

OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF DEATH

Vic Hall, Presbytery Word for week commencing Sunday 15 December 2024
Transcription of recording, slightly edited

David Baker – Introduction

I am going to briefly introduce this week's presbytery word to give it some context. Vic ministered this word on overcoming the fear of death during the service of thanksgiving for Bruce Watkins. Many of you will know that Bruce recently passed away to be with the Lord on Saturday the 9th of November. The service of thanksgiving was then held on Thursday the 21st of November at the church in Toowoomba.

Notably, one of the central features of that thanksgiving service was Bruce's own testimony, which he wrote less than two months before he passed away. In that testimony, he was able to reflect on the Lord's mercy to him over the various seasons of his life. He was able to testify about the nature of his repentance and faith, in response to the Lord's word and he was also able to give thanks to the Lord for the work of regeneration in his life. After receiving that testimony, a number of us were also able to then bear witness to the work of regeneration in his life.

In relation to this theme of overcoming the fear of death, Bruce openly reflected that a big part of his initial motivation for becoming a Christian was the fear of hell. Then he was also able to identify the impact that this underlying fear had on his Christian life and ministry. He wrote in his testimony (and I am going to read a very short extract, and I am reading in Bruce's own words now). He said, 'I was trying to save myself, not knowing about the finished work of Christ. I did not realise that the faith I had was *my* faith and not *His* faith (speaking about the faith of Christ). So I was constantly hounding the Lord as to why I was not being changed in the way I thought I should be, not knowing that Christ had already done the work.'

I am sure that we would all put our hand up with Bruce and also with the apostle Paul in that manner to say that we are very familiar with this dilemma. That is, the dilemma of being motivated by fear and trying to save ourselves.

Of course, Bruce also testified about his deliverance from that fear. Reflecting on a heart operation that he had about eight years ago, he said, 'The Lord met me a second time, enabling me to live after a heart valve replacement which almost took my life. I knew that He had given me time to finish the works I had not yet done. He began to open my eyes to understand truths in Scripture that I had not seen before. I came to embrace the finished work of Christ that I could not save myself. The most wonderful blessing was that I began to learn about genuine fellowship. All I needed to do was to be yoked to Christ. He had already walked out my whole life with all of its struggles and failures, learning for me the obedience I needed, so that I could walk on the Highway of Holiness as I walked with Him.'

It was wonderful to receive that testimony from Bruce and we rejoice that he did continue to walk the pathway that Christ had pioneered for him all the way to the end.

In the week before his physical death, he was able to confidently say, 'I have no fear at the prospect of death.' You will note that Vic picks up that statement then at the beginning of his word and then continues to speak to all of us concerning how we must overcome the fear of death in our lives.

Without delivering the punch lines of course, I know that you will appreciate, as I did, the sharper definition of temptation as being our fear-driven selfishness that leads us to sin. I am sure that you will be blessed by the fresh focus on Christ's priesthood and

the way that He gives aid to us as the seed of Abraham in the midst of our temptation.

You will recall that Vic began to minister on Christ as our suffering High Priest at Easter this year. This word now certainly contains a further understanding of the priesthood of Christ which is the central theme of the book of Hebrews.

Even though this word was prepared for Bruce's thanksgiving service (and it certainly had a very specific application and focus on that day), it is a word that is relevant for all of us. We all need to overcome the fear of death. This is part of the word of present truth to us all as a lampstand church in this season.

Vic Hall

I am going to reflect from Thursday October the 31st when Bruce knew that his specialist had said that he was terminal. He got in touch with me and spelled it all out in writing for me as a farewell. I will not say how I responded to that when I got back to him. It was quite a good comment that I made back to him. But I will take one point out of what he said because I have set about my word today, my exhortation, on 'overcoming the fear of death'. Overcoming the fear of death. I am going to work through that with you in about ten to fifteen or so minutes. We are not under any pressure, but we will take our time and digest this question of the fear of death.

