

You Are
**NEVER
ALONE:**
GOD'S ANSWER TO FEAR



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HEBREWS 13:5



We live in strange times.

A few recent headlines tell the story:

“We’re on the Cusp of an Economic Catastrophe”

“Most Daunting Virus in Half Century”

“2020 Election Nightmare”

“China Fires Missiles in ‘Warning to USA’”

“Shoppers Throw Punches Over Toilet Paper”

We live with a level of anxiety we haven’t seen since 9/11. People worry about their health and the health of their loved ones. We’re worried about losing our jobs and our income. We feel trapped by events we can’t control.

What will tomorrow bring?

Will our health hold up, or will we have a heart attack or a sudden stroke?

Will someone we know test positive for the coronavirus?

Will we end up in a nursing home or waste away in a hospital?

What about our children? What if something happens to them?

Who will take care of us in our old age?

The coronavirus pandemic reminds us we are not in charge, and we are more vulnerable than we dreamed. *No one imagined a global shutdown in the early days of 2020.* In the last few months, we learned about the quarantine and how to wear a mask to help “flatten the curve.” We’ve discovered “social distancing,” which means you stay away from me, and I’ll stay away from you.

No wonder people are hoarding toilet paper.

No wonder we can’t sleep.

No wonder we feel shaky.

Given the current unrest in major cities across the country, we have good reason to worry about the future. No one knows what tomorrow will bring.

In these uncertain days, we need to focus on the promises God has made. Here are three truths that ought to encourage us:

1. *Don’t worry about tomorrow because God is already there.* I received a note from our friend Greg Hatteberg, Alumni Director at Dallas Seminary. As he prayed for us, he felt the Lord saying to him, “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” That simple statement brought huge comfort to my heart. We all need to remember that “God’s got this.”

2. *God promises to be with you no matter what happens to you.* This is true today and tomorrow and all the days after that. You cannot outlive God’s mercy. We come and go, but his mercy endures forever.

3. *God has you on his heart at this very moment.* To all our fears the Lord simply says, “I am with you always.”

That brings me to our text:

He has said, “I will never leave you nor will I forsake you”
(Hebrews 13:5).

God knew we would doubt this promise, so he wrapped it in five negatives. Twice he repeats two Greek words that mean no. Then he adds another word that also means no. It’s hard to bring out the proper emphasis in English. It’s as if God is saying, “I will never, never, never, never leave you or forsake you. Absolutely not!”

This verse from *How Firm a Foundation* catches the meaning:

“The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.”

Let's look at four examples where God said to someone, “I am with you.” We need this study because what God said to the men and women of the Bible, he says to us today.

#1: JACOB *the* CHEATER

These are the words the Lord spoke to Jacob when he was running away from his problems:

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you (Genesis 28:15).

It had been two days since he had left home—

Esau seething in the background,
Rebekah weeping, and
Isaac waving goodbye.

He runs because he stole the inheritance from his brother Esau and then deceived his father into giving him a blessing meant for his brother. That double deceit destroyed his family and enraged his brother who wanted to kill him.

His family fractured, Jacob runs for his life.

That night, with a stone for a pillow, sleeping in the wilderness under the starry sky, he dreams of angels coming and going on a ladder that stretched from earth to heaven.

Until this moment, God has never spoken to Jacob directly.

To his grandfather Abraham—yes.
To his father Isaac—yes.
To Jacob—no.

God now speaks to Jacob at the moment of his desperation. All that has happened is prologue. God worked through his deception and trickery to bring him to this precise moment in life.

C. S. Lewis called pain God's megaphone to rouse a sleeping world. The Lord whispers in our pleasure, but he shouts in our pain. Now at last, Jacob is ready to listen to the Lord.

When the painful truth finally catches up with Jacob, he has nowhere to go. Why did he cheat? Perhaps he reasoned this way: "If God were here, I wouldn't have to do things this way. But God's not here, so I've got to take care of myself."

Here is God's message: "Jacob, I'm nearer to you than you think. I was with you when you tricked Esau and when you deceived your father. I am with you when you are running for your life. Everywhere you go, I will go with you."

At this point Jacob feels

Guilty about his past,
Fearful of the future, and
Uncertain in the present.

To all of that, God simply says, "I will be with you." It's a total solution to guilt, fear, and anxiety.

We all need to learn there is no place we can go where God is not already there.

#2: ISRAEL *the* TERRIFIED

The scene shifts to the Jews as they gather on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moses is now an old man and about to die. Knowing the enemies his people would face as they enter Canaan, he gives this amazing promise in Deuteronomy 31:6:

Be strong and courageous; don't be terrified or afraid of them. For the Lord your God is the one who will go with you; he will not leave you or abandon you.

When Moses says, “Don’t be terrified or afraid of them,” he’s talking about the pagan nations surrounding the Jews. The list includes the Hivites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Edomites, the Moabites, the Jebusites, the Perizzites, and the Philistines. That’s a daunting list of bad guys.

