

NORTHERN LIGHT

Digest
JUNE 2015

Grace Communion International Canada / Communion Internationale dans la Grâce, Canada

Fear

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Something happening
to our kids? Losing
our health? What
keeps you up at night?***

What are we afraid of? Something happening to our kids? Losing our health? What keeps you up at night?

A few years ago, while visiting a small town on the beautiful east coast of Tasmania, my wife and I took a few moments to go to the town's visitor centre. Like most small town visitor

centres, it was staffed by a couple senior ladies who were a wealth of knowledge. While we were browsing the various tourist brochures, post-cards and souvenir stuffed koalas and platypuses, the telephone rang.

One of the tourist centre hosts answered and a long conversation ensued with someone on the other end. Every once in a while I heard, phrases like, "Don't worry," "snakes", "never had any problems here." After the visitor host hung up the phone, I couldn't help but ask, "What was that call all about?"

"Oh," she said "that was someone from the US calling to ask if we had any poisonous snakes in this part of Tasmania." "Apparently, they had heard that Australia has extremely poisonous snakes, and they wanted to make sure they were safe to leave the States and come to Tasmania."

The visitor host said that was a first for her.

Curious, when I got back to our friends' house in Hobart, I Googled the Parks and Wildlife Service of Tasmania about "Poisonous Snakes," and here is what I discovered:

"...There have been no recorded deaths in Tasmania from snakebites for several decades. Far more people die from ant bites, peanuts or spouses than snakes - a point well worth contemplating next time you head out into the Tasmanian bush!" (<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/?base=3198>)

The fact is, although there are many things that demand a healthy fear from us, statistics show we live in fairly safe circumstances. Crime rates in Canada are the lowest they have been in decades. Automobiles are safer than ever before. Air travel is still the safest mode of travel.



As Neil Earle explains in the next article, many fears fostered in society are the creation of 24 hour news channels or internet scares. Unfortunately, even our leaders play on our fears— especially during election time.

So, what is a Christian to do? First, we should remember that fear can help us to avoid dangerous situations. But if fear is incapacitating us, then one may need to seek the help of health care professionals. Often fears can originate from some type of past trauma or chemical imbalances in our bodies.

Second, it is important to always remember, no matter what nightmares we may dream or experience, no matter where we may go or what we may do, no matter even what may be done to us, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

"So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us,

“...None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us” (Romans 8: 31-39 the Message).

embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn’t gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God’s chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:

They kill us in cold blood because they hate you. We’re sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one.

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Wonderful words of assurance in a world filled with fear.

Bill Hall

Godly Fear (and not the other kind)

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It’s now official—social media (twitter, smart phones, texting, face book, snap chat, etc.) are making us more anxious. It’s not just FOMO—Fear of Missing Out, says psychologist Archibald Hart in *The Digital Invasion*. Rather it’s that the globe’s nervous system now seems to be “wired” for hyper-connectivity, susceptible to every gossipy tweet along the global “jungle telegraph” that is the Internet.

CBS-TV veteran reporter Bob Scheiffer opines that the Internet’s big flaw is “it has no editor and/or fact-checker. Every respectable news outlet has that.” The result, he said, is that wrong ideas “spread like crabgrass and are often as poisonous.”

Scheiffer may be showing his age but it seems that a free-floating vague sense of anxiety has settled in on North Americans. In November 2014, after the back-to-back deaths of two Canadian soldiers, international relations professor Jez Littlewood of Carleton University noted how polling showed that 83% of Canadians favored blocking internet sites promoting extremist ideologies. Toronto-based pollster Shachi Kurl reports that such recent events have shaken Canada’s sense of security. Add to this, fears about intervention in Iraq, social security, the fast slide of the Canadian dollar vis-a-vis the U.S. currency and our cup of worry seems pretty full.

Our Over-Communicated Age

No doubt about it, the constant drumbeat of 24 hour news seems almost designed to keep us on edge. As the Canadian media savant Marshall McLuhan said years ago, “We don’t have eyelids any more. We wear all humanity on our skin.” Of course it goes without saying that there are many beneficial uses to the Internet. But...on February 5 we were treated to a paradigmatic display of digital overkill when a Twitter from the ISIS terrorist group claimed that a Jordanian bombing run had killed an American hostage. Result? All the news networks came to heel and felt duty-bound to report the story.

