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Sermon preached by Mr. J. K. Popham  
on Wednesday evening, 1st. October 1924

Text: Proverbs 29 v. 25

"The fear of man bringeth a snare: but  
whoso putteth his trust in the Lord  
shall be safe."

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Man is naturally a sociable and a dependent creature. Society is necessary for man, even according to God's word - "It is not good that the man should be alone." And relationships and positions in life bring about various communications between men, - interdependences - so that no man can really, practically, be said to be quite independent of others, but, as everything else that we possess and have, we have perverted, so have we, through sin, perverted this natural interdependence. Man has become, through sin, so perverted from the proper perspective of things, that he is now a person of extremes. Either he is, as one declared himself to be, - he feared not God, he regarded not God, nor feared man; or, he is a slave to man, - to the fear of man, - is moved about by the opinion of man. And this Scripture before us declares that the fear of man brings, as attaching to it, the evil, - it brings a snare - and therefore it is implied, that there is such a thing as being delivered from the fear of man; it is implied also that God approves of it as a proper and a gracious independence of man. We have many instances of the truth of this word, "The fear of man bringeth a snare," - in the Scriptures, which, for illustration, let me notice one or two of them.

Take first, the case of Abraham. He feared that he would be killed when he went into Egypt; feared the Egyptians, lest, for the sake of his comely wife he should be killed: and the consequence of that fear of man was, through sin in him, that he lied and declared that Sarah was his sister. To come to the New Testament, take the case of Peter, a saint and an apostle of Jesus Christ. He, as a disciple of the Lord Jesus and as an apostle, feared God, but such was the fear of man in him, - the slavish fear of man, - that, as you know, he dissembled in the church. He had company and had liberty of conversation with Gentile Christians, but when the Jews came from James, then he dissembled and separated himself, made out that he

did not really receive the Gentiles, - and for this Paul withstood him to the face because he was to be blamed. Take the case also of Peter, the same great believer and blessed apostle of Christ, when afraid Christ was to be tried and brought to judgment, Peter, through the fear of man, had a snare, such a snare as made him deny his Lord and Master and Redeemer, and with an oath and a curse, he said that he knew Him not. And take too, the case of Pilate when having declared the innocence of the Lord Jesus Christ - the Man, - then the people clamoured against Christ, clamoured for Him to be delivered to be crucified, declaring that if he let Jesus go he would be an enemy to Caesar, then Pilate delivered Him up to be crucified, and this instance with others which will occur to your memory, shows us the terrible consequence of "the fear of man," which the Lord here, by the wise man, declares, "bringeth a snare" and some of us, in our own hearts and experience, - what snares the fear of man has brought us into. It moved even Peter, a godly man, to dissemble; it moved him even to deny the Lord Jesus. It moved Abraham, the friend of God, to tell a lie to the Egyptians. It moved Pilate to deliver up Jesus, though he had before asserted that he found nothing wrong in Him, and therefore it is a terrible thing to be under the power of this fear. It may have this movement in you for instance, . . . . a person in a religious profession may fear one slavishly, whom he thinks has more experience than he, and if the fear of God, - the tender fear of God, the keeping power of God, - be not in his heart, alive and lively, that slavish fear of man may lead him to pretend, to claim what he knows not, for the fear of man; make his experience tally, or try to, with that of another Christian whom he admires, and this is very solemn, exceedingly terrible. The sin of presumption is a great sin; the great transgression against which the Psalmist prayed thus, "Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression." O but who can deliver himself from this "fear of man?" You may say you fear not man, - you may boldly stand up and declare it - and you may all the while, even in making that profession, be a slave to it. It is too much for us. Every evil is too much for us in our own strength. You may also come under the fear of man as to what he may do to you - fear his revilings. Man does not like to be reviled. The Lord Jesus bore the revilings of men, and "when He was reviled, reviled not again." We,

if we are reviled, are apt to revile again. If we are threatened, we are apt to threaten those who threaten us. God says, "Vengeance belongeth unto Me:" and in many ways we may be ensnared by this "fear of man." The preacher may be ensnared by it, so as to see, - when he preaches, or would do, - see only man, and if one in preaching, sees only man, then his preaching would be but natural and not spiritual. It "bringeth a snare." Who can say how much preaching is barren, through the snare that is induced by the "fear of man?"

