

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

---

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### What are you afraid of?

Presented by Chris Witts

Most of us would admit to being afraid of something. It could be fear of heights (known as “acrophobia”) or fear of spiders. Then there are those who are afraid of making phone calls or going out to meet new people.

Fear is a common emotion which can be a crippling problem for some. We live in fearful times when terrorist attacks, pollution, crime and cancer are issues people often talk about. Every rational person has a fear of something, but when fear takes control, it becomes a phobia. And a phobia is an excessive and irrational fear which takes people on a scary journey .

Fear can be good or bad, rational or irrational, depending on what’s happening at the time. It can help you keep alive when confronted with a dangerous situation; for example, a speed sign designed to slow down a driver in wet and slippery conditions. It can be a deterrent to getting into trouble. But mostly, fear is a limiting factor in people’s lives which stops them from being the individual God meant them to be.

How often have you met someone who has enormous potential, but is held back by some invisible fear, stopping them from moving ahead or achieving their goals and dreams? I heard of someone who was afraid of going for a job interview just in case he didn’t get the job. And so he never tried.

John Calvin, the Protestant reformer, said “our minds are factories of fear.” And if that is correct, we need to look to God and His Word for some answers to this question, “What are you afraid of? It’s a good question, one that some prefer not to think about.

During the 1991 Gulf War, a veteran military officer prepared his troops for the likelihood of a bloody ground war. The men had not seen real combat but he told them “You will be afraid. If you’re not afraid, there’s something wrong with you. You’ll know when you’re afraid – you’ll taste a metal taste in your mouth like you’re chewing half a dozen nails. Understand it, and talk about it,” he advised.

Too often we don’t want to admit our fears for fear of what others may think of us. Or we fear the future, preferring the good old days. But we can come to acknowledge our fears with God’s help. Hebrews 13 verses 5 & 6 has a lovely word of encouragement : “God has said, I will never leave you, I will never abandon you. Let us be bold, then, and say “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.””

This is the message our world needs to hear, that we have a God out there who loves us and can help us conquer fear. God loves me no matter what. The writer of the Psalms in the Old Testament had such a strong handle on fear that he could say “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge” (Psalm 46: 1, 2,7).

The greatest king of Israel, David, one of the greatest men in the Old Testament wrote the words of Psalm 27, “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid ?” (v 1). David learned that God is the antidote for fear. A study of the Bible shows that fear has been a companion of man from the beginning of time. There are almost 100 passages in the Bible that encourages us not to fear, like Psalm 27. But David is saying that faith in God throws off fear today. Many people think God is out dated and old fashioned a relic of the past – but did you know our God is the God of today as well as yesterday ? He is more concerned about our today than He is about our yesterday. He has been faithful in the past, as David could easily explain. And so it is for us, if we only thought about it for a moment. From the moment of our birth, we’ve had a Heavenly Father whose love and care has been constantly ours.

What about tomorrow? Well, David said “Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear though war break out against me, even then I will be confident” (v3). What tremendous courage and hope for the future, no fear, only a trust in a powerful God who had proved Himself in the past.

Author Selwyn Hughes tells of a man who attended a meeting who had a problem overcoming his fears. But something happened at the meeting. He said, “When I came here, I was full of fear. Every night I slept with my socks on because my circulation was so bad. I have surrendered myself to God and all fear has gone. Last night, for the first time in years, I slept without my socks on.”

In the New Testament, we read of the disciples, who journeyed and lived with Jesus, knew what fear was like. They lived with it each day, but especially during the dark days of the death of their Master, Jesus Christ which we specially commemorate at Easter. John records in his Gospel that on the Sunday evening the disciples had met together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Their fear was perfectly natural: the hostility towards Jesus and his followers was still raging, and they weren’t sure if their lives were in jeopardy as well. All of a sudden, the risen Christ came and stood in the middle. “Peace be with you” He said. At the time of their greatest need, Jesus came with assurance that with Him, all would be well.