For the moment, let’s focus on what the Jews had to do first. They must cross the Jordan River. But what’s on the other side? The Promised Land and the enemy. They crossed at a spot not far from Jericho with its enormous double walls, reminding them they must fight to obtain all God had promised them. But this is not unusual. When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he offered this comment on the situation in Ephesus: **“A great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me”** (1 Corinthians 16:9). That’s always the case, isn’t it? Opportunities and enemies often go together. One man put it this way: “The door of opportunity swings on the hinges of opposition.”

I recently read a book about Winston Churchill called *The Splendid and the Vile*. It chronicles his first year as Prime Minister when the Nazis seemed unstoppable and the eventual destruction of England seemed inevitable. Hitler so far was undefeated as his armies rolled across Europe. In his first speech as Prime Minister, Churchill spoke with brutal honesty: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” The following years proved the truth of his words.

The Jews faced a math problem. If you stacked up the armies, there were way too many bad guys for them to fight. They were doomed to defeat. But the question is always, who is on your side?

If God is with you, you can’t lose. It’s as simple as that. Yes, there will be blood, toil, tears and sweat. But when you fight with God on your side, you cannot lose.

That’s the message to God’s people.

#3: JOSHUA *the* FEARFUL

Now we run the clock forward a few weeks. Moses is dead, and Joshua now leads the people of Israel. They still must cross the Jordan River and begin the long series of battles that would take seven years to

complete. The question has become very personal: Is Joshua up to the challenge? Here is God's promise to him:

**No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live.
I will be with you, just as I was with Moses. I will not leave
you or abandon you (Joshua 1:5).**

As you think about this stupendous promise, don't overlook one little phrase: "As I was with Moses." Joshua knew all about Moses because he had been his right-hand man for many years. Moses stood before Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go." When Pharaoh said no, Moses repeated those words. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not show mercy. Then the plagues came down—boils and frogs and darkness and hail and water turned to blood. Pharaoh still would not relent. Finally, one terrible night the death angel passed over the land, taking the life of every firstborn son in Egypt. Only those with the blood of a lamb on the doorpost were spared. Only then did Pharaoh grudgingly relent.

When the people of God were trapped at the Red Sea, Moses stretched out his staff and the waters parted, so they walked across on dry ground. Later, Moses went up the mountain to talk to the Lord face to face. He came down with the Ten Commandments written in stone by the finger of God. Miracle after miracle happened while Moses was alive.

For 40 years their shoes never wore out.
For 40 years they never ran out of food.
For 40 years they never lost a battle.

Moses! What a man!

I don't blame Joshua for feeling inadequate.
How do you follow George Washington or Abraham Lincoln?
How do you replace a legend?

Will God be with Joshua as he was with Moses?
The answer is yes.

Why? Because God said, "I will never leave you."
That's a wonderful promise.

Most of us know the antiphonal chant that goes like this:

Pastor: God is good.
Congregation: All the time.
Pastor: And all the time.
Congregation: God is good.

That chant started in the churches of Nigeria. When I mentioned that in one of my sermon emails, a woman in Lagos, Nigeria, wrote me with an additional bit of information: "It's true. We do say that in our churches. But we add a phrase. After we say that chant, everyone then says in unison: 'I am a witness.'"

That's good.
That's powerful.
That's biblical.

That's the deeper meaning of the promise God made to Joshua.

It's not a promise of an easy road, unlimited victory, and no tears. God is saying, "You've got to fight for the land I am giving you. But I will go with you as you go."

#4: SOLOMON *the* TIMID

As King David grew older, he wanted to build a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. But the Lord told him he couldn't build it because he was a man of blood. David accepted God's decree and called on his son Solomon to build the Lord's temple. Here is David's encouragement to his son in 1 Chronicles 28:20:

Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Don't be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He won't leave you or abandon you until all the work for the service of the Lord's house is finished.

That's a heavy load to lay on a young man. Solomon was the wisest man on earth, but he followed the man after God's own heart. Joshua followed Moses, and that was hard enough, but Moses wasn't his father.

It's hard to be the son of a famous man. David was a natural leader, a gifted poet, and a mighty warrior. He unified the tribes and inspired the nation. Without a doubt, he was the greatest king Israel ever had.

How do you follow a man like that?

We get a glimpse of the pressure he faced when David asked the nation's leaders to support his son: **“My son Solomon—God has chosen him alone—is young and inexperienced”** (1 Chronicles 29:1). The Hebrew word translated “inexperienced” can also mean “tender” or “delicate” or “timid.” Clearly, David wondered if his son was up to the task.

I'd be timid too!

I'd be fearful too!

I'd be worried too!

Who feels like you aren't enough?

Who feels like you can't do it?

Who feels like you are a fraud waiting to be uncovered?

NO unfinished BUSINESS

This is God's Word to you.

He will not leave you.

He will not forsake you.

He will finish the work he called you to do.

Everything God has for us is contained in these simple words: “I will never leave you.” Whatever you need from the Lord, he will supply it because he will never leave you. If you feel inadequate, that's good because you will depend even more on the Lord.

Remember what God has done for you in the past. Has he brought you through deep waters, dark nights, and bitter tears? If he did not leave you then, why would he leave you now? Think of all the prayers God has answered. Will all that be wasted?

