

FACING OUR FEARS

It was not always so, but fear is part of our human condition. First, we are small. Whatever size of footprint we leave behind us, we shall each fill one small plot, in a single cemetery, in but one location in all the earth. Then, there is our brevity. Our lives are as mists appearing for a little time before vanishing away (James 4:14). The dread of the



sinister Silas comes to mind, whispering in death, "I am a ghost!" (film, *The Da Vinci Code*). All this said though, our fears have heightened.

FEARS OF COVID

We comfort ourselves that compared to the Spanish flu a century ago (500 million infected and 50 million deaths), the Coronavirus remains of limited impact (100 million affected, 74 million recovered, and 2.16 million deaths). We celebrate the recovery rate, and the remarkably swift appearances of the vaccines. Yet, we would have to live under a rock or be very callous not to contemplate those who died distressed and remote from loved ones, and those families robbed of the final months together and arranging funerals less than reflective of the deceased.

Complacency has ebbed away as the virus has come closer to home, with word of fresh strains more vicious than the first. Facebook feeds record the bereavements, leaving friends feeling for those who have lost both parents in quick succession. The United Kingdom has now had more cases than the population of Wales, crossing the 100,000 mark of deaths. The United States has had over a quarter of the cases documented worldwide, with over 440,000 deaths. Who can tell the true statistics in China and North Korea?

FEARS OF COLLAPSE

Spare a thought for business owners. They have complied with what has been asked of them, but who can blame them for frustration when lockdowns become a political football. We admire their COVID innovations, but drive

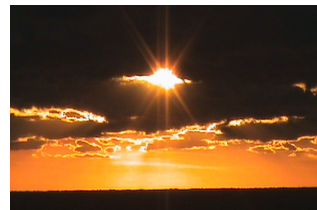
down streets, noticing shops that have silently closed. Social distancing robbed them even of the fanfare of a closing sale. What now for owners and employees alike? The government bailouts in richer lands help some to tide over, but what of the burden of national debt on our children and grandchildren? The full cost of the pandemic is yet to be told.

FEARS OF CORRUPTION

We would think that a global pandemic would stir us to pull together. Rather, it has exacerbated suspicions not only of China but of domestic powers, too. Inevitably, the longer the virus lingers the more lockdowns test patience. Recent Dutch riots against a curfew illustrate this. The hypocrisy of western politicians preaching restrictions but breaking their own mandates doesn't help. Nor does the deeming of the abortion industry essential business, while barring churches from ministering in such circumstances.

In America, the perfect storm has developed. Against the backdrop of COVID, we have witnessed legitimate protest against racism morphing into politically coopted rampages. The affirming of these riots in some political circles helped to foster claims the Presidential election was stolen. In turn, the detrimental storming of the Capitol left politicians running for cover, only for the incoming administration to reemerge for the rapid erosion of free speech, the excessive use of the national guard, and an ominous alliance with the media and big tech companies.

There is plenty of fear to go around. Of course, none of this is new to the oppressed in Asia and Africa. Yet, eastern Europe, recalling oppression behind the iron curtain, is leading opposition to the loss of liberty in the West. While we know not where world events are going, we do know the one who knows the future. He invites us



to turn back to him. Let each of us say with King David 3,000 years ago, "*When I am afraid, I put my trust in [God]*" (Psalm 56:3). He is the light piercing our darkness!

SEEKING OUR SECURITY

We don't run to contemplate the origin of fear. When afraid we are in no mood to do so, and when over our fears we wish to forget about them. Yet, the road to security begins with understanding our fears. The greatest cause is not our smallness, mortality, or uncertain circumstances, but our want of relationship and favor with God.

Note, the first mention of fear in the Bible occurs after our first parents sinned against God: *"The LORD God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself'"* (Genesis 3: 9-10). Adam's fear became adhered to human experience.

We fear because God is holy (without sin). He cannot look on us in our sins (Habakkuk 1:13), and is within his right as a just God to punish us for our sins (Romans 1:32). Yet, instead of returning to God to confess our sins, we prefer to rebuff God than to discover his cleansing and forgiveness.

Nevertheless, God has reached out to us sinful, fearful, and mortal as we are. He has revealed to us how we may draw near to him, find security in him, and the courage to live life thereafter to the fullest.

