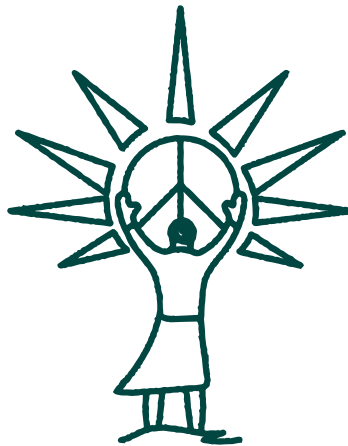


1517.

HIS GOSPEL IS PEACE

*The Advent
Of Christ
& The End
Of Fear*



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HIS GOSPEL IS PEACE

THE ADVENT OF CHRIST
AND THE END OF FEAR



1517 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Written and edited by 1517

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INTRODUCTION

To be human is to understand what it means to fear. The smallest child is afraid when the lights turn off at night. The most famous rock star is driven by fear of rejection from their adoring fans. Fear keeps us from the Thanksgiving dinner table (or perhaps fuels the shouting match after the pumpkin pie is served). Fear causes us to stockpile our houses with toilet paper and water bottles “just in case.” Fear elevates and prolongs our anxiety or our shame as we choose to avoid addressing our mistakes - and the mistakes of others - out of concern that we’ll only make things worse.

The season of Advent helps us long for a different reality: one ruled by peace rather than fear. For the Son of God was born into our tribulation, despair, and fear not just to comfort us but to bring about an end to whatever terrifies us most.

This is why the psalmist can assert, “We will not fear, though the earth gives way.”

It’s why one of Jesus’ common refrains is “Fear not.”

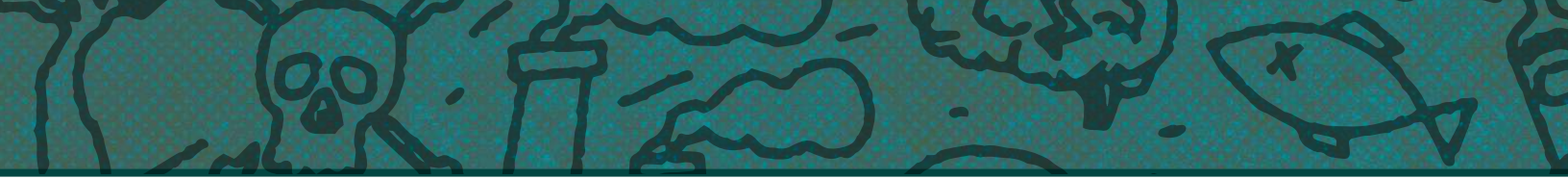
It’s why Paul proclaims that the peace of God guards and rules over the hearts of his people.

The Prince of Peace comes to live for us, die for us, and rise for us. In doing so, he overcomes death itself, cleanses us of our sin, defeats the evil one, and makes us righteous. Through faith in our Savior, born Immanuel, we cannot be rejected, we have nothing to be ashamed of, and we have the promise of life everlasting. In Christ alone, fear is exchanged for peace.

We pray, whether you use this as a personal devotional or in a group setting, that these Scripture passages and reflections on the good news of God's peace strengthen your faith in the only one who can answer our dread, the one who willingly entered a fearful and terrified world as an innocent and helpless babe and by which the angels proclaimed: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you are a pastor and would like to use our Advent and Christmas Sermon Series on *His Gospel is Peace* in addition to this personal study, you can download it at 1517.org/advent.




Joshua 1:9

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous.
Do not be frightened; and do not be dismayed, for the
Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened; and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

People talk a lot about manifesting these days: manifest your best life. Set your mind against fear, and you’ll arrive at peace. Clear your head, meditate with consistency, wait patiently, and your hopes will fulfill themselves. Unfortunately, Joshua 1:9 is often read in manifestation mode. Just like the season of Advent, we take God’s commandment to be courageous as something to muster up rather than something revealed to us. So we pull out our Christmas trees, we decorate the house, we feign cheer and good tidings, just as we attempt to manifest our own courage.

But God isn’t commanding Joshua to pull courage from thin air. Instead, the courage God commands—and the end of fear—is based on the surety of the promises that precede it:

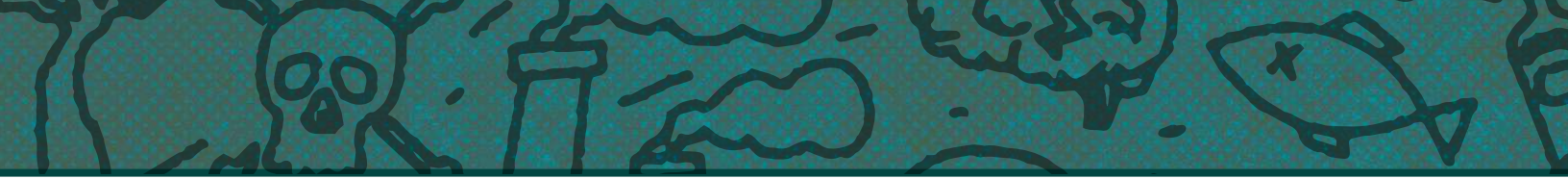


Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you (Josh. 1:3-6).

This isn't the first time God has made this promise: "Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you." From the very beginning, despite their rebellion and their fear, God has been with his people. He has sought them out (Gen. 3:9), he has remembered them (Gen. 8:1), he has blessed them (Gen. 12:1-3), he has delivered them from slavery, and he has gone before them (Deut. 31:3).

In the midst of your uncertainty, your terror, and the fight that is life, God does the same for you as he did for Joshua: he does not leave you, nor does he forsake you. He doesn't ask you to be courageous on your own. In this season of Advent, you are reminded that through a baby born in a manger, fear no longer has any power; you are his, and his strength is yours.

Heavenly Father,
remind me that no matter what battle I face,
you will never leave me nor forsake me.
Amen.



Psalm 46:1-3

God is our refuge and strength, a very-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way, Though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling

As we pass through the various stages of life, the phrase, “You are in trouble,” carries a different weight. As children, we fear being “in trouble” with our parents or a teacher. Getting “in trouble” is an ongoing temptation during our teenage years. Then, into our twenties, thirties, forties, and beyond, being “in trouble” can mean financial or marriage woes, depression or addiction, along with a lengthy list of other unwelcome experiences in which trouble is a very present reality.

What we need, daily and desperately, is a “very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). It sounds a bit awkward in English, but the Hebrew reads something like this: “a help in tight times he is greatly to be found.” In tight times, when the proverbial walls are closing in, we need that help that is “greatly to be found.” It is found, the psalm says, in “God [who] is our refuge and strength” (46:1).

Here’s the rub, though: God is not really “the Answer” we are looking for. Give us a strategy. Give us a to-do list. Give us a workout routine, yoga postures, breathing ex-



ercises, something, anything that *we can do* to deal with our troubles. But as helpful or unhelpful as some of those strategies may be, the psalmist says, “No. God is our refuge. God is our strength.”

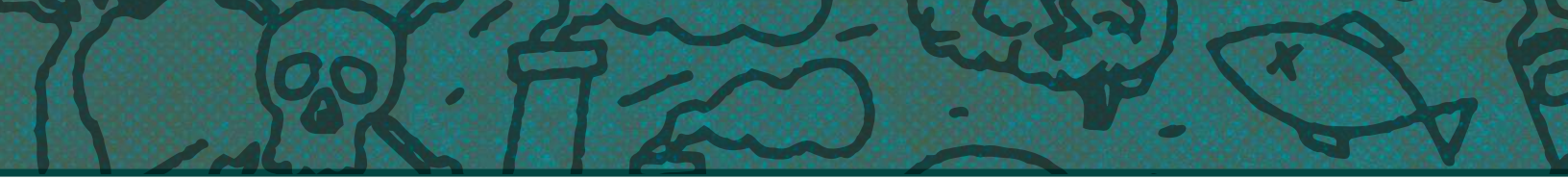
His strength comes to us as a lowly babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes. His refuge is given to us in his weakness.

In Christ alone, the refuge of the troubled, the strength of the weary, we can say, “Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling” (46:2-3). We will not fear not because of *something in us* but because of *someone for us*. When walls are closing in, the outstretched arms of the cross stop them. When we are full of trembling, inside and outside, the empty tomb of our risen Lord of life preaches to us that no matter what, in Jesus, who came to us and who we now wait for again, all shall be well.