God never starts anything he does not finish. I remember landing in an African country and noticing a long stretch of unfinished buildings. Those brick-and-steel skeletons meant the government started them but ran out of money. That never happens with God. What he starts, he finishes.

That's true of you and me. *He has not brought us this far to leave us now.* God's honor depends on him finishing the good work he began in us.

Hold on to this truth.
God will never let you go!

Let me remind you one more time of the teaching of Hebrews 13:5. It contains five negatives that guarantee our salvation. As the songwriter said:

"That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!"

You are never alone.
You are never abandoned.
You are never on your own.

THE GOD WHO GOES *before*

What should we take away from all this?

If like Jacob, you are guilty, take heart.

God will never leave you.

If like Israel, you are terrified, take heart.

God will never leave you.

If like Joshua, you feel unqualified, take heart.

God will never leave you.

If like Solomon, you are timid, take heart.

God will never leave you.

Think about it this way. He's not only with you now, he's way up the road ahead of you. *He is the God who goes before his people.* While I'm living in Tuesday, he's clearing the road for me on Friday. That's what Proverbs 3:6 means when it says, "**He will make your paths straight.**"

Or to say it another way: *God is already at work providing solutions for problems I don't even know I have yet!* That's a mind-blowing truth.

Are you worried about next week? Forget it. He's already there.
What about that doctor's appointment? Sleep well. He's already there.
What about that tough decision? Fear not. He's already there.

It would be enough if God walked with us through the events of life. But he does much more than that. He's at work in the future while we live in the present.

Our God was with us yesterday, he is with us today, and he will be with us tomorrow. That's what it means to say, "I will never leave you." Many of us need this truth right now. I know I do.

HE WILL *meet you* AT BAGGAGE CLAIM

I passed over one part of Jacob's story so I could mention it now. When Jacob awoke from his dream, he exclaimed, "**Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it**" (Genesis 28:16). How typical of us. We think the Lord has forgotten us, but we are the ones who have forgotten him.

Where is God when we need him? He's where he's always been, but we didn't know it. You can run away from God to the other side of the earth, and when you get off the plane, he will meet you at baggage claim.

Not everyone meets God in a church service. You are more likely to meet God on the bed of affliction, or when you lose your job, or when your children are sick, or when your friends betray you, or when your marriage collapses. You are more likely to meet him after the accident than during the coffee hour on Sunday morning.

Often we don't pay attention to the Lord until tragedy strikes. Then we look up to heaven and say, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

That brings us back to the great promise: "You are never alone." Let me tell you how I learned this. Soon after graduating from seminary, Marlene and I moved to Southern California, where I became the pastor of a small church in suburban Los Angeles. In the beginning, Marlene played the piano while I led the music and preached the sermon. I also helped teach a class of 5th-6th grade boys. One weekend we took the boys to a retreat at a camp in the mountains above San Bernardino. I have forgotten everything about that retreat except for this. The speaker wanted to impress on the youngsters that God would never leave them. He had us hold up our right hands, and starting with the

thumb, he had us repeat this phrase, touching a different finger with each word:

I
Will
Never
Leave
You.

Try that right now. Hold up your right hand and touch your fingers as you say, “I will never leave you.” How powerful is that simple exercise? It’s been 40 years, and I still remember it.

I came to Christ more than 50 years ago. Though I have often failed the Lord, he has never failed me. When I have stumbled, the Lord has picked me up. Never once has he failed to keep his promises to me. After a half-century of walking with Christ, I can affirm with my life what the Bible says. I am not alone, and neither are you if you know the Lord.

When Jesus died on the cross, he paid the price so you could be forgiven. He is the only Savior you will ever need.

Come to him!
Believe in him!
Run to the cross!

If you trust in Jesus, he will never leave you, not in this world or the one to come. He will walk with you on your journey, he will stay by your side as you take your last breath, and he will welcome you into your eternal home.

THE *calmest people* ON EARTH

I began by talking about the frightening conditions we see all around us. Our world is in crisis, and no one knows what tomorrow will bring. The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us that we are more vulnerable than we thought. Our leaders cannot save us, and we can’t save ourselves.

A young mother wrote me saying she feels unprepared for what lies ahead. Most of us feel the same way. *But if hard days are coming, we*

won't have to walk through them alone. We have God's Word, we have the Holy Spirit, we have the body of Christ, and we have the word of the Lord who said, "I will never leave you." The virus can do many deadly things, but it cannot separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God's Word gives us an anchor that can hold us when the waves of trouble rise on every side. Build your life on this truth: God has said, "Wherever you go, I will go with you." That leads me to this simple conclusion: *Christians ought to be the calmest people on earth because we know the Lord, and he holds the future in his hands.*

He was with us yesterday.

He is with us today.

He will be with us tomorrow.

In that confidence, we march forward with faith in our hearts, with a song on our lips, and with the joy of the Lord as our strength.

Don't despair and don't give in to fear. We were made for times like these.

Chin up, child of God. Stop staring in the soup. You are not alone! Put a smile on your face because Jesus said, "I will never leave you."

Forgive us, Lord, for doubting your presence. Thank you for being there, just when we need you most. Amen.

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