

## **HOW TO AVOID GIVING IN TO FEAR**

*51 Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek Jehovah. Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn. <sup>2</sup>Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When he was only a single individual I called him; I blessed him and caused him to multiply. <sup>3</sup>Jehovah will comfort Zion, he will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the garden of Jehovah. Joy and gladness shall be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.*

*<sup>4</sup>Listen to me, O my people; pay attention to me, O my nation. I will provide instruction and I will establish my justice as a light for the nations. <sup>5</sup>My righteousness is approaching, my salvation has gone forth. My arm shall judge the nations. The islands look to me in hope and trust in my arm [for salvation]. <sup>6</sup>Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth below—the heavens will vanish like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment; likewise, the inhabitants of the world will die. But my salvation shall last forever and my righteousness shall not be abolished. <sup>7</sup>Listen to me, you who are acquainted with righteousness—the people who have my law in their heart: Do not fear the reproach of men, nor be alarmed by their reviling; <sup>8</sup>for they will become like a moth-eaten garment and the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness shall last forever and my salvation shall remain through all generations.*

*<sup>9</sup>Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of Jehovah! Awake, as [you did] in days gone by, [as you did] in the generations of long ago. Was it not you who chopped Rahab to pieces? [Was it not you] who thrust through that monster [with a sword]? <sup>10</sup>Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep? [Was it not you] who turned the depths of the sea into a roadway so that the redeemed could pass through it? <sup>11</sup>Those who have been ransomed by Jehovah will return; they will enter Zion with singing, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them; sorrow and sighing will flee away. <sup>12</sup>I, I am the one who comforts you. Who do you think you are—you who are afraid of [mortal] man who shall die, [afraid of] a son of man who is made like a blade of grass? <sup>13</sup>You have forgotten Jehovah your Maker, the one who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. [Why do] you live in constant fear every day because of the fury of the oppressor as he aims to destroy you? [But] what has become of the fury of the oppressor? <sup>14</sup>The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in the dungeon, nor will they go hungry; <sup>15</sup>because I am Jehovah your God, the one who churns up the sea so that its waves roar—Jehovah of hosts is my name. <sup>16</sup>I have put my words in your mouth and covered you in the hallow of my hand—to set the heavens in place and to lay the foundation of the earth, and [now] to say to Zion, You are my people. (Isa. 51:1-16)*

### **Introduction**

Suppose you found yourself in the middle of this scenario. While on a tour of Israel, your bus is hijacked by some Palestinian terrorists. You are terror-stricken. You begin to panic. But at that very moment the LORD shakes you by the shoulders and demands, “How dare you be afraid of these mortal men!?”

That is precisely how the LORD deals with Israel's fears:

*Who do you think you are—you who are afraid of [mortal] man who shall die, [afraid of] a son of man who is made like a blade of grass? <sup>13</sup>You have forgotten Jehovah your Maker, the one who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. (Isa. 51:12b-13a)*

Many times we lose sight of Christ, becoming pre-occupied with the threats we face, and consequently we give in to our fears. But the message of Isaiah 51 is this: Because the LORD is our God, we must not deny Him by succumbing to our fears.

### **I. Be Encouraged by God's Faithfulness (Isa. 51:1-6)**

These Old Testament people of God are instructed to look back to their physical and spiritual forefather, Abraham: *"Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn. <sup>2</sup>Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth"* (vs. 1b-2a.) They are to consider their spiritual forefather in order that they may renew their confidence in the LORD, being reminded of His faithfulness and power. With regard to their forefather Abraham, the LORD reminds the present generation: *"When he was only a single individual I called him; I blessed him and caused him to multiply"* (vs. 2b.) We, too, are being reminded of the fact that the LORD protected Abraham, preserved him, provided for him, and fulfilled His promises to him. Note the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 22:32, where He quotes the LORD as declaring, *"I am the God of Abraham."* The use of the present tense indicates abiding faithfulness on the part of God and a continuing covenant relationship with Abraham.

Just as the LORD watched over Abraham and fulfilled His promises to him, so shall the LORD do the same for Abraham's spiritual descendants—those who, like Abraham, *"pursue righteousness"* and *"seek Jehovah"* (vs. 1a.) The LORD now proceeds to assure His covenant people of this truth:

*Jehovah will comfort Zion, he will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the garden of Jehovah. Joy and gladness shall be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. (Isa. 51:3)*

Isaiah here is envisioning the condition of the land of Israel at the time when God's people were taken away into the Babylonian exile. He then looks beyond that ordeal to the time of their deliverance and restoration to the Promised Land, the time when the LORD will comfort Zion and restore her. Note: Isaiah views that restoration from the Babylonian captivity as a type, or living model, of the final restoration of the redeemed to the LORD in a renewed creation, the full and final manifestation of the kingdom of God, the ultimate Zion. Note, too, that the things God will do for Zion (His dwelling place and that of His people) are expressed in

the past tense as accomplished facts, thereby expressing the certainty of God's covenant faithfulness to His people.