Because Jesus is our mighty fortress, “a helper who can always be found in times of trouble” (EHV), rather than cowering in fear, we stand and lift up our heads because we are the beloved children of God.

Heavenly Father,
*when trouble seeks to overwhelm us, send your Spirit
to carry us into Christ, our refuge and strength.*

Amen.




Psalm 112:6-8

For the righteous will never be moved; he will be
remembered forever. He is not afraid of bad news; his
heart is firm, trusting in the Lord. His heart is steady;
he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph
on his adversaries.

Psalm 112 can't properly be understood apart from Psalm 111. That's often the case in Scripture, but it's especially true here because Psalms 111 and 112 form an acrostic based on the Hebrew alphabet. They are literally connected by letters.

Psalm 111 is about God's faithfulness. Martin Luther cherished it and encouraged Christians to do the same. God is a God of his word. He will do what he says. His promise is sure. This is the foundation on which Psalm 112 builds.

Psalm 112 shifts our focus. It tells us about the person who trusts in the Lord, who holds God to his promises. This person is blessed. Nothing in the world compares to having God in his promises, which are fully embodied in his incarnate Son, Jesus, born of a virgin, and who lived, died, and rose for us. God's promise--Jesus--is secure, and therefore the person who trusts in him is, too.



“In the end, it will all be good. And if it isn’t good, it isn’t the end,” is a phrase that catches the spirit of our verses. Through trust in the God who is unmoved concerning what he has sworn, the righteous are unmoved as well. They are steady. And they will triumph in the end, because they are God’s and God always wins in the end. God never forgets, he loves to remember the righteous, and so the righteous are never forgotten.

“

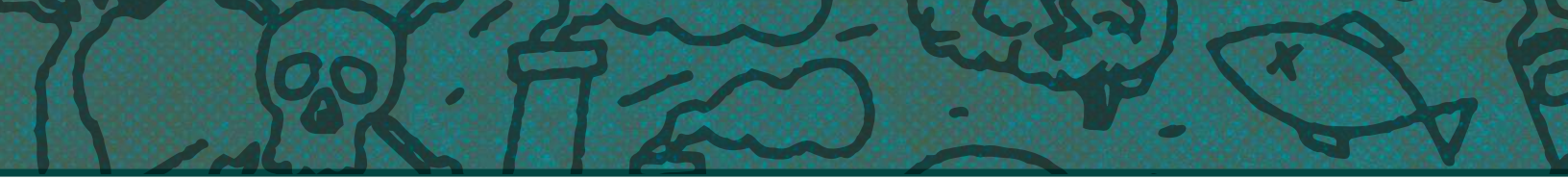
**TAKE HEART. KNOW YOUR GOD.
KNOW THAT HE REMEMBERS YOU.**

Your God is the God of Psalm 111. Psalm 112 describes you because it describes Christ, in whom your life is hidden through faith, in whom you now have life and live. The goal is not to make Psalm 112 true of you. The point is to realize Psalm 112 is already true of you. We don’t actualize these words. We get used to them. So take heart. Know your God. Know that he remembers you. He graciously sees you, and in him you will see the end, which will be good, and if it isn’t good, it’s not the end yet.

Lord Jesus,

*you made God known to us by becoming man, as the
incarnate Messiah. Grant that, in clinging to you, we
may be unmoved and steady, even as you are,
because we are yours.*

Amen.




Isaiah 8:12-13

Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls
conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in
dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy.
Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

The goal of the Christian life is not to live fearlessly. Rather, it is to have the right kind of fear.

We live in a world rife with fear. The very air we breathe is thick with it. Everywhere we look, we hear people crying, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” It is the cry of the world, telling us that the universe will come crashing down if our preferred political candidate loses the race. It is the cry of our hearts, insisting that we won’t be okay if our social media post doesn’t perform well enough. It is the cry of the devil, whispering the toxic lie that our failures disqualify us from God’s love. Fear is everywhere: fear of judgment, fear of death, fear of failure, fear of war, fear of environmental disaster, fear of the past, fear of the future, fear of rejection. The list goes on.

The Christian response most often given to this problem is simple: Choose faith over fear. The problem, though, is that—left to our own devices—we’ll always choose fear



over faith. Our default setting is not dependence but independence. In other words, faith does not come naturally. Since the fall, our hearts are hard-wired to distrust God. There's a reason "Fear Not" is one of the most common phrases in all of Scripture. Even the bravest Christian warrior will lose courage in the face of an enemy big and scary enough: enemies like sin, death, and the devil.

Bravery, then, is not the solution. So what is?

The prophet Isaiah says, "Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy; he is the one you are to fear..." (Isa. 8:12-13a). God is reassuring his prophet that the fears infecting the people hold no staying power because God is bigger and stronger than them. Moreover, in Jesus Christ, the one who has tied up the strong man (Matt. 12: 29), God has demonstrated his solidarity with us. Our fears died with Jesus at the cross. He is for us, and "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31b).

Gracious Heavenly Father,

*forgive me when I fear the wrong things. Teach me to love
and trust you most of all, so that the fear of the Lord would
expel the lesser anxieties that daily plague me.*

Amen.




Isaiah 9:6-7

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his
name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his
government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne
of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and
forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The prophet Isaiah manages to squeeze into two verses the immeasurable hope of the world. The hope of peace? Yes. The hope of conquering fear? Yes. The hope of justice and righteousness? Yes. This hope of all people, of all times, everywhere is riding on the shoulders of a single man. This is not about a movement or institution. We are not banking on a revolutionary cause or governmental program. All eyes are on a child, a Son, who is born for us and given the name Jesus.

He is a Wonderful Counselor who, even as a twelve-year-old, amazed the teachers of the law with this understanding (Luke 2:47) and, as an adult, was the walking incarnation of wisdom. He is the Mighty God, fully divine with his Father, who “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). He is the Ever-



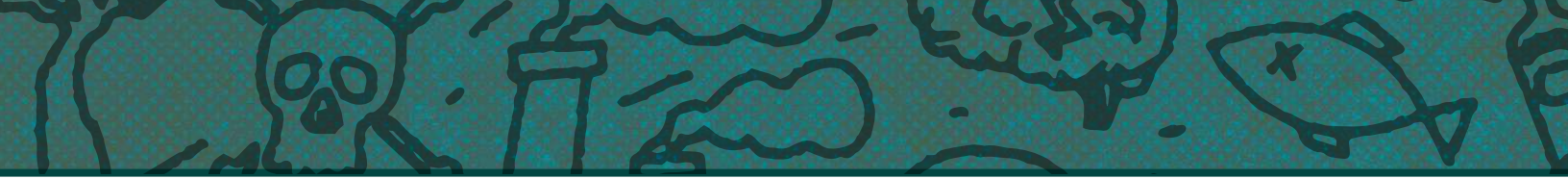
lasting Father in that he, with paternal love, beckons us to come to him, to receive from him compassion, forgiveness, and a place in the family of God. He is the Prince of Peace, who gives us peace “not as the world gives” (John 14:27), but a peace that “surpasses all understanding,” which guards our hearts and minds against all assaults from forces of evil (Phil. 4:8).

Isaiah says this regal child will sit “on the throne of David,” a fact confirmed when the angel Gabriel said to Mary that her child “will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32-33). Gabriel adds, “Of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:33), echoing what Isaiah had already said, “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end” (Isa. 9:7).

In Christ, we are made part of this kingdom, baptized into its heavenly citizenry. He reigns over us in love. His throne is one of grace. All our hopes are in him, and in him, all our hopes are sure and certain.

O Prince of Peace and Mighty God,
*the hope of all the ends of the earth, place over us your
shield of love, shelter us from every danger, and keep us
ever faithful as citizens of your kingdom of mercy.*

Amen.



Isaiah 26:3

You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.

Peace is a fleeting thing in this life. Every day, we are faced with events and circumstances that attack the very notion that everything is right. Peace is here one moment and gone the next. It feels neither perfect nor durable. And even if you manage to grab some semblance of peace for a short time, there is the looming reality that peace in this life is finite because life itself is finite. Death is coming for all of us. How, then, can we ever have perfect peace?

To understand what the Prophet Isaiah is saying in 26:3, you must go back to chapter 25, verses 8 and 9: “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us” (Isa. 25:8-9).



