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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

The title of this message is inspired by the famous gospel song by the same name. It is one of the most loved Christian songs in the world and was made famous by Ethel Walters, who used it as the title of her autobiography. Many other singers have recorded it and it enjoyed a revival when Lauryn Hill sang it in Sister Act 2. You know the song, but let's go behind the music.

"His Eye is on the Sparrow" was written by Civilla Martin, the wife of a Baptist Pastor. She described in her own words how she came to write the song. "In the spring of 1905, my husband and I were sojourning in Elmira, New York. We contracted a deep friendship with a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle—true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for over twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheel chair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to all who knew them. One day while we were visiting with the Doolittles, my husband commented on their bright hopefulness and asked them the secret of their joy in the midst of pain. Mrs. Doolittle's reply was simple: 'If His eye is on the sparrow, then I know He watches me.' The beauty of this expression of simple faith gripped my heart and that same evening I wrote the words for the song." The rest, as they say, is history. If you're discouraged, afraid of the future, or struggling with the problems of today, listen again to the words of this beautiful song: "Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart feel lonely, and long for heaven and home? When Jesus is my portion, a constant friend is He. His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me. His eye is on the sparrow; and I know He watches me. I sing because I'm happy. I sing because I'm free! His eye is on the sparrow; and I know He watches me. His eye is on the sparrow; and I know He watches me."

Of course, the lyrics of that song are taken from the words of Jesus. In light of this let's read the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 10:28-31:

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Reading the Bible is sometimes like tuning in to God's Animal Planet channel! Last week it was a message on sheep, snakes, and doves, and in this message He refers to sparrows. When Jesus used these simple word pictures and analogies they were to demonstrate important spiritual principles. The message Jesus is communicating to us today is, "Don't be afraid." He starts this section by saying, "Don't be afraid," and He concludes with the same message. What is it you're afraid of today? God has a message of reassurance and hope for you today. He's telling you that you don't have to be afraid. Jesus gives us three powerful reasons why you can say, "I'm not afraid."

(1) I'M NOT AFRAID, BECAUSE THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN IN THIS LIFE IS THE DEATH OF MY BODY—AND I AM AN ETERNAL SOUL!

Earlier in Matthew 10, Jesus sent out His disciples with the warning that they were going out like sheep among wolves, and there would be enemies who would arrest them and even kill them. But then He said, "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body."

Fear can be a debilitating force in your life. The Greek word for fear is "phobos" and there are at least 254 recognized forms of phobia. According to *Psychology Today*, the five most common fears among Americans are (1) Arachnophobia (fear of spiders); (2) Glossophobia (fear of speaking in public); (3) Aerophobia (fear of flying); (4) Claustrophobia (fear of confined spaces); and (5) Acrophobia (fear of heights).

Jesus told the disciples not to be afraid even though they faced the threat of death. Look at our most common fears. The common thread is the fear of death. We're afraid of spiders because we've heard of people being bitten by a poisonous spider and dying. We aren't really afraid of flying, we're afraid of crashing. We aren't really afraid of close spaces, but of suffocating. The only one of the top five phobias that doesn't threaten you physically is public speaking—and some people would rather die than give a speech!

Jesus says we don't have to fear those who can kill the body. With the continuation of terrorist attempts on Americans, most of us live with a nagging fear that there will be another attack sometime in the near future. Jesus is saying, "Don't be afraid—the worst they can do is kill the body."

I preached on this same passage 8 years ago when I was teaching verse by verse through Luke. I checked my records and do you know when I last preached on not being afraid because God is watching over us like He watches over sparrows? It was on September 16, 2001—five days after the 9/11 attacks on America. As you know my message schedule is to teach verse after verse. It was more than just a fluke coincidence that this passage was the one I was scheduled to preach on five days after we were attacked over 8 years ago.

I quote other people often, but with your indulgence I'd like to quote what I said eight years ago: "Insidious fear is drifting across our nation like an early morning fog over a lake. We've told our kids there is no monster under the bed—only to see again there are monsters that kill innocent civilians and think their god will reward them. The scene of civilian jets slamming into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon burning will be forever engraved upon our collective minds. Who can forget the sight of those two massive twin towers crumbling to the earth? America has been knocked down, but don't count her out yet. The terrorists have only stirred up a hornet's nest of righteous indignation. Like our Lord Jesus who suffered unimaginable pain and agony, I believe our nation will experience a resurrection of hope and a rebirth of Godly, moral values. If we seek God's face, I am convinced we will rise from the ashes and will once again stand as one nation under God."

I'm still hopeful that America will turn to God and that He will give us a powerful spiritual awakening.