The fear of death is something that besets all of us. Whether we know it or not, it is there. The whole instinct for self-preservation (for survival) is actually the fear of death. When we were born, we were born, and then we were born crying. We did not know who we were or what we were doing here, so we had to find out an awful lot of things as we have gone through life.

I will comment on what he [Bruce] sent to me. He said, 'This morning's diagnosis did not come as a surprise. The Lord is very

gracious. I have no fear at the prospect of death.' I am going to take that comment that he sent to me. 'I have no fear at the prospect of death'; and then how he arrived at overcoming this so that he could die indeed as he did, with joy, as we have already heard.

'I am not sure [he said], of the pathway between now and death.' That is another question that most of us have. I am not sure of it, but he said David Baker was just back and I had not long been back myself from New Guinea. 'David Baker is coming to see me this morning, so I am looking forward to that blessing.' He was waiting for David to come. 'Thanks again Vic, for everything and the many years over which I have known you and Lorraine. May the Lord continue to strengthen you daily for the works that are yet yours.'

With that little comment from Bruce, I thought, well, why don't we just look at overcoming the fear of death? This is a word that I believe that the Lord has for all of us. I will just take three Scriptures here, but then I am going to read from them. I thought I would lean a little bit toward the book of Job because it appears to me that 'Job' was one of Bruce's favourite sermons. He did a whole series on Job that he took around the whole country — preaching on Job. I have dug a bit deeper into Job here. I will pick up on that and weave that into it. But also because of the concept of shepherding, which was part of Bruce's whole focus as a shepherd. The Lord was his Shepherd and he followed that dimension of shepherding.

I am going to read some Scripture here that we are all familiar with. I will read first of all Psalm 23 to us in which again King David highlights the concept that he was not afraid of death. He had learnt that lesson. Let us read the Scriptures and then I want to come back and focus right down particularly in Hebrews chapter 2. I might read seven verses there and just unpack it [but] not totally. I am going to unpack it further in the coming

months but unpack how we overcome or how he [David] overcame the fear of death. That is from that chapter.

Psalm 23: 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.' Can you say to yourself that you can say, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' I am doing this for all of us, okay? 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.'

Now when you read Psalm 23 [I will comment very quickly here], the next block is parallel with the first block. It is not the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; happy, happy, happy and then after that, sad, sad, sad. The way it actually reads is the first block, 'The Lord is my shepherd; I am full of faith; I shall not want.' Then you run parallel with that while He is my shepherd, 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.'

Keep this in your mind, just this second... This is what King David is saying to us. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.' When you have heard today Bruce's testimony, hear one side — Bruce talking about his own self, saying what a struggle life was to him. He struggles with inferiority and all of these things. I knew Bruce quite well and so I wondered what inferiority meant when I looked at him. But anyway, we all have our own inner struggles, don't we — how we think. These two things run together for all of us. It is good to hold both these things together, because the one thing that is true is the Lord is our Shepherd; we shall not want. The other side of it is we do walk through the valley of the shadow of death; but we do not have to fear evil; but we will fear evil if we do not know that the Lord is our Shepherd. I am not going to preach on this here today but just flag that to us as you

read this Psalm here. 'Yea, though I walk for the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.' That is key knowing He is with you through it all. That is the real key — not *what* you know, but *who* you know. 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.' This block again goes over the top of those first two points. At the very same point, a table is prepared before me in the presence of my enemies, 'You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me [this is faith now being expressed] all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord [that is Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem] forever.'

Amazing, isn't it? Then with that, we must put Isaiah chapter 12 and verse 2 in and take the first stanza in this. 'And in that day, as he [Bruce] was passing away in *that* day. And then as he said to me, 'In *that* day, [the day when he knew he was terminal; in *that* day] you will say: 'O Lord, I will praise You. Though You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for YAH, the Lord, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation.' I think those verses there were particularly tailored to Bruce; but they are particularly tailored to every one of us.