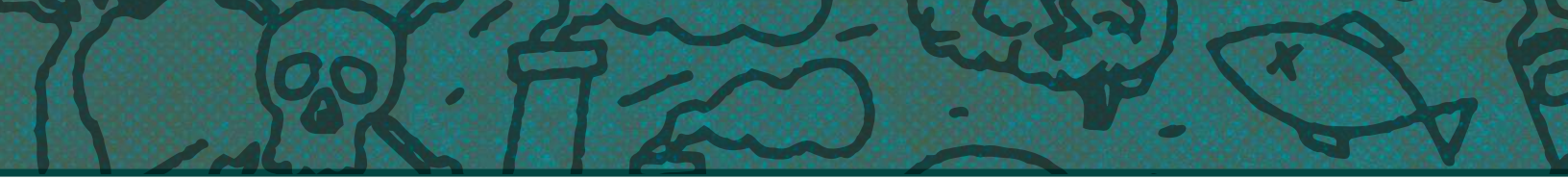
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**THE PERFECT PEACE
ISAIAH IS TALKING
ABOUT COMES FROM
OUTSIDE YOURSELF.**

The perfect peace Isaiah is talking about comes from outside yourself. It comes from hearing the promise that God has swallowed up death, taken away all your sins, and saved you. It is a gospel peace. It is a gift given to you. This peace does hide itself when life is hard or when temptation wins. This peace has promised never to leave nor forsake you. This peace is a person. This peace was born in Bethlehem. This peace is Jesus Christ, the perfect one, and your perfect peace.

Heavenly Father,
*thank you for the peace that comes only from the work
of your Son and help me to trust in all that you have
promised me in him.*

Amen.




Matthew 8:26

And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.

For a seasoned storm-chaser to fear for their life, the storm must be bad indeed. This was the case with the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. These experienced fishermen knew the water like the back of their hands, or at least they thought they did. But when evening came, the *sharkia* (Arabic for “shark”) winds for which Galilee is notorious swooped down and overwhelmed the little boat. They were caught in its jaws. At the mercy of the waves, the disciples’ fight-or-flight response kicked in, and they were tempted to give in to their most primal fears.

Fear works like this. It swoops in unexpectedly, threatening to undermine the objective truths of God’s promises. Caught in the jaws of our fears, our lizard brains kick in, and we are tempted to believe the most heinous of lies. “I may as well despair.” “God doesn’t love me.” “This storm is bigger and stronger than Jesus.” Like the disciples, we are brought to the end of ourselves and the only words we can muster are a paltry: “Save us, Lord; we are perishing” (v. 25). Yet, mercifully, these words are enough.



Jesus' response to his disciples' fears was immediate: "And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm." The disciples were saved not because of their great faith but despite their lack of it. In fact, it was in their darkest hour that help arrived. His word, as always, proved to be truer and stronger than their anxieties. He rebuked the wind and the waves, casting the fear far from their hearts with his authoritative word.

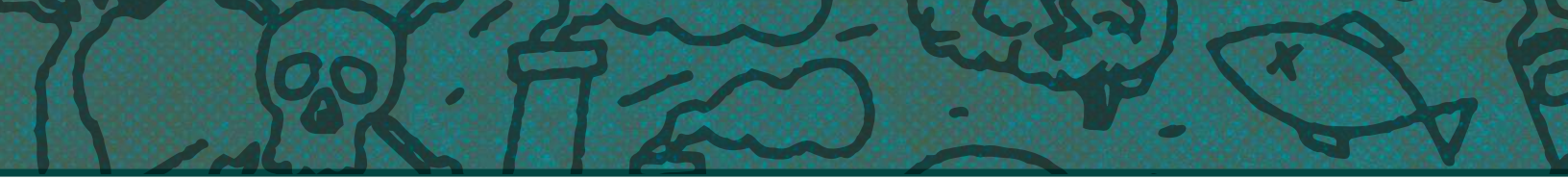
When we were caught in the storm of our sin, God sent a manger-king to rescue us. This Word-made-flesh came in the darkest hour of night when all hope seemed lost: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone" (Isa. 9:2).

Jesus casts out the night in and around us, curb-stomps the monsters, and crushes the head of Satan. Caught in the grip of his grace, we are freed from the jaws of despair.

Jesus,

*when sin threatens to overwhelm me, teach
me to pray like the disciples: "Save me, Lord;
I am perishing."*

Amen.




Matthew 17:6-8

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

On the mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus, in all God’s glory, spoke with Moses and Elijah as three of his disciples stood nearby. Like them, he was a prophet, but unlike them, he was also the message they proclaimed--the Bible is a book about him, after all. Moses and Elijah knew this. And so, like the frightened Peter, James, and John, they, too, looked to him for answers on this day.

The apostles had seen many things in their time with Jesus: the blind given sight, the deaf given hearing, the dead given life, and more. Today, though, they had the most splendid sight of all: *only* Jesus. When they were overcome with fear at the sight of the transfigured Lord, Jesus calmed them with his words. Then they saw the Jesus they had walked, talked, and eaten with. They saw the Jesus they knew well who was fully human, and yet not like the rest of them. They saw Jesus and only him.

It’s hard to see Jesus in this life, let alone only Jesus. There is just so much to hear and see. And yet, the most blessed thing of all is to see Jesus and to see Jesus only. And that



happens solely when he calms us with his words. And so we do well to open our ears to focus our eyes. And when we see Jesus only, we see everything else rightly again. We see a world given to us in Christ; we see Christ in our neighbor; we see Christ as our beginning, our present, and our end.

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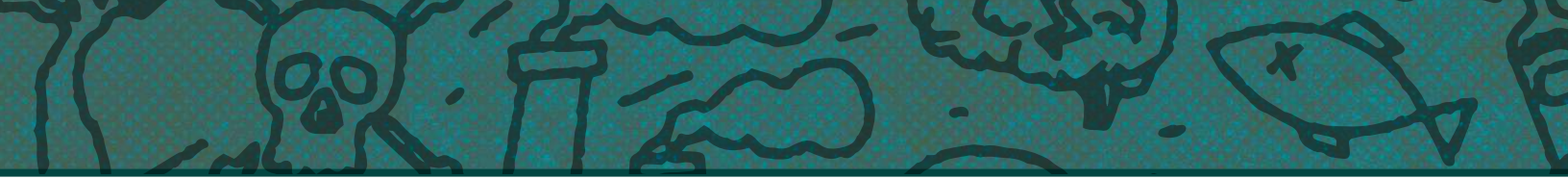
**JESUS IS NEVER “ONLY.”
JESUS IS EVERYTHING!**

Jesus is never “only.” Jesus is everything! In the depths of our fear, confusion, and distraction, only Jesus can focus our eyes on him and speak a word of comfort, for he still speaks today. He is your savior, promised by prophets and born in Bethlehem, and because he has come for us, we can “Rise and have no fear.”

Lord Jesus,

fill our ears and focus our eyes and put all things in proper perspective. Grant that we see only you so that we may then see everything rightly.

Amen.



Mark 5:36

But overhearing what they said, Jesus
said to the ruler of the synagogue,
“Do not fear, only believe.”

Sometimes, Jesus says things that are best described as simply impossible. Simple to say but impossible to do. A ruler of the synagogue’s daughter has been declared dead, and Jesus tells him not to be afraid, only to believe. How could anyone do this?

One thing that stands out about the ministry of Jesus is how little power he credits to death. He almost never even refers to it as death unless he is speaking of his own death on the cross. Jesus’ go-to name for death is sleep. We see that in this story as he finds people weeping and wailing over the death of this man’s daughter and says to them: “Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping” (Mark 5:39).

We think the opposite of fear is peace, but many times, Jesus contrasts fear with faith. This is because true peace is born out of faith in Christ. Without faith, there is no peace. This is not a command to replace fear with a faith we have created in ourselves. Jesus



knows we can't do that. So, instead, he speaks faith into the hearts of his fearful creation. Jesus doesn't wait for the weepers and mourners to believe before he raises this little girl from the dead (after all, we are told that those hearing these words from Jesus laughed at him); instead, he does it in the presence of fear and doubt.

