

Matthew 10:29-31

Introduction

We saw in our last study that the fear of man is a powerful thing – and especially the fear of what he can do to us. As Jesus sends us out into a hostile world where there is always the possibility of being scorned and maligned, of persecution and suffering, and even of being put to death for His name’s sake, He knows that fear will be one of our greatest enemies. So in verses 26-31 Jesus says three times, “have no fear of them... do not fear... fear not.”

“So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.” Despite all appearances to the contrary, in the providence of God the Gospel is always advancing, never retreating. It *will* be heard, and known, and believed among all the nations. So then, let us not cower in dark corners, but rather speak the truth in the light and proclaim the Gospel on the housetops.

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Calvin says that by these words Jesus intends to provoke and arouse all of His disciples to despise death as a light and trivial thing. All those who fear and tremble before God for His power to destroy a man (both body and soul) in hell are also the very ones who are free to trust and obey Him no matter what men may do. When we take hold of these words of Jesus by faith, we will have gone a long way towards extinguishing the fear in our hearts. But now in today’s study, Jesus will strike the death blow that will annihilate all fear once and for all for everyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear (faith).

First, though, I have to give a disclaimer. We’re going to talk about things in this study that are beyond our understanding and comprehension. Much of what we say will only raise a multitude of questions in our minds. Some of them may likely be trivial and idle speculations, but others will be very serious and legitimate. For right now, we will simply attempt a straightforward exposition of our text in Matthew chapter ten – leaving until our next study a more systematic approach to our topic and the questions that it raises. The risk that I am afraid we’re taking is that we may initially miss the power and beauty of these verses for all the questions we’ll be asking! So I would beg you to please leave these questions aside until the next chapter and simply allow yourself to be caught up into the wondrous truth of God’s Word – *by faith*.

I. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”

In Luke’s Gospel, we hear Jesus saying that five sparrows were sold for only two pennies (Luke 12:6). You probably have a note in your Bible which explains the fact that a “penny” was a Roman copper coin worth about 1/16 of a denarius (which was a day’s wage for a laborer). Let’s say that a laborer today earned ten dollars an hour (no benefits or union pay) and worked for eight hours. One/sixteenth of his wage is \$2.50. This means that one sparrow was worth \$1.25, and if you bought five, you could get each sparrow for a dollar apiece. Now the quality of living for a common laborer in the first century was far less that it is today (even at ten dollars an hour without benefits), so perhaps we could say that the cost of a sparrow would be the equivalent of

50 cents. Now what can you buy today for fifty cents? Sparrows were common, small, unimportant, and cheap. They were bought and sold en masse in the marketplace for food. In man's estimation, a sparrow isn't even a blip on the radar. And yet Jesus goes on to say:

II. **“And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.”**

What in the world does this mean? Is Jesus saying that of the billions of sparrows in the world, not one of them will ever die without God *knowing* it (NLT; NCV)? This is certainly true. God knows and is intimately aware of all things that happen in the world. But this *by itself* is no comfort to us. The *bare* fact that God *knows* what is *happening* will mean nothing to us in the midst of suffering and persecution. It will not deliver us from the paralyzing power of fear.

So is Jesus saying that not one sparrow falls to the ground without the *care and concern* of our Father? This is also true (Matthew 6:26, 30), and it may be a great comfort to us when we are being tied to the stake, but it will not be enough to extinguish all fear. After all, God may love us and care for us as we suffer death for the sake of Christ, but was He powerless to stop it? Did He stand by watching helplessly as we met our end – wishing that He could have kept us from our fate? And if He did care, and if He wasn't powerless to stop it, then *why* didn't He? No, Jesus' point is not simply that God knows or even that God cares. The fact of the matter is, Jesus doesn't *say* either one of these things. Whatever Jesus is saying, it is meant to eradicate all fear from the hearts of those who live under the threat of persecution and martyrdom!

