

The Archenemy

Romans 8:15

PEOPLE ARE AFRAID

Is this weird or what. Did you know that today is the ides of March. These are strange, uncertain, and unsettling times. How quickly things can change. When this year of 2020 began, was the COVID-19 virus of any concern to you? I had heard of the novel coronavirus, but was not terribly concerned. Yet now with whiplash inducing speed concerts and conventions are canceled, travel is restricted, entire sports have been suspended, some seasons canceled, schools are closed and churches are not holding worship services! I will soon mark 41 years of ministry as a pastor. Those 41 years include more than 2,100 Sunday mornings, and this is the first time I have had to cancel a worship service because of something like this. I find myself instead of leading a worship service as I have done for most of those last 2,100 Sundays, sitting at home talking to Laurie's phone in the blind faith that there might be a group of my brothers and sisters in Christ out there somewhere watching. This virus is not as frightening as what happened on 9/11 in 2001, but at the moment it is causing more upheaval than anything since that awful day.

Laurie and I went to the grocery store on Friday. I was stunned. No doubt you've been there and experienced it. To me it had an "end of the world" kind of feel to it. As we were walking from our car toward the store we passed a sketchy looking guy slouching next to his disreputable van. As I got close the guy said quietly to me, "Hey, buddy, are you interested in some toilet paper?" Caught off guard I said, "I'm sorry, what?" He said while looking around warily, "I've got some toilet paper in my van that I'm selling. I'm not talking about that cheapo, two ply garbage. I've got the good stuff, Charmin Ultra Soft." Well, naturally I was interested. So I said, "How much are you charging?" He said, "I'll give you a great deal. It's only \$15 a roll." "Are you kidding me? That's outrageous!" He shrugged, then nodded toward the store and said, "Well go ahead and try to get some in there then."

Okay, actually that didn't happen. But it could have. At this point people are getting more than a little panicky about the Great Toilet Paper Shortage. Can it be long before black market toilet paper makes an appearance? Our daughter in law, Anna, told me that she has thought of a great incentive for potential buyers of their house that she and Toby are trying to sell. She said she's going to offer to give anyone who buys the house a roll of toilet paper. That will certainly motivate some buyers, I think. I thought John Sisti described the scene in the grocery store well when he said it seemed to him that people were manifesting a quiet panic there.

They weren't screaming in fear, they weren't fighting each other (yet), but they were mostly grim, very focused and fearful. Obviously there was not a roll of toilet paper on the shelves. But there was also no bread and the milk was almost gone. At one point Laurie sent me in search of an item, and when I returned to the dairy section where I had left her I found her climbing into the dairy cooler because there was one last jug of milk but it was all the way at the back and the only way she could reach it was to climb in there.

Is there a worldwide shortage of toilet paper, bread and milk? Have these commodities suddenly become so scarce, so rare that if you Don't buy whatever you can find right now it's likely you'll never again be able to get any? So the certainty is that someday soon you're going to find yourself sitting on the throne in your bathroom faced with the doomsday scenario that you have just one sheet of toilet paper left, and after that you're down to using newspaper, except you haven't gotten a newspaper in 10 years. I know, some younger people are saying, "What's a newspaper?" It's sort of an archaic paper version of your Google feed.

What's going on in stores is due to one thing: people are panicking. They are driven by fear and it is the panic and fear that have created artificial shortages. I could not help but think, man, if it gets this bad over this virus, what would happen if we actually had something happen that was a real threat to all our lives, where food staples really were scarce? I'm pretty sure that would rip the façade off civilization in short order and violence would follow quickly.

Our son, Toby, last week had his first patient in the ER with a corona virus related complaint. She didn't have the virus. She had chest pains and an exceedingly elevated heart beat rate. She was having a panic attack because she was so afraid of the corona virus. She actually was in danger of doing damage to herself purely through her own fear.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, in chapter 8 verses 14-15, he wrote, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

God's Spirit does not make us slaves and cause us to be owned by fear. But notice he says he does not make us live in fear *again*. We can only live in fear again if we have previously lived in fear. And that's exactly what he's saying. Human beings live every day of their lives with fear. It never leaves us alone.

At the root of the problem is that we are afraid of God. We are afraid that he is going to judge us, to condemn us, because we judge ourselves. We know we deserve judgment because we can't even live up to our own standards for who and what we ought to be. We fear God won't like us. That he will abandon us, that he wants to punish us.

But that's just the beginning of fear. We fear pain. We fear disappointment. We have a debilitating and constant fear of rejection. We are always afraid of what people might think of us. We fear failure. We fear embarrassment. Most of all, we fear death. That's a terrifying fear that stalks us every day of our lives.