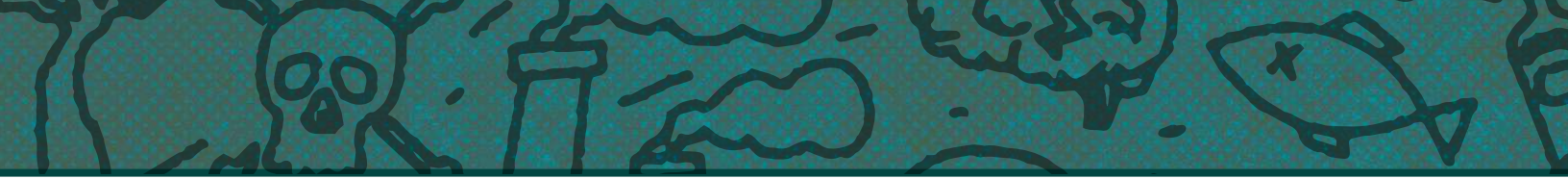
"Taking her by the hand he said to her, 'Talitha cumi,' which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.' And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement" (Mark 5:41-42).

Jesus overturns death with a word. Fear has now been replaced by faith, and where there is faith, there is peace. Do not fear; only believe. Simple to say but impossible to do. The good news is Jesus is Lord of the impossible. His birth into a sinful and chaotic world speaks faith and peace into hearts that can muster up neither. He was born to make war with death and he has won. On the day of resurrection, he will take you by the hand and say, "Child of God, wake up."

Heavenly Father,

*replace our doubts and fears with the faith
and peace that only come from your
Son, Jesus Christ.*

Amen.



Mark 6:49-51

But when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded.

The story of Jesus walking on water would serve as an excellent opening to any horror film. Think about it for a moment: the disciples are fighting strong winds as they try to make their way across the Sea of Galilee. Out of the darkness, they see something—smaller than a boat but larger than a fish—moving above the water toward them. Not hovering, not gliding, not floating, but walking on a surface that should not be able to bear any weight. The only conceivable conclusion is that what is approaching is a spirit, a ghost—something or someone not human. And this unknown being is heading straight for them. Terrified really is the only appropriate response.

Of course, there is something very supernatural to what the disciples are witnessing. But it’s supernatural because the form they mistake for a ghost is not just fully divine but also fully human.



And yet, the disciples know this God-man, Jesus. Jesus, who is both their God and their friend. Yes, they have already seen him perform miracles, but they have also seen him eat fish, hammer wood, and laugh at their jokes. They know he was born in a small town to ordinary folk. They've heard his voice teach, drive out demons, and forgive sins. They know his voice. And they trust his words because what he proclaims is truth itself.

It's Jesus' voice, his pronouncement of who he is, that calms the disciples' fears.

His voice still speaks today as he comes to us in the most astounding ways. Jesus loves nothing more than to continue to announce himself to us: "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." Jesus speaks to calm our fears and give us the truth that we know him and are his.

When what you see is uncertain, unknown, or downright terrifying, trust your ears. They will lead you to the voice of our God and our friend, Jesus.

Dear Jesus,

*when terror sets in, speak through your word
that I may know you are truly flesh and blood,
given for my sins.*


Amen.



Luke 1:67-79

And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Zechariah had been divinely tongue-tied the entire time his wife, Elizabeth, was pregnant. The angel Gabriel had zipped his lips shut for disbelieving the good news that his elderly wife would conceive (Luke 1:20). After more than forty weeks of muteness, Zechariah’s mouth finally opened, his tongue was loosed, and he blessed God with a Spirit-inspired song traditionally called the Benedictus. The message of the song is this: All that God promised in the Old Testament is now being fulfilled.



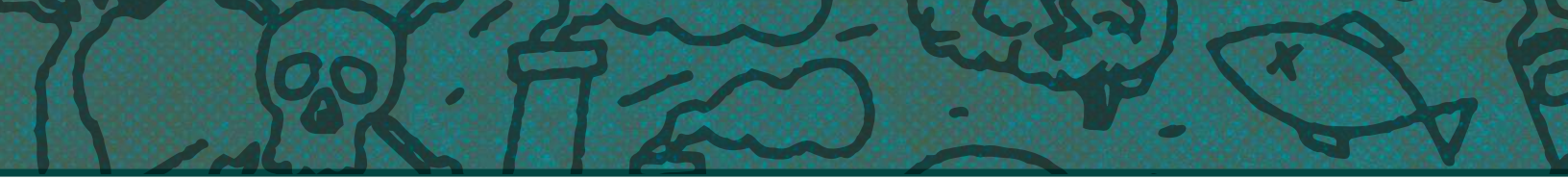
The Lord promised David that he would raise up a son after him who would reign over an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-16). Zechariah sings that God “has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:69). Promise fulfilled. Through prophet after prophet, the Lord promised to come to his people and save them. Zechariah blesses “the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people...that we should be saved from our enemies” (Luke 1:68, 71). Promise fulfilled. Already in Genesis, the Lord swore an oath to Abraham that in his seed, “all the nations of the earth [would] be blessed” (Gen. 22:18). Zechariah sings that God is now showing the mercy he promised to our fathers, remembering his covenant and the oath he swore to our father Abraham (Luke 1:72-73). Once more, promise fulfilled.

The fulfillment of all these promises comes in Jesus, whom John, the son of Zechariah, would announce as he goes “before the Lord to prepare his ways” (vs. 76). In Christ, we are “delivered from the hand of our enemies” that we “might serve him without fear” (vs. 74). Those two words, “without fear,” signal a foundational shift, for menacing fears encircle human life: fear of enemies and evils, fear of disease and death, fear of condemnation and hell. All fears, however, cower and retreat before the Fearless One, Christ our Lord.

In him, we are safe. Whatever this world throws at us can do us no everlasting harm since we are in him who is life, forgiveness, heaven, and love embodied. All of God’s promises are not only yes in him (2 Cor. 1:20), but yes for you.

Lord Jesus,
fulfiller of the promises of our Father, grant that we might serve you without fear, safe and secure in the salvation you have acquired for us and given to us.

Amen.




Luke 2:14

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on
whom his favor rests. (NIV)

The Evangelist Luke records two occasions when God’s “good pleasure” (in Greek, *eudokia*) is mentioned. One of them is during the ministry of Jesus, when “he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will [*eudokia*]’” (10:21). The first and earliest mention was on the night Jesus was born, when “a multitude of the heavenly host” praised God and sang, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor [*eudokia*] rests” (2:14, NIV).

How fitting that in both of these contexts, those who heard the song and those of whom Jesus spoke were not the high and mighty but the humble and lowly: little children and shepherds. This is not because the “little people” of this world are especially deserving of God’s good pleasure. Rather, they are singled out because God’s way of working in this world is to bring all of us low, to diminish us, to empty us of ourselves, that we might receive in humble faith his good pleasure toward us in his Son, who fills us



and enriches us with himself. As the mother of Jesus sang, “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52).

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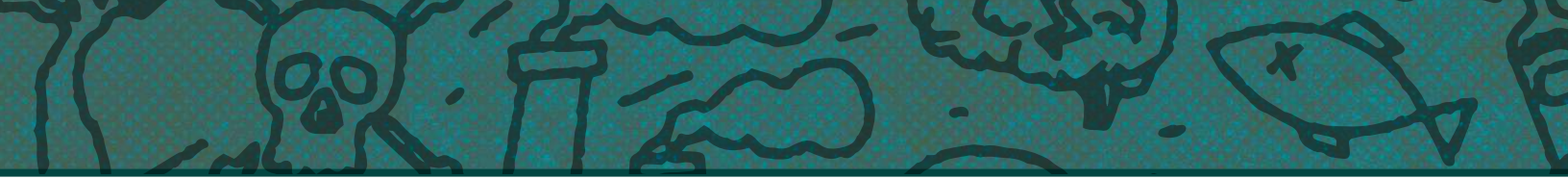
**PEACE IN JESUS IS NOT SIMPLY THE
ABSENCE OF CONFLICT OR FEAR, BUT
THE FULLNESS OF LOVE.**

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,” the angels sang, for he alone is worthy of glory. And how does God show his glory? By sending his favor, his good pleasure, down to earth as a flesh-and-blood baby born in lowly circumstances. The Father’s glory in the highest heaven descends to us on earth in Jesus to give us peace. Peace in Jesus is not simply the absence of conflict or fear, but the fullness of love. A fullness that fills us when we are brought low and emptied of self. A fullness that incorporates us into the life of God so that we might be the children of our heavenly Father. The good pleasure of heaven, the favor of our Father, rests upon us as we rest in Jesus, born for us that we might be reborn in him; this is true peace.

