). This is what was called "the Fall." It was the first entrance of sin into the world. It contaminated everything, but it especially contaminated Adam and Eve's relationship with their creator.

Genesis 3:8-10 tells us the story, and it is here that we find the first appearance of fear:

*"And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was **afraid**, because I was naked, and I hid myself.'"* (Genesis 3:8-10, ESV)

The Hebrew word here can be used for reverence, respect, or dread. In light of what Adam and Eve had done, they were right to be afraid. So in this context, being afraid is tragic, but it is appropriate. Fearing a holy God when you have just violated His single command and knowing that the consequence is death would be understandably scary. The fear in Genesis 3 is tragically appropriate. Adam and Eve *should* be afraid.

Prior to this moment there was no need to fear. There was no violation of God's command. There was perfect harmony between God and mankind. But the entrance of sin changed everything. It brought separation from God, a flawed world, punishment, and death. Therefore, fear is a direct result of sin. Sin created fear.

Not All Fear is Sin

However, when talking about fear it is important to not assume that all fear is sin. Part of the challenge of dealing with this subject is that fear can actually be a right and appropriate response. Adam and Eve were right to be afraid, and there are many places in the Scriptures where fear is actually commanded. A few examples:

*"And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with **fear** throughout the time of your exile," (1 Peter 1:17, ESV)*

*"Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. **Fear God**. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2:17, ESV)*

*"So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the **fear of the Lord** and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." (Acts 9:31, ESV)*

*"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with **fear** and trembling," (Philippians 2:12, ESV)*

So it would be wrong to simply say, "Fear is sin." Sometimes to *not* fear would be to sin. In fact, having an appropriate fear is the mark of maturity. My wife has often said that it is only by the grace of God that any boy lives to age 13. Why? Because most little boys do not have enough fear. Their lack of fear is, at times, dangerous and scary.

In this sense, you can think of fear as respect and even honor. To fear God means that you understand who He is and who you are. It means you understand your limitations. To fear in this way is actually to honor God, is wise, and is a mark of maturity.

As we build our definition of fear from the Bible, we need to understand that 1) fear is an emotional response to the brokenness from sin, and 2) it can be appropriate and right.

Commanded Not to Fear

But there is also a clear sense in the Scriptures that fear can, in fact, be a bad thing. Fear is identified as something that believers should turn away from. This is different than the fear of God. In fact, it seems that problem is giving something else the fear that only God should possess in our hearts. A few examples in context:

- When talking about anxiety: "**Fear not**, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:31, ESV)
- Regarding our trust in our possessions: "**Fear not**, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys." (Luke 12:32–33, ESV)

- When it comes to fearing people: *"So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will **not** fear; what can man do to me?'"* (Hebrews 13:6, ESV)
- Regarding the stewardship of your gifts: *"For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit **not of fear** but of power and love and self-control."* (2 Timothy 1:6–7, ESV)

When you put these verses together, you get a sense that there is something about fear and belief or trust. Worry, covetousness, the fear of man, and poor stewardship of your gifts are all symptoms of more than fear. They are symptoms of unbelief. This is when fear becomes sinful.

It seems to me that fear moves from merely an appropriate response to brokenness of the world and respect for God into sin when fear begins to eclipse faith and belief. We are commanded not to fear because there can be a connection between fear and unbelief. In other words, we can be guilty of unbelief and express that through fear – sinful fear. And that is why the Bible says, "Fear not!"

As you can see, the issue of fear is complicated. Fear was initially caused by sin, but it is commanded by God in respect to Himself. Yet it is identified as sinful if fear looks like unbelief.

God's Solution to Fear

How does all of this relate to Advent? How does Advent celebrate the releasing of us from fear and sin? This where Hebrews 4:14-16 helps us by showing us what God has done for us in the incarnation of Jesus.

1. Atonement – A change in our relationship

The writer of Hebrews says *"we have a great high priest through the heavens, Jesus Christ"* (Heb. 4:14). The high priest's role was to intercede on behalf of the people and to atone for sins by passing into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. Jesus, through His death, provides a once-for-all atonement that addressed the problem of sin. Hebrews 10:11-14 summarizes this truth so well:

"And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." (Hebrews 10:11–14, ESV)

Jesus was both the sacrifice and the high priest making the forgiveness of sins possible for those who put their faith in Him. The effect of this atonement is that the problem of sin and a person's separation from God is addressed. And if the problem of sin is addressed in our relationship with God, then it directly affects the issue of fear. In other words, where there is no sin there is no fear.

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that *we are children of God,"* (Romans 8:15–16, ESV)

When a person receives the atonement offered through Jesus, there is a fundamental change in that person's relationship with God. No longer are we like Adam and Eve, hiding and fearful because of the shame of our actions. Instead we are adopted and welcomed as beloved children. This is what Jesus did through His atonement; this is what it means that God has released us from our sins and our fears.

"By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." (1 John 4:17–18, ESV)

Therefore, in Christ there is no condemnation and no judgment (Rom. 8:1). Our relationship with our creator has been restored. The difference between God's holiness and our guilt has been fully addressed by Christ. God has set in motion a fundamental change in our relationship through the atonement offered by His son. This is how perfect love casts out fear. By dealing with the reality of sin, God dealt a death blow to fear.