There are hundreds of verses in God's Word encouraging us not be afraid. One of my favorites is

found in Psalm 27. This is a great verse to memorize and quote often: "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?" (Psalm 27:1-2)

Jesus is reassuring us today that we don't have to fear death because the worst thing that can ever happen in this life is the death of our body, and we are more than just a body: We are a soul. C.S. Lewis wrote: "You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body." Our soul lives inside our body. It's who we really are, our personality. And physical death cannot destroy our soul, because our soul will live on long after the stars have burned out and the universe has faded away.

Jesus said there is only thing we should fear. We should have a reverential awe of God because He has the power to destroy both body and soul in hell. To fear God is the beginning of wisdom. But fearing God doesn't mean cringing in terror before Him. It means having a loving respect for Him. My acrostic for FEAR when it relates to God is **F**ather **E**arns **L**ove and **R**espect. Surveys reveal that a vast majority of Americans believe there is a heaven and most of them really think they are going there. Only a small percentage of Americans believe there is a hell. Well, Jesus believed hell exists. Once you know Jesus you don't have to fear hell. The reason we share our faith with others is because we don't want *anyone* to spend eternity separated from God. So don't be afraid of any man and what he can do to do—have a holy, awe-inspiring reverence for God who is all-powerful.

(2) I'M NOT AFRAID, BECAUSE IF GOD CARES ENOUGH TO NUMBER MY HAIRS, HE CARES ABOUT THE OTHER DETAILS OF MY LIFE!

We all know that God so loved the world—collectively. But have you ever stopped to realize that the same God who put the stars in place loves you personally? He cares so much for you that Jesus said He has numbered the hairs on your head. Now I want to ask a question and anyone except a bald man may answer it: "How many hairs are on your head?" Do you even have a guess? Well, some hairologist counted. So "hair" are some hair statistics. If you are blonde (a real blonde) you have around 145,000 hairs; if you have black or brown hair you have about 120,000 hairs and if you're a redhead you only have 90,000. And God knows how many hairs are on your head, and it doesn't event tax His omniscience to do it.

I read recently that most humans can only see a maximum of seven items without counting. In other words, if I'm taking care of three children, I can look at the group and know there are three without counting. I can look at six or seven and know they are there without counting. But if I have 12 or 20 children to watch over I have to stop and count, or put them in four groups of five in order to keep up with them. I can recognize eight if they're in two groups of four, but mix them up and I have to count. What's the point? Our Father, in His unlimited omniscience, can look through this crowd and say, "94,894" without counting or "114,925" without counting or "three" without counting. And he can number our hairs as easily as I can say, "Three speakers on the steps."

The point is if God can number something as trivial as my hairs, then He is smart enough to know everything else about me as well. He not only KNOWS but He cares. The Bible says,

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7) Why do we sometimes think there are issues too trivial to bring to the Lord in prayer? We make a big mistake if we think there is anything too small or insignificant to bring to the Lord. If He cares about your hair, He cares about EVERYTHING in your life.

But Jesus didn't say God knows the number of your hairs, because a scientist with a microscope can count them. Jesus said every hair is *numbered*, that means each one has a special number, a unique designation. I've had a lot of haircuts in my life, but I've never once had a barber say to me, “Hey, I just want to let you know that hair number 947 has a split end.” I don't have my hairs numbered, but God does. The point is God knows things about you even you don't know. In other words, God knows you better than you know yourself!

The Psalmist declares: “Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar...How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.” (Psalm 139:1-2, 17-18) Wow! Not only does God count your hairs, He thinks about you so many times each day, the number exceeds the grains of sand on the beach. When I'm in Florida I love to walk on the sugar-white sands at Destin. There are gazillions of grains of sand, and sometimes when I'm walking I'll look at the sand and say, “There's another thought, there's another thought. Thank you God for thinking of me!” Here's another reason Jesus said, “Don't be afraid!”

(3) I'M NOT AFRAID, BECAUSE IF GOD CARES ABOUT A SPARROW WHO FALLS, HE WON'T STOP LOVING ME WHEN I FAIL!

Sparrows are some of the most plentiful, common birds in the world. Where you find people, you'll find sparrows. They only live in populated areas because they are scavengers of leftovers. Sparrows hop up to you at the outdoor restaurant and wait for crumbs. They aren't known for their beautiful colors or for their sweet songs. Jesus said two sparrows sell for a penny. A penny is our smallest coin, but the actual word Jesus used meant $\frac{1}{4}$ of a penny. In other words, two sparrows would sell for $\frac{1}{2}$ penny. In Luke Jesus said, four sparrows are sold for a penny, and the merchant throws in the fifth one for free, like a baker's dozen. They were cheap and common. It would make better sense if Jesus had said God knows when every eagle falls, because eagles are such majestic birds. But Jesus was making a point that God cares for the most common, unnoticed birds. Naturalists tell us that there are approximately 35,000 bald eagles in the U.S. and Canada. But who cares enough to count the sparrows? Only God.

