

Fear Not, You Worm Jacob!

by John Piper

God's people should not be fearful, but rather enjoy great confidence in God, knowing that he will help them despite their sin and corruption.

Scripture: Job 25:6, Psalm 22:6, Isaiah 41:14, Romans 3:23, Hebrews 10:27

Topics: "Fear And Courage", "Gods Grace"

Description

John Piper preaches on Isaiah 41:14, emphasizing that God's people should not be fearful but have contrite courageous confidence in Him. The text reveals that God's people are in the condition of a worm, emphasizing their unworthiness and need for God's help. The sermon highlights the dangers of the gospel of self-esteem, which diminishes the awe of God's grace and promotes self-worth over humility before God. Piper urges believers to acknowledge their sinfulness, trust in God's grace, and be fearless in proclaiming His love and mercy.

Transcript

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Isaiah 41:14

"Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I will help you, says the Lord; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel."

The main point of this text is that the people of God should not be a fearful people. We should not be a people who are anxious or troubled or worried or fretful about things that threaten our life and happiness: economic adversity, hostile people, satanic opposition, guilt-laden consciences, deteriorating health, and death. The mark of God's people is not incapacitating fear, but rather contrite courageous confidence in God. That's the main point of Isaiah 41:14.

Then there are two subordinate points which clarify for us this experience of fearlessness. First, God's people are in the condition of a worm: "Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel." Second, the source of our fearlessness is the promise that God will help us: "Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I will help you, says the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel." In other words, freedom from fretting comes not because we are not in the condition of a worm but because God engages all his forces on behalf of worms who take refuge in him.

These truths are very important today for three reasons: 1) There are as many temptations to fear today as there were in the 8th century B.C. 2) The secular and religious culture in which we live tries to teach us all day long that we are not in the condition of a worm and that all the problems of our life come from thinking that we are. 3) There are many segments of the church today where the grace of God is causing tears of joy, that the Holy One of Israel should choose to take up residence in sinners like us. Satan has master-minded a phenomenal victory in the American church. By teaching us through a thousand lectures and articles and books that we are too valuable to be called worms, he has made it impossible for us to sing "Amazing Grace" with truly amazed hearts. The more beautiful and valuable man is made to appear, the less amazing it is that God should love him and help him. The gospel of self-esteem is healing our wounds very lightly. The wings of self-worth that carry us briefly out of fear will quickly weary and drop us in despair some day. For, as John Newton said in his hymn, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved." Where the glory of God's free and sovereign grace pales in the shadow of human self-esteem, there will one day be a great shudder of fear. When the Holy One of Israel rouses himself to get glory over the nations in the vindication of his worm Jacob. So the word of God to his people in Isaiah 41:14 is a remarkably relevant and necessary word for our day. "Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel. For I will help you."

Let's focus in turn on these three points: 1) God's people are in the condition of a worm. 2) Nevertheless, they should not be gripped by fear but enjoy great confidence in God. 3) For God, in his free grace toward sinners, will always help those who trust him.

First, then, God's people are in the condition of a worm: "Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel!" What did God mean when he called his servant, his chosen one, his beloved, a worm? There are two other places in the Bible where this word refers to man. In Job 25:4-6 Bildad says to Job, "How can man be righteous before God? How can he who is born of woman be clean? Behold, even the moon is not bright and the stars not clean in his sight; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!" The least we can say from this passage is that one meaning the term "worm" has when applied to man is that he is unclean, unrighteous, unacceptable to God. The image is used probably because worms are dirty not only on the outside but they are filled with dirt. The other passage is Psalm 22:6 where the psalmist cries out, "I am a worm and no man; scorned by men, and despised by the people." Here the focus is not on the condition of filth but on the way worms are treated: they are scorned by men and despised.

Now when we look at our own text (Is. 41:14) there is evidence that both these meanings are in view when God calls Israel a worm. On the one hand, Israel is presently being trodden down in captivity by his enemies. Israel is despised and scorned, but God is going to reverse that situation according to verses 15 and 16. He's going to make the worm a victorious threshing sledge (v. 15). On the other hand, if we ask why Israel is being treated like a worm in captivity, the answer is that Israel acted like a worm in uncleanness. Isaiah 59:1-8 says

Your iniquities have made a separation between you and God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity. They hatch adders' eggs, they weave the spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and from one which is crushed a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing; men will not cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil and

they make haste to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they know not and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked, no one who goes in them knows peace.

The reason God gave Israel over to captivity, to be treated like a worm was because Israel was a worm in his heart. When Isaiah saw the Holy One of Israel he said (6:5), "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." The heart of Israel was corrupt to the core with pride and arrogance and self-exaltation. The most religious people on earth were an abomination to God because of their haughtiness. Isaiah warns the people in 2:11-17,

The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the pride of men shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; against all the cedars of Lebanon lofty and lifted up; against all the oaks of Bashan, against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills; against every high tower, and against every fortified wall, against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. And the haughtiness of men shall be humbled, and the pride of men shall be brought low; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

Once you begin to see that God is God, that it is he that made us, that he alone is to be honored and lifted up in the world, that the magnificence of his power is 10 million times greater than spaceship Columbia, that his right and authority over all things is absolute--once you begin to see that God is God, then it becomes very hard to overstate the wickedness of the human heart in which there is one peep of rebellion against the Almighty. It is not an exaggeration when God calls Israel a worm. On the contrary, God must settle for inadequate words to describe the enormity of Israel's sin.

