

## **From Fear to Faith**

By

Curtis Dickinson

The angel said to the shepherd, “Fear not.” These worries will be echoed millions of times this month in carols, pageants and sermons. But what is there about Christmas to fear? How can there be fear when good will is being poured on from every page of every newspaper, from every commercial on every TV set and from every clerk in every store; and when the strains of Christmas lullabies are peeling forth from the loudspeakers from every direction, from every store, office and shopping center until one would like to escape from the ceaseless bleat of an insipid praise to the season?

The words of the angel are irrelevant to the modern nomad. He has learned to tranquilize his fears. Socially he conforms to the world and is accepted. Financially he has the promise of security from the cradle to the grave. Physically he looks to medical science and confidently anticipates a cure for whatever disease might befall him. Spiritually he has been convinced that God is the father of all, that all men are brothers, and therefore if there is anything to judgment or another life after this one, all will be in the same boat. There is evidence that modern man would rather go to hell with the majority than to enjoy immortality with the extremist minority!

So, there’s nothing to fear and the angel might as well save his breath.

Of course, the shepherds of Judea felt differently. When they were confronted with a messenger from God, they were “sore afraid.” This was not because they were greater sinners than other men. They were not superstitious. They were not afraid of their jobs nor was it the general tension of the times that sent the stroke of fear slicing through their spines. Their fear was the healthy-minded fear felt by men who are aware of the reality of God, to whom God is a real living personality who called man into being and to whom man must account.

Suddenly they were confronted with God! Here was a situation for which social experience, financial success and physical exercise had not prepared them. Immediately there comes to mind the thought of one’s sin and the total inability to erase it and keep God from knowing about it! Coupled with this thought is the idea of judgment and the final destiny. When man really believes God and knows something of His power and justice, even the messenger of God instills in his mind some deep sense of awe.

Here is the failure of the church and the ministry. We have been content to say, “We have the answer,” but we have failed to explain what it is we have the answer to. Before we can preach the cure, we first must preach the diagnosis; and the diagnosis is fearful. It is much simpler to make Christmas a time for “children’s programs” where everyone can be amused at the antics of the cute kids. They present pageants portraying the shepherds, the wise men, Mary and Joseph and the manger, with accompanying carols. But somehow

the meaning gets lost in the nostalgia of tradition, and soon everyone is eating Christmas candy, and nobody understood the angel's "Fear not."

If I were to try to put my finger on the reason why there is so much commercialization of Christmas and so little actual realization of Christmas candy it would be right here: Man no longer has a healthy fear of Almighty God. There can be no understanding of the "glad tidings of great joy" until first there is the real fear of the Creator's just judgment. There can be no sense of RELIEF from the impending peril unless the peril itself is known and dreaded. The shepherds who first trembled at the sight of the Lord's angel were soon "glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20). This is because they were conscious of the need for salvation, as shown by their genuine fear of God and the necessity of the angel's "Fear not."

There is plenty of fear in the world. Many physicians tell us that fear is the: cause of most of the physical disorders of the day. Hospitals are filled with those who are mentally and physically disabled by fear. But these fears do not stem from the proper motivation: the fear of God. Rather they are produced by the complexities of a world which tries to operate without God. In fact, most of the fears of modern man exist because deep in his heart he simply does not believe God. He is more afraid of being burned by a bomb than of being burned in the lake of fire. The reason is that he believes in atom bombs and hydrogen bombs, but he doesn't believe in "Gehenna" (Hell), the lake of fire where the sinner is punished by the "second death." He is afraid of failing to measure up in the eyes of his family, friends and associates, but not afraid of failing to measure up to God's commands. He is afraid of spoiling his self-styled "image," not afraid of spoiling God's image, the pattern in which he was created"

It is this fear of the wrong things that takes away the potential for joy at Christmas – or any other time. And, of course Christ seeks to fill us with peace and joy at all times. One may be afraid he will choose the wrong gift, or that he will not receive the desired gift, or that he will miss out on the festival party where sick appetites are satiated, or he may be afraid of the future – the war, his job or any number of things. To one who is only concerned with his material and social status, the birth of Jesus could mean very little. But if ever he learns to concern himself with God and God's eternal purpose, then the words, "Fear not," and the subsequent message of salvation from sin and death become a message of great joy and glad tidings indeed.

