Hugging the Cactus

In college I took an Abnormal Psychology class that entailed a half day field trip to the Louisiana State Insane Asylum, today called the Central Louisiana State Hospital. This began with a boisterous two-hour bus ride there with 19-22 year-olds. It was my first encounter with serious mental illness – not just troubled or occasionally neurotic people but committed psychotic patients. I recall one who had severe hysteria, constantly brushing non-existent bugs off his body. He also had a nervous tick with his neck, snapping it around when the “bugs” started crawling on him. He breathed heavily during the hallucination induced attack, muttering curses at the attackers. The professor told us to engage the patients in conversation, so this fellow and I had a 20-minute conversation. I helped him not a whit. As I left, I realized that I had gained a nervous neck twitch, like the patient. Then I conversed with a severely depressed person and became depressed myself. Next a paranoid patient kept glancing over my shoulder as we spoke waiting for “the man” to come for him. Soon I also looked around. By the end of the day, the bus ride back had the students silently avoiding eye contact with each other. The return trip was the exact opposite of the first one. When I got back to the dorm, I called my mom and asked if she thought I was crazy. She said, “Yes, but not ‘insane asylum’ crazy!” That comforted me – sort of!

This was my first realization that mental unwellness is contagious. So also says the Bible.

 Proverbs 13:20 [Douay-Rheims Bible](https://biblehub.com/drb/proverbs/13.htm)
 He that walketh with the wise, shall be wise: a friend of fools shall become like to them.

Both wisdom and foolishness are contagious. Hang around with wise men, you get wise. Hang around with fools and you can almost feel the brain cells escaping. Hang around with Jesus, and the apostles exploded with faith and power after Pentecost. Hang around with negative fearful people and soon you “shall become like to them.” As the saying goes, “You lay down with dogs, you get fleas.”

Speaking of dogs and fleas, have you watched TV lately? The news shows teem with panic. They have scoreboards like sports, comparing the corona virus cases nation to nation, and state to state. They even go as far as rating the “hot spots” where the carnage is worst. The financial analysts tremble as stocks dive, evaporating trillions in savings and squashing hope. “Experts” vie to shock with horrible statistics while images of the sick fill the screen. When I turn off the news it reminds me of leaving the insane asylum. I feel depressed and hopeless.

Amazingly we tell ourselves the next day, “We gotta be informed. We gotta know what’s going on. We gotta be ‘in the loop’.” Sure, that’s true, but we must make sure that “the loop” we’re in is not a noose! These “experts” are fear-mongers. Why? Fear mongers will never be wrong. If the situation becomes worse than predicted they’ll say, “I told you it would be bad!” If it’s not as bad as they said, they’ll say “Good thing you did what I said to do or it would have been worse!” Bureaucratic leaders use negative predictions to manage expectations to make themselves look right and get credit for caring. Accuracy is a secondary consideration, if one at all. These “experts” are making us sicker than the virus.

Answer this question posed by the wisest man of all: Luke 12:25 NIV “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” Think about it. Worrying can take away, but never add anything positive to our lives.

A few days ago a couple in Illinois were having a tough time because the woman had labored breathing. They tried alternative treatment to no avail instead of going to the hospital (where they thought virus infection was rampant). As she grew worse, the man shot her, then himself. The autopsies revealed them both to be virus free. What killed them? Fear and worry...and probably too much TV. How awful.

To live God’s life with wisdom we need to know the facts, not the fear.

 Proverbs 6:6-8 New Living Translation

 Take a lesson from the ants, you lazybones. Learn from their ways and become wise!

 Though they have no prince or governor or ruler to make them work,

 they labor hard all summer, gathering food for the winter.

Ants instinctually know to store food when it’s abundant in the summer for when it is scarce in the winter. Wisdom is to be aware of a changing situation and take appropriate action to handle it. There is risk in the changing vagaries of life. Wisdom dictates you plan for it. If we see dark clouds in the morning, we take an umbrella for rain. Before we take a long auto trip, we check our tires and spare. We budget money from periodic pay checks for the large monthly home payment. We all know (or at least used to know) that if you act in wisdom, you don’t have to be paralyzed by fear. Imagine worrying about the day because you see dark clouds and don’t leave or cancelling travel for fear of a flat tire stranding you. This is not rational or logical thinking. It is unwell and unwise thinking. Hey, the ants adjust and plan for when the weather changes. Are our brains bigger than ants? They may be but we don’t act that way when we allow ourselves to become irrationally panicked.