This was a sign of the times. Smart-phones are incredibly useful and even life-saving, Astra Taylor reports in *The Peoples Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age* and nobody wants to stand against real progress but...the drawbacks are coming home to roost. Social scientists now advise that those of us aged over 50 will soon feel like aliens in our own country thanks to the escalating uptick in the complicated new technologies zooming across cyberspace.

Christians are not immune. Shrinking privacy, the trivializing of public discourse, an ever deepening generational chasm and,



above all, the crowding out of the time we need to make sense of our lives—all of this now seems a hallmark of the times.

Naming the Fear

It's true. What risk assessment expert Gavin De Becker warned about just after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States has come to pass. Their majesties Fear and Dread have many more delivery systems with which to assail us. De Becker wrote *Fear Less: Real Truth about Risk, Safety, and the Security in a Time of Terrorism* to shed some much needed perspective. His analysis was steady to say the least:

- you're safer in an airplane than in your own shower
- there were almost 5000 flights in the air over North America on 9/11 therefore your chances of safety were quite high indeed
- your chances of being killed in a terror attack, De Becker claims, are 1 in 20 million
- even though at least 7500 flights are aloft each day, one plane crash draws reporters like flies at a picnic
- 20 pounds of anthrax released in the air...would fall to the ground harmlessly
- building a private nuclear bomb calls for large amounts of plutonium, but stored where—in a suburban basement?
- many fear a trip to the Holy Land but tour groups return safely every day

So we can take heart. The Christian hope which subsumes our fears draws on strong biblical roots. Our wise God has already catalogued, named and circumscribed our fears—including the fear of a sudden meaningless death (Hebrews 2:15). Fear and anger are primal emotions and Bible writers were well acquainted with them and gave us the antidote. Bible teacher J.D. Douglas distinguished among "godly fear" and the slavish fear that is the result of sin or a perceived threat, the fear of men and the normal existential dread of death.

"Fear not!"

"Holy fear is God-given," wrote Douglas in the *New Bible Dictionary*, "enabling men to reverence God's authority, obey his commandments and hate and shun all forms of evil (page 365)." This is healthy fear, such as the fear of driving too close to the cliff. Fear of itself is neutral. The corrupt Roman governor Felix feared when St. Paul spoke about future judgment (Acts 24:25). But the Philippian jailor was quickly motivated by fear to seek God after an earthquake set St. Paul free (Acts 16:29).

Theologian Ralph Earle wrote trenchantly about what some see as the most repeated command in the Bible—"Fear not!" Jesus is quoted in the Gospels using the Greek word "phobos" from which we get "phobia." Says Ralph Earle: "Jesus used it in the sense of [not] being afraid of the future. He comforted his disciples with the words, 'Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Luke 12:7). In verse 32 of the same chapter he says 'Do not be afraid little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.' Fear as a preventative has value. But fright or terror has

NORTHERN LIGHT Digest

Vol.4, No. 2 June 2015

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Northern Light Digest is published 4 times annually for members of the Grace Communion International Canada. Editorial contributions and comments on any issue raised in Northern Light Digest are welcome although unsolicited materials may not be returned. Please address all correspondence to:

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The new online edition of Northern Light Digest is available at www.gcicanada.ca

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no place in the Christians' life, at least in his relationship to God" (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, page 409).

God is Our Shelter

Old Testament writers knew God's true character. Psalm 91, for example, bathes our mind in engaging and positive declarative sentences. "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Most Christians have such a shelter. It is called our prayer closet where we can pour out anything anytime to our great God. Oh, what a relief in these times of stress and strain. That's why we chime in with the Psalmist, "we can say of the Lord: He is my Refuge and my Fortress, My God, in whom I trust" (verses 1-2).

