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New Fear in a New Year
Series: Adversity – The Light of Truth for Dark Times
Series #2

Introduction: Psalm 112:1 says, “Praise the Lord. Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands.” And then in verses 6-8 of that same psalm it says, “Surely the righteous will never be shaken; they will be remembered forever. ⁷ They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. ⁸ Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.” (NIV)

Those verses from Psalm 112 capture the tension between fearing the right things and fearing the wrong things. If you fear the Lord, as you ought, then you will never be shaken and removed, but your legacy of righteous trust will endure. Bad news will not strike fear in your heart because you will be steadfast in trusting the Lord. Your heart will be secure knowing that eventually God will triumph over evil and you will be numbered among his victorious people. Which means that if you fear the wrong things, then bad news will strike terror in your heart and you will be easily moved and you will not be secure in a steadfast heart. The psalmist spells this tension out for us because we struggle here. We need the constant reminder of this truth – blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!

The year 2020 most certainly put our tendency to fear in the convenient grab and go bag of our emotions. It seems that every time we turned around there was something else happening in our world to stoke this fire of fear. This morning I want to give you installment number 2 in our series on Adversity, which is a short series we are doing to start off 2021. I explained the logic for the series last week, but essentially, 2020 was such a unique year with such unique opportunities to see our hearts exposed and to have to exercise trust in God in ways we have never had to before. Many of the issues we will cover in this series are things that we are not done with – these are things that will carry into 2021. Last week we considered the reality of our union with Christ as the greatest antidote to Christian consumerism. This week we turn our attention to fear.

If I were tasked with giving 2020 a title, I would call it – “The Year of Fear.” I have never experienced a year where fear was more part of our culture’s shared experience. We have always had plenty of things to fear in this sin-cursed and devil-dominated world, but 2020 provided that on steroids. In January we killed a high-level state sponsored terrorist with connections to Iran, and there was pretty serious talk about another world war. But February didn’t want to be outdone, so that month produced the single greatest daily loss in the Stock Market over fears of a quickly spreading disease from China – which began our financial woes lasting all year. Then in March – well, you don’t really need me to talk about March, do you? In March, the first outbreaks of this potentially deadly virus were happening in our country and within a matter of hours everything was shut down. What was originally a couple of weeks to slow the spread still

continues in some places some 10 months later! Then there were the wildfires raging out of control in the western US. Followed by the death of George Floyd and the rise of Antifa and Black Lives Matter as they stoked the rage of riots in every major city in the US. This produced a level of social unrest many of us have never before experienced in our lifetimes. As the nation teetered on complete disarray, the presidential election heated up. Oh, and a Supreme Court justice died, and the fight began about who would take her place. The surge in Covid cases in the Fall were coupled with the actual election and the fallout of an undeclared winner. Then came the charges of voter fraud and election stealing which made it all the way to the Supreme Court – who refused to hear the case and seek truth in the matter. And this led to the protests by hundreds of thousands of people this past week in our Nation’s capital which sadly erupted into violence and criminal trespassing by some in the crowd.

And that is just some of the things that easily provoked fear in this last year. Fear is that emotion of anxiety or dread over a real or perceived threat to one’s security or general welfare. It is best to understand fear as being on a scale of various expressions. In other words, it is not a vanilla emotion that always makes itself known in one way. Rather, it can be seen on one end of the spectrum in a passing anxiety about personal safety – like maybe something you feel when your teenager takes the keys and starts learning how to drive. And on the other end, it is seen in the immobilizing and all-consuming phobia that is certain something bad is going to happen so every possible way for that bad thing to happen must be avoided. And it can show up in any variation between those two ends of the spectrum. Fear can obviously be an extremely helpful emotion which keeps us from true and real danger. But it can also be an incredibly damaging emotion which paralyzes us from living as God has called us to. And when the Scriptures talk about fear, it is always presented as an emotion that can be controlled in the heart of the believer. I don’t mean that the rising of fear in the heart can be controlled, but that the Scriptures always present the believer as having an option to not fear in sinful ways. In fact, this is one of the most repeated commands in the Scriptures – do not fear.

