

Jesus Christ the Great Liberator -- from the bondage

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good. 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. He said, who told you that you were naked?

[1 : 04] Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit and I ate.

Then the Lord God said to the woman, what is this that you have done? The woman said, the serpent deceived me and I ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field.

On your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall crush your head and you shall bruise his heel. To the woman, he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing.

In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you. And to Adam, he said, because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.

[2 : 19] Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken, for you are dust. And to dust you shall return.

Then the Lord God drove out the man and at the east of the garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Wonderful picture there in the beginning of the world as God created it to be. The world as we would love it to be. Perfect peace and harmony.

Male and female. Human beings and nature. And of man and God. And yet it ends with the tragedy of a curse. Curse on human relationships, upon nature.

[3 : 22] And a curse on our very lives. To dust. You will return. And that's the world that we actually know, isn't it? Human experience that ends relentlessly in the darkness of death.

And rebellion, you see, against our creator has left us in bondage to the power of sin and death. And to the fear of death. But God's extraordinary promise, even as that curse is pronounced, was that death would not have the last word.

That God himself would intervene in history. Through the promised offspring of the woman. Who would come at last to destroy the work of the devil.

To redeem, to liberate his people. And down through the ages, that promise shone brightly in a dark world. Answering the deep, deep yearning of the human heart.

The yearning in hearts weighed down by ancient grief and centuries of sorrow. In hearts that in the darkness hide. And in the shades of death abide.

[4 : 29] A yearning for tomorrow. A yearning that in the shades of death abides.

Friends, I want to say to you this Christmas Eve, that the Christmas message is the only hope in the face of humanity's greatest enemy. Death.

And that Jesus Christ is the great liberator from bondage to that fear. So in between our carols and readings tonight, I want to explore a little about what the Bible has to say about this fear of death.

And the power that it has to enslave our lives. And first of all, the Bible tackles head on the curse of fear. The Christmas message is about the true curse of fear.

Christmas shines a bright light on the bondage of fear. The bondage of fear to our sinful mortality. I recently read this book by Professor Frank Furedi.

[5 : 40] He's the emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent. And the book is called How Fear Works. Now, he's done a lot of work in this area. His first book called The Culture of Fear, written some 20 years ago, charted the way that our society in the West has become so fearful of everything.

A hundred years ago, the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell thought that science would help people to overcome what he called the craven fears that we get from religion.

But Professor Furedi says that the demise of fear in God in our culture has not, he says, liberated humanity from the dread of the future.

In fact, it's quite the opposite. He says that whereas in principle, uncertainty about the future can either lead to hope or to fear, our 21st century society is overshadowed by, quote, a dark mood of intangible anxiety.

A pessimistic teleology of doom pervades public deliberation, he says. And that was written two years ago, by the way, long before COVID.

[6 : 56] And we live, don't we, with the constant warnings, with the constant threats of imminent disaster, which crush hope, which cultivates fear.

And the media reporting of these, he says, tend to encourage a mood of paralyzing dread. Now, there's a whole vocabulary of doom.

What was once a simple forecast of windy weather is now an extreme weather warning. And actually, Furedi charts the use of that term throughout the news media.

And prior to 1990, he says it barely existed at all. In the decade running up to the year 2000, he found it 69 times in a whole decade. But now you find that term in the news thousands of times every single year.

It's the same with health warnings. He tells us that although children today will live on average 20 years longer than their grandparents, there has never been so much fear stirred up about the things that you must eat or not eat.

[8 : 03] And he quotes lists and lists of studies, which can be found to tell you that almost anything you can think of to eat will give you cancer. In fact, there's so much fear around today of skin cancer from sunlight that it's resulted in a huge problem of vitamin D deficiency because of lack of sun exposure, because so many kids and so many people are smothered, in fact, to 50 sun cream all the time.

And now that actually might become a very big factor in the current pandemic of COVID. And we've certainly witnessed, haven't we, an avalanche of fear-provoking headlines all around COVID, just as we do with talk of climate, emergency, extinction, rebellion, and so on.

And I, therefore, I find it hard not to find Professor Furedi's phrase is pretty accurate. We live in the 21st century in a climate of fear, gripped by a constant sense of vulnerability and of risk.

