

**THE
FEAR NOTS
OF THE
FIRST NATIVITY**



*A short series of Christmas sermons
by Pastor David Legge*

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The Fear Nots Of The First Nativity - Chapter 1

"Fear Not, Joseph"

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Now we're turning in our Bibles to Matthew's Gospel chapter 1. I have been announcing over the last few meetings in the Hall, that I want to take up the beginning of a three-part series this morning on the Nativity theme, and I've entitled the whole series - though it be only three weeks - 'The 'Fear Nots' of the First Nativity'. It will comprise of three texts that you find throughout two of the Gospels, Matthew's gospel that we're looking at this morning, and two other texts in Luke's gospel, where we hear these words 'Fear not, Fear not'. We will look this morning at the first 'Fear not' which is spoken to Joseph, and we'll entitle this message this morning: 'Fear Not, Joseph' - Fear not, Joseph!

We'll read the whole of what is familiar to us in chapter 1 at least of the Nativity theme in Matthew's gospel. Verse 18 is the first verse, in verses 1 to 17 you have the genealogy of the Lord Jesus, proving without a shadow of a doubt that He has the right to the throne of David, that He has the right to be the King of the Jews. Then in verse 18: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused", or had been betrothed, "to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man", or a righteous man, "and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS".

If you're familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, and particularly the Nativity story, you will know that for centuries devout Jews - such as Simeon - looked skyward, heavenward, waiting for the consolation of Israel. When Simeon saw the consolation of Israel he was free, as far as he was concerned, to die and to go to heaven, because the Lord had answered his prayer - he had seen Messiah. That is what the consolation of Israel was, it was Messiah who was coming to console them, coming to deliver them, coming to be the fulfilment of all their prophecies, deliver them from Gentile rule, and bring them into the kingdom of God on the earth. Simeon looked for it, Anna looked for it, many godly old saints looked for it; and all of a sudden now we see in Matthew's gospel the fulfilment of all of God's promises found in a little baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Paul put it like this in Galatians 4 verses 4 and 5: 'But when the fulness of the time was come, God brought forth his Son, born of a woman, to deliver them that were under the law'. Now I want you to note, and I took this up in a study - if you remember - last Christmas (you probably don't!), about four weeks of study looking at Matthew's particular nativity scene, under the title 'The Fulfilment of Truth in the Fullness of Time' - the fulfilment of truth in the fullness of time, because that is Matthew's theme. God promised that He would send a deliverer, God had foretold in the prophecies of the Old Testament that Messiah would come. What we find in Matthew's gospel is that no matter how long it takes, no matter how many generations pass by, God always fulfils His word.

Do you know that today? What Matthew's telling us, throughout all of his gospel but at the beginning in the Nativity scene is: God fulfils His promises, God never fails in what He has said to man. Isaiah echoed that in Isaiah 55 in the Old Testament: 'So shall my word', the Lord said, 'be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it'. What we have here in Matthew 1 and 2 is Matthew's account, which traces the fulfilment of God's plan revealed in scripture. That's why you have in verses 1 to 7 the ancestry of Jesus, the Messiah King. Now you might think, as you're reading through all these names, 'and so-and-so begat so-and-so, and so-and-so begat so-and-so', 'This is a very dull way to begin a book! He wouldn't sell too many of his novels of Matthew's gospel according to him, if he started the first chapter in this way'. But the fact of the matter is, although it may be dull to you, for a Jewish reader this was the fulfilment of all they had waited on. The one who would be in the line of David, who would come and be their Messiah, this was a new beginning, this was the fulfilment of all of Israel's history - because this was His-story: the lineage, the genealogy of their Messiah, the one they had been waiting so long for.

In fact, in verse 1 this statement 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ' in the literal Greek could be translated 'The Book of Genesis'. We get 'genealogy' from 'Genesis', 'beginnings'. This is a new beginning, Genesis is the book of beginnings of the universe telling us how God made the heavens and the earth; and now Matthew is bringing to this Jewish people the new beginning. All of a sudden the light dawns on their spirit that Messiah has come. This list begins with Abraham, and takes us down all through the generations finally to King David; and Matthew's desire is to show that this Christ is indeed the true King of Israel in the line of David, who was designed to show us God's purpose. He has come! He has been eagerly awaited, and He is now here!

So what I want you to see, before we go on any further, is that Matthew's account of the nativity is not simply an account of Jesus' birth and childhood so that we should be able to re-enact it in primary school plays today; but what it is is a series of scenes designed to show how God's purpose that was declared in the Old Testament was coming to literal, actual, specific, 100% perfect fulfilment in the birth of Jesus Christ. That's why each of the subsequent quotations that we find here from the Old Testament are given with a formula - the Old Testament verse is quoted: 'He shall be born of a virgin', found in Isaiah; and then we have the fulfilment, Mary is told, without knowing a man in the sexual sense, that she was with child of the Holy Ghost - the virgin conceived. We find also in Isaiah chapter 7 that it was prophesied that He would be called Immanuel - you have that verse quoted here, and then you have the fulfilment. What Matthew is showing in Matthew chapter 1 and chapter 2 is that all that the Old Testament prophet said is fulfilled in Christ!

Isn't that wonderful? Now there are many other themes that run under the surface of Matthew's gospel in the Nativity scene, but the overwhelming theme that I want you to understand today is this: God fulfils His word. Did you hear that? God always fulfils His word. Now that is the context where we find the verse that takes up our attention today, and it is verse 20: 'But while he thought on these things', Joseph, that is, 'behold, the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost'. This is not just the story of the fulfilment of God's promises in national Israelite history, and we could fall short there and just deal with it as a theological piece of Scripture that tells us about Israel's fulfilment, and not realise that it's also a personal history of the individuals that were involved. There are biographical details given to us of Joseph, of Mary, of the baby Jesus, of the shepherds, of the wise men and others.

This is what chiefly I want you to see this morning and then in the following two weeks or so: the three 'Fear nots' that are in the Nativity scene, first spoken to Joseph here, second spoken to Mary in Luke 1:30, and the third spoken to the shepherds in Luke 2:10. Let's deal first of all with 'Fear Not, Joseph', Matthew chapter 1 verse 20. The first thing that I want you to see is that this 'Fear not' was given to Joseph, who was in what we

could consider an impossible situation. Do you hear that? Joseph was in what we would consider was an impossible situation. That's why I believe Matthew's account is told from Joseph's standpoint while, when you look at Luke's account, it's told from Mary's standpoint. Joseph's ends with verse 18: 'The birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child'. Now, as far as Joseph was concerned, he didn't know it was of the Holy Ghost. He didn't know this was an immaculate conception. He didn't know this was the fulfilment of Isaiah 7, no one had let him in on the secret!

When we look at Luke's gospel 1 and 2, we find that Mary knew because Gabriel the angel had appeared to her and told her - but Joseph did not know, he was in the dark. We know, Matthew tells us, that this child was of the Holy Ghost, but as far as Joseph was concerned: he didn't know where this child had come from. He didn't know this woman in a sexual sense, as far as he was concerned no one else knew her, she was espoused to him to be his wife and his wife alone - how could this thing be? As far as we are concerned, I think if you put yourself in Joseph's shoes, he was in an impossible situation.

I believe here the great lesson is to be found in Joseph's reaction to what had taken place in his life, because in all likelihood the first thought that came into Joseph's mind was the first thought that would come into your mind - what would it be? 'She has been unfaithful to me'. Let's be real, I know we respect the Scriptures, but it's about human beings, this story. It's biographical: what would you think if you heard that your espoused engaged partner was with child? What would be the first thought that would come into your mind? What would you do? How would you feel? How would you cope with a situation like this?

If we just think about it for a moment, regarding Joseph, this situation could have resulted in the stoning of Mary. If you cast your mind back, if you know this Scripture, in John 8 you will remember there was a woman caught in adultery, and she was pulled out before religious people - and they all lifted stones ready to stone her, to destroy her. Joseph could have very well been justified, it says 'he being a just man', to do away with her, and to make this sin known, and the law would have condemned her to death. Joseph, it says, was a righteous man, and that means that Joseph knew that he couldn't sweep this sin under the carpet. He knew that it had to be dealt with in a right way; but Joseph, being a righteous man, was not a cruel arrogant man. He was not a legalistic man, he was also a kind man, and we read here that he was righteous - though he didn't want to make a public example of her - and he was thinking about this thing. He knew it was right for him to put her away publicly, in other words to divorce her - but being a kind man, being a loving and a sympathetic man, he didn't want to bring public disgrace upon her.

Can I just pause for a moment: because I think Joseph is one of the most underrated characters in the whole of the New Testament, indeed the Bible. Here you see a balance in the personality of Joseph that is seen in the personality of his adopted Son, Jesus Christ of Nazareth - full of grace and truth. Of course, he couldn't come to the epitome that was in Christ of grace and truth, but nevertheless we see here that he was a righteous man who knew what was right - yet even though he was in the dark regarding what God was doing in the womb of his loved one, he was loving and kind and compassionate toward her - and there's a lesson for us all in that. Many of us here know all too well what it is to be right, but do we know what it is to be right in a gracious way?

Let's face it: Joseph was in the dark regarding what was going on the womb of Mary. As far as you are concerned and I am concerned, in the circumstances that we go through - some of them that we reckon impossible situations - we're in the dark as well. Is that not the case? You don't know what's going on, you don't know what God's doing! You ask the question: 'Why did this happen? Why did it happen when it happened? Why did it have to happen the way that it happened?'. We want to know the ins and outs of the background to the story of our lives, and if we're honest with ourselves and honest with God, we find it very difficult having faith in Him without knowing all the facts in the story. We won't trust God until we know

everything, we have to know that it's going to turn out alright, we have to know everything is going to work together for our good without just taking God at His word and trusting Him even though things seem to be absolutely impossible.

Now I'm sure Joseph had his struggles, and we'll see in a moment or two that I believe he did, but nevertheless Joseph was a man who trusted God according to what God said. Harold Wilmington, a Bible commentator, said this of Joseph: 'Joseph must be considered by all standards of measurement as a truly just man with the spiritual maturity of a David, Moses, Peter or Paul. In fact, had it not been for Judah's sin, Joseph would have been ruling from Jerusalem as the rightful King. It was he, not Herod, who had the proper credentials to sit on the throne'. He should have been sitting on the throne - Joseph - in the lineage of the King, not Herod; but we see, at least in his personality and his characteristics, the character and the personality of a King.

However, he still felt - even though he was merciful, even though he was compassionate - as a just man he still felt that his hand was forced, and he had to do something with Mary. That's why we find in verse 20, when he thought on these things - what things? Verse 19, he didn't want to make her a public example, but he was minded to put her away privately. He wasn't going to do what the Pharisees did in John 8, and bring her out into the square and make a public example, but he was going to do what he thought was the righteous thing, and divorce her privately. No one, as far as the family was concerned, or the wider family, outside the family, would know about it - but he had to do what was right. So we find this statement, 'Fear not', in the midst of Joseph feeling that he was in an impossible situation, he was going to have to do something if he was going to be right. So, while he thought on these things...

Before I go on to expound that verse in more detail, what is usually the result when we think upon impossible things? This was an impossible situation as far as Joseph was concerned. You know what it's like: your back is to the wall, everybody seems to be against you, you don't know how this situation is going to be resolved - what do you do about it? You do what Joseph does: we think about these things. I believe we do more than think about them, the Greek word 'think' is also found in Matthew's gospel 9:4: 'Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?'. So this word 'think' can also be used of evil things, not just righteous things - and how many of us, when trouble comes along our way, we really think about it! The sense is 'meditate', we reflect on evil, we ponder our problems, we consider our crises, and the result is all of the mulling over of these things in our minds produces what? What does it produce? Fear! 'How am I going to get out of this fix?'

That's why, you don't need to turn to it, but that's one of the reasons why Paul in Philippians 4 verses 6-8 said: 'Be anxious for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds', guard your hearts and minds, 'through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest', honourable, 'whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure...if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things'. That is intrinsically linked with not being worried about things, not being fearful, don't mull bad things over in your mind, and meditate and ponder and consider them - but commit all those bad things to the Lord in prayer, and you'll be delivered of your care.