And so, the thing I want to point your attention to this morning about fear is that you have a choice to fear, and better, you have a choice what to fear and what not to fear. In fact, it is a choice which you must make as you seek to walk by faith in obedience to your Lord. I want to approach this by putting before you two categories of fear. The first is the category of things we are prone to fear but shouldn’t. These are the things that tempt us to fear every day of our lives in this sin-cursed world. But these are things which we must not fear. The second category of fear I want to consider is things we should fear but often don’t. So, let’s jump into that first category of fear – things we’re prone to fear but shouldn’t.

I. Things We’re Prone to Fear but Shouldn’t

- a. And by shouldn’t, I mean that we are commanded to not fear these things. It is not just preferable, it is sinful for us to fear these things. And not only is it sinful, but it is also terribly damaging to our faithfulness to the Lord. Fear in the heart of the believer, left unchecked and unhindered will produce a panic which consumes us and paralyzes us and thereby keeps us from obeying God. The first thing we are prone to fear but shouldn’t is loss of personal control.
- b. Loss of Personal Control – 1 Sam. 13:11-13a

- i. With each of these categories I am going right to the root of the weed, but we are often dealing with simply pulling the dandelion heads off, instead of pulling out the root. So, it will take some heart work to realize that the fear you are experiencing is a fear that is rooted in a perceived loss of personal control. It might be fear over my teenager driving, or it might be fear over a society in turmoil, or it might be anxiety over something that's not getting done at work or something that my spouse needs to work on in the marriage. It might come out in manipulative statements which express fake concern for others, but which are rooted in gaining personal control of the situation. This can be hard to see, but the Lord is able beloved, by His Word and His Spirit, to light up the darkest parts of your heart and show you that this is exactly what is going on.
- ii. One of the clearest Biblical examples of this is King Saul in 1 Samuel 14. You'll remember that this is early in Saul's reign and his son Jonathan has just defeated a garrison of the Philistines and there is a bigger war brewing. All of Israel is called to join Saul at Gilgal to prepare for war with the Philistines. The Philistines numbered 30,000 chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand on the seashore! When the people of Israel saw that, they knew they were in trouble and they hid themselves in caves. At the end of verse 7 we are told that the people were there with Saul, trembling. They were all waiting for Samuel the prophet to show up and to sacrifice to the Lord and secure the Lord's favor before entering into battle.
- iii. In verse 8 we read that Saul waited the appointed time – seven days – and Samuel didn't show up. So, here he is facing an enemy beyond his ability to defeat – his only hope is God's intervention. The people are afraid, and they are scattering from him at the end of verse 8. The prophet is nowhere to be found and everything is about to blow apart for Saul – or at least that is what he fears. There is a lot of fear in this text, but a fear of the Lord is not there. Saul takes the burnt offering and the peace offerings and offers them himself – though he was not a priest – so that he can regain control as he supposedly secures God's blessing. And of course, then Samuel shows up on the scene as soon as he made the offering. And he said this in verse 11. *Read 14:11-13a.*
- iv. Do you hear the tremble and fear in Saul's voice? He is about to lose control of the situation. It is all falling apart around him, and he must do something. But what he does is foolish because he is driven by his fear. This is what this type of fear does. Because we think we are about to lose control of a situation over which we really don't have any control anyways, we take some step of intervention so as to prevent losing control. And what happens anyways – we lose control – and we act foolishly. This is what Saul's fear did. He acted foolishly and sinned against the Lord – and this was the weed which grew out of the root of his fear.

