

Our Daily Fears and the Future

I am writing this text in my room in Zagreb, on the thirteenth day of my life of isolation from the outside world as we all try to stop the spread of the coronavirus. My self-isolation began on Sunday, March 22nd 2020, when a destructive earthquake hit Zagreb early in the morning. The global coronavirus (COVID-19) and the earthquake in Zagreb found me during a several months long process of introducing a younger colleague into editorial work in order to enable him to take over editing of the Croatian and English versions of *Kairos*. All three developments have to do with specific crises and the fears they cause. The coronavirus pandemic has caused global health and economic crises, as well as some others, and it gave rise to many subsequent fears. Apart from great material damage, the Zagreb earthquake also caused a local residential crisis and the city restoration crisis, as well as fears from another earthquake, the loss of life and property. Getting a replacement editor is an inevitable crisis for every publication and *Kairos* is no exception. And yet, each crisis is inevitably followed by different fears and challenges, the overcoming of which helps one achieve a better future.

Fear is part of man's experience from the earliest age all the way to his old age. If we were to add up all of human fears, we would have quite a task and the list would be a long, messy one. Fear of illness, the dark, heights, depths, disasters, fires, floods, earthquakes, traffic accidents, unemployment, loneliness, poverty, rejection, lack of acceptance, environmental pollution, the migrant crisis, the inability to possess everything we want...

In the Bible, fear is an often described human experience. In fact, there is not a single human today who has never experienced some sort of fear to a varying degree. Unlike various analysts, fortune tellers, all kinds of prophets, and "snake-oil sellers," the Bible is the only one that can provide a stable foothold for understanding fear and having a carefree and peaceful life, in spite of all of those everyday fears. And while we are followed by different fears in our everyday lives, the Bible instructs us to focus on the "mother of all fears" - the fear of the Lord. Why? God is Lord over every situation where we experience fear. He is Lord over every illness, virus, epidemic, pandemic, earthquake, accident, and other things that cause fear in humans. As the sovereign Creator and Lord, he is able to send or allow troubles which cause fear, and he is able to deliver or protect a person from them.

The Bible uses several different terms to describe fear: holy fear, slavish fear, fear of man, and fear of atrocities. Fear is the condition of agitation and concern,

when a person is pondering or facing something unknown that is a source of danger. The fear of the Lord, or holy fear, is a condition where a person is facing the God they know, when they meditate on and obey the Word of God, when they experience God in action, when they are in his presence, and when they are discovering his holiness.

In the Biblical book of Proverbs, almost two thousand years ago, we find a spiritual diagnosis and a way out of situations such as the one we are experiencing today with the coronavirus pandemic:

*Turn to my reproof, behold, **I will pour out my spirit on you**; I will make my words known to you. Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel and did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your **calamity**; I will mock when **your dread** comes, when your dread comes like a storm and **your calamity comes like a whirlwind**, when **distress and anguish** come upon you. 'Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but they will not find me, because they hated knowledge **and did not choose the fear of the Lord**. They would not accept my counsel, They spurned all my reproof. So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way and be satiated with their own devices. For the waywardness of the naive will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them. But he who listens to me shall live **securely and will be at ease from the dread of evil**' (Prov. 1:23-33). (author's emphasis)*

This passage uses its particular literary expression in order to give us an answer to numerous questions that relate to fear, and to point us towards a way out of every situation where we are afraid. I will only mention some of the questions. Why is this happening? Where is God in all this suffering and pain? How long is this going to last? What are we supposed to do?

Why is the coronavirus pandemic happening? Although the book of Proverbs does not mention the coronavirus pandemic, by comparing today's situation with the passage above, it is easy to find some common characteristics. First, the people's refusal to heed God's admonition through the work of the Holy Spirit and the exhortations from the Word of God. God has called and is still calling people today yet people are rejecting him. God has extended and is extending his hand, but nobody is taking notice. Why are we going through these troubles today? Because people are eating the fruits of our actions and we are being filled by our own advice.

Second, the passage clearly communicates where God is and what he is doing at this time of human turmoil. He is very close to every man. He laughs at human ruin and mocks people in their anguish, fear, troubles, and sufferings. And while these problems cause both Christians and non-Christians to multiply their prayers, fasting, to organize prayer chains, and non-stop wakes and they look forward to church services, worship sessions, and times of fellowship; God

is making it clear that he can hear them but will not respond. To those who seek him not for himself but only in order to get out of troubles and to preserve their own lives God is clearly saying, “*they will seek me diligently but they will not find me.*”

Thirdly, the passage gives us the answer to the question of what should we do. In times of trouble, prayer is not a solution for deliverance. Neither is fasting, worship, or online church services but only repentance and coming closer to God for himself and not in order to get out of trouble. Because if we draw closer to God for his holiness and glory, we will be so overcome with his nearness, holiness, and glory that we would not even know about fears, worries, and troubles.

The passage in Proverbs is intended for God’s apostate people, today’s Christians, who dislike, despise, and twist the Word of God, adapting it to the “spirit of the times,” to the contemporary (non) Christian and pagan culture. How long will these trials last for? I do not know! However, Proverbs are giving us a clear solution. It is a personal choice of the fear of God and obedience to God, because only then will a person become and remain carefree and go on to live peacefully, without fearing evil (Prov. 1:33).

The fear of the Lord is a person’s own choice. “In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and his children will have refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life” (Prov. 14:26-27). The fear of the Lord is my fear of hurting God, of not being obedient enough, of not obeying his commandments, of going against his will. The fear of the Lord includes knowing God’s holiness, justice, and righteousness. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7) and wisdom (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10).