Whilst Franklin Roosevelt said “The only thing to fear is fear itself,” many of us face fear on a daily basis. Perhaps in our early childhood years, we learn to be fearful, especially if we are deprived of love, affection and acceptance. If we have not known the miracle of “unconditional love”, fears can arise just as weeds grow in the garden. The personality was designed to function by love, and when it is deprived of it, fears can take over.

I think one of the saddest results of fear is the way it damages our potential. We can’t really be our best when crippled by fear. And I can think of two occasions in the Bible when talented men lost their way because they were afraid.

Just after the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus sent His disciples away in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee because He wanted some time alone for prayer and rest. While He was on the mountain, the disciples were away a fair distance when the strong wind and waves started to hit their boat. It was dark and cold, sometime between three and six o’clock in the morning, when suddenly they saw someone walking towards them on the water. It was frightening moment. They thought it was a ghost, but the familiar voice of Jesus reassured them. “Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27). Jesus was walking towards them in their time of need, and Peter decided he would come to his Master, and got out of the boat and started walking towards Him. But he didn’t last long, and started to sink, because he was afraid. At least Peter had

the courage to attempt the impossible, because he had been invited to come. “You of little faith” said Jesus, “why did you doubt?”

I’m sure there have been many of us who have been glad to find Jesus alongside in the troubled waters of life. We may have stepped out towards Him in faith, only to be intimidated and fall because of life’s problems. If we take our eyes off Jesus, it’s inevitable that our fears and circumstances will loom larger than they ought.

Matthew tells the story of the talents, about a man who was given one talent and told to invest it. Instead, he dug a hole and buried his master’s money in the ground. He was afraid to take a risk in case he failed. He acted irresponsibly with something which was entrusted to him. Fear immobilised him, and it cost him dearly in the end. When the master returned to find out how his investments had gone, this man sadly said “I was afraid, and I hid your talent in the ground.” A wasted opportunity, never to be regained.

I wonder how many people have ignored opportunities in life which they later regret. Perhaps that’s happened to you – some mistake or “skeleton in the cupboard” has crippled the way you look at life. Or life today is not easy, and you sense some disaster is about to happen. And then others fear their health will not hold out, and this cripples their thinking today. What if I lose my mind, or my family put me in a nursing home against my will?

I like the lovely words of Proverbs chapter 3 which says, “When you lie down you will not be afraid; your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked. For the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared” (vv 24-26).

Let’s face our fear and identify it. Take a sheet of paper and write down the details of your fear. What is it? How does it affect you? How long have you been afraid? Try to separate the imaginary fears from the real ones. So many of our fears are not grounded in fact, only imagination. And then ask God to help you locate the cause of your fears. There’s probably been some incident which happened years ago which has been pushed down into the subconscious and the lid is closed. God, through His Holy Spirit, can come and bring inner healing and release.

The author Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman wrote in his book *Peace of Mind*, “We master fear through faith – faith in the worthwhileness of life and the trustworthiness of God. Faith in the meaning of our pain and striving, and our confidence that God will not cast us aside, but will use each one of us as a piece of priceless mosaic in the design of His universe.”

If you’re still not sure, have a look at some verses from the Bible. Here’s God’s Word which says ‘Fear not.’ Indeed, life without God can be fearful, as people like Abraham and Moses found out. God said to Abraham “Fear not, Abram. I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward.” To the Israelites, who were about to cross the Red Sea Moses said “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” To Joshua who faced an enormous challenge, God said “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God’ will be with you wherever you go.”

Let’s take to heart Jesus words in Mark 5 when He said “Do not fear, only believe.” It’s a matter of faith and trust in Jesus as Saviour. Perhaps what we need to do is “let go and let God” – release those fears, one by one, to Him who is quite adequate in dealing with any of our problems. It’s also good to find a trusted friend

or counsellor who can be a confidant in times of difficulty: talk out your fears, and allow that friend to pray with you. Remember, that where God is there is no fear.

The Scriptures also tell me that “there is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). The more I focus on God’s love for me, the less fearful and apprehensive I am. Can you remember your first encounter with death? Perhaps it was a pet cat or dog who was with you for years, and it got old and had to be put to sleep. Or a close friend or relative died. Everyone is deeply upset, and there is a rise of fear attached to a loss like this.

