

Title: Jesus is with us in times of fear

Object: Pictures of snakes and spiders

Scripture: **34** "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." (Isaiah 12:2)

Is anyone here afraid of snakes? How about the dark -- is anyone afraid of the dark? Are any of you ever afraid during a thunderstorm? Well, the fact is, we are all afraid of something. Even the rich and famous have their fears. Listen to a few of them.

FEAR OF FLYING: John Madden, a famous football coach and sports commentator, is so afraid of flying that he will only travel by bus. In fact, he is so afraid of flying that he bought his own bus. I read that the bus cost him one million dollars! I guess if you're afraid to fly, it helps if you can afford to buy your own bus.

FEAR OF CLOWNS: You have probably heard of Johnny Depp. He was the star of "Pirates of the Caribbean." You might be surprised to know that the sight of a clown makes this brave pirate shake in his boots! Yes, he is afraid of clowns.

FEAR OF HEIGHTS: Actor Liam Neeson is one of many people who share this fear. This is one Jedi knight that does not like flight scenes high up.

FEAR OF INSECTS: Do creepy crawly bugs scare you? Well, you are not alone. Actress Scarlett Johansson is afraid of cockroaches and singer Justin Timberlake is afraid of spiders.

Jesus dealt with fear also. One day Jesus was with His disciples in the temple. The disciples were commenting on how beautiful the temple was when Jesus began to tell them about some things that were going to happen. Jesus told them that the temple would one day be destroyed and that there would be wars, earthquakes, and people starving. He also told them that they were going to be hated and persecuted and even thrown into prison. Those are pretty scary things, aren't they? It would be understandable for the disciples to be afraid, but Jesus told them not to be afraid. He promised that He would be with them and that not a hair on their heads would be harmed if they put their trust in Him.

Jesus has also promised to help us when we are afraid. Every one is afraid of something, and fear can be a good thing, but we should not let our fears keep us from enjoying the life that Jesus wants us to have. After all, He has promised to help us when we are afraid.

Dear Jesus, we put our faith and trust in Your promise to be with us when we are afraid. Amen.

John 16:1-4

Persecution

I remember when I was first being exposed to the Gospel of Jesus, people presented the gospel in such favorable ways that one would think by accepting Jesus my life would become a wonderment of peace, love and joy. They were half right; spiritually we lose our sin and become a child of the eternal God and have the fullness of salvation and in this, there is wonderment of peace, love and joy. However, there is also a cost when one becomes a follower of Jesus. Jesus spoke of the character of those who become His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. Jesus said, **10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** (Matthew 5:10-12) Jesus is saying the normal expectation for one who follows Him is persecution.

I gave up my career to fulfill God’s calling for my life and I have never looked back. Joyce and I have experienced persecution for the name of Jesus. We have suffered at the hands of evil people and have been accused falsely. God has used these experiences and for me, I have grown spiritually, and God has used them to mold me into a better man. Not that going through these trials was fun, but they were necessary for God to give me the growth and experiences to be able to serve Him better and to serve His people. At times, I was not able to completely let go of myself and trust in God as I went through some of these trials – to my shame, but at least in retrospect I can rejoice and be glad and I now see what God was doing in my life. If I

am doing what God has called me to and live faithfully to Him – then I should expect persecution. If I am not experiencing persecution or spiritual warfare I ask myself, “Am I living faithfully to God’s calling in my life?” The more effectively we are living to honor Christ and share His gospel with the lost the more normal persecution and spiritual warfare will be part of our life. My beloved is there any persecution or spiritual warfare in your life? If not, you might want to consider, why not?

Christ calls us to leave anything in life that will take away from our commitment to live for Him. Jesus becomes our primary focus and then other aspects of life follow. Matthew records Jesus thoughts in chapter 10, beginning in verse 35, “**For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**” (Matthew 10:35-39) We cannot truly love our parents, spouse or children unless we have given ourselves to Christ and love Him first. Taking up the cross of Christ means to be living in His will; whether you are a teacher, scientist, plumber, missionary, pastor etc. This line of thinking reminds me of Jim Elliot a missionary to Ecuador who gave his life in 1956 at the age of 28 witnessing Christ to the lost. Jim said, “**He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.**” Both Jim and we possess the Holy Spirit enabling us to live for the glory of Christ even when to the world it appears impossible. We are mortal and we cannot keep our lives one day longer than God has ordained. But no matter what happens in a believer’s life we cannot lose eternity with God. Do not hold onto this life too dearly and make compromises in your faith. Jesus

teaches to be spiritually prepared enables us to better deal with the evil of this world. This is Jesus' message to us this morning as it was to the disciples. Jesus warned of the coming persecution in chapter 15 and now He returns to warn the disciples - to forewarn and forearm them.