Now I know that's very simplistic for many of us, and if you've tried it you will know that - but the fact of the matter is, we have to declare things as they really are, and it's simply this: when you leave God out of your impossible situations, they get worse. The fear gets worse, the anxiety gets worse, the nervous thoughts get worse, because God is not in the picture of your situation, you've left God out. I know it seems impossible, but the God that we are dealing with is the God of the impossible, as Joseph would come to see. But our hearts fill with fear, and I believe Joseph's heart was filled with fear. He knew he wanted to marry

Mary, but now he felt that he couldn't righteously marry her - he was afraid to marry her, so he was going to put her away privately.

The tense suggests that he was thinking about the determination to which he had come, verse 19, he was determined to put her away. As he was thinking about these things - now mark this - as he was thinking 'I'm going to put her away, I have to put her away': behold! Like lightning! Unexpectedly! Immediately, at that moment of fear: the angel of the Lord appeared, and said unto Joseph 'Fear not!, Fear not'. All of a sudden, because of the word of the Lord in this man's life, what happened? His plans were redirected, his life was interrupted, his fears had been confronted, and how often that happens in our own lives, doesn't it? Our plans are stalled, our schemes are maybe even stopped, because of God's divine sovereignty. Things may seem to be at an end for us, but the fact of the matter is this, as Proverbs says: 'A man's heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth his steps'.

Do you find yourself today in an impossible situation? Joseph was in a situation, I would say, more impossible than yours - for in a rational, reasonable sense, there was no other conclusion than that Mary had been unfaithful to him. But all of a sudden, what he had restricted God in, God broke through! God declared Himself as the God of the impossible, and Joseph took God at His word and believed Him, and had faith! Now you might say: 'That's OK for Joseph, sure an angel told him in a dream'. Well, I'll grant you that point, but remember what the angel told him, the angel told him that the explanation was one that had never ever been seen in all of human history: that that child had come there from the Holy Spirit - it never had been heard of before.

When people saw an unmarried woman, there was only one possible explanation, and that was unfaithfulness - or that he was telling a lie, and it was his child, he could be accused of fathering the child. A sword was in his heart, just as a sword would pierce Mary's heart one day - but you still say, 'But an angel told him, if an angel told me that my situation would be OK, that God was going to deliver me in a miraculous way, well then I would believe it!'. Let's be realistic today: the angel told him in a dream. I'll be honest with you: if you came into the church tonight and said: 'David, I had a wee doze this afternoon, and an angel told me in a dream that my situation was going to be alright', I wouldn't believe you! Maybe that's little faith on my part, but that's the way we are, we're sceptical, aren't we? I would probably say: 'Did you have cheese for your tea? Or have you been hitting the drink?' - that's what people would say to you, isn't it? 'Did you have a party last night? Are you hallucinating, are you imagining? Is senile dementia entering in prematurely?'. Was the angel going to go and tell Joseph's family? Was the angel going to tell Joseph's Rabbi, and Joseph's town? What do you think they would think? Is that not enough reason for Joseph to be afraid? Sure, when the angel told Zacharias that his wife Elizabeth was going to bear a son, he said: 'Whereby shall I know this, for I am an old man, and my wife is well stricken in years?' - he doubted even though an angel told him. Angel or no angel, miracle or no miracle, we tend to doubt God's word, don't we? We have God's word for a lot of things, but we don't believe it.

What I want you to see this morning is this: God told him to fear not, and that is God's word to you today - fear not! Fear not, little flock, whatever your lot. I am told, I haven't counted them - you can do it for me - that there are 366 'Fear nots' in the whole of the Bible, one for every day of the year, and one for a leap year when you need it. 'Fear not', yet we still live in our fears - and I'm asking you, coming up to Christmas, which can be a very very difficult time for many I know: what are the fears that you are pondering, the fears that you're analysing, that you're running over again and again like playback in your mind as we run up to Christmas?

This Greek word 'fear' is the word 'phobos' (sp?) - if you listen carefully to the pronunciation you will hear that we derive our English word 'phobia' from it. To name a couple of phobias: claustrophobia, fear of closed in spaces; arachnophobia, fear of spiders; photophobia, fear of light; xenophobia, fear of strangers - we could

go on and on and on, but that suffix 'phobia', could be put onto your fear, and my fear, and every fear that is conceivable - that which is robbing us of the peace of God in our heart. Now Joseph's was a social phobia: 'What would people think of me in my impossible situation?', yet he didn't question, he didn't argue with God. You've got questions, you've got problems, but he just had faith - an angel gave him one command to marry Mary, and he obeyed. That's faith.

Can I take you on a bit further as we close? Joseph was in what we would consider an impossible situation, but what I want you to see is: the reason why Joseph overcame that impossible situation was that Joseph had the God of the impossible, who providentially ordered his circumstances and was behind them all. Now please note that there were no more miracles here - God didn't say, 'I get your point now Joseph, I realise that people are going to misunderstand what's going on here, so I'll just give everybody in your family, everybody in your district and village, the same dream that you had, so that they will know that this child is of the Holy Spirit' - is that what God did? No!

Sometimes we're looking for the miracle, we're looking for the flashing light, and the Red Sea to be parted in our situation - and that miracle may not come! Nevertheless, we still have the God of the impossible. You know, this wasn't a unique situation - it was in the sense that this was a conception where no man was involved - but if you remember Genesis 18, the angel appeared also to Sarah and told her in old age that she would bear a son. What did she do? She went into her tent and she had a good belly laugh! 'At my age? In my nineties - and my husband, he's not 21! How are we going to bear a child at this stage in our life?' - and what did God say to Sarah? 'Why do you laugh Sarah? Why do you laugh? For nothing is impossible with God!'

In Luke 1 verse 34, in the same nativity story, we find the same words spoken: 'Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?'; verse 37: 'For with God nothing shall be impossible' - or, as the Revised Version says, 'For no word from God shall be void of power'. This is God's word! Now here's God's word to you today: 'Fear not' - that is not just that you, like Vincent Peel, decide 'Well, this is the power of positive thinking. I have to look at the mirror in the morning and say 'Fear not, Fear not, Fear not', when I'm shaking like a leaf' - this is God's word, which is not void of power. There is intrinsic power in what God says to all of us today: 'Fear not'.

I know it's easy to say it, but what God's word is saying in this situation is: when it seems most improbable, even impossible, for God to fulfil His word; then is when it is most expected. God loves to do the impossible, that's why William Cowper wrote that hymn:

'Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take:
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace,
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes shall ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour,
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower'.

Now that's all very nice poetic prose and all that, but when you read Cowper's life and you realise that he struggled with depression, with despair most of his life, before salvation, after salvation, even struggling with suicide - then we realise that out of that he found that he was able to embrace God's word and trust.

Can I leave you with a verse today? It's from the Psalm that Peter read to us, Psalm 46, turn with me to it please - a minute or two will suffice. Psalm 46 verses 1 and 2, we know the words are familiar: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea'. The Amplified Version translates the second part of verse 1, 'a very present help in trouble', this way: 'a well-proved help in trouble'. Does it not encourage you today that Joseph, and many other of the saints of God in impossible situations, found God to prove His word faithful? A literal translation of that second part of the verse is this: 'very much found to be a help in distresses', and verse 2, 'on account of this, we will not fear when the earth changes', seismic change, 'and the mountains are slipping into the heart of the seas'. The permanent things that we thought were going to last forever in our lives go into oblivion!

Can I leave you with one translation of the second part of verse 1 that has been precious to me? It's the New American Standard Bible's marginal rendering, and it says this: 'God is our refuge and strength, abundantly available for help in tight places' - abundantly available for help in tight places, isn't that beautiful? What tight place are you in? I'll tell you: 'Fear not' - do you know why? Because Immanuel is your portion - 'God with us', us in our nature, incarnate in flesh, God condescending to be with us - with us at our side! I know everything seems to be going wrong for you at this moment, and you're saying 'It's not meant to be like this, how can God sort out a mess like mine?'. 'Fear not!', God says, 'This too is of the Holy Ghost, and in the fullness of My time your new beginning will be born'. In the meantime, keep looking to Jesus.

When the businessman Alan Emery was in the wool business, he spent one evening with a shepherd on the Texas prairie. During the night in the long wait he heard coyotes wailing, and it just pierced the air with such fear - you can imagine the situation. The shepherd dog's growled and peered into the darkness, not knowing where the noise was coming from. The sheep, which had been sleeping, lumbered all of a sudden to their feet, alarmed, fearful, and bleating pitifully. The shepherd began tossing more logs onto the fire, and the flames shot up. In the glow, Alan said that he looked and he saw thousands of little lights all around the prairie - and those little lights were the reflection of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. When he realised that, he said that in the midst of the danger 'I observed that the sheep were not looking into the darkness like the dogs, but the sheep were keeping their eyes set in the direction of safety, they were looking to the shepherd'. He said that at that point he couldn't help thinking of Hebrews 12: 'Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith' - and that is why, Matthew says in 4 and 16: 'The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light has sprung up'. Fear not, Immanuel is with you.

Let's all bow our heads: Lord, we remember that David could say that his own familiar friend had deserted him. In another place he could say, 'When father and mother forsake me...' - Lord, we read in the scripture of the widow, of the orphan, we read of those who have been deserted by husband and wife; yet, our Father, we thank Thee that we also read the Saviour saying: 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. I will be with thee, even unto the end'. Lord, may we all take this with us today, especially if there are those not saved, and they have been fearful - they feel it is impossible that God should be made real to them. Lord, may they reach out and embrace by faith the compassion of the same God that tells all of us to fear not. In the Saviour's name we pray, Amen.

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The Fear Nots Of The First Nativity - Chapter 2

"Fear Not, Mary"

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If you were with us last week, we began a Christmas series, a three-part series entitled "The 'Fear Nots' of the First Nativity". Last week we were in Matthew's Gospel, his nativity scene, and we were looking at chapter 1 - and that particular title last week was 'Fear Not, Joseph', how the angel told Joseph not to fear to take Mary unto him as his wife, because the child in her womb was of the Holy Ghost. She had not been unfaithful to him, but this was in the plan of God. We saw how God's word was speaking to us: there are certain providential problems that come into all of our lives, but God still says by His Spirit in the word to 'Fear Not', because these things have not come by chance. We do not believe in fatalism though, but yet we do believe in a providential hand of a guiding, loving God.

Now this week we're looking at 'Fear Not, Mary', and we'll read all of chapter 1 down to verse 38, because I will be referring to Zacharias and Elizabeth, and the birth of John the Baptist as well. So, Luke's gospel chapter 1: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand", Luke says, "to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused", or betrothed, "to a man

whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her", and we end our reading at verse 38.

This morning we're looking at the subject that I have taken: 'Fear not, Mary' - and God willing, the week after next, when I return with you just before Christmas we'll look at 'The Fear Not to the Shepherds' that we also find in Luke's gospel and chapter 2.

Now most of you will know that Luke has been designated by the apostle Paul to be the 'beloved physician', but what many people do not see is the fact that in the New Testament specifically Luke is also the beloved historian. He's not called such, but that is the nature of the two books which Dr Luke wrote. Of course, they are Luke's gospel, the third gospel, and the only real historical book in the purest sense in the New Testament, the book of the Acts of the Apostles - also authored by Luke. So, if you like, Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are a two-volume book concerning the historical facts relating to the early Christian church. In fact, if you look at the introduction of the book of the Acts - we don't have time to do it this morning - but if you look also at the introduction, the first four verses, of Luke's gospel chapter 1, you will see that it is addressed to a gentleman called Theophilus. Now Theophilus' name literally means 'dear to God', or 'friend of God', and some feel that this might be a generic term to express all the believers who would read the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. I personally think it's an individual who had come to know the Saviour, or maybe even someone, quite a noble man, because he is designated as such, someone who had heard about the goings-on regarding the early Christian church, and wanted to know a little bit more about this Jesus whose message was turning the world upside down.

He was probably a person of high rank, perhaps in the household of Caesar, we don't really know - but one thing we're probably sure of is that after Theophilus read this history in Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, it more than likely was circulated around other believers in that particular day. A history of the early church, of the workings and words of the Lord Jesus, and of the workings and works of the apostles.