He quotes another academic who says that, at the core of modern fear lies the two essential and related causes, ontological insecurity and existential anxiety.

Well, in plain speak, what that means is that it's our great insecurity about who we really are, and it's our great uncertainty about what life and the world is really all about, that is making us anxious, making us fearful, and making us sick.

[9 : 36] So you can see, can't you, that there's fertile ground in our society for the identity politics that's so much becoming a feature of our Western world today. But you see, all of these insecurities, these anxieties, these insecurities and fears, they boil down to something that is actually common to every one of us, our mortality.

And deep down, whether we're conscious of it or not, as Sigmund Freud put it, the fear of death controls us more frequently than we're aware.

Well, on that at least, the Bible agrees. The Apostle of Christ tells us that in Jesus Christ, God himself partook of our flesh and blood that he might deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

And the Bible also actually agrees with a great psychoanalysis when he adds, the fear of death is usually the outcome of consciousness of guilt.

But there, of course, the Bible of the Christian Faith Park Company with Dr. Freud, because his contention was that guilt is just an errant neurosis.

[10 : 53] It's just a figment of our minds to be erased somehow on the analyst's couch, even though it might take many years to do so. But even a hundred years and more since Freud and his psychoanalysis, it's done no more, has it, than a hundred years of Bertrand Russell's science to banish these ontological insecurities and these existential anxieties.

As Professor Furedi rightly observes, our culture of fear is more enslaving than ever. Science, you see, can't banish death, can it?

Because psychology can't banish our guilt. Because our guilt isn't just a neurosis. It's not just a pathological religious instinct to be overcome.

Guilt, I'm afraid, is a reality. And indeed, it's the great reality at the heart of our humanity. And it's the entail, it's the consequence of our rejection of God as our sovereign creator.

Guilt is not just an unreal rumination within ourselves. It's the result of our very real rebellion against God. That's what sin really means.

[12 : 18] And death is the inevitable and devastating consequence of that treasonous, guilty state. That we are in. So whether we realize it or not, the true curse of fear is just that.

It's our bondage to our sinful mortality. And it blights our lives in so many ways, doesn't it? We know it does. What was it that the famous actor once said?

I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying. But the fear of death enslaves us in so many ways.

And sometimes in such destructive ways, irrational ways. And we've seen a lot of that in recent times, haven't we? It's a great worry to many doctors. That often an exaggerated fear of a one virus is making many people stopping and holding them back from seeking treatment for things that actually are far more likely to kill them.

And it's as though the acute fear of death before their eyes everywhere in the shape of COVID has caused exactly what Professor Fureti calls that paralyzing mood of dread.

[13 : 40] And that is the true curse of fear. Not only makes us sad, but it makes us mad at times as well. And Freud was right, of course, to associate the fear of death with guilt.

But he was so wrong in the real source of that real guilt. The real sting of death, says the Apostle Paul in the Bible, is sin.

Sin. Which entered the world through one man's transgression right at the beginning. Not through some sort of accidental fall as if it was a slip-up, but through a calculated rebellion of human beings who said, no, we will decide what's right and what's wrong.

We will rule ourselves, not you. We will be the only God and Lord of our lives. We will be autonomous. And as a result, says the Apostle Paul, death reigned.

The great enemy and its enslaving power is fear. We heard the sound of you and we were afraid.

[14 : 53] So we hid. That's the word of guilty humanity. Way back at the beginning of the story. And ever since. You read on from there in Genesis 3 into Genesis chapter 4 and it's just more of the entail of sin.

We have Cain murdering his brother Abel. Death reigning. And of course the result of that wasn't peace for Cain as he thought it would be, but fear. The fear of the fugitive.

There was no liberation for him, just bondage. I shall be a fugitive, he said. Whoever finds me will kill me. Death reigned. And death still reigns and robs us today, doesn't it?

There'll be many tears shed all around the world this Christmas for loved ones who are now absent forever. And you see, the Bible never plays let's pretend.

It confronts us with the truth, always. About the true curse of fear. Our sad mortality due to our sinful hostility against God our creator.

[16 : 04] And our helplessness in the face of the judgment of God. We're right to fear the horror of death. We're right to fear the darkness of destruction.

But friends, the Christmas message is also about the true crushing of fear by the one who was promised right from the beginning to crush the head of the serpent.

To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.

