

Fear Not 'I Be Strong 'I

by Tom Macartney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of overcoming fear and weakness through faith in God's presence and strength.

Scripture: Joshua 1:9, Isaiah 35:3, Isaiah 41:10, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:13, Revelation 1:16

Topics: "Overcoming Fear", "Spiritual Strength"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches on the recurring theme in the Bible of overcoming fear and weakness as Christians, emphasizing the importance of being strong and fearless in the face of life's challenges. He delves into various instances in the Bible where God reassures His people with the words 'Fear not', highlighting the need for faith and trust in God's promises. The sermon also explores the connection between 'Fear not' and 'Be strong', emphasizing that spiritual strength comes from faith and reliance on God's power. Ultimately, the key to fearlessness and strength lies in the known presence of the Lord with His people.

Transcript

The fact that the words, "Fear not...Be strong", (and similar ones), occur so often throughout the scriptures, indicates that the spirit of fearfulness (anxiety, worry, timidity), and the spirit of weakness (defeatism, giving in, giving up, compromise), are two of our greatest enemies, as Christians.

Consider verses 3 and 4 in Isaiah 35, a chapter picturing the pilgrimage of the redeemed and ransomed of the Lord to Zion. (See Heb. 12:22-24.)

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, Be strong, Fear not Behold, your God will come ... and save you." (See also Heb. 12:12, 13 on discipline.)

These verses seem at first sight somewhat out of place in this chapter about Zion's happy future, until we realise that those who travel the highway to Zion, the way of holiness, will encounter many difficulties. Among them weak hands (the inability to act; paralysis; the feeling of insufficiency; saying, I cannot, instead of, I can do all things in Him who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13)), feeble knees (making it difficult or impossible to walk the way and make progress) and fearful hearts (Phil. 4:6, 7). Let us look into this.

"FEAR NOT"

(1) Here are some examples of circumstances, as wide as life itself with all its cares, worries, problems and crises, in which we find these words to Abraham (consider his helplessness, and the hopelessness of his situation, because he was childless): "Fear not, Abram; I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward he wavered not through unbelief, but grew strong through faith" (Gen. 15:1, 2. Rom. 4:20). So we too, in impossible situations, will hear the call, "Fear not".

Then the words to Isaac (consider the trouble he had with the Philistines over the wells of living water his father Abraham had dug and they had filled with earth): "Fear not, for I am with you" (Gen. 26:12-33). So for us, digging and maintaining the wells of living water, that is, a living relationship with the living Lord day by day, is a matter of life and death (John 4:14).

Next the words to Jacob (consider his understandable fears about going down into Egypt; should he leave the land of promise?) He knew what the Lord had said to Isaac his father, "Go not down into Egypt (Gen. 26:2). He knew of Abraham's sad mistake (Gen. 12:10 - 13:1), but there was also the Lord's covenant with Abraham and revelation to him of the future sojourn in Egypt (Genesis 15). Then the Lord spoke: "Jacob fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation; I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will surely bring you up again" (Gen. 46:2-4). God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. Israel's sojourn in Egypt was part of His plan. In times of critical guidance, when we are truly seeking His will, we may expect His re-assuring, "Fear not".

Consider the bewilderment of Mary and Joseph over the birth of the Lord Jesus and God saying, "Fear not, Mary" (Luke 1:29, 30) and, "Fear not, Joseph" (Matt. 1:20).

Consider too, the storm on the lake and the fearful disciples. Jesus said: "Why are you fearful?" (Matt. 8 :26); and the angel's message to Paul before the shipwreck on his dangerous journey to Rome: "Fear not, Paul" (Acts 27:24). 'Storms' are a recurring feature of a true Christian's life, and so we have these constant words of encouragement, "Fear not".

And consider Timothy, to whom Paul wrote in his last letter: "For God did not give us a spirit of fearfulness and timidity; but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:7). Timothy, it seems, had a sensitive temperament and a real battle with fear, and who would blame him as he now contemplated life without Paul. So Paul wrote to him this great letter of encouragement, urging him to, "suffer hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2:3; 4:5). Note our need of knowing our temperaments and realising that the fall has damaged us deeply. E.g. making some of us hard and insensitive, others the reverse.

(2) Then we have the occasions when the central issue is the context of the whole Christian life, that is, the spiritual warfare in which it is lived; the battle for spiritual progress, entering and possessing the land of our inheritance in Christ, following and serving the Lord as His witnesses in a godless world. We need the Lord's "Fear not," for we are engaged in a Holy War. Consider Joshua 1, with Israel on the threshold of the land, when God told them: "Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:6, 7, 9, 18). Jericho is to be conquered, the land to be possessed. And we must bear in mind too that, later on, fear disqualified many from being in Gideon's army (Judg. 7:2, 3).