So is Jesus saying that not one sparrow falls to the ground without God's *consent and permission* (TEV)? Here we may be getting closer to the truth as this seems to be more in line with what Jesus *actually said*. What Jesus actually said is that *apart from God*, not one sparrow will ever die. So in some way the death of each individual sparrow is intimately connected to God Himself. It is amazing enough to think that God knows and cares about the death of each and every sparrow that has ever fallen to the ground. And yet far more amazing than this is the thought that not one individual sparrow falls to the ground without God's *active and special permission*. The world and even many Christians, however, don't think like this. We think of God giving His general “permission” at the very beginning of the world to the eventual death of all sparrows as a group. But this is not what *Jesus* says. What Jesus says is that ***not ONE sparrow*** will fall to the ground apart from our Father! At the very least, Jesus is saying that God permits and allows the death of each individual sparrow on a one by one, case by case basis. Think about that the next time you see a bird fallen on the ground.

But though we are getting closer to the truth, we have not yet arrived at the truth – at the real meaning of Jesus' words. Because where is the comfort in the bare fact that God has permitted and consented to our persecution, suffering, and/or death at the hands of a hostile world? We still have to ask: *Why* did God give His special consent and permission – if He didn't *have to*? Indeed, what do we mean when we say that God permits and allows the death of each sparrow on a one by one, case by case, individual basis? Do we mean that when God “becomes aware” of the fact that a sparrow is about to fly into the snare of the fowler, He simply chooses *not* to intervene? Do we mean that when God knows that a sparrow has come to the end of its life because of the natural effects of genetics, climate, diet, and other environmental factors, He simply chooses *not* to miraculously extend the sparrow's life? When we say that God permits

and allows the death of each individual sparrow, do we simply mean that God is choosing *not* to intervene in the *fatalistic* chain of cause and effect or the *chance* decisions of the trapper? But this will be no comfort to us in the midst of persecution, because then our persecution, our suffering, and our death at the hands of a hostile world is simply the *chance* result of *man's will*, or the *fatalistic* result of natural *causes and effects*. We can talk all day long about the *good* that God will bring from all the things that He left to chance and the fatalism of natural law, but at the end of the day, there will be *nothing* in this to deliver us from the terrible power of fear. Indeed, we should be able to see by now that in light of the context, this interpretation is utterly impossible.

When Jesus tells us that apart from God, not one sparrow will die, He teaches us that no sparrow will ever fall to the ground unless the death of that individual sparrow has been sovereignly *decreed and ordained* from all eternity by the most holy, wise, good, and perfect will of God. Think about this the next time you see a bird that has fallen to the ground. The Baptist Confession says in the chapter on Divine Providence: “God the good Creator of all things, in His infinite power and wisdom doth uphold, *direct, dispose, and govern* all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least... according unto... the free and immutable counsel of His own will.” God says to Job that it is *He* who *hunts* the prey for the lion and satisfies the appetite of the young lions (38:39)... God provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones *cry to God for help*, and wander about for lack of food (38:41).

- ✓ Psalm 104:27-30 – These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face [and withhold their food], they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

Jesus said that apart from God, not one sparrow will ever die!

- ✓ Psalm 135:6 (cf. 115:3) – Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

Now, can you imagine anything more insignificant than a sparrow? Perhaps an ant, or a gnat, or a flea? Or perhaps one of the hairs on our head? After what He said about the sparrows, Jesus goes on to say:

III. **“But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.”**

We could go through the same process here that we went through with the sparrows, and the results would be the same. The point here is not just that God *knows* the number of the hairs on our head, nor just that God *cares* about each and every individual hair on our head. Notice again that Jesus is not talking about our hairs as a whole collection, but rather about each individual *hair* on our head!!! So what does Jesus mean to teach us when He says that God has numbered all the hairs on our head? Well first of all, notice that Jesus says, “But *even* the hairs of your head are all numbered”, and then He returns to the topic of sparrows in verse 31, “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” His point about the hairs on our head is the *same* as

His point about the sparrows. If we think it is amazing that not a single sparrow will ever fall to the ground apart from God, then Jesus wants us to know something even more amazing: *Not even a single hair will ever fall from our heads apart from God.*

Notice that Jesus says not just that God *knows* how many hairs we have, but rather that God has actually numbered or *counted* our hairs. Does God have to count things like we do in order to know the total? No, of course not! So why does Jesus bother to say that God has *counted* the hairs on our head. Well, to say that God *counts* something is just a picturesque way of saying that God has *determined and ordained* something to be.

- ✓ Job 38:34-37 – Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? ... Who can **number** the clouds by wisdom? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens?