Addressing these Old Testament believers as *"my people"* and *"my nation,"* the LORD informs them of what the future holds. *"I will establish my justice as a light for the nations"* (vs. 4.) In light of New Testament revelation where there is revealed the fulfillment of this promise, we find that the LORD's justice, inflicted upon Christ at Calvary, is revealed to the Gentile peoples as the way of salvation. *"My righteousness is approaching; my salvation has gone forth"* (vs. 5a.) His righteousness is about to be revealed in the act of final judgment (it is *"approaching"*), but before that day, His offer of salvation through the gospel shall go forth into the whole world. *"My arm shall judge the nations. The islands look to me in hope and trust in my arm [for salvation]"* (vs. 5b.) The LORD shall finally come to judge the whole earth, and when He comes there shall be found, even in the distant islands, those who have responded to the gospel and are waiting for Him as their Savior. *"The heavens will vanish like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment; likewise, the inhabitants of the world will die"* (vs. 6a.) This present creation, together with all the people that are a part of it, shall be swept away in the righteous judgment of God. Revelation 6:12-17 presents a graphic description of that day:

*I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red<sup>13</sup> and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. <sup>14</sup>The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. <sup>15</sup>Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. <sup>16</sup>They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! <sup>17</sup>for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:12-17)*

The LORD goes on to declare, *"But my salvation shall last forever and my righteousness shall not be abolished"* (vs. 6b.) The LORD assures us that He will save His people with an everlasting salvation; His covenant faithfulness shall prevail and endure forever.

How do we avoid giving in to our fears? We gain the victory and are enabled to stand faithful when we are encouraged by God's faithfulness:

*Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; surely, I will help you; surely, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isa.41:10)*

## II. Heed God's Command that We Not Give In to Our Fears (Isa. 51:7-8,12-16)

In verse 7 the LORD is again addressing those who *"are acquainted with righteousness—the people who have my law in their heart."* Here is true conversion to Jesus the Messiah, characterized by a deep affinity with and affection for the righteousness of God. This affinity with Christ and His righteousness causes us to encounter *"reproach"* (scorn and censure) and *"reviling"* (verbal abuse) at the hands of sinful men. This in turn tempts us to become fearful and dismayed—i.e.; to experience a loss of ability to carry on because of terror or anxiety or great perplexity. But the LORD's counsel and command is that we not fear men and not succumb to such emotions: *"Do not fear the reproach of men, nor be alarmed by their reviling."*

In verse 8 the LORD gives His people a two-fold exhortation. On the one hand, they are not to overestimate the forces aligned against them, for we are told, *"they will become like a moth-eaten garment and the worm will devour them like wool."* That is to say, they shall disintegrate before the presence and the power of Almighty God, they cannot survive to perpetuate their evil against us. On the other hand, God's people must not forget the everlasting righteousness of the LORD our God: a righteousness that shall prevail against evil, a righteousness that shall uphold us in the face of evil and cause us to prevail—in His righteousness the LORD will not forsake us, He will cause us to share in His eternal salvation. By way of example: at a public school graduation, the American Civil Liberties Union threatened to take legal action against anyone who dared to offer public prayer on behalf of the graduates. Despite their threats, a pastor led the class in prayer. His wife later reported that at no time had she ever sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit more powerfully (Oostburg WI, 1993.)

In verse 12a the LORD emphatically identifies Himself as the One who comforts His people: *"I, I am the one who comforts you"*—He is the One who cares for us. As Isaiah has previously testified, *"He will tend his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom; he will gently lead the nursing ewes"* (Isa. 40:11.) Precisely because it is the LORD Almighty who pledges to comfort us and care for us, He is indignant that we should tremble in fear and retreat from a stand for righteousness:

*Who do you think you are—you who are afraid of [mortal] man who shall die, [afraid of] a son of man who is made like a blade of grass? <sup>13</sup>You have forgotten Jehovah your Maker, the one who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. (vs. 12b-13a)*

Do we fear man? Let us recognize that he is a mere mortal *"who shall die,"* he is made *"like a blade of grass"* that so easily perishes in the heat of the sun. Do we forget the LORD? Let us remember that He is the Almighty Maker and Sustainer of all things (vs. 13.) Let us be like the Psalmist who declares, *"I have set Jehovah always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved"* (Psl. 16:8.)