Persecution Coming

Jesus says to the disciples beginning in verse 2, **"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you."** The message is clear, Jesus wants His followers to know of the coming persecution of Him by the world and all who follow Him. The world's hatred of Christ and His followers has waned and intensified throughout history. It appears to me we are entering a period of the hatred, rejection and persecution intensifying. Since we know that more Christians were martyred for their faith in the 20th century than all the centuries combined this is a sobering thought.

Jesus had spoken of the hatred of the world toward Him earlier in chapter 15. Look in your bibles at verses 18 and 19 of chapter 16, **"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."** This speaks of the general hatred the world will have towards Christians. Here in chapter 16 Jesus is not just repeating Himself but He is adding new dimension of what the world's hatred will be.

Persecution - Forewarned and Forearmed

Jesus now specifically says the world's hatred will include excommunication and murder. What is also startling is this is to come from religious people. Jesus is explaining this terrible coming persecution and hatred to prepare His followers so that, as verse 1 reads, to **"keep you from falling away."** Jesus' followers are not to be like the Jews wandering in the wilderness who continually bucked against Moses and God even though God did great signs and wonders before them. They are to stay true to Christ and their faith no matter what the world does to them. This is where the "rubber meets the road." My brothers and sisters are you ready? Are you and is our church preparing our children and ourselves for this difficult future? Hatred, excommunication and murder - they may be the cost of discipleship.

Persecution - Excommunication

Jesus tells his disciples and gathered followers they will suffer the penalty of excommunication. Verse 2 says, **"They will put you out of the synagogues."** The meaning of this is deeper than most people today perceive. It not only meant they would not be allowed into the synagogue to worship, but that they would be excommunication from the spiritual life of Israel; no worship, no sacrifices and not being able to hear the reading of the scriptures, which were read in the synagogues since the normal person had no other access to the scriptures.

It also meant as we read in Matthew just a few minutes ago, **"For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."** (Matthew 10:35-36) Believers in Christ would be considered dead to their families and the family was more than just blood relations, but the extended family of

the village. They would be considered worse than a pagan. If they were self-employed they would lose customers and if someone employed them they would lose their job. When they died they would be refused the right to an honorable burial. Jesus' warning here has massive consequences. It wasn't like it is today; just go to another church, move to another town and get another job. We were in a home fellowship Bible study and one of the women was Jewish by birth and a Jew in faith. She became a Christian. Her husband divorced her, her children removed themselves from her life, she did not have any relationship with her grandchildren and her family held a funeral for she was dead to them. Yet, she remained faithful. This story does have a happier outcome. After over 25 years her ex-husband contacted her and wanted to reestablish a relationship for he had come to faith in Christ. It is exciting to see what God is gradually restoring. She remains faithful and is leaving the rest up to the Lord. She is a true believer.

Today we see the growing separation of Christians from the secular society but also the growing separation of the true church of Christ and those who say they are Christian. Many churches are secularized and they too are beginning to persecute the true church. The false churches that are obviously not of Christ: Jehovah Witness, Mormons, many others and especially Islam are more openly attacking Christians and they do so with the blessing of both society and the secularized "Christian" churches. Persecution from the secular world we expect. Persecution from religious people and churches is more difficult, but this was the case for Jesus, the disciples, the early church and it is a major threat today.

My beloved, we are to be like Martin Luther. Martin felt the heavy burden of his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. We think of Luther as this stalwart man standing up to the corrupt church. However, the burden of

losing church community and family was difficult. Despite this, his faith was more important, his loyalty to Christ more dear. Like Jeremiah who stood before Judah of his day and declared it spiritually bankrupt and God's judgment was coming upon Judah and Jerusalem. So, too, Luther stood before men and declared the truth of Christ. The spiritual leadership and the government assaulted Jeremiah and Luther. Luther expressed well what would have been on Jeremiah's heart when he asked God, "Am I to stand up alone and preach against your people, your kingdom, your priest, and your Word? For that, of course, is where your name is; they have your Law, your temple, and both the spiritual and worldly government, ordained by you yourself. Who am I to oppose singlehandedly all that is God's? I would rather say that they are right, retract my preaching, or at least keep silent." For Christians to stand firm on the whole of the Bible comes with a cost and is painful because it brings persecution from within and without. But, even one person can change much when he is in the will of God and faithful to live for God's glory, history has shown us this.

America has a broad breath of churches claiming they are Christian. This prompts several questions we must ask. Who are God's ministers? Are they the professionally trained clergy? No. God's ministers are all who confess Christ and His work as the Bible presents them. The true church is composed of all who believe in the inerrancy and completeness of the Bible. By faith they are dedicated to live the scriptures. The Bible alone is our standard – Sola Scriptura! When we evaluate a church or a pastor or a person who claims to be Christian - the Bible is the standard for our judgment. We should not be swayed by how important the person is, how much money one has, how big of a following they have, how many books they have written or if they are a polished and an inspirational speaker. We should ask, "What are the doctrines they teach?" Many Americans evaluate the church by the music instead of the doctrine of

the Word. Many evaluate a church by the number of programs and the building complex instead of the doctrine of the Word. Christ's Church is made up of those who live what the Bible teaches without regard to social correctness or government legislation. Those who take such a stand will be strong in their faith and their churches will be strong, but make no mistake persecution will come.