Fear takes root in our lives and in many cases spreads to irrational things. We have all heard of acrophobia, fear of heights; arachnophobia, fear of spiders; and agoraphobia, which is fear of the marketplace or the outdoors. There actually are some people out there who have aulophobia. That's a fear of flutes! Yeah, boy, those flute players terrify me. One of the weirdest I've ever heard of is caliginophobia, which is fear of beautiful women.

Those are more rare, but the fact is, fear is, for lack of a better word, pandemic. Researchers have discovered that most people have lurking down inside a disquiet, an unease that is at a low level, but that it peeks out at moments when they are quiet and not distracted by anything. Why does it matter that we have fear?

FEAR CAN HAVE SOME NEGATIVE EFFECTS

250 times in the Bible God says to people, "Do not be afraid," or words similar that have the same message. That would only be true if being afraid were something negative, something we should be afraid of.

In 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, preached a sermon about fear. It was a time of great unrest, uncertainty and fear in Germany. In fact, that fear would be a prime factor in opening the door to Nazi rule, which would end up being one of the most devastating, fearful things to occur in the entire history of the human race. In his sermon Bonhoeffer said, "Fear is, somehow, the archenemy itself. It crouches in people's hearts. It hollows out their insides until their resistance and strength are spent." He described fear as a helplessness, a fog spreading over everything.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota some years ago studied what fear does to us. They found out it causes greater vulnerability to infection, increases blood

pressure and risk of heart attack and stroke, causes digestive problems and back pain, increases our risk for cancer, leads to fatigue, chronic depression, accelerated aging, and causes greater belly fat! It will wear you out, cause you to have heart problems, depress you, make you old and fat and kill you. Fear causes greater vulnerability to infection, so our very fear of the COVID-19 virus makes us more susceptible to it!

Fear can do a lot of damage. David Ropeik, formerly of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, did a report recently for the National Center for Biotechnology Information. In the report he wrote, “The hazards of risk perception may be more significant than any of the individual risks about which we fret.” In other words, the fear itself is more dangerous than most of the things we fear! Franklin D. Roosevelt was right, at least to some extent, when he said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

One evidence of this is in the panic buying and shortages that are now occurring in stores. The fear itself is having a negative impact on everyone. Shopping has become an ordeal and there are items we all need that we would all have plenty of if everyone just remained calm.

Not only does fear do us harm physically, but it is debilitating in other ways. It robs us of joy. We lose hope, we lose the zest and joy of living and we Don't even realize what is happening to us. We quickly get so used to a fearful state that it seems almost natural to us.

Fear can cause us to compromise. Perhaps you remember that when the Apostle Paul launched off with his buddy, Barnabus, on a trip with the goal of winning people to faith in Christ and starting new churches in Asia Minor, they took along Barnabus' nephew, John Mark. He was a young man who showed a lot of potential. They would run into some violent opposition on that trip. But what is interesting is what we see in Acts 13:13. “From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.” John bailed out even before things got bad because he was intimidated, afraid.

You remember what happened to Peter the night Jesus was arrested. That very night he vehemently proclaimed that he would be always loyal and faithful to Jesus. Hours later, after Jesus was arrested, Peter was identified by a servant girl as a follower of Jesus, and he adamantly denied it. He horribly compromised because he was afraid. Fear drives people to behave in ways they would usually never act, and even to do things they are later ashamed of. I daresay people at this point are

not thinking of others when they are buying and hoarding supplies. It's that, "I'm taking care of me and I Don't care what it does to you" attitude.

Fear can cause us to lose sight of our mission, of what matters most. I saw this in a small, unusual way as a freshman in college. I had essentially walked on in an attempt to get a spot on the baseball team. Very early on we were having batting practice, and I knew that while the idea was for us to practice and hone our skills, I knew it was also a time for the coaches to see what we could do. It was one more data point for them. This particular practice we were hitting against live pitching, and I had the misfortune of having to hit against a sophomore who had been all league as a freshman. The problem wasn't that he was good enough to be all league, it was that something had happened to him. It wasn't physical. This guy threw harder than anyone else we had. In the bullpen he would fire blazing fastballs and violent sliders for strikes, one after another. But when an actual batter was at the plate he completely lost his ability to control his pitches. They were just as fast as ever, but he had no idea where they were going. I stepped in against him and he began firing rockets over my head, into the dirt three feet in from of home plate, behind me, two feet outside, and right at my head. I quickly began to fear that this guy was going to accidentally kill me. The worse the pitches got, the greater the fear. And that fear finally took over. Part of the test of batting practice was seeing how well you managed the strike zone. Did you swing at strikes or chase bad pitches? But I got to the place where I just wanted to get out of there without serious injury. I unconsciously decided that if he threw a pitch that was in the same zip code as the plate, I would swing at it. I didn't care how bad the pitch was or how bad I looked, I just wanted to go home uninjured. The fear took over, and the mission of showing my abilities to the coach got completely lost. And fear can do that to us in life with the far more important things of life.

