

Text: Hebrews 2:15, Various

Title: The Fear of Death

Truth: A life motivated by fear of things or diseases is no way to live.

Date/Location: Sunday September 6, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

As I have thought for the past months about the COVID-19 pandemic, I wondered why people are so dreadfully afraid of this virus. The evidence is clear that there is tremendous fear. The extreme and rapid behavior modification for such a long period of time proves it.

Hear that modifier “for such a long period”! In the short term, at the beginning of the pandemic in March and April, we acted with prudence because of many unknowns and terrible predictions. But that is not the case now: the unknowns have been largely cleared up, the doomsday predictions have proven false. We know where to target our efforts, quarantines, and how to reduce spread.

1. **Government** edicts shutting down normal work, commercial activity, and mandating in effect house arrest with no criminal cause on a massive scale. A massive and rapid shift of power in states away from the legislative to the executive branches, seized over night and without regard for the constitutional system in which we live. If there was no **fear** of something bad, this would not have happened. This in turn has led to another phenomenon which sinful people tend toward, and that is accumulation of power and retaliatory behavior¹ to make people conform to what the governing authorities wish.
2. Stoppage of **church** meetings for lengthy periods of time. Some churches are not meeting for worship and the ordinances in places where they can meet, even until January 2021. Some are suggesting that they will not be back until COVID-19 is eradicated. That may never occur, or at least not for years. If Christians were not in **fear**, and governments trying to shut them down as well, this would not be happening.
3. Over-caution in the **medical** community. This is partly due to risk aversion and defensive medicine practices (avoid lawsuits = keep money). Of course, medical practitioners do not want people to die, and they do not want to be very busy, but this should not be the motivation to tell “noble lies” to manipulate people into desired behaviors. The initial near-

¹ Revoking business licenses and taking away parking lot leases after court losses prevented the authorities from getting their way.

All Scripture is from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

catastrophe was avoided, and hospitals are on a far, far better footing than they were in April. Equipment and knowledge are much better now. But the “big if” hangs over the doctors’ heads as a generator of **fear**. “What if we go back to worse than April?” Personally, I am 100% confident that we will not do so.

4. Social fabric changes in the **population at large**. Human nature and government policy has encouraged people to become snitches, informal agents of the government trying to enforce their version or morality upon others. On the street, people are more stand-offish. Forget about hospitality and the like in many cases. People even in the church are strongly divided on the right course of conduct, to the point of anger and hatred, some even leaving churches. I know of one case of a deacon leaving a church to go to another that is doing substantially the same thing as his original church, just a few weeks different in timing. This is caused by **fear** and slavish obedience to governing authorities who do not have legitimate authority in the realm of church governance. It is not mere prudence. **Fear** is hasty. Prudence is patient.

There are some other strange features that demonstrate the fear that is upon our world yet at the same time:

5. The subtle **change of terms** of the social agreement to combat the virus. At first it was “15 days to flatten the curve.” People largely agreed to that premise and were willing to take a couple or three weeks to bring the virus down. But now, people at large are unquestioning in their adherence to the idea that we must reduce the number of *cases* as close to zero as possible. We won’t return to activity X (church, sports, etc.) until the risk is zero. **That is a manifestation of fear**. Changing from *deaths* to *cases* has been a subtle but effective shift to continue societal stoppage. The number of deaths today seems to have faded into the background in terms of importance. It is my view that cases are basically irrelevant, much like other coronaviruses. It is deaths and severe complications like stroke that really matter. If we have millions of cases, but very few deaths and strokes, then that would be a smashing success.
6. A seeming **failure to recognize that risk** is unavoidable in life. Societies lived with far worse situations in terms of death and disease for most of human history. Life spans in 1920 were somewhere between 55 and 61 years for men and a little longer for women. 100 years before that in 1820, life expectancy from birth for men was 39, and for women 43 and a half. If you made it to 20, you might expect to live until your early 40s. Now when people die at 78 or 80 from COVID (life expectancy for men is

around 81) there is panic in the streets. Now the society seems to demand that the government protect us from all risk, and the cost of much liberty. **That is fear.** Wisdom recognizes that zero risk is impossible.