Now there is only one sovereign cure. Only one blessed deliverance possible from this ensnaring fear of man so as to bring about a gracious and proper independence of man, and that is, a knowledge of God. The alternative to this evil in the text is "But whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe." That is the alternative! There is no other alternative. If you think you are stout enough to fear no man and do not therefore fear God, that is not a real deliverance from this; you are under a worse evil even than these temporary falls that saints may have, into snares under the fear of man, but this is the deliverance, - "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe." Now if we are among those who put their trust in the Lord, truly we must know the Lord. You cannot trust an unknown God. You cannot put your trust in Him whom you are utterly ignorant of.

Then let us notice some particular things in God, which, as known - as being revealed - become in a sinner, in the soul, in the man, - a fearful man, - a power that brings him deliberately to put his trust in the Lord. And the first thing that I would mention, and that does come first in experience, is this - we are compelled, and sometimes we are enabled, deliberately to put our trust in the Lord, as a sin pardoning God. That must be first, because when you are in trouble, - when you are in trouble by the fear of man in some particular; when some difficulty confronts you and in that difficulty you fear even the man's self; then there comes up this, - 'I am a sinner ... I am a guilty man.' You look round for a refuge, and if you are distant from God; if you have guilt on your conscience; if the terms in which you are, in your experience with God, are not of that close nature which when the soul is healthy, the terms are: then what can you do? O, woe be to that man that is alone when he falleth into the snare through the fear of man; who is alone, - that is to say, - far off from God. He will destroy all them that are

far off from Him. But we do get far off, and sometimes troubles come to us when we are far off, and then we are brought to realise that the troubles are come to us because of our neglect of the throne of grace; then we are filled with guiltiness; then we have great fears, not now so much the slavish fear of man; that is swallowed up in a greater fear: and that is lest the Lord should never shine, lest the Lord should never permit you to call on Him again, lest He should put you away from His presence and take His Holy Spirit away from you. Then, to have faith in your heart, and that faith enlivened by the testimony of the Holy Spirit to this, - that the Lord our God is the God of salvation; that He is a God to whom there is none like, even a God that pardoneth iniquity and transgression and sin, - O it is a great thing to have that testimony brought afresh to such a person in such a case. And then there is a consequence in the heart; in the practice of that person; and this is the consequence: "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord." You will put your trust in that God that is manifested to you, declared to you as being a sin pardoning God, and we could never, - no sinner could properly and truly and spiritually put his trust in Him, - but for this truth. I never could. Guilt keeps a man from God. Guilt separates between the Lord and His people, so it is a very great and blessed thing to have faith in God in that which is declared of Him about sin - that He can be just, and yet forgive sin. But you may say and you may feel, that though you have believed in this, yet you have sinned so continually, have so often fallen away in your spirit and turned to vanity, that you wonder whether the Lord will forgive you; whether He will pardon you; whether you may, even in this case, trust in Him. It is not a light thing with a convinced person in trouble, to trust in the Lord. He is brought to it but not lightly. Then you will be thankful of this which is made known of the Lord, that He not only forgives once, but that He is said to be a God of pardons; that He will not only forgive once and refuse for every subsequent sin: and in this is brought out the faithfulness of God to His covenant, that covenant which the Lord Jesus settled and sealed and confirmed by His death. O my friends, when you are brought to this; when you are in trouble; when you fear life more than death it may be, in some particular things and ways; when you feel fearful lest this and that thing will overtake you; lest such and such a person will be permitted to do their worst concerning you; then, to be brought, - though guilty, and though your sins, you may see to have been very provocative, - to be

brought to believe in the covenant that is "ordered in all things, and sure" and that it is secured by the death of the Lord Jesus.

"Whoso putteth His trust in the Lord." ... And this is preliminary, if I might use the term, it is preliminary to a dealing with God in respect of particular troubles and fears and difficulties that may be upon you, for until this way is cleared you can have no access to God. You know this, some of you. We have in our hymn, the truth of the matter, where the hymnwriter says,

"With my burden I begin;  
Lord, remove this load of sin."