When talking about fears, I think the greatest fear we have is death and dying. No one likes to be reminded that one day they will die. I recall someone writing “Some people are so afraid to die that they never begin to live”. And I’m sure that’s true. No one gets off this planet alive – death is inevitable. Not everyone is as positive about their impending death as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was. In prison and facing execution he said “Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom.” Only a person confident in his faith could say such a thing.

In his book *The Road Less Travelled*, Dr Scott Peck said that most of our fears are really a fear of death. He said “It’s natural to be afraid of death. It is a consequence of our existence.” Instinctively, we want to stay alive. Death is the greatest mystery of all. Even surrounded by hundreds of people when you die, you must pass through death yourself.

We recoil from the idea of death, but someone dies each second of each day. You probably have lost someone close to you. The Bible says “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement” (Hebrews 9:27). But we need not be fearful about man’s greatest enemy. For the Christian faith says death is merely a *departure*. The apostle Paul said, “the time has come for my departure” (2 Timothy 4:6). The original Greek word for “departure” was used to describe a vessel with its anchor pulled up and set loose from its moorings, and set sail. That’s how death is described in the Bible, as we are set free from sickness or sudden death. The anchor is weighed and set sail for a golden shore.

It prompted Isaac Watts to write the famous lines in his hymn:

There is a land of pure delight where saints immortal reign;  
Infinite day excludes the night, and pleasures banish the pain.

Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you,” and we can be confident of His words. He also said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live, even though he dies. Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die” ( John 11: 25).

If you still have trouble understanding or fearing death, here’s something else the Bible says. Paul said to Timothy “Our Saviour Christ Jesus has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel ( 2 Tim 1: 10). Wouldn’t it be a release not to worry about death? It’s not a pleasant thought, because we’re not sure how it will happen, but to be confident of entering Heaven brings a wonderful feeling of confidence and peace. In fact, it can change the way we look at life. As a committed Christian, you can say, “Death is not the end of my life after all. I am born to live in two worlds, and when death closes the door to life, it opens a door to a new life.”

Jesus said “Whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; but he has crossed from death to life”. At the heart of the Christian faith is this belief that death is not a tragedy, but a transformation to a higher realm of life and service and worship.

That’s why making our peace with God is such an important decision. If we put our trust in Jesus, we can face death in a certain hope that in that crucial moment, God will take care of us in the same way He took care of Jesus 2000 years ago. Everything will be alright. God will look after the details) but we do need to learn to trust in God, our Heavenly Father. The name “Immanuel” means “God with us.” Just as God is with us before death, He will be with us after death. We really are never alone.

John Bunyan’s classic *Pilgrim’s Progress* describes the journey of a person seeking God, and the details the struggles he encounters after becoming a Christian. The main character was called “Pilgrim,” and along the journey of life he meets many people including “Hopeful.” His name is changed to “Christian,” and at the end of their journey, they come across a wide river separating them from the celestial city. It was the river of death, and Christian was terrified. As he waded across, his feet couldn’t feel the bottom and he started to drown. But then he thought of the words of the King, “When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you” (Isaiah 43:2). His feet touch the bottom, and crossing to the other side was not so terrifying. And so it is for us. If we have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, death is only a temporary loss.

It’s not the presence or absence of fear that defines who you are. It’s the way you respond to the fears you have. It would be nice not to have fears, but with God’s help, fears need not control you. It’s all about making a choice. Blaise Pascal once said “If you knew, really knew, how much God loved you, not one fear would remain in your heart.” Why? Because when we have the unshakeable conviction that we are deeply loved by God, we can face every situation with calmness and confidence. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, God is still in complete control.

*Heavenly Father, we admit that sometimes our fears get out of control. We go through life with the chain of fear wrapped around our heart, and we need Your help. Turn Your spotlight, dear Lord, on the cause of my fears and show me what to do, Help me realise that the more Your love flows in, the more fear flows out. Keep me so aware of Your great love that no fear can take root in my heart. This I ask in Jesus Name. AMEN.*