Now what does that have to do with us? The first thing to stress is that Israel is a lesson book for all the nations. Paul said in Romans 3:19 that the law speaks to those under the law "so that every mouth might be stopped and the whole world might be held accountable before God." God has illustrated clearly in the case of Israel what is true with all of us. None is righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10). All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (3:23). Everyone is without excuse because God has revealed to all that he alone is to be thanked and glorified (1:20f). Yet none of us offers God the gratitude and admiration and affection and obedience of which he is worthy. The insult to God of our half-hearted, lukewarm, fickle allegiance is so great when measured against what an infinitely wise and powerful and just and merciful God deserves, that there only remains a "fearful prospect of judgment and a fury of fire" (Hebrews 10:27). Brothers and sisters, if we felt a tiny fraction of how filthy and loathsome our sinful hearts are to the Holy One of Israel, we could not begin to feel indignant when we are called a worm.

What then shall we say about our own day and the dominance of the gospel of self-esteem--the teaching that traces our problems back to the fundamental cause that we don't regard ourselves highly enough? What can you say to the American church where by and large the ultimate sin is no longer failure to honor God but the failure to esteem oneself; where self-abasement not God-abasement is the ultimate evil; and the cry of deliverance from this evil is not, "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?" but rather, "O worthy man that I am, would that I could only see it better"? What shall we say?

The first thing I would say is this: Jacob is a worm. And until God has completed the miraculous work of our sanctification and made us perfect, we will still have in us enough of our old corruption to keep us poor in spirit and walking in all lowliness. I do not dispute that Christ has paid for our redemption and that the

Holy Spirit has entered our lives and begun to transform us. But what needs to be emphasized is that to take this unimaginable, divine condescension, this utterly free and unmerited grace by which God exalts his all-sufficiency and to turn it into a story whose theme is my worthiness is a travesty of Biblical revelation. What's more, it is not a contradiction of the atonement when I, a child of God, feel like a rotten worm for sinning against the God who died for me. I ask you, what should I think about myself when I sin? How should I regard my heart when it does not love mercy, is not aflame with righteousness, feels no compassion for the lost, takes no delight in the Word, recoils from prayer, harbors lustful thoughts, cherishes the praise of men? What adjectives shall I use to describe this heart?

You may say to me: Call it forgiven. And I answer: I do. O, I do. I do. But listen, forgiveness will not cause a ripple in the pool of my emotions unless I smell the stench of corruption in my heart. What is missing in the gospel of self-esteem is a vivid and horrid portrayal of the corruption remaining even in the Christian heart. C.S. Lewis said, "When a man is getting better, he understands more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less." And John Murray wrote, "As long as sin remains there must be consciousness of it, and thus conviction of our own sinfulness will contain self-abhorrence, confession and the plea of forgiveness and cleansing." I think these men are absolutely right. And therefore the only way that I know how to account for the ease with which Christians accept the summons to self-esteem is that their sin has ceased to be hideous and revolting in the eyes of their hearts. And sin has ceased to be hideous because God is no longer God. He is not the free, all-glorious, sovereign Judge of history whose eyes are too pure to look on evil. Instead he is a vague, sentimental granddaddy who somehow functions to help us find self-worth. When God is dethroned as the Holy One of Israel, the repugnance we once felt at pride is replaced by the repugnance we now feel at being called a worm. But O that God might be God at Bethlehem!

Does this mean that God aims for us to cower before him and be incapacitated by guilt and depression and fear? No. (And this is the second point from our test.) "Fear not, you worm Jacob!" It does mean that we will be broken and contrite in spirit. And this brokenness will permeate and humble all that we do. But it is not the enemy of joy and courage. Jonathan Edwards, in one of my favorite portions, wrote,

All gracious affections that are a sweet odor to Christ, and that fill the soul of a Christian with a heavenly sweetness and fragrancy, are broken-hearted affections. A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is an humble broken-hearted love. The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is an humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable and full of glory, is an humble, brokenhearted joy, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit, and more like a little child, and more disposed to an universal lowliness of behavior.

To know that there is corruption left in our hearts and that our feeble affections dishonor the God who loved us, does not mean we lie still, wallowing in the mud of guilt. It means we flee to Christ and cling to the cross and take refuge like little chicks under the wings of divine mercy. And there we gain courage to love, not because we regard ourselves highly but because we regard grace as our all-sufficient supply. The word to worms who will admit their corruption, humble themselves, and take refuge in Jesus is, "Fear not, you worm Jacob."

And the final point of the text gives the reason why, even though we are a worm, we need not fear: "I will help you, says the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel." The good news of the Bible is not that we are not worms, but that God helps worms who trust him. Yes, he is working to take away our corruption. But how far has any of us come? The greatest thing about being a Christian pastor is that what

I have to offer people is not steps to a positive self-image, but the gracious help of the Holy one of Israel.

The saddest thing of all about the gospel of self-esteem is how small and insipid it makes everything. It takes gospel truths that for centuries have stunned the saints and made them speechless with awe and reduces them to psychological devices in the service of our puny self-image. I know that the Christians who promote the gospel of self-esteem say the grace of God is the foundation stone. But I ask, is it the pinnacle as well? Is it exalted and lifted up and magnified? Does the gospel of self-esteem leave you exulting and glorifying in the unspeakable riches of God's sovereign grace to sinners like us? Or does it leave you exulting in the discovery that you are really somebody?

My prayer for Bethlehem and my goal in preaching is that we might be a people who humbly and broken-heartedly acknowledge the worm-like corruption remaining in our hearts; but who trust with all our heart that in his grace God is for us because Jesus died for our sins; and who therefore, are fearless and courageous in the proclamation and demonstration of God's grace in the world.

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