

Distinct but Inseparable Series, No. 10

“Peace and Fear”

1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Corinthians 13:5-6; 2 Timothy 1:8-13; 4:6-8 Revelation 3:14-16

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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

In last week's installment in this series of sermons on matched pairs of biblical truth, we considered love and hate, two very different states of mind and heart but essential to hold together in the Christian mind and life. And today we have a somewhat similar pair, peace and fear. I had a great many texts to choose from and could have limited myself to but one text for each of the truths in this matched set but wanted to give you something of an impression of how often and in how many different ways we encounter these two different realities in the teaching of the Bible.

These texts have long produced and seem calculated to produce two very different inner states or conditions; two minds or hearts. In the one case there is uncertainty, disquiet, concern, even fear. In the other there is happy confidence, assurance, and a deep sense of security. And what makes this so interesting and so important is that those states occur *in the same heart, in the same believing heart*. Indeed, these very different states or conditions can jostle with one another *in the same heart at the same time*.

I could have chosen a different set of texts, texts that also reflect either unease and fear or peace and confidence. But in that case the matter at issue would not be oneself, would not concern the individual believer's own soul, but rather his or her concern or confidence in the welfare of someone else or of the church as a whole.

I just finished a new intellectual biography of John Owen, the prince of 17th century Puritan theologians, by an English scholar by the name of Crawford Gribben. *What a great name!* The subtitle of Gribben's study is: *Experiences of Defeat*. Owen had a lot to fear during his life and more often than not he was worried by the prospects he saw for the life of the church and the life of his country. He was a significant figure in the English civil war and the twenty years of the Commonwealth in the middle of the 17th century – a period of English history that started well and finished badly – all of which came to nothing when Cromwell died, and Charles II was restored to the throne. Owen, so much an insider during the Commonwealth, was then made an outsider by the Act of Uniformity which deprived him and some 2,000 other English ministers of their employment. By the end of his life he was despairing of English Christianity and worried that the Reformation was in great danger of being overturned entirely.

Now Owen was a Calvinist. He knew that God was in control, that the gates of hell would never ultimately prevail over the church of Christ, but he cared about the church, the church he knew, the church he had fought for and served, and she was struggling as he came to the end of his life. It was not impossible that it would soon once again be illegal to be a Protestant. More than that, in such times of persecution one has reason to worry whether people will remain faithful to Christ and the gospel. Clearly there was nothing wrong with worry and fear such as that. Love for God, love for others, love for the church must mean worry and fear for Christians. When God's name is being reviled, when the souls of others we love are troubled or in danger, when

the church is beset by her enemies, if we are not worried it would be evidence that we do not care.

Jeremiah worried all his life about the people of God. His was not a heart at peace! He wanted so much for them to be restored to true faith and to the love of God and saw them instead drifting further and further from the Lord and as a result suffering more and more of the Lord's punishments.

...my eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

That kind of sadness, worry, and fear is entirely appropriate, whether we are worried about the soul of a loved one or about a friend who seems impervious to the gospel, or about the church in an age increasingly hostile to her convictions. Christians are and can be worried or afraid for many other things than their own personal welfare! And in this sad and evil world there is a lot to worry about! *But Christians are worried or afraid even as they rest in the confidence that the Judge of all the earth will do right.*

But the texts that I chose to read all concern the matter of *one's own* assurance of salvation. And taken together they amount to a startling juxtaposition of contrary states of mind and heart. If there were a man, or so we think, whose salvation was beyond doubt; if there were a Christian who could worry about everything else but his own salvation, that man was the Apostle Paul! He had been given a sight of the Savior in his glory and heard his voice speaking from the sky. His life had been as dramatically and suddenly transformed by the Spirit of God as any life in human history. He had later had a vision of heaven itself, so wonderful and powerful that he was forbidden to attempt to describe it to others. He had been given, at least during the middle part of his ministry, power to perform miracles of healing in Christ's name. He had witnessed Christ's power up close and personal on any number of occasions. And yet here he says – *I have put these words in the front of my own Bible* – “I beat my body...lest having preached to others I myself be disqualified for the prize.” Remarkable! Paul was not a man *ever to take his own salvation for granted*. Later, in 2 Cor. 5, after reminding his readers that he and they together will have to give answer to the Lord on the Great Day for the lives they have lived – the good they have done and the bad as well – and receive from him what is due for that behavior, he immediately continues, “Knowing, therefore, *the fear* of the Lord, we persuade others...” Paul was afraid that if he failed to do his duty and fulfill his calling, he would pay the price for that. *It was Paul who taught us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. In other words, to do what he did!*

But, then, in 2 Timothy 1 and 4 we hear the note of triumphant certainty from the same Apostle Paul, a note we have heard throughout his letters to be sure. No possibility here that that he had not been given God's grace, that he was not righteous before God in the righteousness of Christ, that he had not lived a Christian life, or that he was not going to heaven. He knew that he was safe *in Christ* even though he had from time to time reckoned with the fact that it might not be so.