7. **Irrational behavior** is another **sign of fear**. Sending sick people back to homes full of senior citizens at high risk is irrational, particularly when field hospitals were ready to receive them yet those hospitals went largely unused. Refusing to bring children into schools or send them to schools when they are by far the least affected by the virus is also irrational. Refusing to address real issues that come with shutting down commerce and inter-human activities (depression, suicide, illness) and medical care (delaying needed treatments, heart and stroke care, etc.) is also irrational. **Fear** acts irrationally. Prudence acts rationally and in measured ways.

To be sure, there is more than fear underlying our current situation.

Another major motivator is greed for power. A crisis is upon the nation, and that is seen as an opportunity by those who want cultural revolution, to bring more chaos. Then, mythically, order is supposed to arise out of the chaos in a new order for the world.

But I am arguing that without fear, these things simply would not have happened.

I. From Whence the Fear?

- A. But this fear must be fear of *something*. What is that thing? It is evident that it is not merely fear of illness, because all of us have had illness many times. We have had flu bugs and gastrointestinal bugs and colds and the like. It is fear of something worse—the fear of **death**.
- B. This fear of death is king when the only thing you have to live for is self. Physical life is the most important thing when you have a naturalistic mindset. Without it, you can do nothing, enjoy nothing, be with no one, etc. It is incomprehensible to leave this life. It is even worse if you are unsure what happens after you die.
- C. This fear is magnified when we consider the truth that every person knows God and knows at some rudimentary level the moral law of God (Romans 1:19-20 and 2:15).² Each is convinced in his or her own conscience that they are guilty of breaking that law. Their conscious awareness of this fact may not strike them as particularly bothersome

² The law is “in their hearts” but not in the sense of how it is in a believer (Psalm 37:31, 40:8, 119:34; Isaiah 51:7, Jer. 31:33).

until later in life, or at certain low points in life, or when they face God as Judge. But it is “in the mix” and undergirds people’s fear of death. People have eternity in their hearts (Eccl. 3:11), so they know that there is something beyond this life. They know God is displeased with sin. At least this: they will not be able to argue when faced with God at judgment.

- D. Hebrews 2:15 speaks of people outside of Christ as “those who were held in slavery all their lives by their fear of death” (NET, see also CSB). Through the fear of death their lives were a kind of slavery. They had no freedom in *life* because they could not handle *death*.
- E. So how exactly does death enslave people? Man will sooner do many things than die—thus he is in a sense enslaved to it. This fear produces a bondage caused by dreading to die. This fear can be taken advantage of by humans with power. They can threaten to kill the person or effectively take away their life or family if they do not do what they are told. Even things as heinous as participating in the holocaust: because of the fear of death, people did it. Many people would do the same kind of thing today. This is an evidence of the enslaving nature of death. People will sin egregiously to avoid death.

This the height of irony, because it is sin itself that causes death in the first place. Why serve sin *more* in order to avoid that which sin causes? Others will cause death in order to cover up their sin (murder to cover up a crime, abortion to cover up sexual sin).

F. Quotes on this

1. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 116. “In the Graeco-Roman world fear of death was recognized as a form of slavery. ‘Are you a slave and afraid of death, which might set you free from suffering?’ According to these writers, one overcomes the fear of death by recognizing that it brings release from suffering. But in Hebrews death is an instrument of the devil which has been overcome by Christ, not welcomed as a release.” “Since death cannot separate Christ’s people from God’s love (Rom. 8:38-39), it can no longer be held over our heads by the devil as a means of intimidation.”
2. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 86-87. “His resurrection...is implied...If death had had the last word with him too, how would anyone have supposed that through death he had disabled the prince of death? The fear of death is a most potent fear. Through fear of death many will consent to do things that nothing else could compel them to do. Some braver souls, it is true, will accept death sooner

than dishonor; but for the majority the fear of death can be a tyrannous instrument of coercion. And death is indeed the king of terrors to those who recognize in it the penalty of sin. But by the death of their Sanctifier, Christ's brothers and sisters are sanctified; his death has transformed the meaning of death for them. To them his death means not judgment, but blessing; not bondage, but liberation. And their own death, when it comes, takes its character from his death. If, then, death itself cannot separate the people of Christ from God's love which has been revealed in him, it can no longer be held over their heads by the devil or any other malign power as a means of intimidation."