The point is not just how many clouds there are in the sky at any given time! When God says that He counts the clouds by wisdom, He teaches us that He has foreordained and predetermined the exact number of the clouds at all times in the history of the world according to His own infinite wisdom. And now in His providence, He is actively governing and directing each cloud in the sky according to His will. D. A. Carson writes: “Imagine Job, if he were able, giving the clouds an order and suddenly being inundated with water (v.34b). Or Job might decide to dispatch the lightning bolts, if he could, and they would report like lackeys to him and say, ‘Here we are’ (v.35). So even these seasonal rains are the result of Yahweh’s *bidding*, who numbers every cloud and measures every jarful of rain (v.37).” God has sovereignly “*appointed*” the exact number of clouds in the sky and the exact number of raindrops that fall from the sky on any given day. None of it is by random chance. None of it has been determined by the inevitable results of cause and effect.

- ✓ Job 36:32 – He covers his hands with the lightning and *commands* it to strike the mark.
- ✓ Psalms 104:3-4 – He makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.
- ✓ Psalms 107:25, 29 – He *commanded* and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

God *lifts up His voice* to the clouds, that a flood of waters may water the earth... God *sends forth* lightnings, that they may go and say to Him, “*Here we are*” (Job 38:34-35).

- ✓ Psalms 87:5-6 – And of Zion it shall be said, “This one and that one were born in her”; for the Most High himself will establish her. The LORD [**counts**; NASB] as he registers the peoples, “This one was born there.”

Why does God *count* as he registers the Gentiles, saying of each individual person that he was born in Zion? The point here is not that God is finding out the number of the citizens of Zion, but that God has ordained the number. One day even Gentiles (v. 4) will be included as native born citizens of Zion by the merciful and loving good pleasure of God’s will.

- ✓ Psalm 147:4-5 – He [**counts**; NASB] the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

God's understanding is beyond measure not because He knows how many stars there are in the heavens. Of course He *knows*, He created them and put them there in the first place! To say that God *counts* the number of the stars is to say with the ESV, NIV, & NRSV that God has *determined* the number of the stars. That's the point. Today's English Version uses the word "decided", and Young's Literal Translation uses the word "appoint". God's understanding is beyond measure because in accordance with His infinite wisdom, He has determined and ordained from all eternity the exact number of the stars at every moment in the history of the universe. If we stumble over the thought that if a star falls from heaven, it fell only by God's special decree and active command, then we are really stumbling over the thought of a God whose understanding is *beyond measure*. If we stumble over the thought that the number of clouds in the heavens is always the direct result of God's special appointment and active rule, then what we are really stumbling over is the thought of a God whose understanding is *beyond measure*.

So what does Jesus mean when He says that God has **counted** all the hairs of our head? He means that not one hair will fall from our heads apart from the **providence** of God, by which He is *directing, disposing, and governing* all creatures *and things*, from the greatest *even to the least*. Think about this the next time you see one of the hairs of your head on your shirt, or in the sink, or on the floor. Now if we stumble over the thought that if a sparrow falls to the ground or if even a hair falls from our head, they fell only by the special decree and providence of God, then what we are really stumbling over is the thought of a God whose understanding is infinitely beyond all measure. What Jesus wants us to know beyond all shadow of a doubt is that nothing in this universe happens by chance. Chance is the notion of pagans who wish to be free of a sovereign God. So we hear the Philistine priests and diviners saying:

- ✓ 1 Samuel 6:9 (NASB) – "Watch, if it goes up by the way of its own territory to Bethshemesh, then He has done us this great evil. But if not, then we will know that it was not His hand that struck us; it happened to us by *chance*."

But among the godly in Israel, there was simply no such thing as chance – ever. Not a sparrow falls to the ground by chance. Not a hair grows or falls from our head by chance. So should we imagine that there is ever anything at all that is too small to be included in God's sovereign decree and His providential governing of the universe? Therefore, it is *impossible* for any man to harm a hair on our head, much less kill us apart from the sovereign decree and active rule of God.

- ✓ Revelation 6:9-11 – When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

- ✓ Revelation 13:10 – If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

The point here is certainly not chance, and neither is it fatalism! Otherwise, where would the motivation be for endurance and faith? The point is the sovereign good pleasure and will of the God who is most holy, most good, most just, and most wise.