The LORD goes on to ask, *“Why do you live in constant fear every day because of the fury of the oppressor as he aims to destroy you?”* (vs. 13b) Here we find the people of God being exposed to the savage, demonic fury of an oppressor (the Babylonian empire), one who threatened to destroy them—but with great indignation the LORD demands, “Why do you fear him?” We so often fail to realize that both we and our oppressors are subject to the control of the LORD our God. Our oppressors can do nothing more than what our LORD ordains, and what He ordains is nothing other than what will contribute to our spiritual good and His glory:

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, even for those who are called according to his purpose ... <sup>35</sup>Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>Even as it is written, For your sake we are killed all the day long; we were accounted as sheep for the slaughter. <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:28,35-39)*

Once again the LORD goes on to ask, *“[But] what has become of the fury of the oppressor?”* He answers His question by asserting, *“The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in the dungeon, nor will they go hungry”* (vs. 13c-14.) The LORD points His people beyond the day of their oppressor to the day of their redemption; He assures His captive people, who presently cower before their oppressor, that they shall soon be set free—He further assures His people that they will be preserved and sustained. We are called as Christians to look beyond our oppressors to the day of our redemption when the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ is revealed in all of its fullness—and we are to live from that perspective, with that assurance, and draw upon that source of resurrection power to stand for Christ in the present. As the Apostle Paul exhorts the church, *“be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power”* (Eph. 6:10.)

Let us take to heart—as a source of comfort and confidence and courage—the words of verses 14-15. *“The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in the dungeon”*—those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ shall be preserved:

*... this is the will of him who sent me, [namely,] that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but should raise it up at the last day. <sup>40</sup>My Father’s will is that every one who looks to the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. (Jn. 6:39-40)*

The sure promise of God continues by saying, *“nor will they go hungry”*—the LORD shall prove Himself faithful to provide for His children in Christ Jesus. As

the Apostle Paul declares, *“my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 4:19.) Attached to these promises is the reason as to why we may have complete confidence in them: *“because I am Jehovah, your God ... Jehovah of hosts is my name”*—the promises are completely reliable because they are made by the LORD Himself.

How do we avoid giving in to our fears? We gain the victory and are enabled to stand faithful when we heed God’s command that we not give in to our fears:

*Do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread of it. <sup>13</sup>Jehovah of hosts, him you must sanctify; he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread—<sup>14</sup>and he will be a sanctuary [for you].* (Isa. 8:12b-14a)

### III. Call upon the LORD with Confidence (Isa. 51:9-11)

Being reminded of the promises of the LORD (as stated in verses 3-8), Isaiah is encouraged to call upon the LORD in prayer: *“Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of Jehovah!”* (vs. 9a.) The LORD is viewed as being “spiritual inactive” and His power as lying dormant, but now Isaiah calls upon the LORD to exert His almighty power on behalf of His people.

Isaiah reminds the LORD of His past works of power and grace on behalf of His people (vs.9b-10.) Egypt, (here identified as *“Rahab”*), had shown itself to be an insolent, arrogant nation, a great demonic monster; but the LORD slew that monster and cut it into pieces (vs. 9b.) The LORD has demonstrated Himself fully capable of removing the obstacles that stood in the way of His people and making a way for their salvation—verse 10 is a reference to the LORD miraculously parting the waters of the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus.

The plea for the LORD to rise up in power now turns into a prayer of praise. Isaiah expresses his confidence that the LORD will come to the rescue of His people and bring them safely to Himself:

*Those who have been ransomed by Jehovah will return; they will enter Zion with singing, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them; sorrow and sighing will flee away.* (vs. 11)

How do we avoid giving in to our fears? We gain the victory and are enabled to stand faithful when we call upon the LORD with confidence. Let us consider the LORD’s promise: *“Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ... <sup>20</sup>And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age’”* (Matt. 28:18, 20.) Let us heed the LORD’s command: *“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”* (Josh. 1:9.) Let us imitate the Psalmist: *“When I am afraid, I will trust in you”* (Psl. 56:3.)

## **Conclusion**

Does the giant specter of fear loom up before you today? Is it defiantly seeking to block your path? Does it attempt to wrap its tentacles around you in an effort to paralyze you and render you immobile? Does it threaten to blow you into retreat and into hiding with its sultry breath of intimidation? Will you allow yourself to be controlled by that specter of fear, rather than being obedient to Christ? ... you who have been set free by Christ in order to be faithful and obedient to Christ?

How can we avoid giving in to our fears? Isaiah 51 supplies us with three words of counsel: 1) Be encouraged by God's faithfulness; 2) Heed God's command that we not give in to our fears; and 3) Call upon the LORD with confidence.