- v. 2020 tempted you with this fear didn't it? So many things that we got used to controlling in our lives – things like schedule and planning – things like our freedom to do what we wanted when we wanted – things like how plans were going to work out to match some goal we had worked toward or some dream we were seeking after. And then Covid hit, and we found out in a hurry that we didn't have control after all. And all along that journey we were certainly tempted to fear losing control, and to take action steps to maintain control that proved to be nothing but foolish and disobedient to our Lord. You see, it is always sinful fear to fear losing personal control because it is always rooted in a lack of trust in the control which God alone has.
- c. **Other people – Galatians 2:12**
- i. The next thing in Scripture that we are prone to fear but shouldn't is other people. There are so many relevant and helpful Scriptures about fearing men. Proverbs 29:25 tells us that the fear of man lays a snare for us – meaning it is a trap. It appears to us to be the best way forward on the path of life, but it is a dangerous pit of folly. It never makes things easier or better in the long run for anyone. Fear of what others will think or of what they might say only produces decisions which prove harmful in the long run.
 - ii. In the New Testament we see a clear example of that in Galatians 2 when Peter and Paul were in Antioch. Paul says this in verse 11 about that incident:
 - 1. “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.” (Gal. 2:11-12)
 - iii. Peter stepped into the trap of fearing men and he suffered the consequence of endangering the Gospel! His foolish act was the weed, but the root of the weed was fear in his heart of what other men would say about him eating with the Gentiles.
 - iv. And lest we beat poor Peter, a preacher's favorite scapegoat, we must remember that we are just like him! We are just as prone to give into the temptation of fearing others when we are faced with a difficult and adverse situation. The things guiding our decisions no longer focus on faith in God and faithfulness to what He has said, but now they are guided by what others will think or say. And it is in the moments of adversity when we are having to make difficult decisions about how to live in challenging times, when we are very prone to be driven by a fear of others and their opinions of us. What we see illustrated in Peter is a fear driven by selfish concerns. It is a weed whose root is planted in the soil of self. And this fear grows as the potential for negative perceptions of

myself increase in the situation. And soon this fear sprouts into the weed of a foolish choice like Peter made. We often fear others but shouldn't.

d. Anything We're Concerned About – Phil. 4:6

- i. The third thing that Scripture presents to us as something we are prone to fear and shouldn't is anything we are concerned about. Philippians 4:6 says, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."
- ii. This anxiety is a self-concern which is focused on some lack or some problem which is immediate and urgent. And this could be anything. And this anxiety, if not countered with thankful faith expressed through prayer, will sprout into the bigger weed of fear which will paralyze us and sap our joy and stop our rejoicing in the Lord who is at hand. The Lord knows the sinful creativity of our hearts. He knows we can make a mountain of fear out of any mole hill of concern. He knows we can take the smallest thing in life and make it into the biggest and most consuming concern as an expression of our self-concerned anxiety.
- iii. And 2020 met the fear factory of your heart with a non-stop supply of things to be concerned and anxious about. Your factory of fear was receiving new shipments every day of truckloads of concerns. And if you let them back up to the dock of your heart and dump their concerns on your factory floor, then your heart knows what to do from there – make some fear! And we can do that with almost anything. You can be fearful about a riot which is thousands of miles away because you are convinced that you are never going to be able to return to your old way of life. You can be anxious about catching a virus which might then produce a fear in your heart which paralyzes you and keeps you from walking in faith and obeying the Lord. There are things to be concerned about with Covid, and there are precautions that need to be taken for some folks. But beloved, if the decisions you are making about how you operate in this Covid infected world are driven by fear then they are unwise decisions. If you are not fulfilling some aspect of God's clear will for you as a servant of Christ because you are gripped by anxious fear, then you need to hear again the call of Philippians 4:6 – do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

e. Opposition to the Gospel – John 15:18-20; 16:33

- i. The fourth thing we are prone to fear and shouldn't is opposition to the Gospel. And I don't think we have thought enough about this concern. But recent political developments in our land have made us look ahead to what is around the corner for the church in our country. We see the censorship and the cancel culture that is already beginning, and we don't need a magical mirror on the wall to tell us that this could easily be shifted to the church. On top of that we have the promise of the president-elect that he will seek to pass the Equality Act within the first

100 days, which seems to give carte blanche protection to the homosexual movement in all of its perversities. This Act will likely empower government officials to use the rule of law and the threat of criminal punishment to silence anyone who dares say that homosexual activity is wrong, and transgenderism is rebellion against our Maker and Creator, and marriage should be between one man and one woman for life.