HOW CAN WE OVERCOME FEAR?

This is the real question. How do we keep from having fear control our lives? We learned last night from Toby that the coronavirus has arrived at his hospital. He had several patients with it yesterday. To make things worse, what has been the concern all along is starting to show up. The ability of our medical system to handle it is now being strained. They are running short of supplies and resources. It is kind of scary. To make it worse, there are two things about fear we need to know.

The first is that fear is contagious. We have seen this already. It is why you can't find toilet paper anywhere. In Deuteronomy 20, God gives some instructions to Israel for going to war. In verses 3-4, he says they should be reminded, "Do not be

fainthearted or afraid; or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.” So that’s good. Don’t be afraid. Don’t panic.

Then he begins to excuse some people from military service. In verse 8, he says, “Then the officers shall add, is anyone afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his fellow soldiers will not become disheartened too.” God told them it was better for those who are afraid to go home than to stick around, because their fear is contagious and would infect others. This is important to know because it reminds us that sometimes our fears are actually something we’ve caught from others.

The second thing we need to know about fear is that it is not always rational and reasonable. That’s part of the explanation for the Great Toilet Paper Shortage. It is important for us to know this because often we think the way to deal with fear is to reason our way out of it. In his book, *Running Scared*, Edward Welch wrote that many treatments for fear rest “on the premise that fear submits to logic, which is a dubious assumption.” Trying to reason our way out of fear doesn’t always work. What can we do then?

Recognize That God Hasn’t Given Us A Spirit Of Fear

Fear strips away a person’s humanity. We become something that is not what God made humans to be. We begin to resemble what the devil would have us be; hopeless, cowering, enslaved, broken down.

Of course there is God given fear. We are all afraid of jumping out of an airplane without a parachute, and that’s a good, life-protecting fear. ...Actually I’m afraid of jumping out of an airplane even with a parachute, but that’s another topic... But the fear that strips away our hope, our joy, our life, our love for other people is not from God. The fear that paralyzes us is not from God.

This is an important distinction to make. As we deal with the threat of the COVID-19 virus we might feel a fear that almost overwhelms us. It is a fear that makes us feel sick and weak. It is a fear that absolutely drains joy and life from us, paralyzes us. It makes us feel hopeless and panicky. It blots out God, for we quit trusting him and focusing first and most of all on his will. It focuses us completely on ourselves and blocks us from loving other people. Understand that this is not fear given to us by God. Where then does it come from? It comes from the enemy of our souls, who wants to destroy our lives. So recognize it for what it is. It is not necessarily inherent in you, it is something the enemy is dumping on you to sap you of all joy,

hope and love. James 4:7 says if we will simply resist the enemy, recognize what he is trying to do and say no to him, he will flee from us.

God always seeks to give life. Jesus said that's why he came, to give us life. Everything God does is motivated by love and intended to make our lives more full. He seeks to give us love, joy, peace, at all times. So understand there is a fear given to you by God, but it is a fear that brings and protects life. It is not a sick fear, a paralyzing, overwhelming fear, but a fear that makes us wise. In the case of COVID-19 it is a fear that respects this disease and directs us to be wise. It does not make us panic and buy so much toilet paper that no one else on the planet can get any. But it does recognize the threat.

I must tell you that until last night I wasn't giving this pandemic all that much thought. I wasn't taking it very seriously. But last night my son called me after his shift in the Emergency Department up at UC Irvine Medical Center, the level one trauma center for Orange County. It was a sobering phone call. He said he himself had not been all that concerned about the disease, viewing it as something equivalent to a flu epidemic. He said the last couple of days have really gotten his attention. Things have taken a significant turn for the worse, and he has seen his first patients with it. He said, "Dad, you need to take this very seriously. This is a potentially scary disease." For those who are younger, it is not a threat. Should a younger person contract the virus it acts like a fairly mild case of flu. But for older people, like me, it can be deadly. He said he was shocked at what the disease did to one of the patients at his hospital in the space of two days. He urged me most strongly to take all the precautions that are being given to us. The healthy fear from God doesn't make me feel sick inside, it doesn't fill me with anxiety, it doesn't make me obsess over this disease. It leaves me calm, at peace, but being wise about what I do. Yes, avoid gathering with groups of people, don't touch your face, wash your hands as instructed. And pray. So as we deal with that unhealthy fear we need to remember its source. This is from an enemy who is trying to destroy us.