Now, for you kids here, you will probably agree with me - as I found, going through both primary school and secondary school - that history is one of the most boring subjects that you could ever do. I'm sad to say that, because I think that history is extremely relevant, but probably the reason why it has been so boring for us sitting in the classroom is that the relevance is not often taught to us. We learn dates, we learn about kings, we learn about classical times and more modern times; but the actual lessons that we can learn from history are not applied to us in our present modern day. Now, if you're a history teacher and you do that, I apologise profusely - but generally speaking, I think that's the case.

You've often heard that history is important - why? Because in history and the study thereof, we learn from our mistakes. But if we learn a load of facts and figures, and don't then apply that to our modern day situation, the likelihood is that we don't learn from our mistakes, and we often repeat the mistakes of history - and we see that all around us, probably, I would say, because our history has not been applied

contemporarily in our modern day age. But you know, history is more than simply learning from our mistakes, but in history we find out where ideas came from, where movements began in embryo, and where individual personalities came from. Now what we have in Luke's gospel is: he tells us of the beginnings of Christianity, and as such he is the historian of the early Christian church. In other words, he is showing us where our faith came from. Now this is important, because if Luke is an historian - and we believe he is - that means that our faith is rooted and grounded on undeniable historical fact. Did you get that? If Luke is an historian, and I believe it can be proved that he is, and one of the best, our faith is rooted and grounded on undeniable historical facts. In other words, our faith does not depend on some subjectively based experiential mysticism. Now what I mean by that is this: some prophet, an individual, of himself, like Joseph Smith, or Brigham Young, or another founder of these cults and false religions like the Buddha that we were thinking about last Monday night, our faith does not rest on some individual personal revelation that that man was given, and no one else was given but he, and he founds a religion and he tells us 'This is the new way to God'. Our faith is rooted on historical fact, on a man who came into this world - and it is documented that He came - and upon the message that He preached that is recorded for us in scripture, and all of these facts that are evidenced for us in the annals of the tested history of time.

Now that should encourage us today - I don't think I've ever got as excited about history as I have been about this message: that our faith is not something that is beyond human life, but our faith is rooted and grounded in something that took place on this earth, that men testified of, that men saw and heard and touched. Let me show you this from another of the apostles, if you turn to 2 Peter, the second epistle of Peter, do turn with me to it - 2 Peter and chapter 1, Peter on a similar vein says this in verse 16: 'We have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty' - we saw Him! Now what he is speaking of specifically here is the Mount of Transfiguration, where Peter, James and John were taken up and saw Christ transfigured, and saw Elijah and Moses on either side. Verse 17 tells us that: 'For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard'. So he says 'we saw and we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount' - we saw, we heard, we were with Him. Verse 19: 'We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation'.

Now it's not my intention to expound that verse, it's a difficult one to do in the time that we have, but it simply means this - it doesn't mean that you can't read the Bible on your own and understand it, but it means this: the truth of God has not been given to one specific individual in an exclusive, unique revelation that only he has had; but the truth of God is found in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Person who was seen by the apostles, and who passed down that teaching in the apostle's doctrine that we have in the New Testament Scriptures. It is based on historical fact.

Now I hope that you're understanding what I'm saying today, and I hope that you'll understand what I'm just about to say, which you'll feel might be irrelevant - but, believe you me, it is not. It is the fact that liberal theologians today doubt the historical accuracy of not just many portions of the Scriptures, but specifically Luke's gospel - Luke being the historian, so-called. But this is what liberal theologians are saying today: 'Well, it doesn't really matter if Luke is not particularly historically accurate. It doesn't matter if Luke isn't an historian, as long as you believe the truths about Christ that you believe about Him, that's all that matters - it doesn't really matter that you can prove it historically through the word of God'. Now listen to me: if you doubt the historicity, then the facts are in doubt. If you doubt that Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are history, as good - even better - than history than you'll get today in any of the libraries or universities of our world - if you doubt that, the facts of our faith are in doubt, and that means you have doubtful faith.

Can I remind you of what the apostle said in 1 Corinthians 15, you can turn to this if you wish? First Corinthians 15, this time specifically in relation to the resurrection, verse 17: 'if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins'. These Greeks were saying: 'Well, it doesn't matter if Christ was literally raised bodily from the grave, as long as He was spiritually raised in the message that is being taught today'. This is what theologians are saying: 'It doesn't matter that it happened or it didn't happen, it doesn't affect your faith' - it does affect your faith! Because our faith is not in cunningly devised fables, our faith is in the facts of what took place historically on this earth when Jesus walked among men. Liberals are saying that Matthew and Luke's account of the Nativity are their own accounts. Matthew and Luke are theologians, they're not expressing history, they're expressing their theological viewpoints - and they call this the 'incarnation myth', the idea that there's something special about Jesus. But they're saying that you don't have to believe in a virgin birth to believe there's something special about Jesus, Jesus wasn't really born of a virgin, but the theologian Luke wanted to express how special Christ was, so he invented this 'incarnation myth'. Now you would be very surprised where you can read about this in some of our so-called evangelical literature. What they're saying is that the gospel writers are not recording facts, but they're expressing theological truths about Jesus - it's not history, it's religious myth.

So what they're doing is: they are denying the historical fact of the incarnation of Jesus. They say: 'You can still believe the truth expressed, but it didn't really happen, we have no proof of it'. They explain this as the 'incarnation myth'. Now here's my question to them: what truth can a myth express? This is a symptom of the post-modern world in which we live: what truth can a myth express? The very definition of 'a myth' is 'untruth'! The real reason for rejecting the incarnation as history is the belief that divine intervention is impossible. Did you get that? The reason why liberal theologians and Bible teachers do not believe in a virgin birth is that they are anti-supernatural, they do not believe it is possible for God to intervene in our natural world in our time, in our age, and do something supernatural, beyond our understanding! Do you know the only thing that is impossible? It is the 'incarnation myth' - that's impossible! For Luke is history - I could show you, this morning, why it is history, but let me show you simply: if Joseph was the father of our Lord Jesus Christ in an earthly sense, or someone else was the father, that means that Joseph was a liar. Because Joseph, you remember from last week, wondered how Mary was with child - now if he was the father, he would know! We consider the fact that if Joseph is a liar, wondering why Mary was pregnant, and if he knew that she was pregnant from him then the gospel writers are liars, because they have put their own conjecture on the situation. Even though Joseph knew who the father was, and Mary knew who the father was, they are concocting this myth in order to found a religion - and they are liars! It makes Mary a liar too, because she claimed - in the passage that we read this morning - 'How can this be, seeing I know not a man?'.

Now what this does is, like all liberalism and biblical criticism in our modern age, it casts aspersions not only on the character of our Lord Jesus; but what it does is it robs Joseph, Mary, Luke and Matthew of their integrity. Either Joseph lied, Mary lied, Matthew lied, or Luke lied - or it's truth! You cannot have both joined together. Now here's a lesson for us all - and this is, by the way, relevant to the 'Fear not'. You might wonder how, but I'll show you in a minute. Here's a lesson before we go on any further: the Scriptures should not be critiqued according to our limited understanding. We should not come to God's word and say: 'I don't understand that, therefore I can't accept it' - but vice versa, our understanding should be subject to, and broadened, heightened by the revelation of God's truth. I wonder which prevails today?

Well, the Nativity scene is either completely true, or it's not true at all. Because Christianity rests on the historicity of the facts of our faith, we're in trouble if it's not true. I believe Luke is a historian, you can see it from the introduction, verses 1-4; you can see it in how he organises the events of this Nativity scene in a chronological order regarding the timing of the events. He talks about 'times' in verse 24, verse 26, verse 36, verse 56. He makes reference to the contemporary secular history in chapter 2, there was a census, and he names Caesar Augustus and so on - this is history! The reason why Luke gives us a history, is to state beyond the shadow of a doubt the historical facts concerning the origins of the truth of Christianity, that

Christ was virgin born, the Son of God - the historicity of the virgin birth. Dr Luke, and I think it's significant that he was a medical doctor, shows us that the supernatural, at times, does providentially intervene and invade the historical; for God has come among men!

Now here's the message: because this has happened, and we have tested proof in historical documents that it has happened in the past, we can believe that God intervenes in our lives today! Now the reason why I began with that little resume of what's going on in liberal theological circles today is because doubt, today, regarding the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, is reminiscent of the doubt that there was then. Isn't that astounding? The same problems people have today with the virgin birth, are the problems that they had in Mary and Joseph's day. Here's the astounding thing: it was the religious people that had the problem with accepting the concept that the natural world could be interrupted by the supernatural.

Now Zacharias is a case in point - he is a priest, he is in the temple, and when he is told that his wife, who is now barren, is going to conceive and have a son, John the Baptist, he does not believe! He is confronted with a divine visitation, he is party to a great miraculous work of God, and his immediate reaction - even though he is saturated in the Old Testament law and rites and rituals - he doesn't believe!

I think Luke takes special note of the fear of Zacharias and the fear of Mary, and indeed if you go through Luke's gospel you will note that he often reports fear in the presence of God and in the presence of God's works. Chapter 8 is an example of that, you don't need to turn to, but let me remind you: He stilled the storm and the disciples were filled with fear, and said 'What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'. He cast the demons out of the Gadarene, and what did the farmers of the pigs into whom the spirits went do, when the pigs went over the precipice into the deep? What did they say? 'Depart from us', they were filled with fear, they couldn't handle the supernatural interrupting their natural way of life. We have the same account as we go into Jairus' daughter, where we find that Jairus was told: 'Fear not, believe only and she shall be made whole'. There is this linkage within the Scriptures of fear and belief or, if you like, unbelief.

Now Mary feared and Zacharias feared, and both of their fears were similar because I believe they feared because they were in the presence of something supernatural, something that they could not understand. Do you understand that? None of us can understand the supernatural. If an angel appeared to me, I would be as afraid just now as if an angel appeared to you - because I'm not used, no matter what other people say, I'm not used to seeing angels - and that's no comment on my wife or child, or anything like that! But the fact of the matter is: this is unusual, and Mary was frightened with the same fear that Joseph was frightened with. But this is what I want you to note: Zacharias' fear led him to unbelief, yet Mary's fear led her to further belief.

Can I ask you, if you're in the congregation today - you could be saved or not saved - but you may continually, or maybe even at this present time, be battling in your mind with the supernatural. You're trying to understand it, and it's a stumbling block to you coming to faith, or it's a stumbling block to you really going all out and out for God. Maybe you've been party to some of this teaching of liberal theologians and religious sceptics - listen: the supernatural is not to be battled with in the mind to be understood, the supernatural is to be bowed to, and Christ is to be worshipped - not understood! Christ is God!

Now you can see this in the questions that both Zacharias and Mary ask. There is a difference between them. In verse 18, Zacharias asks the question: 'How can this be whenever my wife is barren? She is beyond the age of conception'; and Mary's question in verse 34 looks, to the naked eye, similar: 'How can this be, seeing I know not a man?'. But the fact of the matter is, we know from the context that Zacharias' question lacked faith, and Mary's question had faith. Zacharias was asking the question from the vantage point of unbelief and doubt, yet Mary is asking it from the point of faith - 'Lord, how are You going to do it?'. Not 'Are You

really able to do it?', but 'How are You going to do it?'. You can see that from the reply that they get. Zacharias is chastened and made dumb, and we see later from Luke's gospel that he was probably made deaf - but Mary was confirmed in her belief, an angel told her that this child would be of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would be with child of the Spirit.

Now please note this: each of them was faced with a difficulty. One was a difficulty of nature, verse 18, Elizabeth was beyond the age of childbearing and she was barren - a difficulty of nature. The other was a difficulty of circumstance, verse 34, Mary was only betrothed, she didn't know Joseph in that sexual sense yet in marriage. Yet into this situation, where there was a natural problem and a circumstantial problem, God's word was fulfilled! Here's the amazing thing to me here today, and I don't want to encourage you in unbelief, but isn't it wonderful to know that when we are faithless, He remains faithful? Even though He rebuked Zacharias, He still fulfilled His word, and Elizabeth came to be with child!