- ii. Never before have we as Christians in this once great nation had to truly wrestle through the potentialities of facing incredible fines, public scorn and criticism, lawsuits, and even criminal prosecution simply for saying that we believe what the Bible says about human sexuality and marriage. And this of course ties immediately into the Gospel because that is why we hold to those truths from Scripture. We name the sins in our culture with the names the Scripture gives them because those sins have a glorious redemption and atonement available in the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than repeat the lies of our culture that “love is love,” we will speak the truth in love and tell them that without Christ they are enslaved in their sins and will suffer the condemnation of those sins. We will tell them of the hope of Christ Jesus, and we will call them to look to him and live. But this will likely make us incredibly unpopular and persecuted in the months and years to come.
 - iii. And this is scary, isn't it? Yes, but it shouldn't produce paralyzing fear. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 15 and 16:
 1. If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. (John 15:18-20)
 2. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)
 - iv. The early church rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. They took courage and they suffered well, some of them even unto death, and they did not let fear produce cowardice.
- f. **Death – Phil. 1:19-26**
- i. And this leads quite naturally to our last thing that we are prone to fear but shouldn't, and that is death. This has been one of the most confusing aspects of this past year – this year of fear! Our culture has been gripped with a fear of death. We have literally stopped living because we are all afraid of dying – and I know I am generalizing here, but in a general way, it is true. What is confusing to me about that is that we are a culture which generally celebrates death. Not that we rejoice when someone dies, but we make light of death all the time. Our entertainment industry

thrives upon movies whose plots are driven by death. Our video games make light of death like it is no big deal. We treat death as though it is really insignificant by telling women it is their right to choose to take a life growing in their womb if it happens to be inconvenient for them to nurture that life and birth that life into this world. We not only tell them it is okay, but our government pays for under privileged women to have access to these murderous operations known as abortion, and we even sell those aborted babies body parts so that the abortion industry gains more income from the life which was killed. So, when all of a sudden we are being told that life matters and if we can just save one life then all the shutdowns and restrictions are worth it – well, I for one am very confused! Certainly, it shows that a genuine concern for human life is not what is actually driving this narrative from so many of the powers that be.

- ii. But this constant droning about death in this last year has tempted us to be fearful of death in ways we may not have faced before. But beloved, when the perfect love of God through Jesus Christ has entered our hearts, it casts out the fear of death! 1 John 4:18 says that perfect love casts out fear. That is what we see displayed in the life of Paul in his letter to the Philippians. I almost changed my whole sermon and just preached from this text about fear. There were so many things Paul should have feared in Philippians 1. He was in a Roman jail, awaiting trial – with the very real possibility that his execution would be ordered. Not only that, but there was a lot of gospel ministry that he wasn't able to do because he was under house arrest. And there were many who were doing gospel ministry, and at least some of them were doing it out of selfish ambition to actually hurt Paul. There were many things for Paul to fear. But he doesn't fear. And this is because he has the perfect love of Christ within him which has cast out that fear. And he especially doesn't fear death. He says this is 2:20-21:
 1. as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.
- iii. He goes on to say in verse 23 that to die and be with Christ is far better than to stay here in this body. Beloved, if this is true, then there is nothing to fear. If it is true that neither death, nor life, nor any other thing can separate us from the love of Christ, then we have nothing to fear in death. It is but the doorway to great eternal gain! Therefore, whether we would die of Covid or of a car accident or of cancer or of persecution leading to martyrdom – there is nothing there to fear because to die is gain!
- iv. So, beloved, where you see these fears in your life, I call you to the grace of repentance. You have a choice here to turn from those expressions of fear and turn to trusting in the Lord. And that really is the flip side of fear – it is a deep trust in the Lord. And we will develop this more next week, but I

quickly want to point you to some things that we should fear but often don't. So, as we repent of these sinful expressions of fear, we should replace them with a right fear of these things. We should have new fear in a new year!

II. Things We Should Fear but Often Don't

a. Working out our salvation – Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Cor. 7:1; 12:20-21