Remember Who Our Father Is

This passage says that God has given us a spirit of sonship, a spirit that affirms we are God's children. It is a spirit by which we cry out Abba, Father. That is what a beloved child calls out to a Father who loves him or her. It is crying out to God, "Daddy," because we know he loves us more than we will ever understand.

In John 16:33 Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." And he did. Jesus took the biggest, most powerful punches the world and Satan could throw at him, and he overcame all of it. It is his

Spirit now in us. He is with us always, and he still will overcome whatever the world throws our way. Psalm 18:2 says, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation.” God is with us, and he is able to deal with whatever comes. He has power over the coronavirus, and he knew from the foundation of the world that these days would come. They are no surprise to him.

The amazing thing is that God is with us. I love what Bonhoeffer said in his sermon. “Jesus Christ, the crucified and Living One is alone Lord over fear; it knows him as master, it gives way to him alone. Look to Christ when you are afraid...keep him before your eyes, call upon Christ...believe he is with you and you will be free.” What will cut through all the fear is to believe that the Almighty God is our Father and he is with us.

Psalm 56:3-4 says, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” Or what can a mere virus do to me?

Live The Adventure

I will say it again. What is God doing in our lives? Why did Jesus come to this earth? Listen to his words in John 10:10: “The thief comes only to steal, and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.” There is a thief in this world who seeks to steal true life from us, to kill and to destroy. But Jesus came for the very purpose of giving us life, and not just any life, but life to the fullest. That’s what God is doing in your life. But that may not always go the way we think, because we typically take the path of least resistance. We want easy, but God wants full.

Don’t you want full? Yesterday we had our two granddaughters with us all day. At one point we all went to the grocery store. Laurie chose a place to shop that had those little carts for “shoppers in training,” for kids. So we had a cart and little four-year-old Ella had her own cart that she pushed around the store. Man did that little kid shop with glee. She was excited about the whole thing. At one point she found some canned peaches she thought we just had to have so she put a can in her little cart. There was a couple close by observing her antics who were getting a big kick out of her. She saw them, and noticed there was only one can of peaches left on the picked-over shelves. Concerned that they get some before they were all gone, she grabbed it, walked over to them and handed it to them. They were greatly tickled, and very thankful to her. Then we went on about our rounds. At one point as we were nearing the end she said, “This has been the best day ever.” I

thought, little Ella is living the adventure. The adventure is actually what's inside her, that turns everything she does, even mundane things, into an adventure.

God want us to live a full life, an adventure. And he works to give us full life, even if that is at times scary and difficult. In his book, *Wild Goose Chase*, Mark Batterson wrote, "If you would describe your relationship with God as anything less than adventurous, then maybe you think you are following the Spirit but have actually settled for something less." Yes, a full life would be an adventure, wouldn't it? It wouldn't be boring. But consider what the dictionary definition of adventure is: "An undertaking or enterprise of a hazardous nature."

What makes an adventure an adventure is risk. If there is no risk, if nothing can be lost, there is no excitement to it, no real adventure. We who are sports fans know this. What makes a game dull? A blowout. When one football team is ahead of the other 42-0 at half time. You don't even bother watching the second half. What makes it thrilling, exciting, an adventure, is the risk of losing the game going right down to the last second.

With risk comes fear. But for us, it is godly fear, fear that trusts in God and knows he is leading us on an adventure, no matter how scary it might feel. This is part of the adventure. Yes, it might be scary, but God is with us. Wouldn't it have been cool to have been in that boat with the disciples when the storm came and they were sure they were going to die, then Jesus told the storm to knock it off and there was instant calm? Do you think after that you'd ever be really afraid of anything as long as Jesus was with you? Well here are two things you need to remember: You are in the boat, but Jesus is in the boat with you. And somehow, storms seem to find Jesus wherever he goes. So Don't be surprised when the storm hits.

Here's a truth you need to know. As part of the adventure, God wants you to know that he is with you. But the only way we can really know that he is with us is for him to take away our self-devised supports so we have to rely on him alone. Scary times are the times we must remember that God is incredibly close to us, not far away, and that he will be enough for us if we look to him in whom we believe.

So I encourage all of you, trust in our Lord. Let's be of good cheer, and not be faint hearted. Let's know that our hope in the end is that we will be with the Lord in his kingdom *forever*. Let's be wise and take the precautions that are smart. Let's pray for one another, encourage one another, care for one another. Let's live the adventure!

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. See you next Sunday.