We read of what happened - for nine months Zacharias was both dumb and deaf. Mary didn't ask for evidence, like he did, she asked for an explanation and she got it. We must move on, but I want to just say that in verses 21 and 22 we see the people's surprise. They were surprised that he was deaf and dumb as he came out of the temple, but here's a lesson for us all here: unbelief prevented him from sharing the wonderful news of what was going to happen. Do you know that happens to us all when we do not believe? We are robbed of a certain consideration in our witnessing, but look at what happened to Mary after she believed! We read in verse 46 that she rejoiced: 'My soul doth magnify the Lord', and when you believe in the Lord, and take Him by faith and everything that He said, there is a special power that is given to you in expression of worship and joy.

Can I ask you a question? Does it please you when people fail to put confidence in you? What I mean is: if someone that is near to you feels they can't trust you, how do you feel? Well, it is such with God. Zacharias said: 'How will this be?', and the angel said: 'I am Gabriel, that stands in the presence of God - do you know who I am? Do you know who's bringing you this message?'. He failed to believe in God, yet the astounding thing is that he was the priest in the temple, yet simple little Mary was able to embrace all of God's promises for her. Isn't that lovely? J.G.Billet puts it like this: 'How often we see a poor unlettered soul that knows more of the simplicity of the truth of God than many who can talk much of the Bible'. She just believed God!

This is what I want you to see today, verse 30: 'The angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God'. First John 4 verse 18 says this: 'Fear has torment'. Joseph feared, Zacharias feared, Mary feared - and if they were to live on in their fear of the supernatural, or of what was going to transpire regarding the news that had been imparted to them of these births, they would have lived in continual torment. I imagine that Mary's thought was, as soon as she saw this angel: 'What is this manifestation about? Is it a thing for good, or is it a thing for evil? Is God going to bless me, or is He going to judge me? What is happening in my world just now?'. If she had been told the implications of what the angel was about to announce to her, she would have been very afraid when she considered the ramifications of being a single mother in this Palestinian world. What did the angel say? 'Mary, do not fear, because you are highly favoured, and the Lord is with you'.

God's grace and favour is always shown toward the undeserving. You're here this morning, and maybe you're filled with fear for one reason or another, but what I want you to focus on just now is not your fear, but on the favour that God has bestowed upon you if you're a child of God. That verse in 1 John 4:18: 'Fear hath torment', also says this 'perfect love casteth out all fear'. Now what is perfect love? It is unconditional love. What is unconditional love? It is gracious love, unmerited favour, something that you don't deserve but you get because someone loves you enough to give it to you, even though you don't deserve it.

Mary was a sinner, and we know that categorically from the Scriptures - for she rejoiced in God her Saviour.

The fact that she is highly favoured literally means that she was filled with grace, but that grace was not in her to dispense to others, that grace was in her because she was a sinner that was saved by God's marvellous grace, because God loved her. Isaiah 43:4 says: 'Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life'. God said to His Old Testament people, and He says to us today: 'I love you'. That's what He was saying to Mary: 'Mary, fear not, I love you, you've found favour'. Now the word 'found favour', the verb 'found' is 'heures' (sp?), which is the word we get 'eureka' from in the English language, which means 'I've discovered something'. What God was saying to her through Gabriel was this: 'You have been a discoverer of God's grace, and this is an expression of God grace in blessing upon you'.

Do you know where that expression 'eureka' found its fame from? Some of you mathematicians may know, it is attributed to Archimedes, that Greek mathematician, who reputedly jumped out of his bath after discovering the principle of the up-thrust on a floating body - the Archimedes principle, which simply explains why things float and why things don't float. When he found it out - with the duck in the bath maybe - he jumped out: 'Eureka! I have discovered it!'. Now friends, what this truth is is simply that the discovery of the principle of grace in Mary's life caused her not to fear. It didn't matter that the whole world would be against her, God had highly favoured her, and God was with her.

You see, that's all that matters - and that love, that perfect love, that grace casts out all fear. This 'full of grace', this 'highly favoured' is a term that's used in Ephesians 1 verse 6 of believers, every believer, not just the virgin Mary - every believer is described as 'accepted in the beloved'. Can I ask you: did you get there of your own volition, your own steam, your own power? It was all of grace, wasn't it? What God is saying to us today is: we don't need to be afraid. There are those in our world who would persecute us, they believe they are more favoured than us in intelligence, in affluence, and technological ability - but what God's word is saying to all of us today is: that does not matter! God is for us! God is with us! God is for us and with us to save us! He shall be called 'Jesus', for He shall save His people from their sins!

Can I ask you today: have you begun to enter into the discovery of all that God's grace has to offer you? I fear that most Christians are impoverished in this regard. But maybe you're here today, and you're filled with fear, for one reason or another fear has gripped your breast - well, God's word to you today is: one whom God favours ought not to fear anything! If the whole world is against you there need be no disquieting fears or anxious feelings, because the God of heaven is for you. Though this was a mere virgin, a young girl, she was going to be given, through grace, the privilege of being a mother - not through her own efforts, but by a gift of God. Though she was a pauper, she was going to be the mother of Messiah, the King who would sit on the throne of David. She had this grace lavished upon her - now, what was her reaction? Did she say: 'I don't know, I can't believe', or 'I can't believe that the supernatural can invade my natural world to such an extent'? Do you know what she did? She gave the proper answer to grace - do you know what the proper answer to grace is, the proper reaction? Faith! Verse 38: 'Mary said 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word'. And the angel departed from her'.

What do you normally do when a person shows you kindness? You accept it, that is if you're not too proud, you accept it. What is the result when you accept it? You open the gift, and your heart is filled with joy. Mary had this grace poured into her lap, and what did she do? Did she doubt it? She believed it, she embraced it, and then she says: 'I rejoice in God my Saviour'. She said: 'I am at your disposal totally to do with me as you will; and I'm not going to object to you, God, that this is going to spoil my marriage, or wreck my reputation, or blemish my moral standing and ethical regard in the community and the synagogue. Lord, and going to believe You, and leave the issues of my life entirely in Your hands. I submit to Your will, not reluctantly but willingly'. 'Fear not, thou art highly favoured'.

Now, I'm finished, but what I want us to do is open up our lives to allow God to pour in all the grace He can.

If you're in an impossible situation today, believe that God is able to fulfil His word, regardless of the obstacles. May God bless His word to all our hearts.

Our Father, we do give thanks for the incarnation of Thy Son, our Saviour, and for the comfort that it gives to us this day in our world. Bless us on our homeward way, we pray, for Christ's sake, Amen.

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The Fear Nots Of The First Nativity - Chapter 3

"Fear Not, Shepherds"

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Now perhaps you would turn with me to Luke's gospel chapter 2 and verse 10, which is really our text for this morning - 'The Fear Not That Was Spoken Unto The Shepherds'. "And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people".

If the Lord Jesus Christ was going to be Messiah, He would have to fulfil many of the prophecies within the Old Testament Scriptures, indeed all of them - but I mean many of the prophecies that regard Messiah's coming. The one in particular that is contemporary to us today in this passage and at this time of year is Micah 5 verse 2, where the prophet Micah said: 'But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting'. Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem. If He was not born in Bethlehem, He could not be the Messiah.

Now Luke's emphasis, or at least one of his emphases in his nativity scene is this fact: that the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy of Micah, and indeed was born in Bethlehem - and being born in Bethlehem, at least in that sense, qualified to be the Messiah. But I want you to see today that his chief concern in verses 1 to 7 is not just to show us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but to explain how He came to be born in Bethlehem. Now why do I say that? Well, I say that simply because there was a problem. Mary was not in Bethlehem, Mary was in Nazareth. The pregnant Mary, with the child Jesus in her womb, was not in Bethlehem; and that prophecy could not therefore be fulfilled - so she needed somehow, in some strange way, to get to Bethlehem.

Before I go on any further, please do not think that Joseph and Mary in some way engineered circumstances to fit into Scripture. Some people are highbrow enough to think that this is possible, that Mary and Joseph, of their own volition, made their own way to Bethlehem so that their son could at least in this sense fulfil the prophecy of being Messiah, being born in the city of David. Nothing of the sort! In fact, what is true, and what is abundantly satisfying and thrilling to the Bible believing Christian is this: God's providence ordered things in such a way, in such an extraordinary fashion, against all the odds, that Jesus should be born in Bethlehem.

The staggering thing about it is that God used a man, who was probably the supreme organising genius of the ancient world, to arrange that Jesus should be born in Bethlehem. Who am I talking about? Caesar Augustus. It was Caesar Augustus' fault that Jesus was moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem, because Caesar Augustus was the man who ordered the census. Simply what a census was, was that everyone had to return to the city from which their family sprang - not the city of their birth, but the city from which their family sprang - and therefore this was not a choice of Joseph and Mary to return to Bethlehem from Nazareth, they were compelled by law to do it, compelled by none other than Caesar Augustus the Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Now this is tremendously satisfying, because we have learnt in previous weeks that God works regardless of opposing historical circumstances of the day. I think we can clearly say that: God works regardless, in spite of what is going on in the realm of politics, in the realm of our particular society, the laws that are being

passed. But this is something further than this, this is telling us that God not only works regardless of opposing historical circumstances, but God actually works through historical circumstances - even those which oppose His revealed will.

Now let me tease that out for you in introduction to this 'Fear Not' today. I'm sure you're aware that Augustus knew nothing of what the effect of his census would be. He didn't know that he was going to move the Messiah from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be confirmed as the Messiah. The last thing he would have done, and his vassal King Herod would have wanted to happen, was that he would strengthen the credentials of a Messianic claimant to the throne of Israel. That was the antithesis of everything that they stood for. In fact, he was employing this census across the whole of the Roman Empire to get a greater control over parts of the Empire. But the irony of it is this: he, wishing to get greater political and religious power over his Empire, in an attempt to tighten the grip, as it were, upon them, was actually organising the affairs - geographically speaking - to get the son of Mary, the son of David, the Son of God who was destined to sit on the throne of Israel in Jerusalem, and on the throne of the world one day, exactly where the Scriptures said He should be born. No 'Amen's'?

It's tremendous, isn't it? How Caesar Augustus, a godless man, through a will that was opposed to everything that God's will was, actually was found to be the fulfilling instrument of Micah 5:2. Now if that doesn't cause you to believe in the sovereignty of God, I don't know what will! I was reminded, as I was meditating upon this, about the Psalm 76 verse 10, where the Psalmist exclaims: 'Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee'. Even the anger of a godless man, God can use to bring to fruition the counsels of His own will - Proverbs 21 verse 1 says: 'The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will'.

Can I just say in passing: this is the great paradox concerning God's providence and the apparent freedom that mankind has. This is something that has baffled theologians and philosophers, and the sages down through the ages: how can God be supremely sovereign, providential in everything that's going on, yet man still has a free will? Well here's the evidence: Augustus had his own reasons for taking the political actions that he did, and he did exactly what he wanted to do - yet not realising that what he did, in fact, had been predetermined by the counsel and foreknowledge of God long before Augustus was even named.

Isn't it tremendous? But can I just say, before I go on any further, that there could be someone here this morning and you're trying to avoid God's will: you know what God's will is for your life. Maybe you're not even converted, and you know that you ought to be, and you ought to repent of your sins and believe the Gospel - and you think in some simplistic, futile way that you can attempt to avoid God, to run away from God. Psalm 139 would be a good meditation for you, the fact of the matter is this: God can even work through the godless to bring His purposes to pass. You need to beware, you cannot run from God. You cannot hide from His will.

Let's move on. We thought a couple of weeks ago about how Luke primarily is a historian, and what Luke is showing us is that ungodly men and rulers do what they will, but God even moves through their reasoning to bring about His will. Do you remember this in the story of Joseph? You remember everything - we don't have time to contemplate everything that Joseph went through - but then at the end of it all in Genesis 50 and verse 20, Joseph said: 'But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive'. 'Your intention was evil, but God turned evil into good'!

