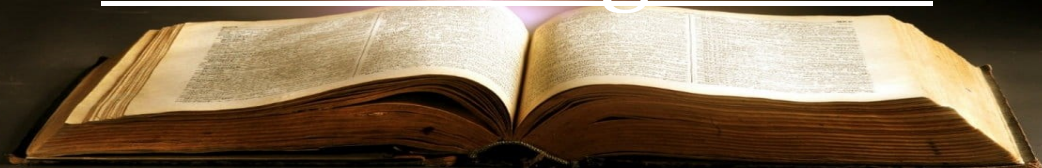


Divine Comfort in Discomfiting Times



By the time this issue of *Ministry* arrives on your desk or doormat, Christmas will be fast approaching. Or, depending on when you are reading this, Christmas may already have passed and, as is customary at this time of the year, we will be reviewing the year soon to end, and perhaps pondering the year ahead. One thing is for sure, though – 2020 has been a year that none will forget. At the time I'm writing this (early October), the Coronavirus has claimed in excess of one million lives worldwide, has shut down the economies of vast swathes of this world for prolonged periods during the past 12 months, and has changed (possibly forever) the way we work, shop, travel, socialise – the list could just go on. Proverbs 27:1 contains this wise counsel: 'Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.' If ever there was a year when this truth felt most apparent, it was 2020. In the face of an invisible killer that has circled the globe, mankind has been unable to plan anything with any degree of certainty, and has been starkly reminded of his own frailty.

A couple of days before New Year's Day 2020, I attended a prayer meeting in my own church. For some inexplicable reason I was feeling a bit apprehensive about the new year, shortly to commence. My minister shared some thoughts from Isaiah 41, highlighting just two of the lovely 'Fear not' statements we find right throughout the Bible. His thoughts were 'a word in season' for my anxious heart that night and, recalling that the Bible contained no less than 365 'Fear not' statements (one for every day of the year!) I did a search on the Bible app on my phone, and how my heart was encouraged! Perhaps your heart may feel fearful tonight as you contemplate 2021? In this short article I want to consider just a few of the Bible's 'Fear not' statements and, in reminding ourselves of some reassuring truths, I hope we may, as a result, be able (D.V.) to step into 2021 with greater confidence, comfort and contentment.

1. The 'Fear Not' of God's SALVATION. Some people view Christmas quite negatively, feeling so many trappings have now been added that the reason we have Christmas in the first place has become side-lined or, sadly, largely missed. Be this as it may, I am still glad we have this special time of the year when, through cards and carols, through giving and goodwill, we are called to consider

God's gift beyond words, given that first Christmas, which remains the greatest still. 'And the angel said unto (the shepherds), **Fear not**: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.' (Luke 2:10-11) Sin is a universal problem, 'for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23). But, whilst our sin problem clearly points to an unchanging need, God has provided an unchanging Saviour. Through placing our trust in the Christ who bore the punishment our sin deserved, we are freed from the fear of condemnation and separation from God in a lost eternity, and given instead the assurance of our acceptance with God and an eternal home in heaven. During this past year Coronavirus has disrupted the wedding plans of over 73,000 couples in the UK. Yet one day there will be a wedding day that nothing will interrupt, when Christ (the Bridegroom) returns for His bride (the Church), to be joined not 'till death us do part' but for all eternity. Dear reader, do you have this hope? Is the Christ of Christmas your Saviour too?

2. The 'Fear Not' of God's SHELTER. Just three chapters after we read of how God called Abram, and promised to make of him a great nation, we read the very first 'fear not' statement of the Bible: 'After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, **Fear not**, Abram: I *am* thy shield, *and* thy exceeding great reward.' (Gen 15:1) What does a shield do? It helps protect us from danger, and from attack. In the well-known passage in the epistle to the Ephesians concerning the Christian armour, we are instructed: 'Above all, taking the shield of faith, whereby ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.' (Eph 6:16). The Roman soldier used his shield to protect his vital organs, and equally Satan will endeavour to attack, subdue and break our hearts, and to hit us with his fiery darts of doubt, fear, temptation, unbelief and failure. But how wonderful to realise that not only can and does our faith act as a shield, but the very God in Whom we trust, Who is Omnipotence Himself, He, too, will be our shield. So we can know a double protection – and whatever we must face, God will face it first: 'And the Lord, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: **fear not**, neither be dismayed.' (Deut 31:8)

