

Fear AND Great Joy

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[0 : 00] Matthew 28, we read at verse 8, they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy. Fear and great joy.

The world would have us believe that these two characteristics are mutually exclusive. One is joyful, then one cannot at the same time be afraid.

And if there is fear, well then what is there to be joyful about? But in this verse we read of these two characteristics occurring simultaneously and it would appear coexisting quite naturally without any contradiction.

We read they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy and then run to bring his disciples word. Fear and great joy. How can this be?

Well, fear is something we experience when we anticipate harm or suffering. It is an anxiety of expectation rather than of something we are going through then and there.

[1 : 05] You know, for example, a soldier before a battle might be afraid, he might have fear, but by the time he's actually dying in his wounds on the battlefield, you could say he's not really afraid of the battle anymore.

Or the thing has happened. So it's not a sense of anxiety of anticipation there that he's got. Yes, he's suffering, but it's not fear anymore. We experience fear when we are brought face to face with something or someone far more powerful than us.

Especially perhaps if we know that they have a grievance against us. What we are suddenly conscious, all of them, is our own weakness and of the impossibility of escape.

Then we fear. And in the world, in the sense of the unbelieving world, fear is always a negative. An anticipation of wrath, of suffering, of defeat.

Joy, on the other hand, is something of which the world actually knows very little. It understands happiness, yes. It understands celebration, yes, at times.

[2 : 13] It understands satisfaction, temporarily. But joy is a word that implies deep and lasting fulfilment. And such fulfilment inevitably brings pleasure with it.

Such is joy. Such as the world, if it be without God, knows little or nothing of small wonder, then. That such an unbelieving world has trouble encompassing the idea of fear and great joy, together in the same sentence.

But it is not only the unbelieving world which struggles here. I would suggest to you that much of what passes for organised Christianity nowadays is characterised by an absence of both the fear of the Lord and the joy of the Lord.

Well, yes, we like to think that we like to cultivate the latter. But so often we're simply trying to ape the shallow, feel-good-for-nour emotions of the world, seeking to cultivate a happiness which we may or may not actually feel.

And all too often we buy into the world's philosophy that because fear and joy must be mutually exclusive, we must choose between them. And inevitably, of course, most folk want the joy or at least seek to cultivate what they think is spiritual happiness.

[3 : 38] Well, I would respectfully suggest that the fear of the Lord will itself issue forth in the joy of the Lord. Just as surely as the stream flows on from the fountain spring, if the one bubbles up with sufficient water, then it will flow down in the stream.

That the fear of the Lord is the spring, and the joy of the Lord will be the stream that flows from it. And that there can be no deep, lasting, pleasurable fulfilment in Christ, no joy of the Lord, except there be also the fear of the Lord.

Fear and great joy. Now, we know, of course, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. It's what Proverbs tells us, chapter 9, verse 10.

And the scriptures are rich with teaching on the benefits to be had from the fear of the Lord. But if we know the Lord, well, should we not love him rather than fear?

And doesn't scripture say, you know, 1 John 4, verse 18, you know, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear. Because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

[4 : 48] So, let's ask ourselves the question, you know, do you honestly believe, do you claim that your love for him is perfect? People say, perfect love casts out fear.

So, I shouldn't have fear. Well, you should only be in that situation if your love is perfect. Do you think your love is perfect? That it cannot be improved upon? That if you live to be a prayerful saint of a hundred, then your love for the Lord will never be greater or richer or purer or holier than it is now?

Wow. If such is really your claim, then I think we may safely conclude that, yes, the fear of the Lord is totally absent from your heart. So, what we need to consider then is this.

Your love, my love, is not perfect here. It's not perfected. Otherwise, you'd be in heaven. Otherwise, that's where we'd be because we'd be perfected.

But because we're here, we're not perfect yet. And our love is not perfect. In heaven, yes, the believer's love will be perfected. And it will abide when faith and hope have long since ceased to be of any use.

[5 : 59] They've been outgrown and will no longer be needed. You don't need faith anymore in heaven. You don't need hope anymore in heaven. But you'll have love in heaven. And it will certainly outlast all the rest.

Now, the Lord's love, however, for his children is perfect. He fears nothing. He doesn't fear sin. He doesn't fear death. He doesn't fear the devil. He's won the victory over them all. His love is perfect. Yours and mine, however, still has a bit of a way to go.

But we begin to be wise when we fear the Lord. And we come to fear him. And we come to fear him and to know him personally.

And to encounter the spiritual reality of his power and his kingdom in our lives. When we encounter the Lord for ourselves, then we see the reality of how great he is.

[6 : 54] So much that passes for Christian faith and worship lacks this vital, life-changing encounter. And so it continues bland, worldly, shallow, leaving the soul unmoved.

But seeking to compensate by gratifying the senses. But our life and our condition will not be changed from the outside. Jesus said, that which is born of the flesh is flesh.

And that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I sin unto thee. You must be born again. Now when a sinner is suddenly brought face to face with the overpowering reality of the spiritual realm.

The reality of the living God or, as we read in scripture, his divine messengers, the angels. That then they are encountering something which they know instinctively is infinitely more powerful than they are.