The false work to excommunicate, persecute and push to the sidelines all who stand on the Word is what the world does, what the false churches do. Our job is to bring God's Word to the forefront and to live faithful to Christ. We are to trust God, who is in charge and has a purpose for all that He establishments and allows. Including persecution and death.

Persecution - Martyrdom

In the second half of verse 2 Jesus tells His followers they may be killed or more accurately murdered or martyred for their faith in Him. Obviously this is not what happens to the majority of believers. However, there have been and will be periods in history when persecution does result in large numbers of believers being murdered. We saw the extensive murdering of Christians by Jewish leaders and Saul, the Roman Emperors Decius, Diocletian, the Roman church during the Reformation, more recently by Hitler and now by Islamic dominated countries and ISIS. It appears things are heating up. It is interesting that the most intense persecution and greatest number of Christians murdered are perpetrated by religiously motivated people all claiming to serve God. Yet, true believers and followers, who serve the true God do not abuse other people. This is exactly what Jesus said in verse 2, **“the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”** Satan uses people's desires for power and to be right with God to abuse the people of God. How can these abusers believe

they serve God? Jesus answers this in verse 3, “they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.” They know not the true God and believe in false gods put forth by Satan for his evil purposes. Observe, does the person or institution claiming to serve God and serve His people with love and are concerned for their welfare in truth serve themselves, dominate and force other people? Even churches in America, are they to be self-serving, change the Bible to meet their own desires or are they to hold fast to the scriptures and considering others more worthy than themselves?

Persecution - Celebrate

How is it that Christians can celebrate, rejoice and have peace in the midst of persecution, abuse, and suffer even unto death as Jesus speaks of in the scriptures? I would like to attempt to answer this question in several ways.

First, persecution demonstrates to the Christian and to those in the world that the true Christian is identified with Christ who suffered, was murdered, who defeated death and rose to live eternally. This is the reason Bonheoffer was able to remain faithful and exhibit peace while in the Nazi concentration camp. Dietrich had eternal hope that his tormentors did not have. He was ready for heaven and they were destined for hell. He hoped for and prayed for their salvation. He lost nothing and gained everything at death and at death his persecutors lost everything.

I am known to have a temper. I can be both passionate and over-bearing at times. Yet, when faced with difficult times of persecution the Lord has given me calm to deal with the conflicts in ways that show a difference and have honored Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, not me. This is the power of the Holy Spirit in me and in Bonheoffer and many others. Like Stephen the Holy Spirit gives us the power to be

faithful. The end result is the glory of God, even though the outcome for each person is different – different for me and Bonheoffer and Stephen and you.

You see, believers are known by God and they know God, but they are not known by the world because the world does not know God and therefore, the world who hates God also hates believers. To be hated by the world is one mark that one belongs to God.

Second, Christians are able to rejoice in the midst of persecution because we know that there are not accidents but rather God has a purpose in everything. Jesus said in verse 1, **“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.”** Persecution will come, God has a purpose and Jesus is forewarning and forearming believers so they will not fall away from their faith. Jesus is saying I am warning you so your faith may endure during these times of persecution and more than endure, your faith will be strengthened.

Persecution grows us in practical holiness, for persecution strips away the unnecessary aspects of life, those things that take our focus off of Christ, and the result is we grow closer to Christ. Peter heard Jesus teach this concept, he experienced it in his own life and he saw it in other’s lives. Please turn in your bibles to 1 Peter chapter one. When Peter saw others suffering persecution he wrote them saying, beginning in verse 6, **“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation**

of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:6-9) Peter is comparing persecution to the crucible that purifies gold. God uses persecution to purify Christian’s lives into something more precious.

Consider that a Christian can rejoice in persecution because more than anything else in this fallen world it shows the supernatural power of God in a believer’s life. This is a great testimony to the unbelieving world and to individuals who do not know Christ and desperately need Him. If all is going well in your life and you rejoice, well then, even though it is a blessing, what is so remarkable about your rejoicing? But, on the other hand, if much is going wrong and you still rejoice, now that is remarkable before this lost world and people will take notice. Paul and Silas sang praises to God at midnight while in jail. The jailer, as well as other prisoners had never seen prisoners rejoice in the midst of beatings and imprisonment. Remember, the result, the jailer fell before Paul and asked what he must do to be saved. He had seen Jesus in Paul and Silas.

My beloved do people see Jesus in you?