I will also comment on Genesis 15:1 and I am going to pick up at one point that this needs a fair bit more. I shall do this in the coming season; a fair bit more unpacking for us. That is Genesis 15:1. 'After these things [we will not go into all what 'those things' were in the journey of Abram], the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid.' Here it is again, at the very start there, right through. 'Do not be afraid, Abram.' [He] called him by name. 'Do not be afraid, Abram.' The Lord was saying to Bruce, 'Do not be afraid, Bruce. I am your shield, your exceeding great reward. I am your

shield, your exceeding great reward.' This is the same word that the Lord is saying to you here today.

I will comment on the shepherding of Christ. Christ is our good Shepherd. We see all this in John 10. There are whole blocks given to the question of shepherding. Christ is our good Shepherd. We are His sheep, the sheep of His pasture. He knows us by name and because we belong to Him, we know *Him*. If you actually belong to Him, you will know Him. If you do not know Him, you had better check how much you belong to Him. He is inviting you to come to know Him so that He can know *you* by name. Knowing you by name means then that you can know *Him* by name because He calls you by *your* name. It is tailored for you. There is a particular journey that you are walking that is unique between you and your good Shepherd. He calls you wherever you walk in His flock by name. He then (as John 10 says), He goes before you and then He orders your walk different from everyone else's walk, in the middle of one flock. That is how John teaches that. John tells you that is what Jesus said. Because we belong to Him, we know Him. He has given His own life in offering to us to save us. John tells us that Jesus said that. 'He laid down His life for His sheep.' Then it says He keeps us alive as His sheep. For the whole of your life, He keeps you alive until your day to depart. Remember every day is in His hand. He has walked out and lived every day of your life. He wants you to connect to what He has already accomplished. He keeps us alive as His sheep. Christ gives to us eternal life and we shall never perish. I have just read that brief summary out of John 10.

Now I am going to read to you from Hebrews 2 verses 14 to 17 and I am going to unpack this now. Here in Hebrews chapter 2, and I am going to read this to you. We will take our time with the Scripture.

'Inasmuch then as children have partaken of flesh and blood [talking about your own

children that are born from you. They partake of your flesh and blood], He Himself [speaking of Jesus Christ], likewise shared in the same [He became flesh and blood like us from the womb of the virgin Mary. And why did He do this? Now stay with me. Why was He born? Why did we have that incarnation of the word made flesh? Yahweh's Son? He partook of flesh and blood; He shared in the same. And for this purpose: this is the major focus; hear me now] ... that through death, [so He was born that He should die the death of the cross] ...that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil, and release those who through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage.'

Did you just see what the apostle said to them? He became a man to destroy the devil, to destroy the power of death and release us from the *fear* of death. The question will be now that I will unpack how does He do that — from the fear of death? The apostle now amplifies a bit more before he gets to the point. He said this, 'For indeed he does not give aid to angels. [He did not become an angel; He did not try to help the angels; He left angels where they were because of the unique love God has for us. Upon whom then?] He did not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham.' He gives aid; that is to deliver you from the fear of death — to the seed of Abraham. Who are the seed of Abraham? Paul tells us, 'If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and you are the heir of this promise' — to be delivered from the fear of death. Gal 3:29.

Then he goes on, 'Therefore, in all things [speaking about Christ], He had to be made like us, like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in the things pertaining to God, to make an appeasement [or a propitiation or an atonement] for the sins of the people.' Verse 18: 'For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are

tempted.' This is the whole focus here of Hebrews for us: aid those who are tempted here. Therefore, holy brethren, because He is aiding you, you can partake of the call that is coming to you from heaven to become a son of God (and for an eternity beyond this), without fear of what is happening as you cross over from this mortal to the immortal stage of our existence.

I am going to read my notes to you now. I will read now and that will take us five minutes. I will stop here and there to focus you with me, to make sure you are getting this basic point. Note, I have already stated it. How many have heard me so far — what the Scripture is {saying}? I am going to rephrase it and state it in my own words to you.