We don't have time to look at it, but in Acts 18 and verses 1 and 2 Luke again records for us another incidence of how an imperial decree unintentionally helped to forward the gospel at a crucial stage. How Priscilla and Aquila were in a certain place because of another decree that was made, and then Paul came across them and there was an opportunity for the Gospel in that. Do you remember Paul in prison, and in

Philippians chapter 1 and verse 12 he again testifies how God can work through such adverse circumstances that come from the evil mind of godless men. He said: 'But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel'. Now isn't this tremendous? Whatever is against us in our age that we live in, whatever is against us - the godless laws that our government may or may not pass in the days that are to come, the laws that are upon us at this very moment, maybe the enemies that are in your personal life, the obstacles that you are facing - isn't it amazing to think that our God's sovereignty goes to such a deep extent that He can even work through their actions and their will to bring His own will to pass?

I love the Reformers, and I love reading about Christian history - and of course, there is no greater Reformer than Martin Luther. Of course, he faced the whole force of papal Rome in the whole of the continent of Europe during the Reformation period. I love to read his writings, but one hymn that's particularly dear to me that he wrote, and it is 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'. I remind you of this verse, tremendous theology in it concerning the sovereignty of God:

'And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us...

Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever'.

So what Luke wants to point out to us first and foremost is the very highest place that earth affords, the throne of Roman Empire, he wants to show us how its counsel - though independently arrived at in a godless manner - is fulfilling God's eternal counsels and decrees. But now he takes us on further, and he wants to show us how God's Son came into the world. Now he's moving from the highest place that earth affords, the heights of earth, to the depths of earth. We're asking the question now: how did God's Son come into this world? Verse 7 gives us the answer, Luke chapter 2 and verse 7: 'And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn'. He came in humiliation. It says 'wrapped' - that was like any other child who would be wrapped in swaddling bands, that was the custom of the day. But no other child would be wrapped swaddling bands and laid in a manger - that was unlike any other. In fact, the inference is that Mary had to wrap the child herself after birth, she had no help - no help to bring the Son of God into the world.

This is tremendous to our minds, it blows our minds and boggles our thoughts to think that there was no regal palace into which the Son of God was welcomed. His bed was a meagre manger, and such indignity that never, perhaps, had been seen before on the face of the earth was reserved for the Lord of glory, the Creator, the Sustainer of the worlds and the universe entering into human history not as a conquering military hero, not as a great prophet called to be such, but a little babe in a manger, in a feeding trough. Even that He should be called 'a babe'!

We don't have time to dwell on this, but is this not the mystery of godliness: God manifest in flesh. Second Corinthians 8 and verse 9: 'For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich'. J. N. Darby put it like this: 'He began in a manger and ended on the cross, and along the way had not where to lay His head'.

We ask how He would come into the world, that's how. We ask to whom, first, the annunciation of His birth was given - and I'm not talking now about Joseph and Mary, I'm talking about apart from them. Who were the first people that received the announcement of His birth? There's a theme running throughout this, we've come from the heights of the Roman Empire down to the depths of the lowly manger - and now we're still staying in the depths, for when God announces the coming of His Son, does He announce it to a high priest? Does He announce it to a King, or to a Scribe? No, the answer is in verse 8: 'And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night'. Again what God is telling us is: 'Look, my manoeuvres are not yours. My ways, my devices, my policies are not able to be understood by the human mind'. The vision of the annunciation of the birth of the Son of God on earth was not given to these highbrow, sophisticated individuals, but given to people who effectively were the unexpected ones to receive it - in fact, in this day and generation, were despised, a despised group of people.

Now although, as you read the Old and New Testament, you will be familiar with the fact that a shepherd was often a respected individual, it was often used as a metaphor for care, it was a symbol, perhaps, of political or religious leadership - and it was even used of God: 'God, the Lord is my shepherd', Psalm 23. But in late Judaism, where we are now in time, after the exile from Babylon, the Pharisaic Jews, the rabbis, brought about a striking devaluation of the occupation of a shepherd to such an extent that a shepherd was considered to be an outcast socially and religiously. They were poorly paid - that wasn't a reason for being an outcast, but if you were poorly paid people suspected that you were pinching pennies, and therefore they were thought - often rightly - of being dishonest. The religious people were forbidden to buy wool or milk or meat from them. Certain civic practices were debarred from them, functions such as a judge or a witness in the court - a shepherd wasn't allowed to be one of those. In fact, people were to withdraw from a shepherd in the same sense as they would withdraw from a tax collector.

Their work not only made them ceremonially unclean, but it kept them away from the temple for weeks at a time on end, and that meant they could never be made clean even if they wanted to. The Midrash, a Jewish commentary on Psalm 23, makes this comment: 'No position in the world is as despised as that of a shepherd'. So we do well to ask the question: why did the first annunciation, other than Mary and Joseph, of the birth of Christ on earth come to a shepherd? Well, here are the two reasons why that I believe take us from the heights of Roman imperialism, to the depths of Christ's humility, to the heights of glory that the angel sang of at the end of this passage.

Here's the first reason why the shepherds heard it first: because God does not call the rich and the mighty, He calls the poor and the lowly. In Luke chapter 1 and verse 51 we read these words: 'He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away'. Is that not what Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 1:26: 'For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty', and so on.

Shepherds, for some reason, I don't know why, weren't even allowed to testify as a witness in the court - but isn't it striking that when God wanted to testify to the world that His Son had come, who did He testify to first? The outcast, the lowly shepherd! James 2:5 says: 'Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?'. Do you know what this tells me? Faith is for the ordinary working man - faith is for everyone, no matter your class, or your creed, or your ability. Moses was keeping sheep, just like the shepherds, when God came and called him. Gideon was threshing wheat when God called him. Elisah was ploughing in the field when God called him. When these men received the revelation and the call of God they were working, because they were ordinary men - not the emperors of this world!

Like Jacob, these shepherds, as it was said of him, were plain men dwelling in tents. Is that not an encouragement to all of us? It's an encouragement to me. Do you remember when I spoke of Mary a couple of weeks ago I quoted J.G. Bellet (sp?) who said: 'How often we see a poor unlettered soul that knows more of the simplicity of the truth of God than many who can talk much of the Bible'. James S. Stewart, the preacher, put it like this: 'Is there not a world of meaning in the fact that it was the very ordinary people, busy about very ordinary tasks, whose eyes first saw the glory of the coming Lord. It means first that the place of duty, however humble, is the place of vision. It means second that it is the men who have kept to the deep simple pieties of life, and have not lost the child heart to whom the gates of the kingdom most readily open'.

Do you know what I'm going to tell you? These shepherds had more insight and understanding of Christ and who He was than many theologians even in our world today, for they recognised in verse 15 that the message they were hearing was the very word of God! They recognised God was speaking, and they made haste to see the King. Their earnestness spoke of a spiritual desire that many do not have today, and in verse 17 they testified of what they heard, they became evangelists! Is that not our responsibility today? To see the glory of the King, to go and to tell? We must move on, but what I want you to note this morning is that the shepherds were the only ones, as far as we are told, to hear or see the angels - and after they visited the manger and told their story, they went off singing praise to God, and they're never heard of again.

God does not call rich and mighty, he calls the poor and lowly. But secondly, the reason why the shepherds were told first is: God's messengers reflect His message. What was the message of the annunciation given to the humble shepherds? Verse 10: 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people'. What God is saying to them here in this whole chapter through Luke is, 'I can do and work through, indirectly, the high and lofty people in human empires like Caesar Augustus. I can work, indirectly, My will through them, but when I want to work directly I do it through the meek and through the lowly - the reason being that My message is a message of grace to the meek and the lowly'. Do you understand? What He is saying is: 'Behold, I bring you good tidings' - that word actually in the Greek is the word for 'evangelise' that you find throughout the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke talks about the preaching of the gospel. He's saying: 'Behold, I evangelise to you great joy, good news that has never been. This good news, shepherds, is not that a soldier has been born. It is not that a judge, like those in the Judges, like Gideon, has been born to deliver you from the Roman Empire and the stiff grip of the iron fists. It is not that a great religious rabbi and reformer has been born - but it is this: a Saviour has been born! A Saviour to meet man's deepest need'.

The Pax Romana, the Roman peace, had lasted since 27 BC up to this time - a peace from a political source, from the rule of Rome. But the stoic philosopher of the day, Epesetus (sp?), wrote these words: 'While the Emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace'. And suddenly, onto the scene of time God declares to humble shepherds this peace that passes all understanding, 'Shalom'. That's not a political peace, that's a deep peace in the hearts of men; and at that announcement the pent up ecstasy of heaven erupted: 'Gloria in excelsis deo' - glory to God in the highest! This was the message of the ages: good will and peace towards men.

Can I say: that Greek word 'good will' is really a bad translation, because what is spoken of here is basically 'grace'. You could translate it 'peace towards men on whom God's favour rests' - and that is not a reward to those who have good will, but that is a gracious gift to those who are the objects of God's good will. Now what's being said here? 'I work indirectly through the thrones of the empires of men; but when I want to work directly, I come to the lowly, to the poor and the humble of the world, because my messengers reflect my message, and my message is this: that there is grace for those who will humble themselves before the mighty hand of God. My favour rests on those who will bow before me'.

I wonder: is the fact that these were shepherds who were abiding in the fields, tending flocks that probably would later go to the temple to be sacrifices, was this not a metaphor of the fact that in John chapter 10 the Saviour would say: 'I am the good Shepherd, the good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep' - the Chief Shepherd, but one who is also the Lamb of God who would take the sins of the world away.

Now in verse 10 here is the 'Fear Not': 'Fear not: because I bring you glad tidings of grace'. Now can I apply this in the closing minute or two please? There are many reasons in these past studies why we should fear not, but what God is literally saying through the angels to the shepherds is this: 'Stop being afraid, stop being frightened, because I am God, and I can work indirectly my sovereignty through the thrones and dominions of men; but I can work directly through you, whatever humble, lowly state you find yourself in. How are you impoverished today? Through sickness? Through sadness? Through bereavement? Don't be afraid, because you've still got my grace!'. When your strength is low, His grace is greatest. Was it Annie Johnson Flint, I think it was, who said:

'He giveth more grace as our burden grows greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials He gives multiplied peace.

His love knows no limit, His grace knows no measure,
His power knows no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again'.

Do you fear today, anything? Why should we fear when we have the grace of God? Can I leave you with a poem, it's by a man called Paul Raider, and I heard it quoted by a missionary who was in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II, Darlene Deibler Rose. She quoted this when she was in prison, and she was locked in that prison cell - and, all of a sudden, she prayed to God, because she looked out of the barred windows, and she saw a banana tree. She just said to the Lord: 'Would you give me just one banana? Just one banana?'. A number of days later she grew up a friendship with one of the Japanese commanders, and he was a nice man. All of a sudden one day, the door of the cell burst open, and a whole big bunch of bananas came flying in onto the floor. She wept, and she thought to herself: 'Oh Lord, how full of unbelief I am'. Then, as she gives her testimony, she quotes this poem called 'Fear Not, Little Flock':

'Fear not, little flock, whatever your lot,
He enters all rooms, the doors being locked,
He never forsakes; He never is gone,
So count on His presence in darkness and dawn

Fear not, little flock, He goeth ahead,
Your Shepherd selecteth the path you must tread;
The waters of Marah He'll sweeten for thee,
He drank all the bitter in dark Gethsemane'.

Fear not, little flock, whatever your lot, for you have the grace of God in Christ Jesus. I trust that message, and that series, has been a blessing to all our hearts. I wonder are you here today, and you're not converted? Oh, dear friend, would you not see this, that this is for all men who will believe; and God's favour will rest upon you if you will believe this Gospel. All of us today, let us embrace the grace of God that is available for us - unmerited favour to the humble and to the lowly, and to the undeserving, yet there for everyone who will

recognise it.