- i. The first thing we should fear but often don't is working out our own salvation. This is laid out for us in Philippians 2:12-13 where the text says, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." The section right before this is that wonderful text which puts the example of Christ's humility before us and calls us to think and act like Christ. And here we are called to obedience, and to working for God's good pleasure. And if we were to keep reading in Philippians 2 we would read about not grumbling or disputing and holding fast to the word of life. All of these thoughts and commands are cousins in the same family. This is what it looks like to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling – to pursue humility and obedience and not grumbling and disputing and holding fast to the word of life.
- ii. In 2 Corinthians 7:1, after telling the church in Corinth to purify themselves and separate themselves from being unequally yoked to the world he says this, "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." This is working out their salvation in fear and trembling – it is fighting for purity of heart and life as we work to bring holiness to completion.
- iii. Later in the book – in chapter 12 – Paul will say that he is fearful that when he comes to see them he will not find them as he wishes. And then he says specifically that he is fearful he will find that there is still quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder among them. He goes on in verse 21 to say that he is afraid that he will be humbled when he gets there because he will have to mourn over many who have still not repented of impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality. In other words, Paul is gravely concerned about their spiritual state of holiness.
- iv. And this should be our top concern. If we are in Christ by grace through faith, then we should long for the holiness of Christ to increase and grow in us. We should work to put sin to death in our hearts as we tremble before our holy God. And we should be compelled to walk in obedience as the love of Christ constrains us. Instead of fearing for our safety and physical health as the top priority, the Scriptures call us to put our spiritual health as our greatest concern. If you got through 2020 with physical health and life, but you faltered spiritually and floundered in your

love for the Lord – fell into your besetting sins again and again – forsook the growth you had seen in prior years – or just grew stagnant as you walked through so many unknowns, then you missed the point! God brought 2020 into your life to grow you in Christlikeness. He was at work to bring all things together for your good to conform you to the image of His Son. Were you working against Him?

b. Deception – 2 Cor. 11:3

- i. The second thing we should fear and often don't is deception. This is also found in 2 Corinthians – in chapter 11. Paul expresses to the church that he is fearful that they will be deceived by a false apostle preaching a false Jesus. He says in 11:3 – “But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” The serpent of the Garden has not ceased his efforts to entrance and deceive the people of God. He looks for every access point he can get into your head and your heart to lure you away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. In fact, you can turn this around and say that where you have waned in your sincere and pure devotion to Christ there is likely some deception that has entered your thinking and polluted your mind and heart.
- ii. So, has your thirst for the latest headline of political happenings in our country increased your pure and sincere devotion to Christ? Has your tracking of the numbers of Covid increased your pure and sincere devotion to Christ? Has your struggle with the latest shut down and the latest government intervention into your life increased your pure and sincere devotion to Christ? Or have those things tempted you to be devoted to things you should not be devoted to? Satan doesn't care if he hinders your devotion to Christ by consuming you with concerns for physical safety or by filling you with anxiety about losing our republic to liberal worldviews and radical politicians. He doesn't care if He distracts you with Trump or with Biden, with Covid or with murder hornets, with financial concerns or with threats to your liberty. He just wants to deceive you and lure you away from this sincere and pure devotion.

c. God – Isaiah 8:11-13, 17, 20

- i. And lastly, the greatest thing we should fear but often don't, is God Himself. We'll talk a lot more about this next week, but sinful fear and anxiety in our hearts are directly related to our lack of a fear of the Lord. This is the answer to every rising of fear in our hearts which will paralyze us and stunt our obedience and faith. It is a greater view of and reverential awe in the presence of our Holy God. Trusting in God begins here with a right understanding of God and of honoring Him as Lord.
- ii. One very quick example of this is found in Isaiah 8. The prophet is facing a day of great opposition in the public square as the nation of Judah is

deceived into fearing their enemies instead of fearing God. *Read Isaiah 8:11-13, 17, 20.*

- iii. Instead of fearing an external enemy that might destroy you, and instead of being in dread about some conspiracy or some headline, we must honor the Lord as holy. It can simply be cute to say that God is sovereign and righteous and omniscient and eternally wise in his ordering of all things under his control. But now you have to live in light of it. Now you have to figure out if you actually and truly believe God to be this kind of Sovereign God. Now you have to turn your heart to full trust in this God. This is the wonderful crucible of adversity, and this is our great privilege today. To Fear God!

Conclusion: Will you allow the Spirit of God to evaluate your heart today? Listening to this sermon is not enough. If you just go your way and spend no more time about what you fear that you shouldn't and what you should fear that you often don't, then you will probably not be much further along in your spiritual growth next Sunday than you are this Sunday. Beloved, take some time before the Lord and consider who and what you fear! Let's pray.