Say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God, behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand and his arm shall rule for him.

[17 : 16] Behold, his reward is with him and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom and shall gently lead those that are with young.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance and with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.

therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel.

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. They that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

[18 : 30] for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Amen. The Christmas message confronts us with the true curse of fear but tells us also of the true crushing of that fear because Christmas shines a bright light on the true banishment of fear, the banishment of fear by our Savior, Messiah.

Fear not, said Isaiah, your God will come and save you. And from the very beginning, even as that sentence of God's curse was announced, there was that promise to crush that curse of fear.

And those words fear not are the constant refrain throughout the whole Old Testament, throughout the law, the prophets and the Psalms. Fear not, Abraham, said the Lord when he called him to follow him.

I am your shield and your great reward. I am the God of your father. Fear not, he said to Isaac and to his son Jacob. Fear not, fear not, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, God said to his people through Moses as they crossed the Red Sea and went to the promised land.

[20 : 13] On the brink of the promised land, some 40 years later, despite all their disastrous rebellions in the desert, God's word came again. Fear not, do not be dismayed.

The Psalms are full of promises to banish fear for everyone who knows and loves the Lord. You will not fear the terror by night nor the arrow that flies by day.

Psalms 91. The Lord is on my side. I will not fear. What can man do to me? even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

And the prophets too, like Isaiah, they resound with the cry, fear not, your God will come and save you. Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.

Rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem, the King of Israel is in your midst, you shall never again fear evil. That's the promised hope of the prophet Zephaniah for the great coming day of the Lord, which he says is surely coming soon.

[21 : 26] And on that day, he says, it shall be said to Jerusalem, fear not, O Zion, the Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save you. And you see, that day that he longed for is the day.

His light began at last to dawn in this world with the birth of Jesus Christ. That's why it shouldn't surprise us at all that the very first Christmas rang out with songs of joy about the true crushing at last of the fear of sin and death.

The very first word spoken from heaven to earth through God's angels is fear not. Told Zechariah, remember, John the Baptist's father in the temple, fear not Zechariah, your prayer has been answered, the Savior's coming.

To Mary, fear not Mary, for you will conceive a son who will be called the son of the most high God. And to Joseph, remember, when he was naturally shocked to find his fiancée was pregnant, and suspected the obvious thing that everyone would suspect.

Fear not, Joseph, said the angel, to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. To the shepherds, remember, scared witless by that sudden appearance of angels, the fully armed host of heaven's armies.

[22 : 52] And we're told they were sore afraid, they were filled with fear. But came the word, fear not. We bring glad tidings of great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, as promised, a savior, who is the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord himself.

You see, the Christmas message is proclaiming these ancient promises at last fulfilled. The true crushing of our deepest fears forever.

Because at last he has come, the promised one, to crush the serpent, to disarm the evil one's power over us. by himself taking our flesh and bearing the penalty of our sin in his body on the tree, as the apostle Peter puts it.

So that as Hebrews chapter 2 says, through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, the devil, and deliver all of those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

And Jesus himself explained all of that to his disciples after his resurrection at the end of Luke's gospel. We're told Jesus said, everything that was written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled.

[24 : 19] And he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. Just as God opened old Zechariah's mind as he pondered all of these things in his state of dumbness, remember that the angel had inflicted on him at the beginning because at first he had closed his mind to God's truth.

But he got it in the end. And when the Lord opened his mouth again, he sang for joy about the one who was coming to crush forever the fear of death by his great salvation.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. As he spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets from of old, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, that we being delivered from the hands of our enemies might serve him without fear, to give knowledge of salvation to his people and the forgiveness of their sins, to give light to those who sit in the darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

All because at last that yearning, the hopes and the fears of all the years were met in the child who was born in that little town of Bethlehem.

Let's hear that well-known carol together now. Jesus said, I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more that they can do.

[26 : 09] 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.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows.

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God. But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

It may seem strange that after all of those wonderful promises of God to banish the bondage of fear, we find Jesus himself, as well as telling us not to fear, clearly telling us that we are to fear.

fear. And that there is real blessing in the right kind of fear. And that is because, of course, the Christian message is about reality.

[27 : 26] Reality about bondage to fear in our sinful mortality. And, of course, also it is a message about rejoicing, banishing fear through our Savior Messiah.