G. This is bad enough for a secular-minded person who does not think about what comes after life is over. It is even worse for someone who understands that death is the penalty for sin, and that beyond death lies *eternal* death waiting to swallow its victims. Inasmuch as we understand what the Lord has done for us, we need not feel the dread of death. In some way, I think believers "get" this idea because we do not have expressions like you see in the OT of how foreboding the grave, death, and Sheol are. Death cannot separate us from God (Rom 8:38-39). There is a secular notion that death is OK because it marks a release from suffering. This is shortsighted for two reasons—it ignores that death is wielded by Satan, and it ignores that for the unbeliever, death actually brings *more* suffering, in eternal torment. This is what Jesus delivered us from!

H. What does the Christian faith do for us in this area of fear of death?

Christ released believers, who previously feared death, from the penalty of sin. From Matthew 16:18, we learn that we can be assured, and bold, and we can win others out of death into the joy of salvation and real life.

I. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus tells us not to be afraid of those who kill the body, but to fear the one who is able to destroy the body *and the soul* in Hell. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10, Prov. 1:7, 9:10, 15:33). Fearing God more than fearing death takes our focus off earthly things and keeps us from improperly fearing other things.

II. The Fear is Stoked by Forces of Evil.

A. The circumstances in which we find ourselves are not merely of human construction. It was not merely humans who were playing with bat viruses in a lab, or carrying the virus to others in the marketplace, or traveling widely, or covering up the human transmissibility of it. It was

not mere people who neglected to stockpile enough PPE or ventilators, or who went out when they felt sick, or who gave orders to shut down the economy. It is not mere humans who are accumulating power at horrifying speed.

- B. By the way, think of Egypt during the famine, under the rule of Joseph. When calamity strikes, the people gave up everything to the government because they were not prepared, or could not prepare, properly. That is what is happening today. Societies in which there is fear of deadly disease are much more likely to be societies where tyrants rule. That is a fact of life. People will sooner give up freedom and responsibility than “security” from a virus, or say, a terrorist.
- C. But back to my point. Eph. 6:12 and Daniel 10:13 remind us that there is an unseen realm out there. Though unseen, it is not unreal. It is very real. And those demonic powers are behind and under and within the movement we see across the world. They enjoy the death and chaos and sin—and fear. They move in high officials and influential public thinkers and writers to convince people in the world to do evil things. They convince people to persecute the church, and the Jews. It is irrelevant whether those people recognize it or not that they are being *used*. They may even be deceived to think they are doing *good*. Remember, “whoever kills you will think he offers God service” (John 16:2).
- D. Fear is attached to deception, either self-deception or deception of others to get them to conform to the way you wish them to behave.

Conclusion

If all of this seems a bit excessive, note that I am not just talking about COVID. I’m speaking about the interconnected network of COVID and homosexuality and cultural Marxism and intersectionality and critical race theory and anti-Christian and anti-Jewish sentiment that is rising in the world. It all fits the Biblical model of a coming Antichrist who will rule the world, promising peace and putting himself up as the savior of mankind, demanding worship and the rest. We are not on board with that because it will be done in unrighteousness, despite the fact that we know that God has ordained it to happen. We are resigned to it in the will of God, but not happy that it will come upon the unsuspecting world and many will die and be lost forever.

We are not victims of the tyrannical fear of death like all the rest.

Consequently, we evaluate things like the COVID crisis much differently than the unbeliever.

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