From which instinctively, again, they realize there is no escape. They have nowhere to run. And, you know, confronted with the perfect purity of this spiritual realm and its messengers.

[8 : 11] But the holiness of this great God. They see themselves to be what they are in truth. What they are in reality. Which is his opposite.

They are puny where he is all-powerful. They are puffed up with pride where he is pure and clean and humble.

And he is understated. They are foul and filthy in the face of his purity and his cleanliness and his holiness. Above all, above all, he is the one sinned against by them.

When we are confronted with the reality of the Lord, we see his purity over against our filthiness. We see his power over against our weakness. We recognize that we are sinful and he is the one we've sinned against.

And that, yes, ought to cause us a wee bit of anxiety, a wee bit of fear. We are his opposite. When sinners are confronted with the reality of God, they realize that they are his opposite.

[9 : 19] Which means that he has no reason to favor them. So, his appearance or that of his angelic messengers always inspires fear.

Even if the person has been a God-fearing worshipper of the true God. Because there is all the difference in the world between outward, physical, earthbound worship of something or someone you may be alive in.

And actually encountering the spiritual reality in a personal way. One may worship, perhaps, as it were, from a distance. But actually believe that, you know, God is in a safe distance in heaven. You know, we're here. He's there. We don't have to worry too much about encountering him personally in that sense. In a really spiritual way, personal way. One may worship, but actually believe that there's that safe distance.

And he's not directly involved in one's daily life here. But the reality of a personal encounter with the Lord or his angelic messengers underlines the vast gulf between him and us.

[10:25] Between his purity and our sinfulness. That we are his opposite in almost every respect. So, yes, believers will experience fear in such an encounter.

Which is precisely why the Lord or his angelic messengers, when they appear to his people, they so often have to begin with the instruction, fear not.

Because those to whom they are speaking are instinctively afraid. You know, verse 5. The angel answered and said unto them, Fear not ye, for I know that ye seeked Jesus, which was crucified.

Now, notice that no such word of reassurance is given to the soldiers. We read at verse 2. You know, behold, there was a great earthquake. For the angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone from the door and sat upon it.

And his countenance was like lightning and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him, the keepers did shake and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, Fear not ye, for I know that ye seeked Jesus, which was crucified.

[11:29] It doesn't say it to the keepers. It doesn't say it to the guards. Their reaction is totally different. Their reaction is dread and terror. And the Lord doesn't say to them, Fear not. Rather, he says it to the women who have come seeking Jesus.

When the Lord says, Fear not, what is meant is that he has no intention or purpose of harming his people. They should not be afraid in that sense.

For he means them only good. It's if such a frighteningly all-powerful God then loves his children, as he himself says, with an everlasting love.

That's what he says in Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 3. You know, we all have loved you with an everlasting love. If they who have the wisdom to fear him simultaneously know that he loves them, as a father loves his children, that he is for them, you know, as he says in Ezekiel, Behold, I am for you.

That's what he says to the mountains of Israel, symbolizing his people, Behold, I am for you. And that none will ever pluck them out of his hand. And that's what Jesus says in John, you know, chapter 10.

[12:43] None will ever pluck them out of my hand, but out of the Father's hand. I am my Father one. If they know that the Father's love is such that he sent his only begotten Son to die for them, to take away their sin and bring them to him in glory for all eternity, how can joy ever be kept from bubbling up and breaking out in the heart of such a saved, redeemed, and greatly beloved child of God?

Yes, they joy because they have come to know the Lord and have believed his message. He is awesome, frighteningly pure and holy.

Such a The hairs on the back of your neck would stand up if you were to encounter him personally. And to know him is to fear him and yet to love him because he has first loved us.

And such love cannot help but bring forth joy, the joy of God. This is what the unbelieving world does not understand because it cannot understand.

Joy is not a superficial happy feeling. It is a deep, lasting fulfillment which is ultimately found only in the Lord.

[14:04] If you look up the word joy in a concordance, you know, you've got one in your shelf or the back of your Bible or whatever. If it's an exhaustive concordance then you'll find that, you know, the vast majority of occasions in which this word joy is used concern the Lord.

Either directly or indirectly. Joy is found in the Lord. And if you take the words great joy, then the figure is almost unanimous. It's almost every single time that great joy is used, then it is directly or indirectly concerned with the Lord.

The Lord is the source of joy as far as the scriptures are concerned. In other words, the Bible teaches joy is inextricably bound up with the Lord himself.

Contrast again the reaction of the guards and that of the women. The guards, there's this dread terror and they became as dead. They became as dead but there's still no fear of the Lord. You know, there's surely this dread, there's this terror. But if there was the fear of the Lord in the spiritual sense, then their response would have been different. You know, if you think in all credit to him, although Saul of Tarsus was such a persecutor, when the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus, there was the fear of the Lord who art my Lord.

[15:23] I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. What would you have me to do? There is that obedience, there is that recognition that this is a power that he cannot fight against. There is the fear of the Lord there with Saul of Tarsus.