Lord, we thank Thee this morning that the very heights of Imperial Rome in their godlessness were actually executing the will of God on the earth. Yet, when You chose to bring directly the message of the revelation of the Gospel to men, You did it through the meek and the lowly, those in the depths of earth's status system and class system. Even the Saviour, as He came, the sign would be He would be wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Even He came as a lowly Saviour, but we thank Thee this morning that He has now been lifted to the highest place, not that earth affords, but heaven affords. He is given a name which is high above every name. Lord, we thank Thee that one day we're going to get there too, but Lord may we be there in spirit even this day, and join the angels and say: 'Glory to God in highest, and peace on whom God's favour rests'. To the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - December 2004

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Appendix A:

"Fear"

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I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Mark's gospel - Mark's gospel and chapter 16, which you probably already know is the account of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, if you're familiar with the New Testament and with your Bible you'll know that often the gospel writers, when they're writing about one specific situation, often in each gospel there is a different slant put on the story. For instance, you could have an account of a work or a miracle of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew's gospel, and then in Mark's gospel you could have the same account but with a different emphasis. The writer, Mark, was trying to get across a different point.

Now, in this account, in Mark chapter 16, of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ there is, I believe, one specific point that the writer wants to get across to those reading his words. So let's look at chapter 16 of Mark, and we will be referring and thinking of the other accounts of the Resurrection, but we're going to specifically look at Mark chapter 16.

Verse 1: "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid. Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue", the remainder, "neither believed they them. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen".

Ann Landers was an agony aunt in a tabloid newspaper, and she confessed that every single month that she would write in this agony aunt slot, that she would receive 10,000 letters every month. When she was asked on one occasion: 'What was the subject that predominated all of your letters? What was the problem, and the burden, and the anxiety that most people wrote to you about?', she had no hesitation in answering the

question. She said, without one second of thinking about it: 'There is one subject that predominates all: it is the subject of fear'. She said: 'Almost every letter that I receive, the root problem, the root diagnosis at the bottom of it all, is the problem of fear'.

Many doctors think that, indeed, 90% of patients, when they first come into their surgery, the first symptom of their problem or their illness was not a sore throat. It wasn't a pain in the chest, it wasn't a growth; but the first symptom that triggered all the other symptoms was the symptom of fear. If we're honest with ourselves, and if we look at the media, the television, the newspapers, even the billboards around us, we see that our society, perhaps more than any society ever in the history of time, is one that is eaten up with fear. It is one that is burdened and dominated with anxiety and the burden of even life itself, and living itself. Our world around us, and our environment around us, has been dominated, has been obsessed with fears and scares.

You only have to turn the TV on in the past week to see how many more scares there have been. The past decade, perhaps, we have been obsessed and bombarded through the television screen by scares - environmental scares. We've been told the ozone layer is going to cave in and the sun is going to burn us all up. The sea is going to come in from Newcastle and wipe us all out. We've been told about health scares. There was chickens: we had salmonella from our eggs, BSE from our cattle. Now, there's Asian flu from chickens again, and all these health scares. There are military scares. We've got more this week. Saddam Hussein has arisen his head again, making threats. More scares. In the Cold War we had the scare that someone was going to press a button in Russia and we were all going to go up in smoke. Scares!

We in our society today have developed a society, an environment of hypochondriacs of every conceivable kind: people who walk about their daily business in the world around us and they are so paranoid, depressed and conscious and worried about everything that could possibly go wrong - that probably has no probability of going wrong at all! Some people are even going about their daily life with the burden and anxiety of living life itself before them. Many of us have become like Louis XV of France. Louis XV was a man who was so paranoid, so obsessed with the subject of death that he forbade any mention of that subject in his presence. In fact, not only did he forbid the mention of the word, but he took away from his environment every reminder of the subject of death. Every grave, every memorial, every war cenotaph in the palace was taken away because it reminded him of that dreaded subject.

The great leader, dictator, Joseph Stalin, was the same. This was a man who ruled one of the superpowers of the earth, yet this was a man who had eight different bedrooms in which to sleep in. He was so afraid of someone coming one night and assassinating him, or someone poisoning his supper or something like that, that he had eight bedrooms and he would fluctuate from one bedroom to another in case someone came to take his life.

Everything that could possibly go wrong, we think will go wrong. It's alright - isn't it? - to look out at the world and say: 'Well that's the way they think', but do you know something? I believe that so often, not only the behaviour of the world can affect the church, but even in our own day and age the attitudes at times, the psyche, the mind-thoughts of the world are actually filtering in to the church of Jesus Christ. We, as Christians, whether consciously or not, have taken the word of God and have set it aside, and have started adopting the mind, thoughts and attitudes of the world around us. The Lord Jesus Christ said that there would come a time when men's hearts would fail them for fear. You know, I think this morning that, often as Christians, perhaps not literally, but in our everyday daily life our hearts are failing us for fear. It's as if people are just taking us like a wet rag and wringing us out with worry and anxiety. There are things in our life that daily, every single day, eat away at our very character.

I want you to look at this chapter of Scripture that we read together this morning: chapter 16 of Mark. I want you to think of the scene for just a moment. We have, portrayed for us in this gospel, the Easter weekend.

We have Good Friday - the death of the Lord - we have Saturday and then we have Sunday. We have here for us a record of what we call nowadays, Easter weekend. I want you to try to think of what the disciples felt like on Good Friday. Try and think about it! The Lord Jesus Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane: soldiers come to Him. He has been praying, and they come to Him with swords and with staves and with armour; and they come to take Him away. One of His disciples, Judas, comes and kisses and betrays the Lord Jesus Christ. They take the Lord Jesus Christ, and then a prophecy is fulfilled. The great prophet said that when the Shepherd would be smitten the sheep would scatter. And the Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ - the Shepherd of the sheep was taken to be crucified - and what happened? It says that the disciples fled. They dispersed! They disappeared! You couldn't find them anywhere. A handful of them came to the cross to watch Christ die, and the rest deserted Him.

We all know Peter, don't we? He, if you like, is the epitome of the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. We think of him around that fire. We think of the witnesses that came to him and said: 'Was not he with the Lord Jesus Christ?'. We think of the little girl who came and said: 'His speech betrayeth him. He has the speech of a Galilean' - and then he went to the extreme of betraying and denying the Lord Jesus Christ with oaths and with curses. But the rest weren't much better - they ran away. I don't know where they went, but they ran away. They were nowhere to be seen.

But I want you to try to think, just for a moment this morning, on what their feelings and what their thoughts were on Saturday morning. They arose on Saturday morning - if they could even sleep because of their guilt - and they awoke to the realisation that the Lord Jesus Christ was dead. Wherever they were, they were awoken - and can you imagine the thoughts that were coursing through their minds? Perhaps they remembered the Lord's life. Perhaps they remembered the miracles that He did; the miraculous words that fell from His lips; the great teaching that they had received at His feet, for three solid years at the feet of God Incarnate. Perhaps they were reminded of all the great things that He had promised them that He would do in the future, but now all they could think of was these words and the fact that Jesus Christ: He was dead.

Do you know what the supreme irony is? That no matter what acts the Lord Jesus Christ did that they remembered, or no matter what words He spoke that they remembered, they had forgotten some of the most critical words that the Lord Jesus Christ had stressed; especially in Mark's gospel that we have before us this morning. The irony is this: that these disciples had been told, time without number, that after three days, after the death of Christ, in three days He would rise again. But they had forgotten! Those who had heard it in their own ears, who had seen Him demonstrate it with Lazarus with their own eyes, those who had believed on Him in their hearts - the irony is they are the ones who had forgot. And the supreme irony is this: that the ones that had remembered were His enemies.

Turn with me for a moment to Matthew 27 - Matthew 27 and verse 62. Chapter 27 and verse 62; it says: 'Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again'. Now, this is the enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are the people who wanted Him dead, who wanted Him six foot under, who wanted Christianity wiped off the face of the earth - and they were the ones who remembered the words that He said: that after three days, 'I will rise again'. If we had time this morning we could go right through all the gospels. We could go to Mark chapter 16, as we read this morning, and if you look at verses 1 to 3 you read that the two Mary's that came to the tomb, they brought with them sweet spices to anoint the body of Jesus. But if you look at verse 1 and verse 2 you see that they came on the third day of the week. That was the day that the Lord said He would rise again! They were coming with the mindset, the assumption, that Jesus was still dead and cold and they were coming to anoint His body. They had forgotten totally that He said: 'On the third day I will rise again'.

If you would go to John 20 you would see Mary Magdalene did not remember either: John 20 and verse 13.

You could see that Peter and John, the two disciples who were in the inner circle of the disciples of the Lord Jesus - they themselves had forgotten. The apostles, all the apostles themselves, in Luke chapter 24 we see that they all forgot. When the women came up to the room and told them: 'We have seen the Lord', they doubted. The two on the road to Emmaus, they talked with this man who they thought was a gardener. They said to Him: 'We thought this man, we thought this one was the deliverer, the Messiah of Israel. Now it is three days and he's still in the grave'. Thomas - doubting Thomas, the man who epitomises doubt for us in our own minds - what did he say? When these women came up and witnessed to the Resurrection of the Lord, he said: 'Except I see the prints in His hands and the scar in His side, and except I thrust my finger into the hands and into His side I will not believe.' They, of all people, had forgotten that Christ had risen from the dead.

If you were to go home this afternoon and look at this passage again - chapter 16 - and count how many times 'fear', or 'affrighted', is mentioned, it would astound you. What Mark is trying to get across, this morning, is the fear of the disciples - how they were so afraid because of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ was dead, what it meant for them. This day, Saturday, when they woke up, when they realised Christ was dead; they realised suddenly that their dream was over. They realised that the deliverer who had promised to deliver them - He was now dead and gone. Suddenly, at that moment, despair, depression that they had never experienced before in their life, it came across them like a cloud. It seemed that there wasn't a glimmer of hope. It was a dark tunnel that they were thrust in, that there was no light at the end of; and that Saturday - that Saturday brought great depression that to them, at that point, they could not lift.

The Saturday after Good Friday, the next day, was a day of desolation. It was a day of shattered dreams. It was a day of gloom. It was a day of inertia. For Mary the mother of Jesus, a sword had pierced her heart as she saw her beloved son die. Would she not have thought of the angel visiting her and promising her that the seed that was in her - that one, that little embryo - would be the deliverer who would bruise the head of Satan and bring victory over sin? But now that dream was over. For Peter, perhaps, his heart welled up in guilt as he thought of the fact that his Lord was dead, and he betrayed Him and perhaps if he hadn't betrayed Him, what might have happened? He might have lived.

I wonder have you ever heard of the rhyme: 'Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace, Wednesday's child is full of woe'? Well, these were Saturday's children. Saturday's children were full of despair, full of tragedy. Their dream was shattered and their dream was over. Can I ask you this morning; have you ever experienced anything like that? Perhaps you haven't experienced anything as earth shattering as Messiah dying, but perhaps you have experienced a loved one dying. Perhaps you've experienced a shattered dream: what you thought was going to be the future and suddenly, in a split second, it was all over and you just didn't know what was going to happen. Or perhaps you just have a fear that something is going to happen, and you're taken up with anxious thoughts and worries.

Have you ever felt depression like this? You know, there are people living today in our society who live in despair and darkness - the darkness of Saturday. They walk about their daily business. They are Saturday's children. Saturday's cities in our world are teeming places of misery and gloom. People in their daily lives, living for themselves, are walking, as it were, a ritual dance to death with an illusion that they think at the end of it there will be hope; only to die and find hell. We live in a godless world; a world that is full of despair; a world where fear grips people from day to day; hopelessness and meaninglessness crush people on every side. Can I ask you believer, this morning, are you one of Saturday's children? Are you like this?

Well, if you are I want to tell you some good news. Turn with me to Romans chapter 1 for a moment - Romans chapter 1 and we'll read from verse 1. It's verse 4 I want to look at, but we'll read from verse 1 to get the context. Romans 1 verse 1: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) concerning his Son

Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared" - now, if you ring your Bible, ring that word! "And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead".

'Declared'! Now, that little word 'declared', in the Greek, is a word - this word: 'horizthentos' (sp?). 'Horizthentos' - that is the word that we get our English word 'horizon' from. Horizthentos - horizon. You can nearly read this verse like this. Verse 3: 'Concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord...who was horizoned to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead'. Jesus Christ was horizoned as the Son of God with power because of his resurrection.