We can easily imagine a little sparrow that is hatched and lives its life in obscurity and falls down dead after a few years; nobody on planet earth even notices or cares. But Jesus said not a single sparrow is forgotten by God. Jesus used this illustration to demonstrate how valuable we are to God. He says we are worth *more* than sparrows to God. That's good to know!

Now notice Jesus didn't say God knows when a sparrow *flies*, He said God notices when a sparrow *falls*. That means when it dies. And Jesus didn't say that God prevents sparrows from falling to the earth. He simply knows about it and cares. The truth is sometimes we fail and fall, and we think we have disappointed God and that He no longer cares for us. But God knows

when you fall, and He still loves you.

The Bible says, "The Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand." (Psalm 37:23-24) I remember when I was teaching Jenni and Laura Grace to learn how to walk. I didn't just say, "There's the sidewalk, walk to the end of it!" No. I realized it was a process that required me to coax them and catch them. When they tried and fell I didn't condemn them and tell them what rotten walkers they were. I caught them and told them, "Good job! Let's try again. You can do it! Good girl!" And when she started walking, I was there to hold her hand. If she started to fall, I just held her tighter and she held my hand tighter.

Spiritually speaking, we're all like preschoolers learning to walk. We're going to stumble and fall, but He has promised to uphold us with His hand. When we stumble He grips us even stronger and that's when we need to grip His hand even tighter.

The God of the Bible isn't some sinister tyrant who is watching over you just waiting for you to make a mistake so He can punish you. He is a loving Father who wants the very best for you.

You don't have to be afraid, because God has promised He will NEVER leave you nor forsake you. He watches over every sparrow that falls, so you can be certain He is watching over you!

I once read a story about a tribe of Native Americans with a unique practice for training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Before that night, he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. One particular young man was blindfolded and led many miles into the wilderness. He was instructed not to remove the blindfold for an hour. On this particular night, dark clouds obscured the moon and stars, and when he removed the blindfold all he could see was utter darkness. Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. He spent a terrifying night on the edge of panic, but he didn't leave. After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight began to lighten the eastern sky. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a long bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long.

How many times have you faced a scary situation and given in to fear? Wouldn't it have made a difference if you had know God was right there with you? Well, He is!

CONCLUSION

Preaching is funny in some ways. Sometimes I think I say something powerful and profound, and nobody really catches it. At other times I say something that I think is so simple and evident that nobody will even remember it, and that statement has a profound effect on people. It happened again last Wednesday night at WEBS. I was finishing up the passage from Revelation 1 where John had a vision of the glorified Christ. It was so awesome and amazing that John fell down on his face like a dead man. Then Jesus reached down and touched John on the shoulder and said, "Don't be afraid, John. It's me. I'm here with you."

Then I said, "There are many times in the Bible where God says, 'Don't be afraid.' Do you know how many times God says, 'Don't be afraid?' I think most people expected me to give a number. But I said, "God says, 'Don't be afraid' every time you are afraid." When you are knocked to your face in fear Jesus reaches down and touches you and says, "Don't be afraid, it's going to okay." Then I said the closing prayer to WEBS."

Since then I have had at least a dozen people email me, or see me in person and say something like, "Do you remember when you asked how many times God says, 'Don't be afraid at WEBS?'" Then they proceed to tell me they were struggling with fear over things like health, the health of family members, a job loss, or a financial problem. And they say, "When you said Jesus reached down and touched John's shoulder and said, 'Don't be afraid' I felt God touching me saying, 'It's going to be okay. I'm here with you. Don't be afraid.' And I want you to know that my fear vanished!"

For years I've enjoyed quoting a little poem that reminds me of the care the Lord has for each of us. It goes like this: Said the robin to the sparrow; "I'd really like to know; Why these anxious human creatures rush about and worry so." Said the sparrow to the robin, "I guess that it must be, that they have no Father such as cares for you and me." But we DO have a loving Father who cares about every detail of our lives.

So what is it that you're afraid of today? Jesus knows, and Jesus cares He is never going to leave you or forsake you. You can leave your fears behind and say, "If His eye is on the sparrow, I *know* he's watching over me!"

OUTLINE

I'M NOT AFRAID, BECAUSE:

1. THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN IN THIS LIFE IS THE DEATH OF MY BODY—AND I AM AN ETERNAL SOUL!

"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?" *Psalm 27:1-2*

2. IF GOD CARES ENOUGH TO NUMBER MY HAIRS, HE CARES ABOUT THE OTHER DETAILS OF MY LIFE!

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." *1 Peter 5:7*

3. IF GOD CARES ABOUT A SPARROW WHO FALLS, HE WON'T STOP LOVING ME WHEN I FAIL!

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