

ME AND MY INSECURITIES, Pt 4

What's Ahead for Me?

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Even if we've never heard of Heaven or Hell, we recognize that we've escaped punishment repeatedly; we've gotten away with mistakes and misdeeds. No one noticed. No one caught us. Or, they asked the wrong questions and we didn't have to tell the awful truth. Or, they believed our lies (or pretended to). Or they just couldn't bring themselves to punish us.

Maybe we believe in karma (a teaching originating in Hinduism: every deed is the cause of a corresponding effect), or simply think that "what goes around, comes around." We find in ourselves an innate fear that we will eventually "get ours," that one way or another, we must pay for our misdeeds.

Insecurity

Feelings of insecurity may be triggered by many different circumstances, but, overall, insecurity is the result of harboring fear in our hearts.

In previous sermons I have spoken about the four most common sources of insecurity:

- Fear of lack ("What about me?")
- Fear of conflict ("Must we fight?")
- Fear of loss ("I can't live without *that!*")

Today, I'll focus on the fourth:

- Fear of punishment ("What's ahead for me?")

These fears are inevitable; everyone is familiar with them. We develop various ways of dealing with them—some are helpful, but most are ineffective. However, God offers *real answers* to the fears you face. Let's consider together His answer to your fear of punishment.

First Attempts

Apart from God, our first attempt to deal with the fear of punishment is avoidance, like the psalmist on one occasion:

Psalm 55:5 *Fear and trembling overwhelm me,
and I can't stop shaking.*

⁶ *Oh, that I had wings like a dove;
then I would fly away and rest!*

⁷ *I would fly far away
to the quiet of the wilderness.*

Paralysis

Failing that, we become paralyzed, like Job, who lamented:

Job 7:13 *I think, 'My bed will comfort me,*

and sleep will ease my misery,'

¹⁴ *but then you shatter me with dreams*

and terrify me with visions.

¹⁵ *I would rather be strangled—
rather die than suffer like this.*

¹⁶ *I hate my life and don't want to go on living.
Oh, leave me alone for my few remaining days.*

Searing Heat

A common path to recovery is to cauterize our conscience. After all, our conscience is responsible for keeping us aware of this frightening prospect.

Romans 2:15 They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right. ¹⁶ And this is the message I proclaim—that the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone's secret life.

So, how can we disable that nagging voice?

1 Timothy 4:1 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

Abandoning the faith and retraining our conscience seem like plausible options. But these offer no help to the committed follower of Christ, who *“must be committed to the mystery of the faith now revealed and must live with a clear conscience”* (1 Timothy 3:9).

Island Living

Unable to abandon their faith, many prefer to isolate instead. They say, “You don't have to go to church to be a Christian.” That is true, so far as it goes. But to grow as a Christian and to conduct yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ, you must be in community, not isolation.

John Donne has written:

*“No man is an island, entire of itself.
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...
Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.”*

Five days after the World Trade Center buildings in New York collapsed from a terrorist attack, professor of international relations Fred Halliday wrote for the British paper, The Observer: “All religions have texts that can be used to justify terror. We have to trust, instead, in international law,” because, as he concluded, “[The] most fitting [analogy] in the light of the global repercussions of these events, and as an antidote to nonsense from East and West about cultural clash, [is found in] the words of John Donne: 'No man is an island.' The issues raised by 11 September confront everyone on this earth.”

Isolation is functionally impossible politically; it is also impossible spiritually. We can no more hide from God than Adam and Eve, who imagined that bushes could conceal them from His eyes. No physical or psychological barriers can do so.

Every barrier we erect becomes our own prison house. If we keep what's out there from coming in, we also keep ourselves from getting out.

Any person's isolation from the body of Christ diminishes me, because we are one body. My isolation from the Church diminishes the Church and the work of Christ. It is not a viable option.

In any case, neither isolation nor security measures can remove our fear; they cannot make us relax. Tension may shift to a lower gear, but it does not disappear; we just learn to live with it. It becomes our emotional baseline. And that is depressing.

The real answer is to turn to God, to receive the Savior He has sent, Jesus Christ.

Take It to Mediation

Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel wrote frequently about divine punishment. Their words, though biblical, can terrorize us today, if we fail to recognize a major difference between the First Covenant and the Second.

*Isaiah 13:11 "I, the Lord, will punish the world for its evil
and the wicked for their sin.
I will crush the arrogance of the proud
and humble the pride of the mighty.*

Those words are true, and still to be fulfilled. However, if we imagine that every bad thing that happens or every time our efforts meet resistance is a result of such prophecy, life will become frustrating, frightening, and futile.

These words were also penned by Isaiah, foretelling a new day:

*Isaiah 54:9 "Just as I swore in the time of Noah
that I would never again let a flood cover the earth,
so now I swear
that I will never again be angry and punish you.
10 For the mountains may move
and the hills disappear,
but even then my faithful love for you will remain.
My covenant of blessing will never be broken,"
says the Lord, who has mercy on you.*

They introduce a distinct relationship with those who make a covenant of faith with God, so that we may say with the psalmist:

*Psalms 103:8 The Lord is compassionate and merciful,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.
9 He will not constantly accuse us,
nor remain angry forever.
10 He does not punish us for all our sins;
he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve.*

Even Job, writing nearly 4,000 years ago, foresaw God's intervening mediation as his only hope:

*Job 9:32 "God is not a mortal like me,
so I cannot argue with him or take him to trial.
33 If only there were a mediator between us,*

someone who could bring us together.

³⁴ *The mediator could make God stop beating me,
and I would no longer live in terror of his punishment.*

³⁵ *Then I could speak to him without fear,
but I cannot do that in my own strength.*

We need a Savior! And God has given one.

End of Days

Punishment is only mentioned by Jesus six times in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and not once in Mark or John — and it is always in the future, in the end of days.

Matthew 25:41 “Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons...

⁴⁶ *“And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”*

Isaiah had prophesied the same:

Isaiah 28:21 *Look! The Lord is coming from heaven
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.*

Isaiah 66:16 *The Lord will punish the world by fire
and by his sword.
He will judge the earth,
and many will be killed by him.*

Paul affirmed it:

2 Thessalonians 1:7 *He will come with his mighty angels,⁸ in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power.*

And to whom does this type of judgment come? To those “who don't know God” and “refuse to obey the Good News.” But that's not you, is it?

Covenant of Grace

In the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit has said:

1 John 4:16 *God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.¹⁷ And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.*

¹⁸ *Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.*

Sometimes, even *my* life feels like a house of cards. I often think that I do not pray sufficiently, and do not read God's Word enough. I fear exposure and the collapse of my ministry and my life. I do not express these fears easily (though I mention them today in public).

Sometimes, those thoughts may be based on real and present failures, but most of the time they are imaginary: a vague, haunting feeling of inadequacy and the leftover memories of failures long past (and previously forgiven).

I, too, must remember the cosmic shift that Jesus accomplished by His death and resurrection, and what Christ has done for me personally in my new birth. I have to “cast down imaginations” and re-view my faith in God’s covenant of unfailing love.

Don’t let ancient history (the Bible’s or your own) hobble you. Deal with your past and then leave it in the past. When the devil carts it up to the present, where it no longer belongs, tell him to eat it for lunch.

The fear of punishment should have no place in the life of a follower of Jesus. We have passed from death to life. Resist such fears in faith. Put your trust in God.

Trust in His eternality (He knows the future, including yours). Trust in His goodness, His kindness toward you. Trust in His care, His promise to provide. Trust in His power, and His ability to act on your behalf.