SECURITY IN GOD

First, the Bible tells us that God made for Adam and Eve clothing of skins. Implied is the killing of animals to cover their nakedness and shame, God thus revealed that it would be by the atoning death of another that security can be found in God (Genesis 3:21; cf. 3:15).

Second, we glean from Noah the first explicit mention in the Bible of an altar. On it he offered to God clean animals and birds. "And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, *'I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth'"* (Genesis 8:20-21).

Third, we read of the call to Abraham to offer up his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. His willingness to obey pictured God the Father offering up his Son in that very place 2,000 years later. The last-minute provision of the ram introduced Isaac to the relief and security found in Christ's atonement for sin (Genesis 22:1-19).

Fourth, we encounter the greatest picture of God's grace in the Old Testament, the deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. The exodus Moses led foreshadowed Christ's liberation of his people from enslavement to sin. In light of the Exodus, Moses counseled the Hebrews:

MOSES

"Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."

Exodus 20:20 (ESV)

"Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." He told them in effect that when we become God's people we need dread God no more. We hold him rather in reverential awe. He inspires our worship, draws us into intimacy, makes us joyfully obedient, and energizes our service.

Fifth, God himself pays the ransom price of our redemption. Note the high watermark of Old Testament revelation—the picture of the suffering servant: *"He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; . . . He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace"* (Isaiah 53:4-5). Eight centuries later, Christ, God's Son, endured these sufferings. Now countless millions across history and the world attest that they have peace.

SECURITY IN LIFE

Do you want this peace? God is offering it to you through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith receives with empty hands and a penitent heart what Christ has done for us. All who come to God through Christ gain both peace with God (aka reconciliation), and the peace or tranquility of being in harmony with God.

Recall Jesus' promise to his followers: *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand"* (John 10:28). He was not saying that his disciples would never die (how else could they be resurrected on Jesus' return?), but that we can never be torn from God. In this confidence, Jesus bid his farewell: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid"* (John 14:27).

Following his ascension and their empowerment at Pentecost, the apostles courageously spread the news of God's grace in Christ throughout the known world. All but John were martyred for doing so. Yet, their security in Christ granted them fortitude. Listen to Paul's encouragement of the threatened Christians of Rome:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or sword? . . . We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 37b-39).

Paul does not say that nothing nasty happens to Christians, but that God's love is unrelenting and that the more we take refuge in God's love the more we shall be victorious in life.

COUNTING OUR COST

Clearly, two realities ran parallel following Christ's exaltation (resurrection and ascension): the evidence of his victory over death in the peaceful but rapid spread of Christianity, and the persecution of Christ's followers. In God's providence, the latter aided the former (Acts 8:1, 4).

REMEMBERING JESUS CHRIST

Persecution reminded those contemplating Christ of his call to count the cost of following him (Luke 14:25-33). It is one thing to be acquitted of God's just punishment, but another to suffer Christ's dishonor before the world.

The apostles spoke of both these sides of the Christian experience. Wrote the apostle John, *"There is no [slavish] fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love"* (1 John 4:18). Yet, Paul, awaiting execution, reminded Timothy, his younger coworker, that, *"God gave us not a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control"* (2 Timothy 1:7). The secret to Paul's calmness in the face of his impending departure lay in the Lord, the righteous Judge, who instead of siding with his executioners would award to him a crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

REMEMBERING VIVIA PERPETUA

Apostolic influence and writings set the tone of Christian living in the early centuries A.D. which followed. One Christian testimony that has survived the passage of time is that of Vivia Perpetua (181–203 A.D.). Her story indicates that victory over fear belonged not to the apostles alone.

Born into a good family, Perpetua enjoyed a happy childhood in Carthage, north Africa. There on the southern rim of the Mediterranean she grew up in a privileged family, enjoying an education few girls of her time and place experienced. Everything changed, however, once she was arrested and charged with the crime of being a Christian.

By this time she was twenty-two years of age, married, with a young child. In the jail Perpetua reflected the spirit of the apostle Peter: *"If anyone suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name"* (1 Peter 4:16). Having been imprisoned himself, Peter spoke from experience. He, like Perpetua, had been made an example by the authorities.