And then finally we read one of a great many texts warning those whom Amos describes as “at ease in Zion.” These are Christians by their own profession. If you could have asked them

whether they believed in Jesus, they would certainly have said “Yes.” They were church-going people. There were other features of their lives that marked them out as belonging to the Christian church. But here is the Lord warning them that he is about to reject them and depart from them. If they failed to repent, they would be among that number Jesus described in his Sermon on the Mount who called him Lord and even did things in his service but to whom he would say on the Day of Judgment, “Depart from me, I never knew you.”

As you know, I could have multiplied texts on both sides of this dialectic of fear and peace, of worry and confidence, of unease and cheerful unconcern. And what is true in Holy Scripture has, as it always will, proved true in the life of the church ever since. These two states of mind and heart have jostled with one another in every Christian heart, or they should have.

Take any great Christian you know something about and you will find, the more you dig into his or her life that, like the Apostle Paul, they were both fearful and confident, uneasy and at peace about their souls. Think about this now. If you take with any seriousness the warnings we find in the Bible and in the teaching of the Lord Jesus himself, his warning that there are many who think themselves saved who are not; I say, if you take seriously his words that *many* not a few, but *many* will say to him, “Lord, Lord,” to whom he will reply, “Depart from me I never knew you!” *how is it possible that you would not worry from time to time* that you might be numbered among those who all their lives deluded themselves into thinking they were saved when they were not?

But, at the same time, how can anyone take seriously the gospel of Jesus Christ, his many and exceeding great promises to those who trust in him, and how can someone desire to love him deeply and serve him faithfully, and not believe that he or she is saved and bound for heaven? “I write these things to you brethren,” John said, “that you may *know* that you have eternal life!” John expected us to *know* that we are saved!

But, as we all know, between fear and confidence lies our sin, our poverty of faith, hope, and love. We believe – we really do – but we know only too well how often we have to cry out to God, “Lord, help my unbelief.” We desire to live a holy life – we really do hunger and thirst for righteousness – but all along the way we sin against God and man and fail repeatedly to walk worthy of the grace we have received.

And so it is; fear and assurance, a nagging unease and a confident hope are both found in our hearts, from time to time more of the one than the other, but sometimes, mysteriously, both in our hearts at the same time. A man who knew a great deal about the juxtaposition of peace and fear in the same human heart was William Cowper, the English poet and hymn writer, and not just because he struggled with depression as many did in this day and as many do today. Cowper was a man who took the Bible and salvation seriously!

I plant my foot upon this ground of trust,
And silence every fear with – God is just.
But if perchance, on some dull drizzling day,
A thought intrude, that says, or seems to say,
If thus the important cause is to be tried,

Suppose the beam should dip on the wrong side;
 I soon recover from these needless frights,
 And – God is merciful – sets all to rights.

In other words, we vacillate between counting on God's justice and God's mercy. It may be that we find comfort in God's justice, but, Cowper admitted, sometimes God's justice is the cause of our concern. What if God's justice is precisely our problem? Such fear is understandable. We could relax in our uninterrupted confidence in God's love, except for the fact that the Bible says so often and in so many ways that many who think they are saved are not. Many will be shocked to discover that they are to be condemned in the judgment of God and shut out of the wedding banquet.

That fact, that there are many who are deceived about their spiritual state, one would think, makes a certain measure of fear or unease inevitable in a serious Christian life. If a person is never troubled by doubts about the integrity of his faith (given every Christian's constant failures of faith), if a person never has a dark night of worry about whether he or she is really in, safely in; if he or she never feels a shudder going up and down the spine at the terrifying thought that the Lord's, "Depart from me, I never knew you" might be spoken to him or to her, and that he or she might hear those words when it is too late to do anything about them – the theme of the Lord's solemn parables spoken at the very end of his ministry and recorded for us in Matthew 25 – I say, if there is no fear in a Christian's heart, can he or she be taking the Bible seriously? *Eternal life is nothing to take for granted!*

Near the beginning of my ministry here we instituted an annual program of the visitation of the congregation by the elders. The congregation was much smaller then and the congregation could be visited, family by family, in a few weeks. It was a way of taking the spiritual temperature of the congregation and of creating an opportunity for all of us to think about some biblical teaching at the same time. The subject we chose for the very first visitation was the assurance of salvation. How do you know that you are saved? What makes you sure of your place in heaven?

In those days the congregation included people who, I had every reason to believe were genuine followers of Jesus Christ and people about whose spiritual state I had grave doubts. But more often than not the responses we got to our questions were appalling. Most of our folk couldn't answer the question with anything remotely resembling a biblical argument. They were taking for granted their answer to the most important question in human life. They didn't seem to have thought about it. Many of them, it appeared, had never once worried that they might be among the lukewarm whom the Lord would spit out of his mouth.

