

DO NOT FEAR THEM

Introduction

With is with us in every moment; therefore we expect present experience of his grace and power.

He is eternal, and so is the life he gives; therefore we should think long-term. What he did in Christ 2000 years ago remains with us. God is always ahead of us – ‘though I go through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23). We are like passengers on a long-haul flight. What is happening around us is important but not nearly as important as reaching our destination; then our experience of the flight will be forgotten.

In these statements Jesus was addressing his disciples, who at that point had reason to fear. How would they cope with Jesus’ opponents? He helped them to see it in perspective, and his words are for every believer in every time. As Bunyan wrote, ‘The lions are chained’.

The saints face opposition

Jesus’ disciples were tempted to keep quiet about him in order to save their skin. But if they had not spoken the truth of God and of his salvation would not be known. Truth would have been hidden and the lie would have won.

Soon they would see Jesus crucified. They would realise the same thing could happen to them because they were identified with him.

There have been many Christian martyrs. In Revelation 20 we read of the ‘souls of those who were beheaded for their testimony to Jesus’. That still happens today.

This is a word for all believers, even those who never expect such treatment. Opposition comes in other ways.

In many cases it is ridicule and ostracism. That is deeply painful, although there is such a thing as ‘rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his Name’ (Acts 5:41).

It often leads to silence – self-censorship. It sometimes leads to doubt – people have been tempted to give up the faith on account of it. And it can lead to a ghetto mentality, where believers regard the outside world as something to be avoided as much as possible. All those outcomes harm the people involved and hinder the work of Christ.

Most often it happens in ways we do not detect. In the Parable of the Sower Jesus mentions people who receive the Word but, ‘the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things entering in, choke the word and it becomes unfruitful’ (Mark 4:19).

These things may be people whom we value, and therefore influence us. It may be interests that become greater than our interest in God and his word. It may be social success leading us to despise or ignore the poor (wrong in society, doubly wrong in the church).

One result of such things is that Christian people will lose the reward they might have received at the Day of Judgement (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Jesus’ experience

Jesus’ followers are identified with him. Their danger is for his sake; and their gains are to do with the things of Christ. Therefore they should think about what he experienced; they are likely to experience similar.

He suffered.

They called him 'Beelzebub', i.e. a demon. How hard it is to be miscalled, especially when it is undeserved.

He was threatened, and when he preached in Nazareth they tried to kill him.

Even his own disciples opposed him at times. He had to rebuke their spirit, sometimes harsh or envious. Simon Peter tried to hinder him going to the cross. To be opposed by enemies is one thing; to have friends undo your work is another.

His close friend, Judas Iscariot, betrayed him to his enemies. 'Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me' (Psalm 41:9).

He was handed over to his enemies, and the enemies of his people. He had come to save them; but they gave their saviour to their enemies. It looked as if his work was ruined.

He was humiliated, physically and by an unjust trial.

At last he was killed.

But he was blessed, 'God has anointed you with the oil of gladness more than your companions' (Psalm 45:7).

During his lifetime the Father affirmed him and showed his approval by a voice from heaven and by the mighty works he was enabled to do. His prayers were answered. The Father supported him in his suffering.

The Father then raised him from the dead. It was the greatest vindication anyone could have. The life the Father gave him was eternal. And his reward was divine glory – 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 2:10-11).

If we are identified with Jesus in his suffering we shall be identified with him in his glory.

The saints' fears

The fear Jesus refers to is the fear of what other people can do to us. Yet we must remember Psalm 27:3 – 'Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear'. This is a reality for many. And some form of suffering will come to all.

This raises the question: 'Who is greater – God or man?' remember David and Goliath.

It raises a second question: 'Who deserves more from us – God or man?' Remember Daniel's friends.

It raises a third question: 'In practice, who do we allow to influence us more – God or man?'

In this conversation Jesus is pointing us to God the Father as the one who should have far more influence over us than any human. What can man do? At the worst he can kill us. What can God do? He can do the same. But there are two differences. God can make alive. And God can cast both soul and body into hell.

Proverbs 18:14 says, 'The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, but who can bear a broken spirit?' His favour is life to our spirit; his frown is death to our spirit.

That is true in death as in life. Jesus spoke of the rich man and Lazarus – the blessing of heaven, and the torment of hell. He said to the thief on the cross, ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ – what encouragement at the moment when both were suffering that worst that man could do to them.

When the Day of Judgement comes, who will we wish we had allowed to influence us? ‘So have no fear of them.’

The saints’ confidence

Jesus spoke about the Father’s care of us today – the day when we fear the hostility of man, not only on Judgement Day.

It is true that he does not guarantee we will not suffer – even be martyred. But we are bound to die someday anyway, and his saints’ death is dear to him (Psalm 116:15).

We must see all our experiences in the context of ‘your Father’s’ care. ‘The hairs of your head are numbered’. He watched over us in our conception and birth (Psalm 139). He has answered our prayers, even for matters of detail – who has never prayed for his help to find something they had lost? He has demonstrated his care in some remarkable providences. In our times of great suffering he has conspicuously upheld us. Has he not delivered us out of temptations that were too strong for us? And he has spoken in the secrecy of our soul.

We have on record his care of others. He cared for David when Saul was trying to kill him. He rescued Israel in the days of Hezekiah and others. He took water from the rock to refresh his people in the desert. He enabled Jesus to feed the 5000, and to calm the storm. He freed Simon Peter from prison.

Jesus has promised the Spirit of ‘your Father’ will help in every time of need, ‘it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you’ (Verse 20). That refers specifically to times when other men threaten us.

But the Spirit is given for all the challenges of life. He enables us to use scripture just as he did when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. He enabled Paul and Silas to rejoice when they were imprisoned in Philippi.

‘O ye of little faith.’

Therefore he says to us, ‘Fear not ... what I tell you in the dark speak in the light, what you hear whispered tell from the housetops.’

The saints’ goal

Believers have one longing greater than any other. That is to appear in peace before Christ at the Great Day. God ‘has committed all judgement to the Son’ (John 5:22). Jesus says, ‘I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to every one according to his work’ (Revelation 22:12). What will happen to us on that day is being decided by what we are doing this day.

Jesus pictures two scenarios. In both cases we will have an audience.

In the first scenario he imagines people who have overcome their fear of man and have acknowledged him. He will reward every one of them ‘according to his work’. They identified with the Son of God in this world. He will identify with them on that day – ‘I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven’. He will own them as the people he came to redeem. He will own them as his servants. He will own them as his heavenly Bride.

In the other scenario he imagines people who succumbed to their fear of man and denied him when they lived in this world. They preferred the praise of men to the praise of God and he will reward every one of them 'according to his work'. As they disowned him so he will disown them. But that day the men of this world shall be of no consequence – they will be seen as the fools they were and their place will be in hell. The lie they chose to embrace will have been exposed. The only honour anyone will have that day will be identification with Christ. Since they chose to depart from him he will say, 'Depart from me' (Matthew 25:41).

Conclusion

This saying of Jesus is a saying for today, the day we are tempted with the fear of man. How can you escape it and conquer with Jesus?

Keep your eye on the goal – Judgement Day and heaven

Have faith in God – he is able to do in you and for you more than you can ask.

Let those two things influence you – and nothing else.

Then, what you have heard whispered, tell it from the housetops. And who knows? The Saviour of the world may use it, and then you will bring others with you to heaven with you.