

And the Darkness Did Not Understand It
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Between different periods of complete and total lockdown, individual quarantine, and moments of tentative freedom, I've had ample opportunity to reflect on humanity's response to the notorious virus that radically transformed the face of humanity—masks and all. I have wondered how it is possible that in our age of incredible scientific achievement and understanding, American society should crumble when confronted with a biological enemy similar to diseases which we've long since overcome. There have certainly been a multitude of factors at play in the events of these past twenty months, but I firmly believe that a significant reason for our failures lies in the cultural and institutional reign of fear over facts. The political lawmakers, leaders, and media personnel whom God has charged to dutifully guide us have conjured up a monstrous cloud of anxiety and distress, hoping that the grave impressions of a true calamity will convince Americans that unprecedented measures must be taken to ensure the safety. I, however, cannot see even the theoretical good which can come about with this approach. For while the umbral haze of fear can only perpetuate itself unto death, the illuminating light of facts and the Truth have proven their ability to uncover a path forward into renewed life during this COVID-19 crisis.

Fear, especially for one's life and future, suffocates the mind and shrouds one's thoughts in a fog of apprehension and despair. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, fear is "the emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger, or by the prospect of some possible evil," (Simpson, 1989). In other words, fear deals with the unknown and intensifies our negative thoughts such that one is gripped in mental paralysis. When gripped in the clutches of fear, the capacity for logical reasoning, long-term planning, and risk assessment is all but non-existent. In the Oxford Encyclopedia of Politics, fear is directly connected to large-

scale political decision making. According to the included psychological research, the causes of such politically debilitating fear include low self-control, low certainty, and low external agency (Wagner, M. et al., 2019). These were all essential components of the news cycle and governmental messaging since the initial lockdowns began and pervaded the conversation during the following years. Fear feeds upon perceived threats and related uncertainties, looming ever larger in one's mind and driving him or her to seek solace of any kind, even death at one's own hand. The specific consequences of fear upon one's decision making are information seeking and conviction references habits. When fear enters the equation, individuals tend to want to seek out more information to reduce uncertainty, yet their judgements concerning this information tend to be much less reliant on foundational convictions and deep-seated reasoning (Wagner, M. et al., 2019). In this way, fear destabilizes and corrodes the mind, leaving it utterly unfit to make prudent decisions about the future.

When my father passed away, fear overwhelmed me and clung to me for weeks after he died. My mind was a roiling sea; emotions and thoughts crashing in on one another, lightning flashes of potential catastrophes and the booming thunder of the words "He's gone" all raged on inside of my skull. My aspirations for college, my future career, marriage prospects and so much more petrified and turned further into stone with every new Dad-shaped crater I discovered in the aftermath. I did not have the mental space necessary to make these important, critical decisions for myself because I was entirely consumed by the fear of what lay next without my father's guiding presence.

In the same way, the fear of COVID-19 and its potentially devastating effects on their lives drove the American response not to a place of preventative action, but crippling inaction. With pure physical survival at the forefront of the conversation thanks to a fear-driven narrative

in the news cycle, many governmental actors instituted draconian lockdown measures. With little thought to the other consequences of such a seismic lifestyle shift for the citizen, those in power pressed on. As time wore on, however, it became apparent that physically confining citizens to their homes only gave birth to new, much greater problems. Prolonged isolation produced catastrophic levels of new mental illness and incidents of suicide among younger people in just the past year—truly a horrifying conclusion to a well-intentioned plan. As a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns and their related messaging, which themselves were inspired out of fear, legions of young people succumbed to serious mental illness and killed themselves, seeing no other escape from a world that appeared to be crumbling around them. According to the CDC itself, “Compared with the rate in 2019, a 31% increase in the proportion of mental health–related emergency department (ED) visits occurred among adolescents aged 12–17 years in 2020,” (Yard, E. et al., 2021). This trend was malignant, for the rate at which these visits occurred only increased as the pandemic progressed:

“Among adolescents aged 12–17 years, mean weekly number of ED visits for suspected suicide attempts were 22.3% higher during summer 2020 and 39.1% higher during winter 2021 than during the corresponding periods in 2019, with a more pronounced increase among females. During winter 2021, ED visits for suspected suicide attempts were 50.6% higher among females compared with the same period in 2019; among males, such ED visits increased 3.7%,” (Yard, E. et al., 2021).