The fear of death is the weapon that Satan uses against mankind to keep them in bondage to sin. Satan, speaking to God about Job, asked for permission from God to make him sick, so that he would fear for his life. His proposition was that Job would give up everything that he had to save his own life. Satan said to God, 'Skin for skin'. What he meant by that was Job will negotiate through trading, and he will also use the Law or anything to survive. That is what he is accusing. He is saying, 'Job is not what you say he is.' That is what Satan is accusing Job of. What he is trying to do is impugn God over God's statement of what He said about Job. Here is God bragging about a man and Satan is bragging back against God. 'I can do anything with a man with the fear of death, and I am going to make you look stupid, God.' That is what Satan is saying to God. 'You are not omnipotent; you are not all wise; you are not all knowing.' That is what the book of Job is all about.

So Satan said to God, 'Skin for skin.' By the way, Job later on said, 'Though *after* my skin ...'. What he meant by this is: after he had died (or after death has done its worst to me), I will survive it through resurrection. That was his own response. 'I will survive death

through resurrection.' He did that because the anointing sat upon him on the ash heap while he was scraping his boils. He was illuminated to know this. That is getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Even 'skin for skin'; Job said 'after my skin...' Satan is really copping it from every angle here. As he is getting 'egg on his face' (but I am not sure Satan knows what egg on the face would be), but anyway, we will let that one rest.

He said, 'All that a man has, he will give for his life.' That is what Satan said to God about Job and about all men. 'All that a man has, he will give for his life.' He claimed that Job would even become bitter at God. He said, 'I will poke this bloke so hard, he will become bitter at You. He will become bitter at You because of the injustice that he has suffered. Then he will curse God — he will curse You.' Job of course, with the help of the Holy Spirit, did not sin in this manner.

Job's wife also was sucked into the plot and, in her despair, provoked him, telling him that there was no point to him holding on to the integrity of his faith in God. She is saying, 'Give up on Him.' Even in the marriage there is trouble. 'Just give up on Him. No point hanging onto this stuff. Your religion is not working for you.' That is what she is saying to her husband, that he should give up. Then she suggested by this (because she actually said it), that he should give up and curse God. By that, she meant by no longer maintaining his faith and trust in God and then die. That is what his wife said to him. He is really under the pump, isn't he? Job's response to his wife was, 'Shall we indeed accept good from God and shall we not also accept adversity? In all this, Job did not sin with his lips.' Job 2.

As we read earlier from the book of Hebrews, Paul tells us that Jesus became a mortal person just like us. He then overcame the fear of dying and death by overcoming death. Now remember, Jesus Himself was faced with the fear of death as a mortal man. He

then overcame the fear of dying and death by overcoming death. How did He do this? He did this by believing that God would deliver Him from eternal death as He obediently laid down His life for us – to die our mortal and eternal death. He is the only One that could have died such a death, and He obediently did this.

Christ was tempted as Job was by the fear of death. The Scripture is clear on that. As the pains of hell took hold upon Him in His dying hours upon the cross, He was sustained by the Spirit of God each moment of this dying event as He trusted in God. His death was an eternal punishment on our behalf. His was an almighty and horrendous death that befell Christ on our behalf – all for ourselves. By the power of Eternal Spirit, Christ suffered an ageless age of years. Now hear this: he suffered an ageless age of years in those hours. He did this by Eternal Spirit. There was an eternal dimension that happened on the cross – an ageless age of years, countless and interminable, and [He] emerged the other side of eternity without sin, having borne the eternal judgement of sin, and having exhausted every alternative to the full measure of perfection that God is. That is what sin is – some alternative to the full perfection of God. He exhausted it all by the power of Eternal Spirit. Every alternative to the full measure of perfection that God is, and also every rebellious thought. He cast down every imagination, every rebellious thought or power that could ever rise up against God. He vanquished it all. All darkness gone. He then emerged by resurrection. I will go again.

He exhausted every alternative to the full measure of the perfection that God is and also every rebellious thought or power that could ever rise up against God. All of this He vanquished; all darkness gone. By this means, He destroyed the devil and his power. He did it through death and He destroyed him that

had the power of death – that is the devil. That is what we read.