Because in all honesty and integrity, he believes he has been serving the God of his fathers by persecuting the church of Jesus Christ. He thinks he's been doing good. He thinks he's been serving the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There is the fear of the Lord in his heart. So when the Lord appears to him and says, look, it's me you've been persecuting. Then his reaction is one of somebody who has the fear of the Lord. For the guards, there's just sheer dread and terror. There's no fear of the Lord there.

They're afraid for themselves and for their own skins, but it's not the fear of the Lord. Otherwise, their reaction too would have been extremely different. But with the devout women, this combination of fear and great joy is a response to the real life encounter with the spiritual realm.

[16:32] They're encountering the angel of God, the messenger of God himself. One that they wouldn't normally meet in their everyday life. It is somebody who has come to them from heaven. It makes it suddenly right there in your face, right there on your doorstep, and it's frightening.

But at the same time, it's joyful. What they knew and believed by faith, they experienced in reality. And what is the effect?

Well, it produces obedience, diligence, a desire to spread the word. And in the midst of obedience, in the midst of this fear and great joy, what do they find, but something more and even better.

It's the Lord himself. First, they have the angel, and they departed quickly from the second door with fear and great joy. And they'd run to bring his disciples' words. In other words, they were acting in obedience to what the angel told them.

But as they're acting in obedience, what happens? As they went to tell his disciples, Behold, Jesus met them. Not just an angel now, but Jesus himself met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by their feet and worshipped him.

[17:39] Now it's the Lord himself. It just gets better and better. This, my friends, is what we so lack in our day and age.

The fear and great joy which these women have had. If it is the world's standards we are going by, then we will think it impossible to reconcile these two characteristics.

But then the world's standards would have us believe that resurrection is impossible in the first place. And yet that is the very thing being described here in this chapter, in this passage.

That's what we're talking about here. It's the very reason why there were guards at the tomb. Just in case something happened to the body. They said if his disciples came to steal him away properly, they also thought just in case there is an attempt for resurrection, we've got the guards there, and they can make sure they shove whoever it is back into the tomb.

You know, if Lazarus was to try and come out of this tomb, if there was guards there to push him back in, they'd have stopped him from coming out. So maybe they're seeking to contain it. Maybe they're seeking to prevent a theft of the corpse, whatever.

[18:48] It is this resurrection itself which is being described here in this chapter, that which the world says could not happen. That's what this passage is all about.

It is the very thing causing these women to have both fear and great joy. The world, in some parts of the church, of course, would have us also believe that, you know, the virgin birth is also impossible.

If the virgin birth is impossible, what are people celebrating at the end of every year, sort of thing? You know, how is there a ministry of Jesus if there hasn't been a birth of Jesus? How is it special if it's not through the virgin Mary?

As scripture tells us. You know, why there needs to be all this doubt and distancing of ourselves from God's truth, I do not know. But the world would deny it was possible.

The world would deny the virgin birth. The world would deny the resurrection. The world would deny so much of what is revealed in scripture because it just can't handle it. But you cannot be bound and constricted by the narrow understandings of the world.

[19 : 53] Its vision is too limited. Its horizon is too narrow. Its knowledge has yet to begin to mature because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

But fools despise wisdom and instruction. Again, Proverbs chapter 1, verse 7. So don't be bound by these limitations that the world would seek to put on you.

Oh, this can't possibly have happened. That can't possibly have happened. When would you ever think of that happening? Well, if God does it and God reveals that he has done it, then of course it's happening. And of course it has happened.

And our knowledge needs to begin. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. So go forward then with this knowledge into whatever is ahead in your life with no fear except the fear of the Lord.

Fear of him, yes, with love and reverence. And if you do so, then the joy of the Lord will follow. The joy of the Lord will be your strength. It will not always be easy.

[21 : 01] But go into what the Lord has before you year by year, day by day, asking the Lord for what you need and he will supply it. We have a tendency to want to have a supply for the month ahead or for the year ahead or to make sure everything's sorted and everything's fine.

But in fact, the Lord only promises us one day at a time. And what that day needs, he will supply. And what the next day needs, he will supply that too.

And even if he were to give you supply for a year ahead, think of the rich fool. You know, he said, oh, that was much goods laid up for many years. Take my knees, eat, drink of me, many. God said to him, but a fool, this night thy soul shall be acquired of thee.

Then whose shall these things be whose thows laid up for thyself? You know, you can have all the supply, but you might not be there to enjoy it. All you're promised is one day at a time.

And for that day, the Lord gives you strength and grace and the supply of everything you need. One day at a time. And so we go forward one day at a time in the fear of the Lord and the joy of the Lord.

[22 : 10] Asking the Lord for what you need and he will supply it. Jesus said, hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name. Ask and ye shall receive that your joy may be full.

And when you are full of this joy, when you're full of this good news of what the Lord has done, you can't help but share it.

And like the women here, we must be sure to do so. They departed quickly. They were told, go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead.

Behold, he going before you to Galilee. There shall ye see him, though I have told you. And he departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy and did run to bring his disciples' word. That's where they went. And how they went is with this fear and great joy. And as they went, Christ met them in the way.

[23 : 12] Let us pray.