Consider Daniel 10, when Daniel is caught up into the great spiritual warfare going on in the unseen world, "O man, greatly beloved, fear not; peace be with you, be strong, yes, be strong. And when he spoke to me, I was strengthened" (verse 19). Daniel is now about 90, and burdened in prayer. Was this because only about 50,000 of the Lord's people had availed themselves of the God-given opportunity of returning to

Jerusalem, given them two years earlier by Cyrus? The majority were content to remain in Babylon. What a tragedy and heartbreak for Daniel; but how much was bound up with Daniel's prayers and the remnant who did return. And we note that these same words, "Fear not ... be strong ... I am with you," come in Haggai's prophecy to the remnant regarding the rebuilding of the temple (Hag. 1:13; 2:4, 5).

"BE STRONG"

We note at once a link between these words, "Fear not" and "Be strong". They are so often found together. Fear is the fruit of unbelief, spiritual strength is the fruit of faith. When Peter took his eyes off the Lord and looked at the waves he was afraid, began to sink and cried out, "Lord save me". And immediately Jesus took hold of him saying, "Why did you doubt" (Matt. 14:22-33). Peter's ability to walk on the waves came from the Lord, not from himself, only as he kept his eyes on Him. The strength, courage, boldness and fearlessness we are bidden to have do not originate in us, but in Christ. He is their source, as Paul also says, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Phil: 4:13). "Be strong (be made powerful) in the Lord, and in the strength of His might" (Eph. 6:10). "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (keep on being empowered, keep in touch with the power, as one commentary has it. 2 Tim. 2:1). Consider Paul's prayer in Eph. 3:16, "That you may be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man" (deep in the inner man, the region where the new life moves and grows, the regenerate consciousness itself, as another commentary explains). This is not mere emotion but a gracious inward strengthening work and witness of the Spirit in our spirits (Rom. 8:14-16; 2 Tim. 1:7). Note, the human will is always required to work together with the divine energy: "Work out your own salvation ... for it is God who works in you" (Phil. 2:12, 13).

Consider Joseph's experience as foretold by Jacob his father, "The archers ... shot at him ... but his bow remained in strength and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob..." (Gen. 49:23, 24). The importance of Joseph is indicated by the large part of Genesis devoted to him.

Consider Caleb's testimony, "Lo, I am this day 85 years old. I am still as strong this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me" (Josh. 14:10, 11). Bear in mind that Caleb, through no fault of his own, endured the 40 years in the wilderness, where his influence for good must have been considerable.

Consider Paul's testimony: "The Lord said to me, My grace is sufficient for you; for My power is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me ... for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9, 10).

It is impressive to see how the early Christians were characterised by boldness and fearlessness in their lives, witness and preaching, a clear evidence of the presence of the Spirit in, among and with them. Was not this the secret of their effectiveness? They were not expressing their opinions or engaging in discussions; they were proclaiming the gospel, centred in a Person who had died and risen again, as His witnesses and heralds, with total conviction and certainty, with great power and great grace (Acts 4:13, 29, 31, 33; 9:27, 29; 19:8).

"I AM WITH YOU"

Here is the secret of fearlessness, and of spiritual strength; the known presence of the risen Lord by His Spirit. "I am with you". In Isaiah we read, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; yes, I will help you; yes, I will uphold you"(Isa. 41:10). In Matt. 28:18-20 we read:

"And Jesus said to them, All authority has been given to Me ... and lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age."

In Psalm 46:1 we read, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present and well proved help in trouble." It is the assurance of His presence at all times that we need above all else. "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14, 15).

Consider the significance and importance of the last 3 verses of Joshua 5, Joshua's remarkable encounter with the Lord. In many ways these verses provide the key to the whole campaign to conquer Jericho and possess the land. Joshua's encounter with the Man with his sword drawn ... the prince or captain of the host of the Lord" (not only the army of Israel, but also the invisible angelic host, as shown e.g. in 2 Kings 6:16, 17), was for him the equivalent of the encounter Moses had with the angel of the Lord at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Above all else Joshua needed complete assurance that the Lord was in charge as he faced Jericho, and this encounter gave it. We hear nothing more of this Man, but He was ever present and always in charge, though invisible. In chapter 6:2 it is Jehovah who speaks to Joshua, giving him detailed instructions for the capture of Jericho, for this Man was a manifestation of Jehovah, one of the pre-incarnate appearances of Christ.

So it was with John on Patmos in a day of persecution. Before the book opens and then unfolds the purposes of God with their glorious finale, John is given a revelation of the glorified Lord Jesus as in complete control of everything: "And His face was like the sun shining in full strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. But He laid His right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the First and the Last, and I am the Living One; and I was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of death and of Hades. Now write..." (Rev. 1:16-19).

Note: John is first brought low at His feet, as one dead, brought to an end of himself, and then is raised by His strong hand to newness of life. This is always the Lord's way. Then he hears the words, "Fear not ... I am the Living One ... alive for evermore ... I hold the keys of every situation". So with complete assurance of His Presence and control of all things, John is able to fulfil his commission, to write the last book of the Bible and complete the scriptures.

This then is the secret we must increasingly discover, faith's complete assurance of His presence with us at all times and His control of everything, so that fear and weakness of every kind are banished by His presence and sovereignty.

"The Lord is on my side; I will not fear." (Ps. 118:6; Heb. 13:6)

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