Good and gracious Father,

*fill us with your favor and grant us your good
pleasure as we rest in the love of your Son,
at peace with you.*

Amen.




Luke 12:32

Fear not, little flock, for it is your
Father's good pleasure to
give you the kingdom.

When we read the Bible, we might think it tells us that fear is irrational. But such a notion couldn't be further from the truth. The Scriptures repeatedly tell us not to fear exactly *because* there are so many reasons to be afraid. However, there is a lot of comfort for Christians packed into the sixteen words Jesus speaks in Luke 12:32. Why shouldn't you be afraid?

You have someone watching over you. You are part of the little flock of God's own sheep. You have Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leading, and tending you. He has given his life for you. He has beaten back everything that seeks to destroy you. And when you lose your way or run away, he leaves the ninety-nine to pursue you and bring you back to the flock. You don't need to be afraid.

You have a Father who loves you. In baptism, he has made you his child. He has taken all your sin away and granted you eternal life. He has promised that nothing can separate



you from his love because of what Jesus has done for you. And he takes great pleasure in giving you all these good gifts. You don't need to be afraid.

“

**YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN JESUS.
HE BELONGS TO YOU, AND YOU
BELONG TO HIM.**

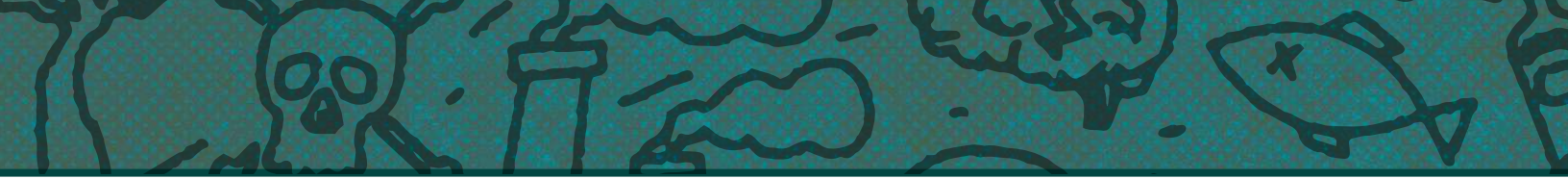
You have been gifted the kingdom of God. This isn't just entrance into heaven. You have been given the kingdom itself. You have been given Jesus. He belongs to you, and you belong to him. This is God's gift to the world. When this gift arrived on Christmas, fear's rule ended. You don't need to be afraid.

Is there much to fear in this world? Yes. But all of it has been swallowed up in the good gifts of God's promises.

Heavenly Father,

*when I am afraid, remind me of
these words from my Good Shepherd and
give me peace.*

Amen.




John 14:25-27

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

The Spirit stokes our memory, bringing to remembrance what Christ has said and done. In this way, the Spirit works like your grandparents looking through a photo album as they explain the past through the pictures, unpacking your story for you and reminding you who you are. Rather than photos, however, the Spirit uses promises, the promises of Jesus. And by the Spirit's work, we know God better because we hear God speak to us and recall what he has spoken to us.

The Spirit brings peace. This isn't peace like the world gives. This isn't some moment of quiet or escape from the normal conflict of life below. This peace is solid and lasting. This peace transcends all the conflict of life here, surpassing understanding. This peace is a gift: it's the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation; it's peace that casts out fear. It's what people seek this time of year.



It's been said if you want to find someone's idol, you should follow their fears. What do you fear? Follow the fears, and you'll find the idols. And so the Spirit casts out fear of men, our instinctual, frightened, presentist fear, and replaces it with the fear of God, which is faith, which knows its beginning, middle, and end already. The Spirit won't let us be afraid because the Spirit won't let us let go of Christ, who will never let go of us. This is peace.

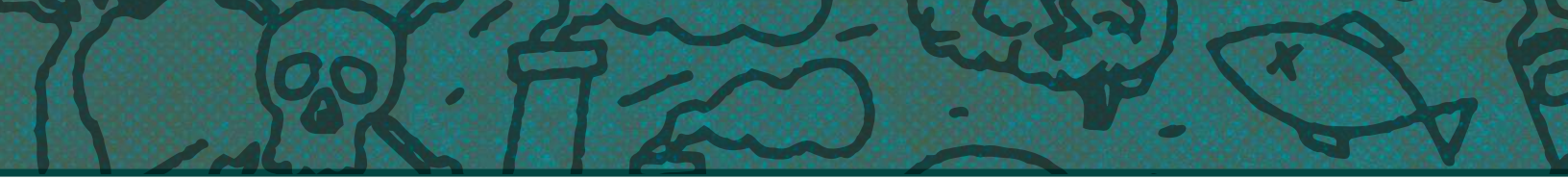
This doesn't mean we never tremble or have late nights. We're saints and sinners. The old Adam will trust anyone but God and seek peace anywhere but where it's found. The Spirit gives the old Adam hell, though. The Spirit stokes our memory. The Spirit helps us with our needs. And we always know where to find the Spirit because God has bound himself to the means of grace and thus to us. The Spirit comes through Word and sacrament, on the lips of preachers and Christian friends, with bread, wine, and water.

Have you been living in fear or peace? Find God where he's promised to be; where he reveals himself in the advent of Christ. Remember what Christ has said and done. Take heart. Cling to Christ. Be taught. Be absolved. Be at peace as your idols are toppled and the true God, by the Spirit, declares you his own, again and again, until glory. This is why Christ was born in the first place.

Lord Jesus,

*you have sent us your Spirit as you promised.
Teach us all things and keep your person, words,
and works always foremost in our memory, so that
we live without fear and in peace.*

Amen.



John 16:33

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

John is all about dramatic contrasts: Light versus darkness, flesh versus spirit, the world below versus the world above, conqueror versus the conquered. This kind of language permeates his Gospel, serving to heighten the tension of the historical narrative. With John, one thing is abundantly clear: the stakes are high. If the Gospel of John had been made into a movie, it would have been directed by Michael Bay or Guy Ritchie. Lots of explosions.

The opening Christmas story sets the tone. John has no time for Hallmark cards or little babies meek and mild or even genealogies. Instead, he comes right out of the gate swinging by making the claim that Jesus is the *logos*. He is the divine answer to everything. He is the ordering principle of the universe. He breaks into our world like a comet, shattering our illusions about who we are and who God is, and freeing us from the darkness which held us captive by overcoming it. “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome



the world” (John 16:33). Jesus has overcome. As New Testament scholar R. C. H. Lenski comments, “How foolish to be afraid of a crushed and conquered foe.”

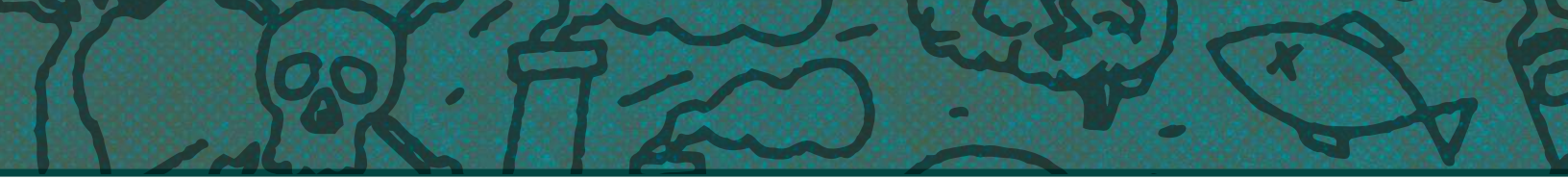
Interestingly enough, Jesus speaks these encouraging words to his disciples immediately on the heels of his prediction that each would abandon him. He was right. As his crucifixion approached, they were overcome with fear and they scattered. They gave in to their deepest anxieties and abandoned their Lord. They valued their own skin more than their Savior. Ultimately, our deepest fears reveal our lack of trust in God. They reveal that our fear of the Lord has been eclipsed by some other, lesser fear. We, too, abandon our Savior by not trusting in him above all things.