Why fear? The misguided keepers of our mental health would tell us that we should have no fears, and in order to eradicate them they erase all rules of right and wrong. They may call it "relativity" or "situation ethics" or some other sophisticated name. But what it means is that there is no Ruler of the Universe to make the rules. Therefore we make our own, as long as we can get by with them. "God" becomes only the creation of one's own thinking and so there is no accounting except to one's self. Hence the false saying that you have no one to fear but yourself. This gets rid of any fear of sin and fear of judgment (Except where civil law is concerned, and it is fast vanishing away). But it leaves a great hollowness, a dead vacuum, a freedom like that of a ship without anchor, rudder or

compass. Hence a greater fear – an unknown and indescribable fear – is generated, and the last state is become worse than the first.

To speak to man in this state of mind about “glad tidings of great joy” is to talk nonsense. From his secular position in the world the birth of Jesus is nothing more than beautiful tradition. It is no wonder that he turns Christmas into a Pagan holiday with Santa Claus, its chief symbol and the satisfaction of the flesh the chief end. The frustrations of life are drowned out in the feasts, parties, family gatherings and the excitement of the day, and then suddenly it is over and in its wake a quiet emptiness. “I’m glad it’s over,” we hear people say. Statistics show that in the aftermath of Christmas there is a larger number of suicides than usual. Men have not understood the angel’s “fear not,” for they feared the wrong things.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” (Psalm 111:10). This fear is not a craven fear. Rather it is a healthy respect and reverence for God’s will and eternal design. “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). God is the one who in the last day will cast the wicked into hell, the lake of fire, where both soul and body will be destroyed. It is this realization that gives a man a wholesome “fear of the Lord,” and which motivates him to place his trust and his life in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Such a noble fear drives a man to act as it did those shepherds of Judea: “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us” (Luke 2:15). Notice that they did not say, “See IF this thing has come to pass.” It was because they believed the angel’s message that the thing had happened as he said, that they decided to act. When a man knows that he has heard the message of God, when he knows that he must confront God as his Maker, he is eager and anxious to “see this thing that has come to pass.” He needs a Savior. The fear is essential before the tidings of Christ become “glad tidings.”

As for the other fears, the ones I called the wrong fears, it is amazing how they fall away when the big one is settled. A man may feel the weight of the world bearing him down with fears too horrible to mention. He strives to identify them and eliminate them all in vain. Then when he faces his responsibility to God and settles the question of sin through the Savior, he suddenly finds most of his fears and burdens have ‘vanished away and the promised joy is his own personal possession.

Unless Christmas is kept with the full realization of the fact that man is under the judgment of death for his sin, there will be no joy over the birth of a Savior. Unless there is great fear, there will be no great joy. The birth of Jesus is meaningless when removed from the scene of Judgment. Hence man, having refused to face the fear of God, turns to artificially contrived joy - tinsel trees, jolly songs, fun parties of liquor, sex and shamelessness, and a general “ho - ho.” After all, the angel said something about great joy, so you’re supposed to be happy. So make yourself happy! But the joy cannot be forced nor imitated. The first thing required for joy is fear, and that’s the last thing man wants!

Of course this is only to postpone the fear, until too late. One day the trumpet shall sound and there will be the call from Christ the King. He will suddenly appear, not as the babe of Bethlehem, but as the King of Kings and Righteous Judge of the Universe!

The believer has already passed the “fear” point. He had his time of fear when he confessed that he was a sinner and deserved the penalty of death. Then he went to Bethlehem — or rather, to Calvary. When we repent and are baptized into Christ, we know “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8). Now, instead of fear, there is joy. Have a joyous Christmas.

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