3. The 'Fear Not' of God's STRENGTHENING. It was these verses, shared by my own minister just prior to New Year's Day 2020, that greatly encouraged me: 'For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, **Fear not**; I will help thee. **Fear not**, thou worm Jacob, and ye men (few men) of Israel; I will help thee, saith the LORD, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff.' (Is 41:13-15) When an earthly father takes the hand of his frightened child, what a huge difference that makes! How much more so when we look to our Heavenly Father, just yearning to support and help us. What a contrast is pictured in these verses above – are there many things more tiny or insignificant than a worm, or many things more towering and immovable than

mountains? What a picture of how inadequate we can feel in the face of our challenges and adversaries. But what a change when God enters the scene. He can give us the strength not found in ourselves, and enable us to do things which, humanly speaking, seem impossible. **'Fear thou not;** for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.' (Is 41:10)

4. The 'Fear Not' of God's SUCCOUR. 2 Chronicles 32 relates how Sennacherib, king of Assyria, had encamped against the fenced cities of Judah. The odds seemed stacked overwhelmingly against them – as Christians we may often find ourselves in a similar situation, and feel overwhelmed, discouraged and afraid. Yet consider the galvanising words of King Hezekiah: 'Be strong and courageous, **be not afraid** nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles.' (2 Chron 32:7-8) Just 12 chapters earlier we find a similar message '... the battle is not yours, but God's.' (2 Chron 20:15) When our cause is at one with God's, though vain is the help of man, and though deliverance may seem frustratingly delayed, yet 'through God we shall do valiantly: for he it is that shall tread down our enemies.' (Ps 60:12)

5. The 'Fear Not' of SUCCESS in God's service. The first 11 verses in Luke chapter 5 recount the incident when, at Jesus' command, Simon had let down his fishing net, and ended up catching such a great multitude of fishes his net brake, and which resulted in them filling two boats to a point where both were in danger of sinking. Astonished, Simon fell at Jesus' feet, beseeching Him 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.' However, Jesus had other plans for Simon, saying unto him, **'Fear not;** from henceforth thou shalt catch men.' (Lk 5:10) As Christians today, we are called to be 'ambassadors for Christ' (2 Cor 5:20) – to bear His name, to reflect His love, and to represent His cause in this earthly domain, making others aware that there is so much more than just the here and now we can see, touch and feel. We may feel inadequate and weak, but yet God can take up and use our stumbling words, uttered for Him, for His glory. He has promised that His word shall not return unto Him void, but shall accomplish that which He pleases, and prosper in the thing whereto He sent it (Is 55:11). As a Christian songwriter once put it so well: 'I know that my *ability* is not Your main concern / It's my *availability* and willingness to learn.'

As I pen my closing remarks, it is exactly 12 weeks from today to Christmas Day. With COVID-19 restrictions seemingly increasing every few days, and with Government ministers even being asked in press briefings, 'Is Christmas cancelled this year?', it is impossible to gauge what the situation will be like at Christmastime, or as we (D.V.) enter into 2021. We cannot see into the future, for God in His wisdom has decreed things that way. We do not know what the future holds, but we *can* personally know the One who holds the future. How comforting are the words of Corrie ten Boom: 'Never be afraid to trust an

unknown future to a known God.' Coronavirus may have caught the world by surprise in 2020, but it didn't surprise the God who knows the end from the beginning (Is 46:10) and 'who works all things after the counsel of His own will' (Eph 1:11). Whatever 2021 may bring, be it sunlight or shadow, be it trials or triumphs, if we know the Lord, He will walk with us every step of the way.

In closing, I can do no better than to quote some words from a poem entitled 'The Gate of the Year' which caught the public's imagination when King George VI quoted it in his 1939 broadcast to the British Empire (just a few months after the outbreak of World War II):

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year / Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown / And he replied, / Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. / That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way. / So I went forth and, finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night.' May we each endeavour to do this, and may God bless, guide, direct and protect each of you in the New Year to come. 'Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; **be not afraid**, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.' (Josh 1:9)