What's your horizon this morning? What is a horizon? Well, a horizon is a boundary, isn't it? It's a boundary in the environment, in the landscape, that you can't see any further. It says 'thus far and no further you can't see'. It's something that stops you. It's a boundary around you, and that's what a horizon is. Can I ask you what your horizon is? What is your boundary? What is the thing that seems to stop you from getting anywhere for God? What is the thing that seems to stop you, even in your own life, getting rid of fears and getting rid of worry and anxiousness? What is that boundary? This verse says - listen to this - that Christ has been horizoned. He has been made your horizon. When Christ came out of the grave He became your boundary, He became your restriction, He became your horizon!

In the school I went to we had a swimming pool. When I went to the school I couldn't swim, but when I left the school I could swim because they just threw you in and let you get on with it! But when I was in the swimming pool I used to wear goggles (not these ones now!), swimming goggles, and they always came off when I got to the deep end. They used to plummet right to the bottom of the deep end - and I used to think: 'Here we go again!'. What I used to do was (I'm sure you know what it's like to do this) I tipped up and when right down to the bottom of the pool, further and further down. The further down you get you feel the weight of the water above you, and then you feel the pressure of the water and your ears start to feel funny, and your nose starts to feel funny. The further down you get you feel that you can go no more, and you just grab the goggles and turn up, and you feel this awesome force pushing you - and it just pushes you right out of the water until you thrust through the surface into the air. That was just like the resurrection of the Lord Jesus - only a thousand times more. Because when the Lord Jesus Christ was risen from the dead there was a spiritual law that was set in motion. It's this: His humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation. Now, I want you to get that: His humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation. Philippians 2 is an example of that. It says Christ humbled Himself and became obedient unto death - His humiliation - even the death of the cross. But His humiliation at the cross necessitated His exaltation. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name".

You know, the Resurrection was exactly the same. Christ had been humbled unto death, even the death of the cross. It was if Christ was being pushed further down and down and down in His life. He could be pushed no further down than this death that He had suffered with the sins of the world upon His shoulder. As He is pushed down and down and down, there is this compulsion and this power of His exultation that, as it were, thrusts Him out of the grave! As Romans says, He becomes the horizon of everyone who trusts in Him. His humiliation set into motion His exultation. Matthew's gospel says at that moment when He thrust out of the grave, when the grave could hold Him no longer, that there was a great earthquake. It says that the guards that stood there, it says that their legs shook and they became as dead men. Think of it! The ones who were living became dead, and the one who was dead became alive! In that split second, because Christ had to be exalted for the stoop that He took, life came into those stick-like dead bones and into that cold flesh, and Christ had risen again.

But there's something that I want you to see in our passage. Chapter 16 - Mark chapter 16: because this is just beautiful. Mark chapter 16 and verse 7, and the angel said to these women after the Lord had risen again:

"But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter". Now, why did he item out Peter there? Why did he emphasise Peter there? 'Go and tell His disciples and Peter'? Can you imagine, when these two women came into the upper room and told them and said: 'Listen, he wanted me specifically to tell you, Peter, that He had risen again'? Can you imagine what that would have felt like for Peter? One who was despairing, one who was degraded, one whose mind was perplexed with fear and was twisted with the turmoil of the fact that he had betrayed the Lord of Glory; and now the Lord of Glory had sent a message to tell him, 'Peter, I've risen again!'.

Do you know what the resurrection meant for Peter? It meant this: that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ, can overcome the greatest enemies: death and hell, by His resurrection. If He can overcome death and hell, what is there in our life that we cannot overcome by the power of His resurrection? What is there? What horizon is too heavy for the Christ to push away as He comes out of the grave? These were Saturday's children. Think of that! These were Saturday's children a few moments before. They were depressed, they were despairing, but then they became Sunday's children! The children, who, it says in the Acts of the Apostles, turned the world upside down. What a change the resurrection made to them!

Someone has said: 'Sunday's children are the arguments the world understands and the world needs'. What is your day? Are you living in the darkness, the pessimism, the hopelessness of Saturday, or are you living in the bounding life and irrepressible hope of Sunday, the Lord's Day? For the disciples it seemed that everything had ended in tragedy. Nothing else could have changed their sad hearts but life coming and coursing through the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know something believer, this morning? The resurrection, for us, is everything. Do you believe that? The resurrection means everything, and so much of the time when we preach the gospel we say: 'Don't forget the cross!' - and we should never forget the cross, but we forget the Resurrection! Paul said that 'if Christ be not risen then is our preaching vain and our faith is also vain; and we, of all men, are most miserable'. It means everything. Do you know why? Because if the cross, the blood of Christ, took our sins away and took the power out of sin, the resurrection of Christ puts God's power into us! It thrusts the life of God into a dead sinner, and we are made alive.

Do you know what Paul's request was? He said, 'above all things' - he said he counted everything in this world: ambition, achievement, status, even health, he said he counted it all but dung! Why? That he might know Him - and what else? - and the power of His resurrection! Believer, this morning, do you know the power of His resurrection? I know you know it in your head, but do you know the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in your life from day to day? Do you know that power that changed Christ from dead to living? Do you know that supernatural power in your life? Do you know that you can?

Oh, the resurrection means so much and I could go on telling you what it means to the Saviour: what it makes Him, and what it means to the sinner, and what it means for Satan, and what it means for the Sabbath, and what it means for baptism. But let me ask you in closing: are you living in Saturday, in the shadow and the dearth of Saturday? Or will you live in the shadow of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in your life? Will you let Him be your horizon? Will you let the dynamite of the resurrection explode your faith? Will you let its floods and fires cremate your anxieties? Will you let its waters come unto your dry and thirsty land in your life? Will you let the resurrection of Christ make a difference in your life, until we face the ultimate horizon that is death?

I read once about a man who was facing that horizon, and I just want to finish with this: telling you what he said, because this was a man who knew the power of the resurrection. A man called Dr W.B. Hinson (sp?) was speaking from his pulpit only a year after commencing his ministry in this specific church. He was told that week by a doctor - he said: 'This week you will go to your death'. He writes this: 'I remember a year ago when a man in this city said, 'You have got to go to your death'. I walked out to where I live, 5 miles out of this city, and I looked across at that mountain I love, and I looked at the river in which I rejoice, and I looked

at the stately trees that are always God's poetry to my soul. Then in the evening, I looked up into the great sky where God was lighting His lamps and I said, 'I may not see you many more times but, mountain, I shall be alive when you are gone. River, I shall be alive when you cease running towards the sea. Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen from your great sockets in the great down-pulling of the material universe'.

Do you know what this man knew? He knew what Job knew. He could cry: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth!'. Do you know, and does knowing make a difference? I pray this morning to God that it will. Let's bow our head and commit ourselves to the Lord.

Our Father, we thank Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ: our risen and exalted Head, the only Head of the church, the only one whom we worship, and the only one who is risen from the dead. Lord, we thank You for what that means to us, for the life that He gives us, for the justification that He has achieved for us by His Resurrection, for the fact that as He is risen so we also will rise and meet Him one day in the air - and so we will forever be with the Lord. We - wonder of wonders - we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. Lord, let us see Him now as we wait around His table. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by Trevor Veale, Preach The Word - June 2001

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*Appendix B:****"Be Still, Believe Only"***

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In Exodus 14 verse 13, Moses was told by God to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. In Luke chapter 8 and verse 50, the whole household of Jairus were told: 'Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole'. Now the two phrases that I want to leave with you today, and drum into your mind and spirit, as God has done with me this week are: 'Believe only, stand still', or, 'Stand still, believe only'.

I don't know whether you've ever felt boxed in in life. Circumstances have transpired that you feel that you have reached a brick wall, and you're in one of life's many cul-de-sacs and you don't know how to get out. Most of us can testify to these experiences at some time or another, that life has brought us into extraordinary difficulties, and we don't know how to escape them. The Israelites in Exodus chapter 14 found themselves in such a situation - they could not retreat, they could not go forward, they were restricted on the right hand and on the left hand, and they did not know what to do.

I wonder have you ever felt like that? You can't retreat, you can't go back on what you've done; you feel that circumstances are restricting you so that you cannot go on; you feel paralysed that you can't go to the right hand or the left hand, and you simply do not know what to do! I'm quite aware of the company that I'm speaking to today, that most of you are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, but I am not ignorant of the fact that there are times when we can get into situations in life, even as Christians, where we feel we are boxed in, we have reached a brick wall, we're in a cul-de-sac and we don't know what to do or where to turn. For many their only answer in those situations is suicide. For some people they feel that that is the only way out, to end it all. That is why the biggest killer in the island of Ireland as a whole today, of young men, is suicide.

You might say within your heart: 'Well, Christians aren't meant to feel that way! Christians are meant to be happy, they're not meant to worry! You were preaching not so long ago that they're to pray about everything, worry about nothing, and be thankful for anything' - well, that's right. That is the ideal that we're to live up to, but the fact of the matter is that all of us, at some time, go through the experience where we do not know how to get out of our difficulties. It's alright singing: 'What the use of worrying, it never was worthwhile; so pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile' - sometimes you just cannot smile, smile, smile. Incidentally, those words were written by the British actor George Howell, and they were set to a cheerful melody that most of you know by his piano-playing brother Felix Howell, and it earned the two of them something round about 40,000 pounds - and in those days that was a small fortune. Yet one year later Felix, who had written the melody, sat down at his piano and he played 'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile', and then he went into a room where he was alone, and he shot himself and killed himself.

No matter how much we smile, and Christians do try their best to smile, even Christians are not immune from troubles like these. There is a depression and a dangerous melancholy that is produced when we feel that there is just no way out. It should never be underestimated. It's alright if you're not of that temperament, and you're more happy-go-lucky, to turn round and to order those people in a disdainful tone, who are sad, to 'just cheer up and forget about it' - but when you're in one of life's cul-de-sacs, when you're facing one of the brick walls that cannot be scaled and you're boxed in, you realise that it's just not as simple as all that. Robert

Burton in his book, 'The Anatomy of Melancholy', said these words, and how true I believe they are: 'If there is a hell on earth it is to be found in the melancholy man's heart'.

If you find yourself in this valley of darkness that I have been describing this morning, the best thing that you can do is listen to absolutely no-one but your Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. The reason why I say that is there will be many voices that will come into your mind and your spirit. Despair will say: 'Just curl up and die, it's over, give up!'. Cowardice will say: 'Oh, this Christian road's not all it's cracked up to be. Go back to the world, retreat. This Christian life's too difficult for you, if you went back to the world you'd have less worries and you'd be more happy there'. You cannot afford, in that type of situation, to listen to those voices - and it should be no surprise to us that Satan's tactic is to tempt us with thoughts like these when we are at our lowest, when we're vulnerable. It's OK to piously say: 'You shouldn't listen to them at all', but when your back's against the wall, and there's no apparent answer that you can find from God or from man, you'll clutch at anything - even perhaps if it's Satan's escape route.

I don't have time to go into all the problems and perplexities that the patriarch Job faced, but you know the book, you can read it for yourself. You know after everything in his life had been taken away from him, then his nearest and dearest thing that he had left, his precious wife, turned around to him in chapter 2 verses 9 and 10 and said to him: 'Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!'. Now he said later to her: 'You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed except good from God, and shall we not accept adversity or evil?'. I'm sure the temptation was there for Job: 'I wonder should I curse God, and just end it all and finish this misery now?'. Now listen, my friends today, no matter how tempting it is to listen to all of Satan's quick-fixes, whatever they are, we must learn as believers in a melancholy age to listen to no-one but Jesus Christ our Lord. What does He say? This is what He says: 'Stand still, believe only'.

Now, I know it's hard to just wait on God, it's hard to wait on anybody - I know that, impatient as I am. But to wait on God when you can't see what's happening, you can't see the dispensing of His gifts coming down, if you like, on the shuttle from heaven to you - it's hard. And what we tend to do as human beings, we want to engineer our own destiny, we want to fix things the way we know they should be. At times in life when things aren't going as we would like them to go, we put our grubby hands on our circumstances and try to rearrange God's providence. This is when we get into danger. We say to ourselves: 'Stand still? You can't just do nothing!' - and impatience, as well as despair and cowardice, will say: 'You've got to do something, give yourself shake, waken up - to stand still is laziness! Do you want this to happen to you?'