Yet the good news is that God’s love is greater than our fear. He came to bring peace through the shed blood of his son, who forgives us and graces us with faith. The dramatic tension we feel within our own hearts, against the world around us, and against the devil can only be stilled by his sure and steady nail-scarred hand. Thanks be to God, he has done just that.

Heavenly Father,

*forgive my attempts to overcome
the world on my own. Help me rest in
the all-sufficiency of your gifts.*

Amen.



John 20:19-21

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

Imagine you've been a part of an amazing movement with an inspiring leader. Everywhere you go, lives are changed. Promises you've heard since infancy are fulfilled. You are a part of something bigger than yourself. But what your leader is saying and doing infuriates a lot of people. So much so, in fact, that they are actively trying to take him out.

And then they do just that. All of it comes to an end. All of what you thought you were a part of comes crumbling down. All of what you thought was true appears to have been false. And now you fear they are coming for you. So what do you do? One of two things: you hide, or you fight. Either way, fear leads us away from trusting others and into relying on ourselves. And if you spend enough time relying on yourself, you know the result of that endeavor is not one of peace but chaos.



Try as we might, humans make bad saviors.

This is where the disciples find themselves. Overwhelmed by their fear, they lock themselves away. They grasp saving themselves by any means necessary.

Locked doors may keep the fear at bay for a while, but they can do nothing to hold back our Savior. And so Jesus reappears in the midst of their fear and hiding to proclaim his peace.

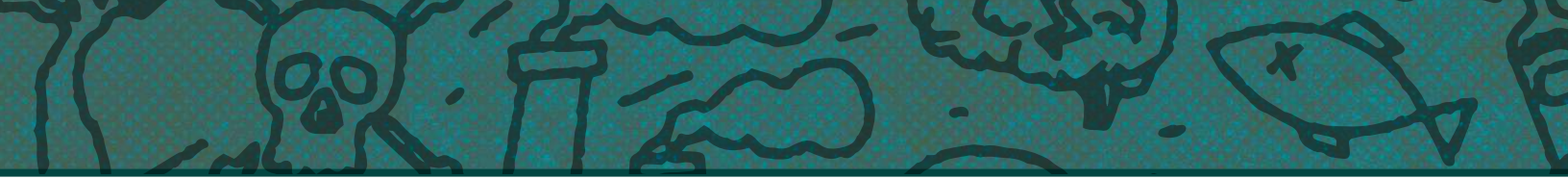
“Peace be with you.”

This is the same promise sung by angels at his birth, for Christ’s peace alone is not a euphemism but a reality. No matter what fear has caused you to do or say, our resurrected leader—the authority incarnate—bestows an end to the root of fear.

Your faith in Christ means fear is no longer coming from you. You don’t have to hide from it, nor do you have to fight it on your own. Our incarnate Savior has granted you his peace. Come out from your hiding place, drop your weapons, and go and live freely.

Thank you, King Jesus,
*for freeing us from our fears and giving
us your peace to live, to work, and to
love those around us.*

Amen.




Romans 5:1

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

What do faith, peace, grace, and hope have to do with the glory of God? Everything. Paul says that we have been justified by faith, and because of that, we have peace with God. The object of that faith is Jesus Christ. He is not only the object of it but also the creator of it. All faith comes through hearing the good news of what Jesus has done to reconcile sinners to God (Rom. 10:17).

So often, we are tempted into anxiety over the quality or quantity of our faith. Our peace is robbed when we start to believe that faith is something we provide or contribute to our salvation. But God takes peace seriously and has not attached it to something in you or something that you created. He has delivered it through faith that *he* created. And however weak that faith may seem, it flows from and clings to the unchangeable, unshakable, once-for-all work of Jesus Christ for you.



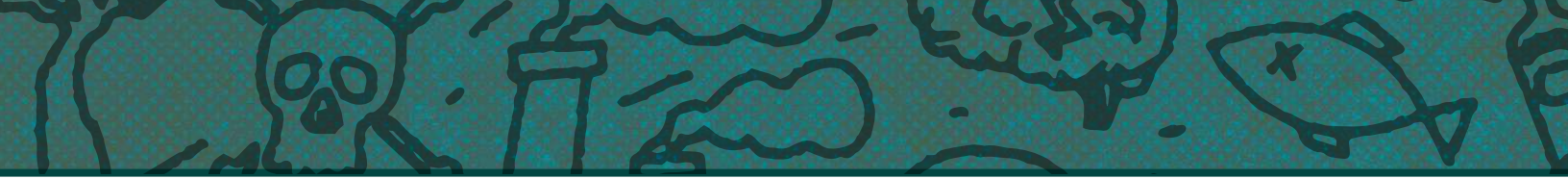
There is more good news. God has gifted you faith, and you have accessed his inexhaustible grace. Any questions about deserving God's love and acceptance are swept away in the flood of God's grace. Any fear that you haven't done enough or that you have doubted too much is laid to rest because of the grace of God on account of Jesus. You are forgiven, justified, and declared righteous, all by grace through faith. This is your hope. This is where you find peace.

“

**GOD IS GLORIFIED
WHEN SINNERS HAVE
PEACE WITH HIM.**

God is glorified when sinners have peace with him. This peace declares to the world that the love of God in Christ has the final say. This is why Jesus came. This is why he was born. Christmas is about peace, and peace is about the glory of God.

Heavenly Father,
*thank you for the faith in your Son that
grants me peace with you and
glorifies your name.*
Amen.




Romans 8:15

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

If I call God, “God,” I speak truthfully. If I call him, “Lord,” I speak submissively. But what if I dare to call him “Father”? Then, I speak with a seeming audacity, a boldness that is shockingly familiar and intimate. Do we mere mortals dare to call the Master of the Universe, the Omnipotent Creator, our Father?

Not only do we dare to do so, but we are invited, even commanded to do so by the very one who places us into God’s family. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he did not say, “When you pray, say, ‘O Nameless Power’ or even ‘Lord God Almighty.’” No, he said to them, “Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven...’” (Matt. 6:9).

To call God “Father” is to live in the space which Jesus created for us. He set us free from sin and death. We are no longer slaves, pandering to the flesh, handcuffed to evil. His cross and resurrection are the keys that unlock those chains. In Christ, liberated from all condemnation, we are led by the Spirit of God as sons of God (Rom. 8:14).



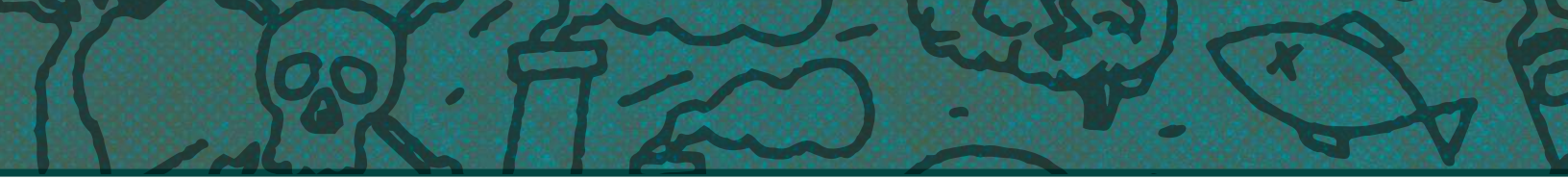
We are far more than servants of God, more than even friends of our Father, for “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:16-17).

“

**GOD IS GLORIFIED
WHEN SINNERS HAVE
PEACE WITH HIM.**

Because in Christ, God has become our Abba, our Father. We do not shudder as slaves shackled to fear, but with boldness and confidence we stand before the Lord as children, his sons and daughters, co-heirs with Jesus. Our Father loves us as he loves Jesus. Our Father sees us as he sees Jesus. Our Father cares for us just as he cared for the Christ child. It's shocking. It's exhilarating. And it's beautiful beyond words, to know that we are not guests or strangers in our Father's home, but his dearly beloved children.

Heavenly Father,
*thank you for the faith in your Son that
grants me peace with you and
glorifies your name.*
Amen.



Philippians 4:7

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What are you anxious about? Take a moment and give the question some thought.

Perhaps you woke up to anxieties this morning, or you laid down with them last night. Perhaps they have to do with you personally. Maybe you feel anxious about the well-being of a loved one or about a fraught relationship. You might even feel anxious about the state of something larger than yourself: your job, your church, your country. Whatever it is, Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything.”

To end here, however, would be to leave us all in judgment, for we have just established the ongoing reality of anxiety that pervades our lives.