Although amid vulgar guards, her greatest pressure while incarcerated came from her father, an honorable and upright citizen of the city. While he loved her dearly, he was not of the same spiritual ilk. Since he worshiped the same gods as his neighbors, causing no offence, his daughter's imprisonment was to him a matter of shame and humiliation. His visits to Perpetua were, then, attempts to get her to renounce her Christian profession, pleading with her for the sake of her baby boy and her family. Her mother and brother brought him to the jail for feeding. Unable to part with him, Perpetua kept him with her in the jail.

The Carthaginians waited to see whether Perpetua, Felistas, and their companions—Saturus, Saturninus, and Revocatus—would deny Christ by sacrificing to idols. Perpetua sought rather to display the grace of God, loving those around her and demonstrating the truth of Jesus. She was upheld by the prayers of her mother and her brother who shared her faith in Christ,



Thus, fully assured that Christ was their Savior, Perpetua and her companions withstood their imprisonment with patience and joy. In her diary, she wrote that one of guards, Pudens, "began to regard us in great esteem, perceiving that the mighty power of God was in us."

The day of trial came. In the market place, against the sound of the pleas from her father to deny Christ, Perpetua stood firm. Affirming her trust in Christ as her Savior she was condemned to face the wild beasts in the city's arena. Her death would serve to entertain the city during the birthday celebration of the emperor's son. Nevertheless, Perpetua and her companions remained radiant and confident according to visitors to the jail. While Pudens came to Christ, she saw her father but once more.

Saturus, Saturninus, and Revocatus, beaten by guards, refused to wear ceremonial pagan garb, and were torn apart by hungry leopards and bears. Perpetua and Felistas, entangled in nets, sang psalms to God before being tossed before a raging cow. Once gored, they were taken to a room off the arena. There Perpetua urged her brother and friend Rusticus to remain firm in the faith and to love one another. The crowds, though, realizing Perpetua and Felistas were still alive, called for their return to the arena for dispatchment by the gladiators. Perpetua's gladiator, still a youth, fumbled nervously, stabbing her ineffectively. Perpetua, holding the sword in place for him, thus entered heaven and the annals of those martyred for Jesus Christ.

Residential Address:

DECIDING OUR DESTINIES

Although faith in Christ is a gift of God, belief in Christ is something to which we are called. It is we who believe in Christ and not God who does the believing for us. There is a sense then in which we decide our destinies.

If you become a Christian you will learn more of what God does to bring us to faith and will praise him for his immeasurable kindnesses in doing so. Right now, though, the most pressing issue in your life is your decision as to what to do with Christ.

GOD'S PROMISES

God promises to those who come to Christ in repentance and faith deliverance from guilt and condemnation. If we have any sense of our sin we'll know that in such a deliverance the greatest cause of our fear is nullified.

But there's more! God not only justifies us when we come to Christ, he adopts us into his family. In this adoption we gain a twofold security. Chiefly, God, previously our Judge, becomes our heavenly Father. Yet, there is also security in membership of God's household. While each of us excepting our elder brother, Jesus Christ, remains a work in progress and are yet to be perfected, we possess so much mutual support in life as brothers and sisters in Christ. The world has nothing to compare with this.

YOUR RESPONSE

What holds you back, then, from coming to Christ? Could it be that for all your fears you love sin more? Perhaps you long for forgiveness but fear more living as a Christian. Or maybe you have forgotten that it is possible to make too much of the cost of discipleship, overlooking that God keeps whom he saves. Recall that life is as a mist, but eternity lasts forever. Whatever your reservation, tell it to God, for he cares that you come to him!

Next Issue Due Out: June 1



WHERE TO FROM HERE? CHECK THIS OUT!

1. You Could Know God
2. You Could Know Yourself
3. You Could Have All Your Sins Forgiven
4. You Could Become A Child of God
5. You Could Experience All Things Working Together for Your Good
6. You Could Learn Contentment in Every Circumstance
7. You Could Become an Incomparably Stronger and Wiser Person
8. You Could Know the Purpose of Life
9. You Could Belong to the Best and Happiest People on Earth
10. You Could Have the Assurance That the Living God Will Welcome You When You Die (available on Amazon).