It must be cleared for access, - comfortable, profitable access, - to God. Then there will be this in God that is seen and believed in; received by faith: His almighty power! Power to deliver from the wrath of man; power to deliver from every snare; power to find, - to obtain access to, - the hearts of men; to turn them whithersoever He will, and this is a great point for faith to exercise itself upon, for it makes man what he is. It wont make you great and other men small, but it will make God great and all men small. You will see then, that what the Scripture says, is indeed true, "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field," and you will say, 'What can a blade of grass do? - it is as weak as I am.' Then you will, by seeing this power in God, put your trust in Him as a sin pardoning God, as a faithful God and as an Almighty God. 'Hast thou forgotten the Almighty arm that formed the earth and sky, and can an all creating hand grow weary or decay?' That is the expostulation of God in His word, with His poor fearful people, that "every day" fear "because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy," and O what a mercy it is, to have such terms, to be upon such terms with God, as to find Him to be thus toward you. For, Almightyness is terrible to a sinner as such, but when this Almightyness is seen to be in a sin pardoning God, in Christ, then how attractive it is, and how it induces this act of faith, - "putteth his trust in the Lord!"

But still there is another thing in God which becomes the object of faith sometimes, and that is His wisdom. You know, we may think, foolishly think, and prescribe to God a certain way of working. We may think He should deliver us in this way, that He

should make that way for us, but He will make His own way. He "will work, and who shall let it," - and who shall counsel Him? - and this is a great matter for faith. Sometimes, faith makes the soul, - the person, the fearful man, - so submissive to the Lord in view of His power and of His wisdom, that he can say, laying his case before the Lord, 'Lord, do as seemeth good in Thy sight. Here I am Lord, Thou knowest my trouble, my difficulty; Thou knowest my fears and my needs; do work, do manifest forth Thy glory, do make bare Thine arm.' - "Put on strength, O arm of the Lord," - 'art Thou not almighty, art Thou not infinitely wise?' And if it please not the Lord to obtain access to the hearts of men to turn them in the way you think they should be turned, and you prove your own powerlessness to turn them by any of your own arguments, then to trust in the Lord to defend you. "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe." One said in a hymn,

"Thou art the ever-living God,  
Were all the nations dead."

and my friends, this is true, that if our case stands well and straight with God, not because we are sinless, but because we have been led by the way that the ransomed shall pass over from sin and trouble and fear of man and every evil and from hell fire, but then, I say, if we have been shown that way, then who can harm us, who can harm him that is hidden "in the secret place of the Most High?" The only thing we need to fear, - and it would be a mercy if we were brought deliberately to it, - is sin. But O what a power it needs to bring us to it, even divine power; the power of faith, the work of faith, wrought in us by the power of the Holy Ghost. This alone can give us so to view our fellow men, time, devils and all evils, all difficulties; in their proper subordination to God.

The Psalmist in one place you know, said, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" 'But,' you may say, 'how can I dare presume to adopt that attitude?' Well, you cannot adopt it, but the Lord can put you into it, and all that, is needful for Him to do, that is, for Him to show Himself to you, for Him to speak to you and declare His name to you, and that would do it. You could not help then inwardly saying it, "The Lord is my light," - you have not any other light of life, - "and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Can you go with the Psalmist? Can you sometimes say you will not fear? Though you walk in the midst of trouble, He will revive

you again. When we have cause to fear some men and our soul case is lean and ill, then we have high and great fears, and then what? To whom will you go then, - to which of the saints will you turn then? None of them. No, they cannot be a refuge, but there is a refuge even then, - in God! I have known it, and it is this: - ashamed though you are by your thriftless state of soul, there is this in God, "I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon," and "revive as the corn." This is in God, and from God, and so, known. There is this in the Lord which does call forth into exercise this deliberate putting of the trust in Him, - His word. If you can trust the promise, if you can trust a promising God, why, my dear friends, a promise of three or four words put into your heart at any time of your life, will be revived in times of trouble, so that God will be in the promise and you will say, 'I trust a faithful promise-performing God.' Say the Lord has said this to you, "I will not fail thee!" Now you may in days past have had some need of the support of that word, but, perhaps today you have greater need of it, more source of real need of the true experience of that word than ever you have had before, and you have, in your apprehension, less merit in you for the inducement to God to fulfill it than ever you had. So emptied out of merit, that you hardly think the Lord God could do anything kind to you. Now when the Spirit renews that word in your heart, in a dire necessity, how great it makes the faithfulness of God to His word and you say, "I will trust and not be afraid." 'Though I am a sinner, though I have lived at a great distance from God, though I have often forgotten Him, though I have given attention to vanity, and have neglected the Lord, yet, He is the same, and I will trust in His promise.' "Hath He said, and shall He not do it?" And my friends, there will be an influence in this; there will be a very solemn and blessed influence in this, for when a person utterly and spiritually trusts in the Lord, there is a sanctifying power in his heart. It is not a lightsome carelessness. That may be with a loud and noisy profession of confidence which comes from hell and not from heaven, but when there is this humble confidence wrought in a trembling sinner, there is a sanctifying power, a humbling power, a power that has in it something of the unction of redemption. Tenderness there is in it, a remembrance of the Lord Jesus, a remembrance of Him who was the Sin-bearer, a remembrance of Him who was Himself reviled, and reviled not again, a remembrance of whom it is written, "by whose