The good news is that Paul doesn’t end on this command. Instead, he gives us one more command, and then finally, a word of proclamation: Do not be anxious, submit everything in prayer; in other words, “Cast your cares on the Lord” (Ps. 55:22). Do these things not for the peace of God, but because of the peace of God.



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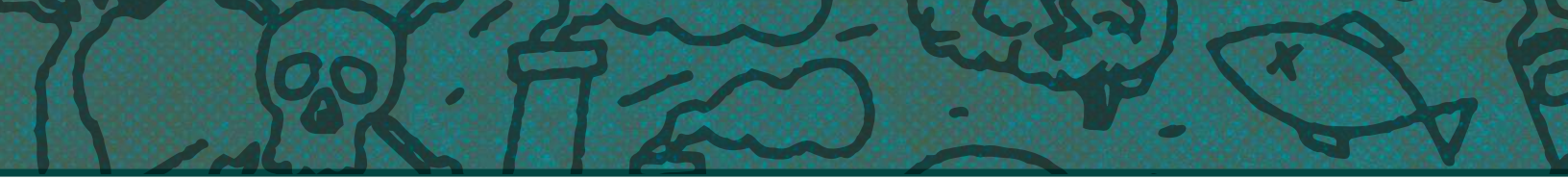
**CHRIST'S PEACE WILL ALWAYS BE MORE
TRUSTWORTHY THAN THE CHANGING
WINDS OF OUR CIRCUMSTANCES**

This is a peace, which is Christ himself. And as Christ, our Savior who came to live, die, and rise for our sake, this peace transcends all understanding. If such peace were limited to our understanding, it would be limited to our experience and feelings. But while we are grateful when our lives and feelings reflect this reality, Christ's peace will always be more trustworthy than the changing winds of our circumstances. He is a peace that meets us in our need, sustains us in our suffering, and answers our problems. He is a peace that has the last word on who we are. He is the Prince of Peace, born for you. This is the good news by which he guards our hearts and minds.

Heavenly Father,

*we hand over our anxieties to you, knowing that
you care about them, you have suffered for them,
and you have answered them through Christ, your
son, who is our peace.*

Amen.



Colossians 1:19-20

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Do you ever wonder how God feels about the incarnation? The eternal God, creator of all things, righteous and holy, took on flesh and became man. Surely, the best you could hope for describing God's attitude towards this event would be that he was willing. But no. Paul tells us that he was pleased to do it. That should leave you amazed. Why would God be pleased to take on flesh and die for people who hate him? That a father would be willing to die for his child is something we understand. But Jesus is pleased to die for his enemies to make them children of God. This tells us something important: God is all about peace and reconciliation.

In Hebrews 12:2, we are told that Christ endured the cross "for the joy set before him." That joy is creation's reconciliation and peace with God. This promise of peace is the message that was spoken to Adam and Eve after the fall. This is the message delivered



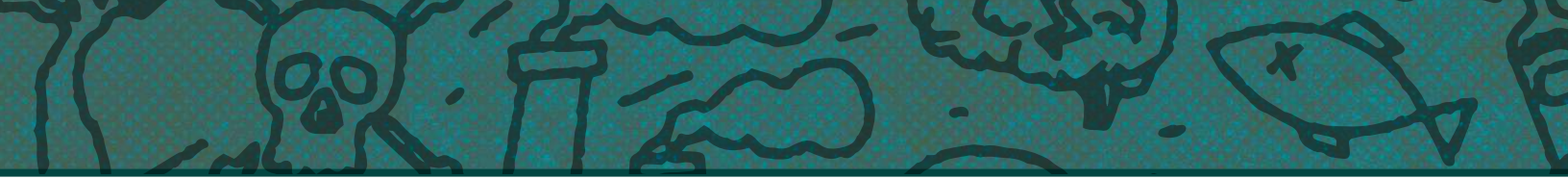
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**WHY WOULD GOD BE PLEASED TO
TAKE ON FLESH AND DIE FOR
PEOPLE WHO HATE HIM?**

to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the message placed in the mouths of the Old Testament prophets and sung by angels to shepherds. And this is the message Christians proclaim and cling to today. Out of unfathomable love, God was pleased to become man and shed his blood to bring peace and reconciliation to the world. Christmas is the declaration that God is not only willing to make peace with you, he is pleased to do it.

Heavenly Father,
*thank you for reconciliation and making
peace with sinners through the cross
of your incarnate Son.*

Amen.



Colossians 3:15

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in one body.
And be thankful.

Paul loves to compare the past and the present in his letters through his use of “were” and “are”: We were one thing, but now we are another. He does this even as he warns Christians still caught in the doings of the past, to remember who they are and live a new life. Something has happened to the Christian, and it’s serious. A change has happened, which leads to more changes, which are fruit and not root.

In this chapter, Paul writes about the Christian life. It’s the Christian life not just because the Christian lives it, but even more because it’s lived in Christ. Christ is our life, and our lives are hidden in him until he reappears.

You were. You were a lot of things. You may still feel like you are those things. You may still sometimes live like you are those things. You, however, are *not* those things. You are something new in Christ. You are, here and now, a new thing, as new as when you first became it. You are God’s chosen one, holy and beloved, together with all the redeemed.



You are Christ's. This is what Christmas is all about.

That “were” is a pesky old pest, though. It clings to our ankles, hangs around our necks, lingers in the corners of our minds, whispers in our ears. That “were” doesn’t want to die, even as it’s dead already. That “were” wants its throne back, even though that throne belongs to Christ. And that “were” isn’t confounded by futility. Its whole being is futile, and so it never gives up until it will have to because Christ will say “Enough!” and all things will be made new, perfectly, forever.

You are God’s own child, together with many others, with whom you are one body. You were something else at one time, and that something else still tries to claim and rule you, but you are not what you were. You are God’s own child. You are the temple of Christ. You are. And that is your peace, the peace of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, which does away with all the “were” and plants you firmly in the “are” of Jesus: in true life, in harmony with your Creator and with his children. Be thankful, because that is what you are.

Lord Jesus,

*there is much that we once were that still plagues
and tempts us. That is not who we are now because
we are yours. Rule in our hearts and your church,
and make us ever new.*

Amen.




2 Timothy 1:6-7

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

With a name that means “God-fearer,” we would expect Timothy to be more courageous than he appears in this Epistle. Raised by a Christian mother, mentored by the Apostle Paul, with more than a decade of intense ministry experience under his belt, we might assume Timothy to be a fearless, battle-hardened veteran. Instead, what we get is a seasoned pastor still wrestling mightily with his own anxieties; uncertain and unsettled. The God-fearer was frightened, tempted to turn tail and run at the prospect of facing the same suffering as his long-time mentor. The dangers Timothy faced in Ephesus were real, not imagined. Ephesus had a history of chewing up and spitting out ministers of the gospel. Whether it was fierce resistance by the Jews (Acts 19:9), demons overpowering exorcists (Acts 19:16), or violent rioting in the streets (Acts 19:21-41), Ephesus was no place for the faint of heart.

Whether the threat is real or imagined, physical or mental, near-at-hand or somewhere out there, our fears exert a powerful influence over us. They seek to drive us inward and



downward, deeper into ourselves, rather than upward and outward towards God. Whenever we're caught in the grip of our fears, the temptation will always be to look to our own resources to save ourselves. Self-dependence comes naturally. God-dependence does not. This is precisely why Paul writes: to speak a steadying gospel word to his wavering co-worker.

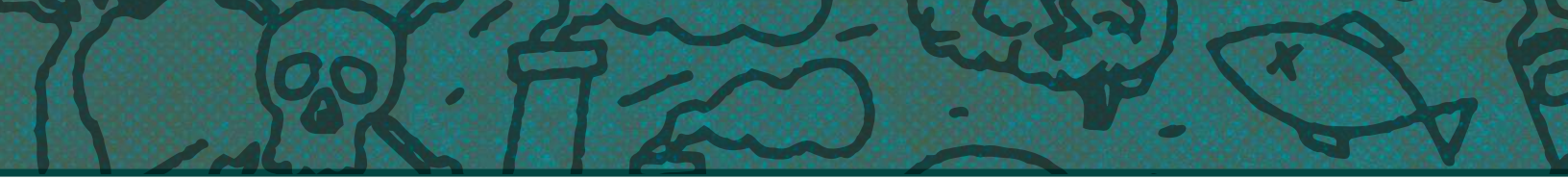
Instead of a spirit of fear, says Paul, God has given us a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind (self-control). Two things are apparent from this exhortation. The first is that God is never the source of fear. Anxiety and dread are never of the Lord but are instead alien to his nature and always come to us from the enemy. The second is that God has given us a stronger spirit, and it is threefold: power, love, and a sound mind. Perfect *love*, which casts out all fear (1 John 4:18), was displayed most fully at the cross, where Jesus died in victory over Satan and defeated death. *Power* (Greek *dynamis*, from which we get the English word for dynamite) explodes the insecurities that threaten to suffocate us since a greater force now controls us. And a *sound mind* comes from the peace of a healed relationship with the Prince of Peace, God himself.