2. Incarnation – A Savior who struggles

The second thing we find in this text is the personal identification of Jesus with humanity. The writer of Hebrews makes a significant point here about the connection between Jesus and His followers. The point in verse 15 is that *"we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."* This means that while Jesus was fully God, He was also fully man. It means that He experienced the limitations of humanity, felt the swing of human emotions and struggles, and He fought temptations.

In John 12 we learn that as Jesus approached the moment before His arrest, He became troubled (John 12:27). Yet Jesus told His disciples to not be troubled in John 14. In fact, He said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God." What is going on here? John Piper, in his book *Future Grace*, helps us understand how to put this together.

Jesus was warning the disciples against giving in to despondency, yielding to it unopposed. Letting it fester and spread. And so he says, fight back: believe God, believe also in me. The first shockwaves of the blast of despondency are not sin. The sin is in not turning on the air-raid siren, and not heading for the bomb shelters, and not deploying the antiaircraft weapons.¹

I think this is very important to understand, and I also believe that it relates to fear, a close companion of despondency or "being troubled." To be human is to have moments when you feel afraid. And there are some moments when it is very appropriate to be afraid. Fear, in and of itself, isn't sinful – in the same way that grief isn't automatically sinful.

When it comes to grief this was a very helpful realization for me. Some Christians seem to believe that grief and belief cannot exist together. That leads some people to feel guilty or unspiritual that they are grieving, as if somehow their grief was because of unbelief or a lack of faith. While grief can be sinful, the difference is whether grief is allowed to rule you.

¹ John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living By Faith in Future Grace*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), 306.

The same is true for despondency and fear. Given the way the Bible talks about fear and what I see happening to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, I would suggest to you that the initial shock waves of fear are not sin. To feel afraid is not fundamentally sinful. The question is what we do about it.

If this is the right reading of Matthew 26 then it gives me great comfort that Jesus knows what it is like to be afraid, troubled, and even despondent. But He also shows us how to fight. He did not allow fear to dissuade from following God's plan for His life even though He was fully aware of the challenges. Jesus was not a stoic figure who carelessly walked to the cross. He felt afraid and battled it. He refused to surrender to unbelief. Instead He eclipsed His fear with the joy that was set before Him (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus was really troubled. He was appropriately afraid. But He didn't sin.

3. Assistance – Mercy when we tremble

Hebrews 4:16 leverages the sympathy of Jesus as a motivator for action.

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16, ESV)

We are to draw near with confidence. The Greek word here means courage or boldness in the face of danger or something intimidating. This is a stronger emotion that eclipses the reality of what should create fear. In other words, even though we might or should be afraid, we can have confidence. Why would the writer talk this way?

I think it is because the reality is that God is still holy and we are still sinners. Nothing about God's holiness or our guilt has changed as it relates to us. Confidence enters the equation because of Jesus. It is His sacrifice that covers our sinfulness. Therefore, we can enter into the throne of grace with confidence, not in ourselves, but in Him. Our faith in Jesus eclipses our fear of judgment.

But Hebrews makes it very practical. In verse 16 the need is more immediate – *"find grace to help in time of need."* And in the context of Hebrews 3-4, the help needed is in the face of failure to persevere or to give in to unbelief (see Hebrews 3:12-13, 4:11-13).

The invitation here is to seek God's help when we face things that would shake our faith. It means that while we tremble, we choose to trust! It means that we can echo the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 56:3 – *"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you."* It means that we cry out for mercy and grace in the midst of our fear. It means that we affirm God's will as best even though we know that the path will be hard. It means that we choose to believe, knowing that the consequences will be quite scary.

It means that in the midst of trembling, we chose to trust.

Finding Rest

"From our fears and sin release us, let us find our rest in thee." There are three things by way of application that I want to press into your soul today.

First, you cannot know true rest or release from fear without a relationship with Jesus Christ. Sin and fear are directly related. Frankly, if you have not dealt with the matter of your soul and your relationship with God, fear is a good thing right now. It would be appropriate and right for you to be afraid. You do not want to meet a holy God in an unconverted and sinful state. Sin creates fear, and I would urge you today to deal with the matter of your soul by putting your faith in Jesus. Receiving Christ is the first step toward freedom.

Second, if you are a follower of Jesus there will be times that create the emotion of fear. I think it is important to see these for what it is: a feeling. It is real; it is significant; and at first it is not sinful. To be afraid is not to sin. There may be good reasons to be afraid. I have dealt with people who were trapped in guilt because they frequently battled fear while feeling like failures because of the struggle. And I've dealt with people who put on a good front acting as if true spirituality was being stoic and unemotional. Their lack of honesty was scary. I just want to encourage you faith and fear can co-exist. You can be afraid and yet full of faith.

Third, followers of Jesus do not allow fear to rule their lives. They fight the kind of fear that tells them lies, begs them to disobey God, or whispers that God has forgotten about them. Fear can become unbelief, and you must fight it with all your might. Cling to the promises of God. Rest on His Word. Preach to your heart the truths of God's Word. Do not allow fear to rule you.

Jesus came into the world in order to defang sin and death and fear. And while they are all still very real, neither sin nor death nor fear have authority over those who are in Christ Jesus.

Perfect love has cast out fear!