We moderns sometimes miss the biblical contrast with ancient idolatry. Can anyone imagine anyone in the First Millennium BC talking about Zeus and Marduk as Lord and Refuge? "Marduk is Love." I don't think so! Or singing: "Yes, Neptune loves me!" No way! The ancient gods were usually hideous repulsive incarnations with scary wolf heads and lion feet. Israel's God was described in tender loving terms in Psalm 91:4, "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge." Jesus repeated that very image in Luke 13 when he wept over the doomed city of Jerusalem whom he wished he could shelter as a hen does its chicks.

But this is a harsh world and Psalm 91 also reflects images of God as a Shield and Buckler i.e. bronze and iron defenses for tough realities. Verses 3-6 lists seven perils that faced people in that day—and now. Pestilence comes first—does EBOLA ring a bell? Verse 5 is eloquent: "You will not fear the terror by night." *Terror by night*. This one hits close to home. Growing up in the Cold War deep freeze of the 1950s I remember reading about nuclear bombs on planes. I had to wonder sometimes when I heard planes flying overhead, an air base just 10 miles way: is this the one that will end it all?

Thankfully, we learn as we get older that most of our fears are not real. As De Becker writes, "The very fact that you fear something is evidence that it is NOT happening." But it's often that nagging fear of the unknown or simple existential dread, that is, the sense of emptiness and uncertainty from just being human that can get to us at times. That, and the lack of control that modern living induces. All this makes us vulnerable to escalating even legitimate worries and concerns. We now have the pervasive electronic technology to keep us awake and fretful all night if we let it. Not that we don't need to watch "the news" to stay informed for Christian commentary and perspectives but there is a balance in everything. Christians are not to live at the whim of every speculation, rumor, supposition and conjecture. Televised or tweeted.

A Testing Formula

The second half of Psalm 91—the ultimate "protection" song—is introduced by verses 7 and 8. The elegant Hebrew poetry summons us from fears of "the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that walks at noonday." Ten thousand falling at your right hand would have conveyed to the Israelites God's mighty deliverance at the time of the Exodus, and that is something Christians can meditate on with profit. The Israelites were slaves and under cruel

taskmasters. But God hates injustice. He does not tolerate evil forever, the wicked get their come-uppance even in this life (Psalm 37:12-15). Think of it: the great threatening dictators of history usually come to sticky ends.

Perhaps, if we were more advanced in Christian faith and love we would have no debilitating fears whatsoever. But who is that perfect? There are, we have argued, godly uses for fear—Jesus experienced godly fear in the garden of Gethsemane (Hebrews 5:7). He is a stellar example of facing three brief questions when confronting our fears: First, what is the worst that can happen? Second, can I improve on the worst? Third, can I face the worst?

Jesus prayed under extreme tension. His sweat fell like drops of blood when he knew what was before him: the cross. But he persevered after three intense rounds of prayer, perhaps the most intense ever offered. But after reconnecting with God's Spirit of power, he was ready. He faced the worst. "Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer! (Matthew 26:46) He was once again, the Master. Jesus showed us that fear can drive us to our knees, help us take wise precautions, and perhaps that is the best thing that can be said about it.

God Speaks to us!

Gethsemane reminds us that when trouble comes and fears scream in at us as panic attacks or nervous exhaustion, then we must cast our eyes even more upon Jesus. He prayed like few men and women ever have. He knew Psalm 91 where God turns back the introductory seven threats (which poetically encapsulated the sum of all fears) with the seven "I wills" in verses 14-16.

These promises are wonderfully comforting and encouraging. "I will protect him," "I will be with him in trouble." "I will deliver him and honor him" and so on. The psalm ends with the one word that fits every occasion—"salvation." Salvation in Hebrew was *yeshua* which became a man's name "Joshua" which in the NT is translated "Jesus." So Jesus is in this psalm both in the negative challenge Satan futilely threw at him in verses 11 and 12 and in the resounding conclusion spoken by Yahweh God himself.

What hope! What reassurance! Christians are encouraged to mediate upon such promises. We can't let this wandering and wicked old world system throw us off track (Romans 15:4). Cyber trivia and Internet anxiety can do their worst but God's people know better. We have learned godly fear, which prioritizes a reverent and humble dependence upon the God who promises freedom from fear.

Neil Earle