- ✓ Job 14:5 – [Man’s] days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass.
- ✓ Psalm 139:16-18 – In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

Jesus knows that the absolute sovereignty and providence of God is the only absolutely foolproof antidote to all of our fears, and so He goes on to say:

IV. **“Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”**

Here is the point! The point is *not* idle philosophical speculations and asking pointless and trivial questions. The point is that this knowledge should be for us the end of all fear – once and for all – for forever and ever! It is true that *all* men in general are of more value than many sparrows, but that is not what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is talking specifically about *us* who have been redeemed, and who can call God our “*Father*”. Jesus said: “Not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground apart from *your Father*.” The sparrows cannot call God their “Father” like we can. The unbelieving world cannot call God “Father” like we can. It is only the redeemed who can call God their Father. And so Jesus’ point is that in the sovereign counsels and providence of God, our death is not at all the same thing as the death of a sparrow. David writes:

- ✓ Psalm 8:3-9 – When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, *the birds of the heavens*, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Ultimately, these verses can only be applied to those human beings who are *in Christ*, to whom *alone* the whole of creation will be subjected (Heb. 2:5-8)! As the crown of God’s creation, made after His image (Gen. 1:26-28), and now renewed after the likeness of Christ (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24), we can confidently say that all that God has ordained with respect to us (which is *all things*!) He has ordained for our *good* and to the display of the glory of His *grace*.

- ✓ Romans 8:28 – And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

- ✓ Ephesians 1:4-6, 11-12 – [God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace... In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

“Fear not, therefore; you [who call God ‘*your Father*’] are of more value than many sparrows.” In His sovereign decree and providence, there is nothing at all concerning you (even down to the number of the hairs on your head) that has been left to the chance decisions of any man’s will or to the fatalism of natural causes and effects. Fear not, therefore! The one we call “Father” is the very one who has foreordained all things, whatsoever comes to pass, and who is now directing, disposing, and governing all creatures and *things*, from the greatest even to the *least*. And *all* that God has foreordained concerning us is for our good, tending *always* to our salvation and *always* to the glory of His *grace*. May fear and despair never again be named among us – to the glory of our sovereign God!

Teaching our Children

Q. Jesus teaches us that not a single sparrow will ever die apart from whom?

A. Jesus teaches us that not a single sparrow will ever die apart from **GOD**.

Q. What does this mean (that not one single sparrow will ever die apart from God)?

A. This means that no sparrow will ever die unless it is according to God’s will and the result of His word. (See Scriptures on page 3; See also Job 38:39, 41 on page 3)

Q. What does Jesus tell us that God has numbered or counted?

A. God has counted the number of hairs on our head!

Q. When God says that He has numbered the clouds in the sky by His wisdom (top of page 4), what does this mean? Does this just mean that God knows *how many* clouds there are in the sky?

A. No! When God says that He numbers the clouds in the sky He teaches us that He is actively commanding and directing each cloud in the sky according to His will! (See Job 36 – Job 38 on page 4)

Q. When the Bible says that God counts the number of the stars (top of page 5), what does this mean? Does this just mean that God knows *how many* stars there are in the sky?

A. No! When the Bible says that God counts the number of the stars, it teaches us that God has decided the number of the stars and so not a single star ever falls from the sky apart from God’s command and direction!

Q. When Jesus says that God has numbered the hairs on our head, what does this mean? Does this just mean that God knows *how many* hairs are on our head?

A. No! When Jesus says that God has numbered the hairs on our head, He teaches us that God has decided how many hairs we will have. Not one hair can ever fall from our head apart from the will and word of God!

Q. Since everything that happens in the world is according to God’s will and rule, do we ever have any reason to fear the future (to be afraid of what will happen tomorrow)? What did Jesus say?

A. No! Jesus said: “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Q. Since God's children are of more value than many sparrows, what can they know about all that God has determined for their lives?

A. God's children can know that all that their Father has determined for their lives is for their good and to bring glory to God's grace. (See Scriptures on bottom of page 6 and top of page 7)

✓ There is *never* any reason for God's children to be afraid! Joyfully lead your children to give praise and glory to God!