The fear of the Lord always keeps us close to God – close to His grace and love, with a correct understanding of His glory, power, and righteousness. Only in the fear of the Lord can we recognize what it is that God is doing in our midst and for us. This doesn’t mean that God isn’t working in our midst and for us; rather, it means that without the fear of the Lord we’re unable to recognize God’s work so we attribute it to our own luck, wisdom, strength, resourcefulness, plans, projects, natural forces, political circumstances, etc.

The fear of the Lord also includes the knowledge that God is a holy God who hates sin and who has the power to punish all those who break his commandments. The fear of the Lord helps Christians to avoid sin. If we fear the Lord, we will obey his commandments and we will resist sin (cf. Ex. 20:20; Prov. 3:7; 16:6). The fear of the Lord enables us to praise God and worship him with all our hearts and with all we are. Commitment to God, the fear of the Lord, and respect are vitally important elements of true worship of God. We should never think that, just because God is merciful and loving with arms wide open to accept and embrace his people, there is no need for repentance and holy awe in his presence.

The secret to a good and fruitful life in the “promised land” can be summarized as the fear of the Lord and obeying God’s laws and commandments. That is why it is no wonder Luke’s account of the early Church, where he emphasized that the Church grew in the fear of the Lord, “*So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase*” (Acts 9:31).

At the end of the 1980’s, I had a remarkable dream. I saw the Zagreb cathedral filled with people. The space in front of the cathedral was also full of people. At one moment, the cathedral towers began to tremble, as if somebody grabbed them and started shaking them. Next, the entire cathedral and the ground around it began to shake. Plaster and parts of the ceiling and walls began to fall off. Plaster was falling in between people so nobody was injured. Then I saw the people leaving the cathedral and space in front of it as they started going one by one through Tomo Bakač street, towards the Josip Jelačić Square. More and more people from the cathedral began joining the row, which moved from Jelačić Square through Ilica street, towards the west part of the city. Somewhere near the British Square I saw that Ilica was full of people from wall to wall, people who were still moving towards the west city exit. This vast row of people was being constantly joined by people from the cathedral. It was a row of scared and burdened people with their heads down, without joy or hope. It resembled the row of captured citizens as they were exiting Vukovar after the city fell during the Homeland War. The row of people from the cathedral continued to move through Ilica, towards the west. Somewhere around Črnomerec I saw a spacious meadow where a multitude of people were praising God joyfully with their hands raised up. In the midst of this multitude there was a man who was standing on some sort of crate and preached from an open Bible. I saw the row of people from the cathedral getting closer to the people on the meadow, where the Bible was preached. I also saw some changes in the row itself. The closer they got to the place where the Bible was being preached, it was more and more noticeable how people were beginning to raise their head, straighten their crooked backs, and their eyes began to light and smiles appeared on their faces. When they got close to the multitude that was gathered around praising God and listening to the preaching of the Word of God, they also began to lift their hands and to praise God as their faces lit up.

When I woke up, I prayed and asked God about the meaning of my dream. I received the following answer, “People have been trapped and burdened. I will set them free and they will worship me freely.”

I shared this vision with some of the church leaders and the whole vision was recorded in the sermon I held on May 22nd 2013 in the EPC Radosne vijesti church in Osijek (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlQmg92NwwA&t=2382s> from 37:05 to 45:02 minute mark).

After the strong earthquake in Zagreb (March 22nd 2020) the two cathedral towers were damaged, and several tons of plaster fell of the walls and ceiling. And just like in my dream, not a single person was injured or hurt in the cathedral during the earthquake. After the earthquake, we found out that some other church buildings in the center of Zagreb were also damaged.

Biblically speaking, the cathedral is the symbol of the Catholic clergy and believers falling away from God. Because of this, I believe that the earthquake was the fulfillment of the first part of my dream and that the second part will come to pass as numerous individuals begin coming to God through the working of the Holy Spirit as has never been seen in Croatia before. Therefore, the aftermath of the Zagreb earthquake is not full of fear and hopelessness, but rather a hope in the future which will be filled with Biblical worship which is acceptable to God.

When I shared my vision for starting a Christian theological journal with some Christian leaders in 2006, most of them listened to me incredulously. A few of them encouraged me, and some openly told me that this cannot be done in the context of the spiritual and economic environment in Croatia because we lack top notch authors; we do not have any readers, we do not have money, we do not have the infrastructure or channels of distribution, we do not have influential backers, we do not have... And yet, I was aware of what we did have so I used it to kickstart the journal. Dr. Thomas Sibley, who was the president of the newly founded Bible Institute in Zagreb, wholeheartedly supported the vision both spiritually and materially, and as a publisher he provided us with several excellent theologians who served as authors and continue to serve as part of the editorial team. I would like to thank Dr. Sibley, article authors, and all other contributors who have enthusiastically done their part in preparing the journal. The first issue of the journal, which we named *Kairos: Evandeoski teološki časopis*, came out in the Spring of 2007, and it was published both in Croatian and in English (*Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology*). The journal was coming out regularly even when I had to edit it while I was in the hospital, where I was recovering from the consequences of a severe heart attack I had suffered and even as I was recovering from the consequences of my stroke. Being aware of my fragile health, the slowing down caused by my advance in years, and the joys of parental obligations, I have decided, after thirteen years of serving as editor, to dedicate my fourteenth year to introducing my younger associate into editorial work so that he could continue editing the Croatian and English versions of *Kairos*.

So in this issue, I have had Ervin Budiselić working by my side as assistant editor, and he will continue to work in this capacity under my supervision for at least one more issue. He will then go on to edit the journal on his own. By that

time, he will have also finished his PhD. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Ervin is still waiting for the invitation to go and defend his doctoral thesis in theology at the Ljubljana University. He has published several scientific and expert theological papers and this year he will also publish book he has authored. I am giving him my blessing and I am commending him to God's grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Stanko Jambrek, editor-in-chief