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Unforgotten

WHAT'S THE SAME | FEAR NOT, YOU'RE VALUED

The Bible is filled with stories of God deeply valuing the undervalued.



He valued Moses who was a stuttering murderer and chose him to lead the great rescue out of Egypt. He valued David who was nothing but a scrawny kid empowered to defeat a bloodthirsty giant. He valued Esther, an overlooked orphan, and promoted her to queen in order to save a marginalized race. He valued Jesus, a blue collar carpenter from a small town, and used him to save the world.

The sparrow, like the raven, is another example of how God chooses to weave the unexpected and undervalued into his storylines.

Sparrows are one of the most common and familiar birds throughout the world. They are not brightly colored. Their songs don't stand out. They are ultimately unremarkable and insignificant.¹ There is nothing rare or unique about them. And yet, God says he knows every single one. They are unforgotten birds even though they are totally forgettable.

Sparrows are also one of the more domesticated birds and build nests in the eaves of houses. We read in Psalm 84:3, “Even the sparrow finds a home, and a swallow a nest for herself.” By nature, they are reliant on others. In fact, they are so reliant that in the 1700s, parts of Europe even campaigned to kill sparrows because they had become an epidemic; wreaking havoc on crops.²

Jesus and his listeners understood what stigma sparrows had for the farming culture of the day—they were the freeloaders of the bird family. So if the raven is the least-liked bird, then the sparrow is the least-valued.

When Jesus says that not a single sparrow falls from the sky without God feeling the loss, it isn’t because the sparrow is a showstopper or because its life brings immense value to his; it is because God notices the unnoticed.

GOD NOTICES THE UNNOTICED. Our study starts with the sparrow, because we will never be freed from anxiety or worry if we fail to grasp our value to God. Freedom from the complicated and tangled control of fearful thoughts will only come if we embrace this essential element of Jesus’ teaching: you matter greatly to God.

And then Jesus uses some funky math to prove it.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT | THE MATH

In Luke’s passage, Jesus says, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?” And then in the Matthew’s passage he says, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?”

Full disclosure: I am bad at math. But I can’t help but wonder, wouldn’t four sparrows cost two pennies if Jesus said that two sparrows cost a single penny? Where did the fifth sparrow come from?

One commentator made this note, “Evidently one [sparrow] was thrown in for nothing when two pennyworth were bought.”³ This beautiful illustration may help us understand the freeing reality of the fifth bird even more:

A little Spanish boy in Vigo who became a devout Christian was asked by an Englishman what had been the influence under which he acted. “It was all because of the odd sparrow,” the boy replied. “I do not understand,” said the Englishman in surprise. “What odd sparrow?”

“Well, Señor, it is this way,” the boy said, “A gentleman gave

me a Testament, and I read in one Gospel that two sparrows were sold for a farthing. And again in Luke, I saw, “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings?” And I said to myself Jesus Christ knew well our custom of selling birds. As you know, Sir, we trap birds, and get one chico for two but for two chicos we throw in an extra sparrow. That extra sparrow is only a make-weight, and of no account at all.

“Now, I think to myself that I am so insignificant, so poor and so small that no one would think of counting me. I’m like the fifth sparrow. And yet, “Not one of them is forgotten before God.” I have never heard anything like it, Sir. No one but He could ever have thought of not forgetting me.”⁴

In Matthew, Jesus uses the penny and the sparrow because they were the least valuable things in the time of history in which the disciples and crowds lived. And in Luke? Jesus takes it one step further by taking away what little value a sparrow had and telling his listeners that God doesn’t even overlook the fifth sparrow which is “only a make-weight, and of no account at all.”

He is drawing our attention to the very least on purpose. God’s heart is for the overlooked. The invisible. The people who think they have been forgotten and are without value. Even the sparrow, which the culture and time said was worthless, Jesus said was valued and seen by the Father.

GOD’S HEART IS FOR THE OVERLOOKED. You are not forgotten by God no matter how small you feel or have been made to feel by fear. These verses reveal the abundance of his loving attention to our ordinary lives. And how freeing that truth is if we choose to believe it.