Risk is inherent in this life. Stuff happens. Things change. Seasons. Weather. Illness. Christians aren’t exempt from changes in life and their associated risks. The rain falls on the just and unjust, said Jesus. We are, though, equipped by God with wisdom from His word, directly from Him, and from other clear minded wise people. As we take action to lessen the risk in whatever we’re facing, we can live without worry and fear, knowing that God will also guide and help us.

We are now faced by a virus pandemic. There are facts about the risk. Once we take wise appropriate action, we can continue to enjoy life. Regrettably I see fear promulgated by the “experts” infecting too many people and stealing their lives away from them. Why is this? Hold on to your hat. The reason that so many are freaking out with fear is because this may be their first serious brush with death and because their ideas about this life are completely wrong.

 Is. 40: 6-8 KJV

 The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:

 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.

 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Every one of us will wither like grass and our best accomplishments will fade like a dandelion. That’s why God uses the word “all” in verse six. Humanity for the most part spends a ton of time and money on facial cream, sports cars and the like in a vain attempt to cheat the grim reaper and focus on anything other than their ‘withering’. Popular thought today is that man is the master of the universe. We can walk on the moon. We build supercomputers that do billions of calculations per second. We can splice genes and modify DNA. Through technology we can see millions of light years into the universe and so minutely that we can smash atoms. Wow, impressive!

Yet this pesky ‘death’ thing is still around! And what is beyond it? Any ideas, modern secular man? None for sure. So modern man runs around terrified from the only thing guaranteed in this life, trying to deceive himself that death is for others – not him. Until… a global pandemic springs up. And the latent fear explodes in his heart and he grabs a microphone, vomiting his fear on millions via TV. The terror is palpable and infectious. “Oh crap!” he internally screams, “Something I can’t even see is going to strangle the life out of me while I am on a ventilator and then I will be stacked like lumber in a refrigerated trailer and eventually be burned or buried in an unmarked grave!” Am I exaggerating this fear of death? I only wish.

 Heb. 2:14-15 NIV

 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil—

 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Jesus died instead of, and in place of you and me. He took the full punishment for our sins that we couldn’t pay off, to make us forgiven and lovely and acceptable before God. What amazing love! Then he accomplished many more things, one of which is nullifying the devil’s hold on mankind through death. You see, once a person accepts Jesus Christ as his lord and believes that God raised him from the dead, that person gets the gift of everlasting life.

 John 3:16

 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Once someone gets the gift of everlasting life, the fear of death and its bondage should become a memory. The non-believer may still be terrified at the great unknown abyss of death, but Christians have the rock-solid promises of God regarding eternal life plus the verification of the spirit that we are the children of God, born again of incorruptible seed.

Regrettably many of us Christian still haven’t confronted the fear of death with “the word of our God [which] shall stand forever.” Everlasting life remains an intellectual concept and not a heart reality. I learned this when my wife Teresa had cancer many years ago. She found herself with an aggressive tumor the size of a small plum. We had three kids aged 9-15 years old. Through prayer and agreement, we opted for surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. One night during chemo she confessed that she was besieged by fear of death and leaving the kids as orphans. Although she had been born again for many years, she had never had to face her own death as a possible, or even probable, reality. She was paralyzed by this idea when she stared into the ‘abyss’. I told her, “Here’s my advice and you’ll probably think I’m crazy. You should embrace death. You need to imagine yourself dying and then being unconscious until Christ returns, then getting up with a new body and mind, as His word promises.” She was not at all impressed by my suggestion. In fact, in horror she told me she didn’t want to hear anything more about it. A day or two later she told me she reconsidered and did what I had suggested, and the fear of death was gone.

I recommended this process because I had done it myself. I once almost died in the middle of the night falling asleep while driving by a date palm plantation in southern California. I woke up going down a 10-foot sloping embankment going 60 miles an hour straight toward massive palm trees.



I straightened out the car to run parallel to the road, avoiding the trees by maybe a foot at high speed. The embankment was so high I couldn’t see the highway above me as the trees zipped by. That’s when I realized I was in trouble! I was driving in sand! And despite my efforts to miss each tree, the speed was bleeding off rapidly making it disastrous to stop the car and get stuck in the sand. So I offered one of my favorite prayers, “Help!!!” and turned up the embankment slightly so that the car wouldn’t flip over and also avoid stopping in the sand, incurring the mother of all tow bills. The car swerved up the embankment and with the last of its momentum crested the highway elevation, rolling lazily forward. I remember looking at the serene moon lit landscaped amazed that I was alive and the car undamaged. It happened so quickly that there was no time to be scared. There was no more sleepiness that night!