stripes ye were healed," and this brings tenderness into the conscience. This brings humility into the mind, this brings love forth from the heart to the Lord. It brings healing, brings a gracious confidence, it brings strength, it brings submission to the Lord's will, it brings contentment with such things as you have, "for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." What more can you have, what more can you want? You say, 'I could be out of all trouble.' Well, that is to come. But, what if the Lord is with you in trouble according to that word? Oh, do observe it, for it means trouble. - "I will be with him in trouble; and I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him My salvation." And when the Lord puts such words as these under your sinking soul, it does produce the wonderful and mysterious confidence that makes you feel an independence of man, - you do not now slavishly fear men. Very naturally disposed to it you may be, - very much. Because you may feel to have the fear of man, you do not now, as viewing God, fear man in that slavish way, but take the men you fear, to this great God and ask Him to manage them for you, and to manage you. And I do feel this, - often I have said it, and oftener and oftener felt it, - the man that I fear most, is myself, and it is that man that I am compelled to take to the Lord to manage.

"Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe," and there is a sense of safety sometimes. "The Lord is on my side;" "--- I will not fear what flesh can do unto me." You may say it, and include in that your own flesh; fear at times lest your own fleshly part will hurry you into some sin and cause you entirely to forsake the Lord. When the Lord enables you to eye His power, - His keeping power, - His faithfulness to His promise, then you will say, "I will not fear what flesh can do unto me." He "shall be safe," . . . and this safety is of a very particular kind. The margin reads - "He shall be set on high." His "life is hid with Christ in God," as Paul says to the Colossians, and O what safety is there! And this brings out into the soul's little experience, - it brings it out, - the great and mysterious truth of the union that is between a poor, fearful, sinful believer and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is his safety! The Head is in heaven and if the Head is safe, the body is safe. Not safe from injury; not safe from trouble; not safe from some inconveniences; not safe even from sin, in respect of the committing of it; but safe first, as to life. "Your life is hid with Christ in God," and when you have some little sweet feeling of this, you wont

be careless as to how you walk as a member of Christ. No, - it wont make you say, 'Well, I am safe and nothing else matters.' You want to be something more than safe in respect of life. You want to be safe in this particular, - kept from falling! And the Psalmist trusted in the Lord in this particular when He said, "Thou hast delivered my soul from death, wilt thou not keep my feet from falling that I may walk before God in the land of the living." You want keeping. The more you trust in the Lord properly, and truly, and spiritually, the more you will want to feel and experience His goodness and His power and His love and the fulfilment of His faithful word in you. It is not trust that saves; that declares, and then goes to sleep and forgets God. That is not patience. No, that is carelessness. That is unbelief. Faith looks and watches and waits and seeks, and is not satisfied without some experience of the keeping power; of the faithful word in the fulfilment of it; of the Lord in the person's life; and this is a very particular thing, because we are hastening on to the end, and although our life's safety depends not upon the amount of communion we have with the Lord here, yet it does betray a coldness; it does betray great unbelief and unkindness, when a person is willing to live out his life in a poor deathly way. One in a hymn complains like this -

"Dear Lord, and shall we ever live  
At this poor dying rate?"