WHAT THAT MEANS | THE FREE BOX

The problem remains though, that if something is free, we struggle to trust it. The free box at a garage sale is the perfect example. We are never surprised when it is filled with things that are broken, defective or dirty.

Free is a much harder sell than fear.

The Israelites are a perfect case study for the chronic human distrust we have with free, and the fear that replaces it. They were oppressed slaves freed from hard labor in Egypt, but the minute they tasted freedom, they began fearing for their lives. “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt!... you have brought us into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death!”²⁵

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So what does God do? Moved by their need, he feeds them manna (which literally means, “what is it?”) from heaven. The Israelites protest God’s mysterious free box food with complaint: “Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish we ate freely in Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.”

Wait. Hold the sparrow-shaped phone. The Israelites believed they “ate freely” in Egypt?

They were slaves. They didn’t eat freely at all.

FREE IS A MUCH HARDER SELL THAN FEAR. The Israelites believed that if the menu was better, the chains were worth it. This is how we sometimes interact with our worry and anxiety. We distrust the free gift of infinite value to our Father, and wonder if fear can serve us better. When we feed our fears, we get comfortable with our confinement. In doing so, we deny our daily bread and break trust with our Father.

Dallas Willard talks about choosing to value the gift of a relationship with Jesus as much as he values us. “Unless we see clearly the superiority of what we receive as his students over every other thing that might be valued, we cannot succeed in our discipleship to Jesus. We will not be able to do the things required to learn his lessons and move ever deeper into a life that is his kingdom.”⁶

To move deeper into a kingdom life free from worry and anxiety means we must accept and embrace God’s gift of value beyond what we bring to the box. He welcomes our brokenness, defectiveness, or dirt—those things don’t change his surpassing love for us. In fact, those are the very things that he often uses in redemptive ways to add value to your life and the lives of others around you.

But, unlike the free box at a garage sale, God’s “free” does require an exchange. It does cost us something.

EMBRACE GOD’S GIFT OF VALUE BEYOND WHAT WE BRING TO THE BOX. God’s “free” asks us to let go of false security and faux joy. It asks that we exchange our chains for his unchanging grace. It means we must identify and rectify anything that is keeping us from understanding our worth to our Dad.

It could be the fear of being found out, fear of finances, fear of people, fear of loss, fear of insecurity, fear of death, fear of pain, fear of change, fear of risk, fear of failure, fear of looking foolish, fear of the future, and the list

goes on.

Jesus can't set us free from fear when we're in a relationship with it.

But the inverse is also true, that when we accept the invaluable gift that is walking with Jesus wholeheartedly, the affair with fear ends. He lovingly pulls apart our white-knuckled worry and interlocks his holy hands with ours. He walks us deeper still into the immeasurable wealth of his presence in our lives.

That is what's in God's free box. And it's absolutely priceless.



DISCUSS

Do you believe that you matter greatly to God?

Are there any areas of your life that you think diminish that value in his eyes?

Over the course of your life, if you had to identify with the raven or the sparrow, which bird would you most likely choose? (Help: have there been seasons in your life that you've considered yourself the "least liked" or the "least valued"?)

This week these fears were listed: fear of being found out, fear of finances, fear of people, fear of loss, fear of insecurity, fear of death, fear of pain, fear of change, fear of risk, fear of failure, fear of looking foolish, fear of the future.

Which one resonates most with you? If none, add your own here:



READ & REFLECT

Read John 8:28-36.

In verse 29, what three things does Jesus say about himself?

In verse 30, what was the result of those things for those who were listening?

In verses 31-32, Jesus uses the word “abide”. In the Greek, the word abide means to “remain” or to “daily remain attached to him.”⁷

How would you describe your daily practice of “remaining” attached to Christ?

How would you describe your daily practice of entertaining worry or anxiety?

Which one are you in a more consistent “relationship” with?

PEACE PRACTICE | JOT JOY DOWN

Write down a few things you notice during the day that you are thankful for. God says that prayer itself is an intervention for anxiety.⁸ As a valued child of God, practicing thankful prayers will be a valuable peace practice to guard your heart and mind as you begin to study his words on this topic.

First Look

Luke 12:22-23

And he said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Second Look

Matthew 6:25

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?