The same is true for you, dear Christian. Your namesake, too, is “God-fearer,” and power, love, and a sound mind are yours in Christ Jesus.

Almighty Father,

*direct my gaze away from my own resources and
toward the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.*

Amen.



Hebrews 2:14b-15


...through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

You have no doubt already read about the connection between fear and death in this devotional series. Connecting the two in our daily lives doesn't take much thought. Peel back the layers of fear in life, and we will eventually arrive at the reality of death.

But here, the author of Hebrews goes further--not only connecting fear to death but death to the devil and slavery. As slaves to sin, we find ourselves in fear of death and under the power of the devil.

Our sin results in death, which brings with it fear, all of which the devil knows and wields to his advantage. On and on, this cycle continues so that life itself must be defined by death.

Yet sin, death, and the devil--that unholy alliance which brings with it fear--don't stand a chance against our God. Into this ongoing cycle of defeat, our God not only breaks in



from the outside but breaks out from the inside. This is why the advent of Christ is so important. “For as by man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:21).

We are saved from those things we most fear because our God goes through them to the point that he suffers their defeat. This defeat, which takes place on the cross, ultimately makes him victorious when he rises from the grave. As Martin Luther says, Christ dies a “death against death” so that all that is connected to it—including our fears—is destroyed once and for all.

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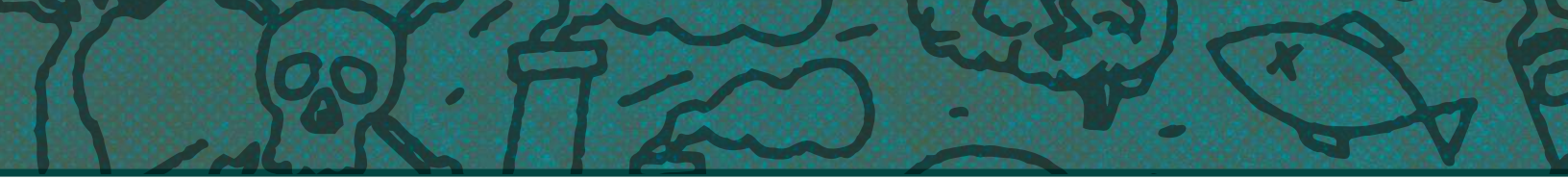
**OUR GOD NOT ONLY BREAKS IN FROM THE
OUTSIDE BUT BREAKS OUT FROM THE INSIDE.**

And now, his victory and all of its spoils are given to you. You are no longer cut off from his sight. You are no longer a slave to sin, death, or the devil. You are no longer one who lives in fear but one who lives in God’s lovingkindness, covered by his righteousness and with the promise of his eternal life. This is the gift of the Christ child for you.

Dear Heavenly Father,

*thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ to
conquer death and the fear it brings, once and for
all, so that we might have your everlasting life.*

Amen.




1 John 4:18

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.
For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears
has not been perfected in love.

True love is Christ's love, and all love is true insofar as it conforms to his love. Christ's love has rescued us from what we were and made us who we are. Christ's love has loved us, not because we were lovable, but precisely when we weren't. Christ loves the unlovable. That's his thing. But the moment he loves them, they become something new. God is love, and because Christ has loved us, we are God's, and because we are God's, we now love, and with true love at that, even if a pale reflection.

We love because Christ first loved us. We love, and that is no trite thing. It's not easy to love in a fallen world. It's not easy to love fallen people. It's not easy to be loved by fallen people. And yet we now love, and we receive love because we have peace in Christ. Confident of his love, we are free. Love is vulnerable, it risks rejection, but we will never be rejected by Christ. So we can love indiscriminately. We can love all, whether they love back or not, because we have been so loved, and true love looks like Christ's love to whatever degree it is true. Perfect love casts out fear. Perfect love was born in Bethle-



hem, and you have been loved with his perfect love. You need not fear. Your punishment has been paid. Heaven awaits. Your life is a gift. You are Christ's reward. That might not seem like much to you for all he did, but he did it all for you. And that love that sought you, bought you, and taught you, is now perfecting you, that is, bringing you to your final end, which is the eternal beginning. What is there to fear when you are loved by God? There is nothing to fear and everything to love.

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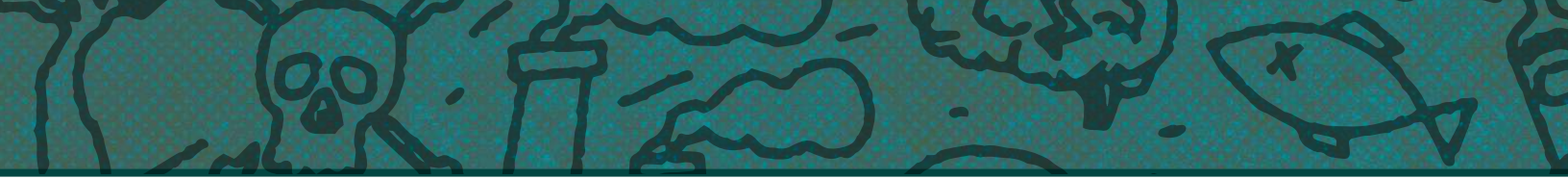
**WE CAN LOVE ALL, WHETHER THEY LOVE BACK
OR NOT, BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN SO LOVED.**

Perfect love casts out fear. Are you afraid? Look to Love. Look to God. Remember who you are. You are loved by God, who loved you before you ever loved him, before you were even lovable. Why would he who loved you in such a way stop now? Surely he won't. So take heart. You are loved. Love freely, not to avoid punishment and not to be loved, but because Love has set you free.

Lord Jesus,

*you are love, and you love us. Cast out our fear and
help us love with the love with which you
yourself have loved us.*

Amen.




Revelation 2:10

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

In his award-winning autobiographical novel *Everything Sad is Untrue*, author Daniel Nayeri talks about the persecution his mother faced when she converted from Islam to Christianity. She once hung a cross necklace in the back of her car and was told that if she didn't remove it, she would be killed. In response, she hung an even bigger cross which covered half of the windshield.

Christian responses to persecution vary widely. We often interpret suffering as a warning light that something has gone wrong. Yet when we look to the Gospels, Jesus was abundantly clear that suffering, cross-carrying, and persecution would be normative for believers (see John 16:33, Matt. 16:24-25). In other words, it shouldn't surprise us.

The church in Smyrna was suffering. They faced tribulation, poverty, slander, and the direct assaults of the devil. Some would be thrown into prison to be released only through martyrdom. Fear in the face of such danger is a natural human reaction, even though it



betrays a fundamental distrust of God. Yet rather than berating them for their trembling hearts, John writes to encourage them: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” The crown spoken of here is a wreath or garland bestowed upon an athlete for winning a race. Through faith (believing, not achieving), Christians receive this crown, which means that death has lost its sting. As John says in the very next verse, “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Rev. 2:11).

This crown of victory is only possible because of the crown of another, the crown of thorns worn by Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, as he seated himself upon the wooden throne of the cross. It was precisely *through* suffering and persecution, *not in spite of* it, that he won the victory.

This manger-king would not escape a deep piercing (Isa. 53:5), nor will those closest to him (Luke 2:35). Yet, we can take heart. Instead of eliminating our present suffering, Jesus does something even better: He redeems it. It is no longer just a cause for anguish and despair but rather a divine tool used to forge us into the image of our Savior, who promises that life--not death--gets the final word.

Jesus,

*thank you for taking the piercings meant for me.
Teach me to face suffering with boldness, knowing
that you will redeem all of it.*

Amen.