Yet amid an environment drenched in climbing death counts, constant reports of outbreaks across the nation, and paranoia on full display wherever the news was played, a disaster like this was bound to happen. We allowed fear to slip into our national consciousness, and it made our reason worthless once it blinded us to the entire scope of our seemingly clear-cut decisions.

Facts, on the other hand, shine brightly through the darkness of fear and facilitate clear, solutions to even the most precarious problems. Solid information offers firm ground upon which

leaders can build complex answers to equally complex issues. While the answers concocted in this way may not fix everything all at once, they provide a more holistic approach to the problem at hand and account for the whole, sacred, and precious human lives in question. Once certain state and local leaders chose to reevaluate their approach to the pandemic upon learning more about the virus, the situation in their localities improved remarkably. Not only did their case and death counts plummet, but their economies, institutions, and citizenry began to regenerate rapidly. A brand-new report from the National Bureau of Economic Research reveals as much, in which states were ranked on a scale of one to one hundred on the efficacy of their individual COVID-19 responses by measuring effects upon each's economy, educational system, and mortality (Kerpen, P. et al., 2022). Overall, the authors state that "Several studies find low COVID-19 transmission rates in schools. Herby, Jonung, and Hanke's (2022) metaanalysis finds that lockdowns in Europe and the United States only reduced COVID-19 mortality by 0.2% on average," and how "Several other studies have found that efforts to reduce COVID mortality had costly unintended consequences," (Kerpen, P. et al., 2022). Returning to the case of Florida, the state received a score within the top parameters of each category and was especially called out as a primary example of appropriate response habits: "Whether or not political leaders can be considered responsible for mortality outcomes is therefore unclear, although advocates of a "focused protection" strategy have suggested that sheltering the high-risk could reduce overall mortality – an approach adopted by Florida," (Kerpen, P. et al., 2022). In short, the nuanced, informed decision to focus on protecting the vulnerable while keeping normalcy and regularity a priority for everyone else has illuminated a path out of our current state despite the blanket fire of fearmongering and mass hysteria from all angles.

Yet even this reality misses our greatest misstep of the pandemic. Entrapped in our secularized and materialistic fear, American society has forsaken the firm foundation of God's grace and truth, which acts as a guiding light not just through trouble and danger, but the only firm foundation in times of plenty as well. Churches were closed *en masse* to reduce the chance that the physical disease might spread, but the spiritual disease of sin was free to metastasize in the hearts of many as a result. Even though we may now be emerging from the worst throes of the virus' rampage, we now stand at the precipice of a much graver concern. Psalm 119 implores us to let "Your Word [be] a lamp for [our] feet, and a light unto [our] path." It is imperative, therefore, that we reignite the flame of faith in Jesus Christ which now lies dormant in the hearts of many Americans. Only through this hope in our greater salvation through Him, the Word made flesh for our sake, can we continue to carry on in a broken world, where disease, war, and discord lie just around the bend.

In my pit of despair, God's Word was the only lamp bright enough to light a path through the waves of grief, shame, and regret that would rise and recede in the years which followed. I found that nothing else granted me the sure direction for my wandering feet, the straightforward answers to my bubbling questions, and the unyielding love of Christ which became a healing balm applied directly to my battered and bruised heart. Purely by clinging to the Truth as my life preserver, I forged onwards and followed God's call to study in preparation for the pastoral ministry here at Concordia University Wisconsin. The waves have not gotten any smaller, nor has the thunder become any quieter. Yet as I cleave to the Bible, the darkness around me increasingly fades from view, unable to comprehend the perfect light of Christ which now fills my life.

References

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