Now of course we always must guard against slothfulness and lethargy, but the problem is not when we are active - of course faith without works is dead, we must be active when God speaks - but the problem comes in our impatience when we must do something instead of looking to the Lord to do everything, which He would do if we looked to Him in the first instance. If we would only be still, God would move. But so often if we don't despair, and if we're not cowards, we're impatient, and then others are presumptuous. There is the boast, when we reach these problems and brick walls, of saying: 'Well, if the sea is before you, march into it, expect a miracle!'. Some people mistake that for faith, it is not faith, it is presumptuousness. Faith is to move in God's time, and if Moses had walked into the Red Sea one moment before God commanded him to do, and in a way that was different than God told him to - which was by lifting his rod and hand over it in God's timing - he would have drowned and all the Israelites with him. He had to wait on God's time and do the thing God's way.

So faith does not listen to presumption, it does not listen to impatience, it doesn't listen to cowardice, it doesn't listen to despair, but it listens to the Spirit of God in Christ which says: 'Stand still, believe only'. Now before we look at the Master's words which we have quoted many times already in this message, I want us to look at His person, His demeanour in Luke chapter 8. You know the story of Jairus' daughter - this man was in danger of losing his only child, his little girl. He cries to the Lord Jesus for help, and Jesus is on His

way, and the crowds come around Him and He's in what the Authorised calls 'the press', the great crowd and multitude pressing against Him. This woman in the crowd who had an issue of blood for 12 years reaches out in faith and touches the hem of Christ's garment, and she's made whole, and then the Lord Jesus is waylaid, as it were, to turn and talk to her and teach the disciples a lesson out of her faith.

Now as that is happening the little girl is getting worse and worse and worse, and then she dies. One of the servants comes to the Lord Jesus and to Jairus and says: 'Jairus trouble not the Master any more, it's no use, it's finished, there's a brick wall, there's a cul-de-sac, there's an impossible situation that you can't get out of, she's dead!'. We know the rest of the story - the Lord Jesus went to the home, and they were mourning and weeping. He cast out of the home those who were doubting and laughed Him to scorn, and He lifted that little cold waxen hand of that 12-year-old corpse, and He touched it and He said: 'Talitha cumi', 'Little maid arise' - and she arose.

What I want you to see is the Lord's demeanour. Luke's gospel, of course, is the gospel that portrays the manhood of the Lord Jesus, His humanity. Of course it doesn't ignore His deity, but it specifically looks at the tender human compassion of the man Christ Jesus. So as we look at this passage on a human level, we see that the Lord Himself, not just Jairus, but the Lord was in an extraordinary difficulty. Here was a brokenhearted father begging Him to come to his home and help his dying only daughter. It was his one and only daughter. Then after this man comes, verse 42 says: 'But he went and the people thronged him' - He was now getting into a tight, and some would say even claustrophobic place. Then in that tight place this woman who had a problem for 12 years, reached out for healing. Now just put yourself for a moment, as a human being, in the shoes of the Lord Jesus Christ in this situation. He's asked for emergency help at that moment, and all of a sudden this great crowd of people trapped Him, and a woman who - on a human level (He knew she was there, of course) but you wouldn't have known she was there - she comes to you for help. What would your reaction be? I imagine mine would be: 'How am I going to get out of this crowd to Jairus' house - I haven't got time for this woman. I know she's in need, but this wee girl needs me more'. The dying girl needs you at this moment, this woman after she touches the hem of your garment she's healed, she's got what she came for. 'Now I must go to Jairus' house, I haven't got time to preach or to teach or anything like that' - perhaps even in your mind would be the thought: 'My reputation will be ruined if this little girl dies! Jairus is the head of the synagogue, and the Jews are already against me!'.

Isn't that the way we would react? But how does the Saviour react? If we see anything we see His perfectly composed human spirit - not once did He panic! Even in an apparently tight place He didn't panic, the fact is that He took time to personally counsel this woman after healing her, and then He turned to the disciples and the crowd using her as an example and taught them a lesson in faith. He was in no hurry. Now observe Him when He's finished with that woman, and the voices start again. You know those voices you hear, well He heard them too - verse 49, second half, the servant from Jairus' house came running: 'Jairus! Forget about it, your daughter is dead, don't trouble the Master any more!'. And I think in essence he was saying: 'You needn't bother Him, it's too late!' - almost with a disdainful tone - 'He's taken that long coming the wee child's died, there's no point in bringing Him now!'. Maybe even some of the folk wouldn't have wanted to see Him, and there was, I think, an accusation of a lack of urgency in the Saviour's heart, a lack of care and compassion. Then that led to, when He got to the house, in verse 53 He receives ridicule from the people: 'and they laughed Him to scorn knowing that she was dead' - 'What does that man take us for - 'She's only sleeping'? Can He not see that she's dead?'.

Do you see that not once did He run to his own defence? But please see this, for this is so important in the spirit of this message that I bring to you from the Lord today: He didn't panic, His inner peace was not disturbed by the thoughts 'How do I put this right? This is the leader of the synagogue's daughter! How can I retrieve this situation?'. Now ask yourself for a moment, as you look at the human Christ, why did He not act under the pressures and the prods of the circumstances around Him? Why did He not listen and obey the

command of the voices that are clamouring to Him for action? Here's why, mark this now: He, above all men, was standing still before God. Have you got it?

Maybe I'm not making myself terribly clear. Turn with me to 1 Peter chapter 2, 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 21, of course Christ is our Saviour, but Peter also cites Him as our example. He says: 'For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps'. What were those steps? 'Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not' - now this is what I want you to notice - 'but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously'. J.M. Darby translates that statement: 'but gave himself over into the hands'; the RSV says: 'but he trusted to him who judges justly'; Weymouth in his translation brings it out beautifully, he says: 'but he left his wrongs in the hands of the righteous judge'. In other words, could I translate it or paraphrase it like this for you: 'He stood still before God! He had committed Himself, His circumstances, everything that He was and had, over to the Lord; and as a man He was standing still before God'. His calm repose was carried along as God sovereignly ordained His pathway. He had committed Himself entirely into the Father's hands, so everything that happened to Him was the Father's will.

Of course we cannot ignore in our Lord Jesus that He was and is God incarnate. He had knowledge that we do not have, but please see that as a man we never see Him in a fluster, do we? He never gets into a tizzy, He never panics, and even at the temple when He was angry it was controlled anger. Even in Gethsemane, when He's on His knees contemplating the cross, there was no panic there! What is panic? I lifted my Oxford English dictionary down, and the definition is this: 'Panic is some uncontrollable fear or alarm' - uncontrollable fear or alarm. Have you ever experienced that? You don't know what to do, you can't retreat, you can't go forward, you can't go right, you can't go left - and you just don't know how to get out of this awful claustrophobic situation. Listen my friend, look at the Christ - Christ was always in control because He knew His Father was! Therefore, how could He panic uncontrollably when He knew His Father was in control - in fact, if He was God incarnate as He was, He was in control; and He tells us after His resurrection: 'All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth'.

That's looking at it from the Saviour's perspective, but what I also want you to do is look at it from Jairus' perspective, from a human perspective that we can identify with more. 'Christ is late! He hasn't come when I needed Him, where is He? Where's His answers? He's maybe even careless! Sure He knew my daughter was ill, He knew she was going to die, so why did He spend time in this crowd preaching? Why did He need to heal this woman?'. Maybe Jairus even thought: 'Oh this is typical me, other people always seem to get the blessings from God, but never me'. I wonder is that the way you feel today? I wonder what the feelings were in Moses' heart as he stood at the Red Sea? They're not recorded for us, but he was a human being you know - and I just wonder, for those few split seconds before God spoke to him, as he gazed at the great barrier of water that was paralysing his plans and seemed to be anaesthetising the promises that God had given him about deliverance and a promised land - I wonder, for just a moment was there doubt? 'Can God really do this? Will God do this?'. Maybe there was a spark of despair: 'This is it! It's too late! It's the end' - despair that threatened to combust his soul and destroy his whole faith before God. We know from chapter 14 of Exodus that he did hear the people, maybe they weren't murmuring, but they were ready to curse him to death, even stone him to death for leading them up this blind alley, telling them God would come in time, God would deliver them. Did he think, presumptuously: 'I must act, I must do something, or there's no telling what these people will do to me!'. Was there even the temptation to panic?

Well, I'm sure there was - but do you know what the glorious story of Moses is, and Jairus' daughter, this is what I want you to see: naked faith won the day! Stand still, don't you do anything! Believe only! I like the order of the Authorised Version in that: 'Just believe' - nothing more, but nothing less! Moses listened to his Master. If you read the other verses around verse 13, it says: 'And the Lord said to Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward: But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out

thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea'. What had Moses to do? What was his part? His part was to stand still, to wait on the word of the Lord, and then to just believe that what His word said would be accomplished - and that's when the victory came! If he had not waited, he would not have known that he had to lift up his hand and the rod over the sea. But he waited, and when he waited God gave the word, and when God gave the word he went forward.

Now dear soul today, let's reverse our thinking for a moment just to consider this: is this not why we meet life's cul-de-sacs, life's crises, brick walls, boxed-in areas? That God could get us to, just for one moment in our busy life with everything that's crammed into a modern 24 hours, to stand still and believe only! It's hard, but that's when faith's victories come. Oh, you know that verse in Isaiah so well: 'He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall' - unnatural crises will come into their life - 'But they that wait upon the LORD' - they that be still, and stand to see the salvation of the Lord, and only believe - 'shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint'. The poet said:

'Stand still!, my soul, for so the Lord commands;
E'en when thy way seems blocked, leave it in His wise hands;
His arm is mighty to divide the wave.
Stand still, my soul, stand still - and thou shalt see
how God can work the impossible for thee,
for with a great deliverance He doth save!'

Another poet said, Annie Johnson Flint, who we get so many sweet verses from:

'Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life,
Where, in spite of all you can do,
There is no way out, there is no way back,
There is no other way but through?
Then wait on the Lord with a trust serene
Till the night of your fear is gone;
He will send the wind, He will heap the floods,
When He says to your soul, 'Go on'.

Can you turn with me as we close to Psalm 46, this is a favourite Psalm of many of us, and we've turned to it time after time when life's roof and walls seem to cave in around us. Verse 1 says: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble'. One version of the Bible I have been reading of late, the marginal reading, the alternative reading, reads like this for 'a very present help in trouble' - and do jot this down, it's been a tremendous blessing to me: 'God is our refuge and strength, abundantly available for help in tight places'. Isn't that lovely? Abundantly available for help in tight places.

Where are you today? Listen, here's the word of the Lord for you: don't despair, don't be cowardly and go back, don't be presumptuous and think that you can just press the problems out of the way, don't be impatient and feel that you have to do something - but stand still, believe only, and God will give the word. One day very soon, sooner than you think, God will say: 'Go on!'

'Be gone unbelief, my Saviour is near' - isn't it wonderful that all of them that laughed the Saviour to scorn, He put them out - He puts out unbelief. You put unbelief out of your heart today - 'Be gone unbelief!' - why? 'My Saviour is near!' - death cannot survive at a funeral where the Saviour is present. 'And for my relief will surely appear' - He is abundantly able and available to help in tight places. 'By prayer let me wrestle, and He

will perform; With Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm'. Verse 3 is precious to me: 'His love in times past forbids me to think He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink' - all those blessings that He's given you in the past, all those times He's come through for you in the past. 'Each sweet Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord led me, I have in review, confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through'.

Let us pray: O give Thy servant patience to be still and bear Thy will, courage to venture wholly on the arm that will not harm, the wisdom that will never let me stray out of my way, the love that now afflicting knoweth best when I should rest. Lord, may we all be still and know that Thou art God. Even when things that seem wrong invade our peace, that we will learn the lesson of the example of our Lord Jesus Christ - who in human flesh committed His wrongs to the Father, the righteous Judge. Lord, help us to believe only, that in our lives - whatever our circumstances may be that cause us present distress - that that faith would lead us through the waters that would threaten to drown us, and into a promised land of milk and honey that we could never have known, and though we were told it we would not have believed it. May we be able to say soon: 'We are here'. Father, bless every heart and head bowed before Thee this morning in the name of our wonderful Saviour, who bore all our iniquities and infirmities on the tree, that we one day might be free from them all by faith. Amen.

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