I came face to face with death that night and it eventually scared me after I was through the wide-eyed, adrenaline infusion terror of an out-of-control auto surfing through palm trees! It was my first stare down with death. I mentally walked through my death, seeing myself crashed into a massive palm tree and flung out the window to have my torso impaled on the sharp, cut fronds. I saw my body broken and bloody in the sand, hidden 10 feet below the road, to be found a week later by a plantation worker, probably named Jose. Then I saw my wife and kids crying at my memorial. I was unconscious as the Bible says and hidden in God’s heart. Soon my wife remarried a good man and he took care of her and my kids as they grew. Then they each got married and had kids.

 1 Thess. 4:13-17 NIV

 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

 According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Then Christ came back in the Rapture of his church! I heard my name called as I sleepily awoke. It was startling to see the ground below me recede quickly. I looked up to see the Lord Jesus in the clouds waiting for me.



But then I realized it wasn’t just me. There were my kids beside me! And their kids too. And my wife… and my parents and friends! And we were all zooming upward in the twinkling of an eye, millions of us -wide-eyed and exuberant, joyful and relieved. The sickness, suffering, and sadness were 100% over. I looked down at my body and realized it was different, and yet the same. I was teeming with energy and peace. Weird! My family was likewise recognizable and still changed. My parents were no longer old and frail, but vibrant and strong as I recall from my youth. My kids were not confused and unsure but confident and grown up. There seemed to be no barriers between any of us as we rose to meet Christ. Our past lives meant little to us. It was irrelevant. How long we lived on Earth or our past earthly status was unimportant. The only thing that was important was that we were made new by Christ.

Then Jesus turned around shouting, ”Follow me!” and headed away from the earth toward the heavens. “Where are we going?” someone shouted. “Wherever he’s going!” someone responded, and we all laughed and followed.

I remember questioning that night if the biblical record of the rapture was true. Then I realized that all the other Bible promises were true and then I spoke in tongues and that sealed it for me. You see there’s something in us “bigger than us”. It’s impossible for me to be able to speak in a language I don’t know unless there’s something in me “bigger than me”. It’s God’s spirit, eternal life, incorruptible seed, Christ in me, the holy spirit, the new man, the new creation… it’s the spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. We have everlasting life – now! We’re just waiting for Christ to return and activate it. This life may seem like a big deal, but folks, in the BIG picture – it’s not really. What is a 1 year to a 100 year life compared to eternity? From a statistical perspective the correct description is “insignificant”. This life is… the first act … the preseason … the appetizer… the first chapter of a book … the trailer for the movie … the introduction to eternity …. providing … you have the ticket! Where do we get one of those?

 1 John 5:11-13a

 And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life

This is crystal clear. Do you have the son of God as your lord and savior? If not, it’s as simple as telling the Lord Jesus you want him as your lord, your leader, your all in all. Then thank God for raising him from the dead because he is alive to fill you with his spirit, guide and bless you. Then one day, he will return to gather us to heaven with his church, giving us new bodies like his. This life is a prelude to eternity. The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us. And He has given us victory even in this life in so many ways. Here’s one.

Are you saved and yet still in bondage to the fear of death? Then “hug the cactus”. This is an expression I heard recently where a person fears something and wants to get over it, so they “embrace” the object of their fear and thereby conquer its power over them. And just like literally “hugging a cactus”, it will be painful, and it will bleed afterward for a short time, but the fear of cacti will be over forever. Similarly, embrace your own death. “See” yourself dying and laying in the casket. “See” your funeral or memorial. “See” yourself being unconscious and ‘sleeping’ until you hear the trumpet blast and being a part of the rapture. “See” your new body (like Christ’s) and yourself flying through the air to be with Christ. “See” yourself understanding answers to the myriad questions you’ve had. “See” yourself seeing your family – all new, not as they were in this life, but renewed in Christ. “See” all the fearful, crazy, flesh-headed people still on the earth, and nowhere around us! “See” Jesus hugging you, welcoming you home!