Paul further tells us that Christ died this death for us so that He could release us from the fear of death. Christ through His resurrection has demonstrated that death has no power over us. It has no substance, for it was misappropriated by Satan, and its power has been taken from him and has been destroyed. And of course, 2 Timothy 1 verse 10 states that when He rose from the dead, He had abolished it and brought immortality to light through the gospel.

The Spirit then is illuminating that to us. Now we think, ‘Oh well, that is amazing. If we are illuminated to that, then we will be free from the fear of death.’ We have preached that many times. I am going to take you one more step. I am going to take you beyond this now, and make you think with me. Think with me in these next three paragraphs. I want you to meditate on this because it needs further unpacking.

The message of the gospel is that Christ came and died for us to give to us His life. His life is resurrection life that lifts us out of death. Those who believe this message, which has been sent to us by God, are then called children of Abraham. That is normally where we would finish; right there; our funeral messages. How many would say, ‘Great! Glad to hear what you have said.’ But there is more now – more than this.

I want you to come with me now to ‘the more than this’. Christ now gives aid to us by delivering us from the fear of death. This fear provokes us to sin by motivating us to selfish, self-centred behaviour for survival at the expense of God and others. Stop again and have a look at yourself and the other law that Satan fathered in us. That is what I am talking about. At the bottom of everybody’s being is the fear of death. What is this fear? What does this do to you? That fear is actually fear in you that provokes you to sin. If we can deal with the fear, we can then

begin to deal with the sin. It is the sin that brings us under condemnation and fear. This fear provokes us to sin by motivating us to selfish, self-centred behaviour for survival at the expense of God and others. This activity is sin. I have just defined what sin is for you – where it comes from. Christ releases us from the fear of death by giving to us the power and capacity to begin to overcome our fear that drives our self-centredness. I will say it again. Christ releases us from the fear of death by giving to us the power and capacity to begin to overcome our fear that drives our self-centredness. This fear-driven selfishness is called in Scripture one word – ‘temptation’. I just redefined it. That word temptation means the fear-driven, selfish motivation within us is called temptation, and when we yield to this temptation, our yielding is sin, as the old hymn writer wrote. Christ comes to us in the distress of our temptation. That is our fear, our anxiety. Are you an anxious person driven by anxiety? We all are to some measure or another. Christ comes to us in the distress of our temptation, gives aid to us because He is our great High Priest.

The very priesthood of God is to address this question of our fear of death. He comes to our aid and how does He come? He comes as a priest, our great High Priest. A priest is someone who has suffered the same temptation that we suffer and has overcome it. That is what Christ did – not only as the suffering *Lamb* of God; He did it as the suffering *Priest* of God. That is the big lesson (or message) of the book of Hebrews. Christ the suffering High Priest.

A priest is someone who has suffered the same temptation that we suffer and has overcome it. He therefore is able to give aid to those who suffer temptation, enabling them to overcome sin. That word in Scripture means not walking *sinless* but walking *blameless*. That is one of the next things that Christ said to Abraham, ‘Walk before Me and

be blameless.’ The Lord is saying that to you. You can walk before God and be blameless. You have begun now to overcome your fear of death. Therefore, you are able to begin to deal with the survival mechanisms that cause you to sin and be selfish and self-centred. You can let go there and you can find Christ is blessing you with the beatitude. You take no thought; you are not afraid anymore on how you will live. The Lord is your Shepherd.

He is therefore able to give aid to those who suffer temptation, enabling them to overcome sin. Christ overcame temptation to sin by the power of God. The Holy Spirit strengthened Christ with the power of Eternal Spirit. Christ is giving to us this same power so that we can live by the grace of God. As we live this way, we are no longer motivated by the fear of death.

We in faith now, take hold of the call. That was the next verse: you are now partaking of the heavenly call. We now then partake of the heavenly call. We in faith now take hold of the call that comes to us from heaven. That call came to Bruce from heaven. It called him to come up to heaven.

We now in faith take hold of the call that comes to us from heaven to believe to become sons of God. Abraham believed that God would give aid to him and his descendants to overcome temptation to sin and to walk in obedience to the word of God and then learn the obedience that God had for them; a lot more to unpack on that. Thank you for your attention.