Now the Lord uses some troubles to make people diligent; to stir them up into an activity and a deliberation in putting their trust in Him, and this is very merciful. This is one of the uses that God puts trouble to, in the cases of his people, whereas in the cases of others, troubles come and either harden them or sink them down into despair, both of which extremes we are liable to, unless kept by the Lord. The Lord does sometimes lead in that way that the ransomed shall pass over, that way that the vulture's eye hath not seen, even the Way, Christ Jesus, and that is nearness to the Lord. There is an activity of faith then. There is a longing to walk near the Lord; to walk unto all pleasing. "Shall be safe." And this safety too I believe, is this. . . . When a man fears the influence of men and teachers in religion, - religious error, - that man having that fear upon him, and it being improper and slavish, he is brought into a snare; a snare, a weakness, a being carried about by the winds of doctrine. Then, when the Lord delivers him from that

snare, enabling him to put his trust in the Lord, as seeing that in the Holy Ghost there is an infallible teacher that can teach the truth to a fool so that the fool shall not err, then, that person is safe from falling into fatal errors, and O my friends, if you and I are brought through safely in this particular in this day of heresy; heresy that steals in; and heresy that comes in boldly; heresy that is so palatable to our reason; then, O what thankfulness we ought to feel to the Lord, what praises we shall render to the Lord for bringing us through, and giving us this infallible teacher. There is another thing too, in which this safety lies, it is in this. . . A man shall be safe from that false going about to establish his own righteousness. The Lord teaches men what their righteousness is worth and He teaches it sometimes by bringing them into trouble. He teaches it by showing them how their righteousnesses stink, and they do stink. They are filthy, and the teacher, the Holy Spirit, in bringing a man off from the fear of man and the snare that it brings, does sometimes so enable the sinner, - the person - to view and to trust in the merits of Christ's obedience, that he is safe from his own righteousness. You may think there is not much danger about righteousness. There is as much danger I believe through our sin in trusting to our own righteousness, as there is danger in committing actual sin. It is one thing that in the Scriptures is solemnly spoken of. If we are justified by our own righteousness, - going about to establish it as the Jews did, - then says the apostle Paul, "Christ is become of no effect unto you," and what an awful word that is! There is a way to hell by the gates of heaven and who can say how much religion some people have who will never enter into heaven, and I believe none will enter into heaven who are not utterly shaken out of, - removed from - trust in their own righteousness. He "shall be safe", who trusts in the Lord's. It is sin-proof; it is glorious; it is everlasting; and we trust in it for this - to be eternally justified! It is a great thing to be able to say before man, - of your conduct, - that none can condemn you, but that wont do before God; that wont bring comfort to a guilty conscience before God. So much is wrong in the spirit. So much is wrong; so little is faith; so much is unbelief. Then what do we want? . . . We want something that is perfect; we want something that we can never acquire, that we can never do; we want that which is spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, "The garments of salvation" and "the robe of righteousness" and this says the Apostle, shall be

"unto all and upon all them that believe," and believing has in it the act of trust.

"Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe." Safe from the anger of a sin avenging God; safe in the day of death. That enemy is disarmed to all who die in faith leaning upon the merits of the death and obedience and person of the Son of God. Safe in life from all fatal errors. Safe from true and real injury, - soul injury; safe from everything that really will bring evil. Safe he shall be! He shall be set up on high. O my friends, though we are in the world; though we have to do with the world; though we have the world in our hearts; though we are very needy and very weak and ignorant, there is a God in heaven, in human nature, His Son Jesus Christ, who is the life of His church. "Your life is hid with Christ in God." And if the Holy Spirit should descend from that fountain of light into your heart and mine, and lift us up to sit with Christ in heavenly things in faith here, from time to time, we should understand a little of what this is: - "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord" - shall be set on high, - "shall be safe." Safe from coveting things he has not, and safe from all necessities that really, would injure him, because all supplies are with the Lord. O what safety, what a fulness of safety there is in the Lord and of the Lord. "Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him."

May the Lord enable us to do it, and make Himself known to us in His sufficiency; in His love; in His compassion; in His faithful word and the power of it, so that we may feel as we go along, that notwithstanding the changes we have, and the troubles that we meet with, and the sins we are guilty of, this remains, God remains, Jesus Christ remains, the atonement He made remains, and that we are interested in Him.

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