Why would any saint want to live in bondage to the fear of death when we have eternal life? Sure, the world thinks we’re foolish, but guess what? They’re foolish! They want to pretend that there will be food in the winter when there won’t be. They want to deceive themselves that just because the sky is thick with black clouds and the moisture can be smelled, that they don’t need to carry an umbrella or have a raincoat. They try to fool themselves that although billions of people have lived since the beginning of time, they will be the second one in history (Jesus being the first) to cheat death. The wise move is to save food in the summer, carry and umbrella, and accept Christ – the only one God raised from the dead.

Once that’s done, we don’t allow ourselves to have death lord itself over us. We “hug the cactus” and live without fear, knowing that ‘goodbye in death’ is really a ‘see you later’. No, I’m not suggesting that we start daily chain saw juggling or planking on Mt. Everest. I’m saying we do all the wise things for whatever we’re confronted – wear a mask, keep away from others, wash our hands, etc. But then, live without fear and worry – none! Let’s have confidence in God who so loved us that He gave His son and wants to freely give us all things. Grace isn’t just for salvation – it’s for every day. The problem is that when we are worried and fearful, we forget God’s grace and promises to us as we focus elsewhere.

 Philippians 4:6-9

 Be careful [Greek *merimnate* – worry] for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

 And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

 Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.

Here are some points from these verses. Point #1. If God says, “Worry about nothing.” it must be available. If he tells you to pick up 20 pounds, He’s also smart enough (and loving enough) to know you can. It doesn’t matter that the world is trembling in fear. It is available to not be overcome by worry. Why? Because in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving we make our requests to our heavenly Father. And “He will supply all our need according to His riches and glory by Christ Jesus” which we learn about a few verses later in the same chapter. After we pray and give our situation to God, He will guard us with His peace. Then…stop watching the TV!

Point #2. If you do return immediately to the TV after prayer, you’ll be doing the opposite of the next verse. “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” “True, honest, just, pure lovely, good report, virtue, and praise” are not words I hear often from the media. The opposite characteristics of those qualities, yes, but not the godly lists. The TV will make you mentally, emotionally and spiritually unwell. It’s mostly people panicking and causing others to panic. Let the peace of God rule in your heart and socially distance from the hysterical herd. God will guide each of us to what we need. If we’re freaking out, we won’t be able to hear Him. And divine guidance is the most crucial necessity during crisis. It’s how each of us emerges with victory.

Changing our mental focus to “True, honest, just, pure lovely, good report, virtue, and praise things and people” is our job. God can’t do it for us. Guarding us with His peace is His job.

Point #3. Think godly positive thoughts and “Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.” In other words, do godly positive, edifying stuff.

This is a great time to pray and act in wisdom. Daily quiet time in prayer allows God access to guide us. We can serve the freaked out in love and compassion. Remember, people act stupidly when they are in panic mode. We should be understanding. What a great time to tell them about eternal life. It’s much better than hand sanitizer or even a case of TP! This is also a great time to enjoy godly teachings. It’s also a great time to soak in some godly music. Online makes this so easy. Hillsong, Bethell, Elevation or Red Rocks are terrific. I like Alan Jackson singing old hymns. Here’s another idea, “A merry heart makes good like a medicine.” Someone has put together a group of comedians who don’t curse and live in the gutter. It’s called ‘Dry Bar’. Search it on Youtube. We like Brian Regan, Michael Junior and Andy Woodhull.

This is also a terrific time to reconnect with family, both earthly and spiritual. We use facetime and Zoom for group teleconferences and fellowships. Here’s another idea out of left field- what about writing your life’s story? People would be blessed to learn of the great things God has done in your life and the things He has taught you. We are a body. We need and learn from each other.

Remember when you said, “If I only had time I’d…” Guess what? We have time! Let’s make the most of it as we live in the Sonshine.

Did you lose your job or career? I’m sorry if you did because I know how painful and scary that is. I also was set adrift in 2008 during the last economic downturn. God will get you through it as He did for me. It wasn’t easy but we built a strong resilient business that is doing well during this time. Downturns are when many of the greatest businesses in history began. For instance, Procter & Gamble, IBM, General Electric, General Motors, United Technologies, Fed Ex, Disney and Hewlett Packard, to name a few. Maybe the economy is weak, but that doesn’t mean God is. “Let your requests be made known to God”. Get counsel from wise brothers and sisters also. Sometimes we need help to hear from God. We’re a body. Social distancing – OK. Spiritual distancing – no chance! We need each other more than ever.

With the world on a seeming frenzy to ‘crazyland’, each of us can contribute to the encouragement and strengthening of each other. We should refuse to participate in the insane asylum of this time. This is one former inmate that has left the asylum and ain’t going back! God bless you!