I will tell you frankly that I think the matter of the assurance of one's salvation is one of the most difficult questions of spiritual theology. It is complicated by the very foundations of assurance that we are given in Holy Scripture. Generally, we are taught to think of assurance of salvation resting on a three-legged stool: 1) the promises of God and the triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death, 2) the testimony or witness of the Holy Spirit to our hearts, and 3) the transformation of our lives by God's grace and power. But every one of those foundations is problematic. I believe in the promises of God and the triumph of Christ; I believe the good news; but do I really? Can I really say that I believe in them when I so often act as if they were not true

and as if God would not be faithful to them? I have felt in my heart the presence of God and received in my soul the witness of the Holy Spirit, but then the Bible says that folk who professed faith in Christ falsely also had such experiences. I know my life is different than it would be were I not a Christian, but I also know it isn't nearly as different as it ought to be. How can I know that it is *different enough*?

I remember reading a memoir of the life and ministry of Donald Macfarlane, a 20th century Scottish pastor of the old, deeper sort. Learned and gifted beyond the ordinary, but unusually humble; a deeply spiritual man whose world, life, and ministry were marked by and infused with a sense of the presence of the Lord and of his glory and grace. People loved him, his ministry was unusually effective, but his ministry was interrupted in the middle of it by a nervous breakdown brought on by Macfarlane's fear that his faith was spurious, that it wouldn't last, that he was kidding himself about being a genuine follower of Jesus Christ.

His case reminds us that, as is true in many dimensions of the Christian life and experience, different Christians struggle in different ways. There are, there always have been many Christians who are sure of their salvation and have solid reasons to be. There have also been many for whom assurance – a sense of peace with God – was a life-long struggle. People experience the grace of God in different measures and in different ways. This too is what we mean by “sovereign grace,” it is a grace that God gives to whom he wishes to give it, in the measure he wishes them to have it, and through the experiences of peace and struggle he has appointed for each of his children.

I don't suppose there is anyone that I have quoted to you more often through the years than John Duncan, unless it is Alexander Whyte. John Duncan, the famous “Rabbi” Duncan of 19th century Scottish Presbyterianism – the title a reflection of his massive learning of Jewish writings and traditions – was first an extraordinarily effective missionary to Jews in Hungary (one of his converts was Alfred Edersheim, the author of the classic *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*) – and then a professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at the seminary of the faithful and orthodox Presbyterians in Edinburgh in the middle of the 19th century. He had an uncanny gift for astute observation and for pithy summations of biblical truth.

He was once asked to lecture on the subject of the difference between justification and sanctification as understood by Reformed Christians and those same subjects as understood in Roman Catholicism. The lecture was a pugnacious defense of Reformed doctrine and what particularly galled John Duncan and provoked his anger was Rome's denial of the right of believers to be sure of their salvation already in this life, to have that peace and confidence that in the New Testament is part and parcel of living faith. However, Duncan himself struggled with doubts about his salvation all his life. The irony was that he was a master at removing the doubts of others but struggled to remove his own.

There were a great many in Scotland in his day who would have said that Duncan's own Christian life had inspired them to live a more committed life themselves and that by his example of godliness he had encouraged them to seek the same godliness for themselves. But the very things he said to others, the very things that others found so compelling in his own speech and life, he struggled to apply to his own case. Some of that, no doubt, was due to the bent or the

tendencies of his own distinct personality. But some of his doubt and fear was certainly due to the fact that, as one of his closest friends would later say of him:

“More than any man I ever knew, he trusted every word, revered every word, and loved every word in the book of God.” [*Just a Talker*, xxxiv]

Take the Bible seriously, take everything it says about faith and salvation seriously, and you will have doubts and fears about your own salvation at least from time to time. But, take the Bible seriously, really seriously, compare what it says about true faith and its spurious imitations and its description of the Christian life; consider the promises of God and the triumph of Jesus Christ; examine your own readiness to trust yourself to Christ’s work and not your own, and you will also rest and relax and rejoice in the confidence that he who began a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Now, once again, it is not at all difficult to see how essential it is to keep peace and fear, worry and happy confidence together in the Christian heart and life. A life without peace, without the confidence of faith, without the assurance of salvation will be, must be a life without the joy of the Lord, which is, the Bible says, our strength. A life without peace will never be as fruitful and useful a Christian life as it ought to be; nor will it commend the gospel to people as it should. In a world so full of fear and worry, a heart at peace is a powerful recommendation of the blessing of faith in Christ.

But, on the other hand, peace without fear, without concern for one’s soul and salvation will be, must be a life without true biblical seriousness about the stakes, about what salvation means, about the reality of divine judgment, about the wracking struggle with sin in a Christian’s life, and about the inevitable disappointments with oneself that all Christians must face in this life. *Without fear we are very likely to take our salvation for granted, as multitudes have done.*

We need both the fear and the peace. We need both the unease and the confidence. We need both the worry and the assurance of God’s love and Christ’s righteousness. And that is why the Bible speaks in ways both to worry us and to assure us. Taking all that it says seriously, means, as it has always meant that we will live in concern and at peace, sometimes more the one than the other, but best of all when we have both at the same time! If you ask how that is possible, I cannot tell you. I can only tell you that from the Apostle Paul to John Duncan to you and me this has been the life of God’s people and will be their life until Christ comes again!