

God Commands Us to Fear Not

Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq was known as “the republic of fear” among opponents—those who were still alive, that is.

The deposed dictator, who was hanged in 2006, so effectively instilled dread among Iraqis during his decades in power that the mere rumor of a visit from his henchmen was enough to make most citizens tremble and submit.

It’s an old tactic in the tyrant playbook: Rule by fear. Spill plenty of blood early on. Pit various social, ethnic and religious groups against each other. Crush any hint of resistance. Later, you can make a bloody example of the odd rebel here and there—or even a random victim plucked off the street—to keep the rest of your subjects anxious. They must believe that you have eyes, ears and knives everywhere. If you’re a good tyrant, you probably do.

Arab strongmen who have fallen from power more recently used the same methods to greater or lesser degrees, until their populations had enough.

“The Arab awakenings happened because the Arab peoples stopped fearing their leaders,” writes *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman of the Arab Spring revolutions. “But they stalled because the Arab peoples have not stopped fearing each other.”

The dictators carefully nurtured the culture of fear and ran their countries like Mafia dons, Friedman observes, “doling out patronage and protection, while ruling with an iron fist. But it will take more than just decapitating these regimes to overcome that legacy. It will take a culture of pluralism and citizenship. Until then, tribes will still fear tribes in Libya and Yemen, sects will still fear sects in Syria and Bahrain, the secular and the Christians will still fear the Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia and the philosophy of ‘rule or die’ will remain a potent competitor to ‘one man, one vote.’”

Fear runs deep in human hearts and minds—and not just in tough neighborhoods like the Middle East.

A few years ago I wrote about the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina's glittering capital, economic hub, cultural center and home to a third of the nation's 40 million people. If you look beneath Buenos Aires' frenetic pace, wide avenues, trendy bars, tango cafes and European atmosphere, you find deep undercurrents of isolation and fear.

"In a big city, the spiritual strongholds are loneliness and fear," said a missionary based there. "People live their lives scared. They're afraid to go out at night. They're afraid someone is going to take something from them. People who don't have anything are afraid they're not going to eat the next day. Fear drives people to do irrational and immoral things. It makes the wealthy become reclusive. It makes the poor get involved in crime or drugs to find an escape."

The crime rate in Buenos Aires is no higher than in other major world cities. The metal bars guarding doors and windows there represent something deeper than simple fear of crime. Waves of political violence, economic chaos and social turmoil experienced by Argentines since the 1970s have left a legacy of suspicion, disillusionment and cynicism.

"People just don't trust anyone anymore," explained the missionary. "They don't trust their government. They don't trust the police. They don't trust the mechanic they take their car to. ... It's a huge barrier to the Gospel, because it makes it very difficult to approach people and share. You've got this priceless gift you'd like to give everybody, but fear keeps them from being open to even talking about it."

What if fear paralyzes not the person you want to tell about Christ, but you? Another missionary believes that's one reason many Christians don't reach out to the spiritually hungry immigrants and refugees who come to America.

"God is ... bringing the nations to us," he says. "But the thing that is driving the church is fear. Until we get over our fear, we will not welcome the lost in our midst. We're afraid of Muslims and we're afraid of foreigners. ... We're in a free country, and yet we're not exercising our freedom to witness to the nations in our midst."

Fear poisons relationships, or prevents them from ever beginning. It sabotages families and nations, motivates murders and sparks wars. It infects whole cultures. Believers should be immune, but we are not.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt told a nation mired in the Great Depression that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he put his finger on a spiritual reality rarely acknowledged by political leaders. Roosevelt urged Americans not to succumb to the "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." He challenged the country to keep its face turned outward, meeting the needs of others also caught in the global economic crisis: "These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men."

The devil loves fear. He is a master at using it to manipulate, hurt and destroy. But he cannot succeed unless you submit. That's why the Lord tells His children again and again throughout Scripture to "fear not," to trust Him, to be strong and of good courage. It's not simply a reassurance; it's an order.

"Jesus said, 'Let not your heart be troubled,'" Oswald Chambers writes, referring to Christ's words in John 14:1. But it's up to you. "God will not keep your heart from being troubled. It is a command – 'Let not ...' Haul yourself up a hundred and one times a day in order to do it, until you get into the habit of putting God first and calculating with Him

in view.”

Fearing not is a crucial part of obeying God, which means loving Him. And love casts out fear.

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