But it is also a message about response, about the blessing of fearing, of revering a sovereign master who, when you truly serve him, then you have nothing else to fear.

Before I briefly explain this last thing and what Jesus means here, another carol reminds us that for all the fulfillment of God's eternal plan and purpose in the work of Jesus Christ, it is where faith receives the gospel word that the breath of life is imparted to all of those who bow the knee to a sovereign Savior.

Those words that we heard from the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke's gospel chapter 12, they tell us about the true command to fear. Because Christmas does also shine a bright light on the true blessing of fear.

The blessing of fear for a sovereign master who is our Savior Messiah and has redeemed us from our sinful mortality.

[28 : 58] The Bible teaches us so clearly about the rescue from the bondage to the wrong kind of fear and into the beauty of the right kind of fear.

Do not fear earthly mortality, says Jesus. The powers of this earthly, ephemeral world. At their worst, all they can ever do is kill our bodies and they can do no more.

fear. That's the fears that stalk us in this world with its cancers, with its strokes, with its heart attacks, with its hundreds, thousands of viruses and bacteria, known and unknown.

the very thing that holds so many of this world's people in a vice-like grip of fear. And Jesus says these are not the things that we're to fear at all.

And those who know the Lord Jesus Christ need have no fear of our mortality, no fear of our earthly death. Because, as the Apostle John so famously says, perfect love casts out all fear.

[30 : 20] And the God who John says to us, the God who is love, that love came down at Christmas to save us from that fear. Which is all to do with real fear of guilt and of real punishment for our sins.

But he has given us knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of our sins, as Zechariah sang. But you see, the divine love, the God who is love, his love is not sentimental love.

It is saving love, but it is also a sovereign love. The love of heaven, the son of righteousness has redeemed us from our sinful mortality, so that, once again, we will rejoice in his sovereign mastery over us.

God will be to God who holds your eternal destiny in his hands, not just your earthly life. And that's the message of the whole Bible.

God is the true fear of the Lord, reverence for him, that's the very beginning of wisdom, says the book of Proverbs, over and over. The fear of the Lord is the very fountain of life.

[31 : 38] God because he is the sovereign Lord, the judge of earth and heaven, and he will judge eternally, says Jesus here, very plainly. In fact, it will be he, it will be Jesus, God the Son, risen and resplendent in glory, who will himself one day judge the living and the dead.

That, friends, is the message of the New Testament gospel. That is the message Jesus Christ sent his church into the world to proclaim. Peter said that to the centurion Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 verse 42.

Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

That is the church's gospel according to the Lord Jesus Christ. And he went on to him and all the prophets, the Old Testament, bears witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

You see, the judge, our sovereign maker and our master, has already come as our saving Messiah. So that we might serve him without fear, as Zechariah says, so that he might guide our feet into the way of peace.

[33 : 04] if we believe and trust in him, if we will receive forgiveness from him by bowing to him as our Lord and our sovereign master, as the ruler, as the keeper of our lives, once again, as he made us to be.

Not resistant, fighting God, there's no peace that way, but reverently fearing God, the God made known in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes, says Jesus, fear him. There's no refuge from him, but there is refuge in him.

Fear the Lord, says the psalmist. Bow to his mastery and you will have nothing else to fear. The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear him and delivers them.

that's the command to fear, you see, that will deliver you from every other fear in life. Why would you resist such a sovereign master who has made himself known as a saving Messiah to grant you that peace and forgiveness?

[34 : 26] Showing us the love of God, the infinite love that, as Jesus says here, cares for every sparrow, the numbers, the very hairs on our heads.

And who says to us, every one of us, however small, however insignificant, unimportant we may feel, who says to us, fear not, you are more valuable, more precious than many sparrows.

listen to Jesus once more as we close tonight. I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God in the eternal judgment to come.

But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. Friends, Christmas brings the only hope in the face of humanity's greatest enemy, death, death itself.

Jesus Christ is the great liberator from bondage to the fear of death. Don't deny him, acknowledge him, fear him, bow down to him as the sovereign master of your life.

[35 : 57] And he will liberate you from all earthly fear forever. Amen.

Let's pray. Eternal God, who are the light of minds that know you, the joy of hearts that love you, the strength of wills that serve you.

Grant us to know you, that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.