"One cannot change the past, but one can ruin the present by worrying over the future."
—Anonymous

22-Jul-16

Should We Fear Terrorism?

The online free encyclopedia, Wikipedia, keeps a "List of terror incidents" by month and by year. (For instance, here is the page for 2016.) The list for July 2016, which at this writing covers only July 1-20, contains more than 120 incidents, from a bombing in Bahrain to an execution in Iraq. The worst acts of terrorism, it seems, happen in the Middle East, Iraq and Syria in particular, as the civil wars there continue to rage. The worst terrorist act so far this month occurred on July 3 in Baghdad, where 308 died when a large car bomb exploded in a busy market.

The world's attention, however, has been focused on Nice, France, since the Bastille Day (July 14) truck attack. In that ISIS-inspired act of terror, 84 people died and 303 were injured when a twenty-ton cargo truck plowed through the crowds walking along the Promenade des Anglais on France's Côte d'Azur. The Tunisian driver of the truck, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, 31, swerved the vehicle to hit celebrating pedestrians along more than a mile of the Promenade. He was stopped only when police surrounded the truck and peppered it with bullets, killing him.
While most of the recent terrorist acts have happened far away, a handful have struck the U.S. The July Wikipedia list records two police shootings (in Dallas and Baton Rouge; eight dead, twelve wounded) and a house bombing (in Panaca, Nevada; bomber died, one injured) as homegrown terrorist acts. While police are especially at risk due to heightened racial tensions in America's urban areas, Islamic terrorism remains a constant threat. "Lone-wolf" terrorists, inspired by the "success" of those like the Orlando, Florida, nightclub shooter, Omar Mateen (49 killed, 53 wounded), and the Nice killer, will likely be emboldened to attempt attacks on similar soft targets among the general public.

With terrorism taking place every day somewhere in the world, how should we as Christians respond? Some acts of terror have happened startlingly near to where we live. Should we be terrified—or is that giving in to the terrorists? Should we be extra-vigilant—or is that over-reacting? Should we not be concerned at all—or is that burying our heads in the sand? Most of all, what is a faithful reaction to terrorism?

On a physical level, can we do anything to prepare for an attack? For its part, the federal government has done precious little to prepare the general public for a local act of terror. The extent of its advice seems to be "follow the instructions of state and local authorities," "remain vigilant," and "report suspicious activities"—all fine measures but only marginally helpful.

From what the public can see, the government's activities have tended to follow the model of the Transportation Security Administration, that is, it has focused on interdicting terrorists and their weapons at points of entry and transit and as they are in the act of committing their crimes. To do this, they have imposed restrictions that have mostly served to inconvenience the public rather than the terrorists. Stronger measures—like profiling likely terrorists or denying Muslims entry into the country for a time—have been avoided.

It appears that the government would never advise the public to do certain things that could be truly helpful: avoid large gatherings of people, especially on holidays and significant dates (September 11, the beginning and end of Ramadan, etc.); avoid likely targets (sports stadiums, concerts,
clubs, restaurants, movie theaters, etc.); avoid symbolic sites (historical places, government buildings, symbols of American power); avoid public transportation, etc. Government officials consider giving such recommendations to be a guaranteed way to create panic and ruin the economy (and to lose their jobs or the next election). Even so, nothing is stopping us from following such common-sense advice on our own.

Christians, of course, can call on a Power higher than the federal government for help in time of need. The apostle Paul, for instance, faced frequent persecution, and he implored the brethren to pray for God's help: "Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe . . ." (Romans 15:30-31).

In another place, he asks for a similar prayer to be offered on his behalf:

> Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men, for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one. (II Thessalonians 3:1-3)

We can pray for ourselves and for others in the church in a similar way, knowing that God is eager to show Himself strong on behalf of those who are loyal to Him (II Chronicles 16:9). If we are faithful to Him, He will be faithful to us, not allowing us to become victims of a "random act of terror." And if He does allow church members to die by terrorism—which, sad to say, has already happened—we can be assured that He is aware (Matthew 10:27-31) and that those who die have finished their course to His satisfaction (II Timothy 4:7). We do not need to conduct our lives in fear of men.

As the crisis at the close of this age approaches, we know that increasingly "perilous times will come" (II Timothy 3:1) and "evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse" (II Timothy 3:13). In the same chapter, the apostle recalls "persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the
"Lord delivered me" (II Timothy 3:11, emphasis ours). The same Lord is watching out for His people still as they navigate through an ever more turbulent world.

Psalm 91 describes a situation in which God's people are under duress. It immediately assures us that, if we "dwell in the secret place of the Most High" (Psalm 91:1), a reference to living intimately with God, He will be our refuge and fortress (verse 2). The psalm continues:

Surely He shall deliver you. . . . You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not come near you. (Psalm 91:3, 5-7)

What a comfort! Rather than dwell on the horror and terror of those threatening destruction, the people of God should focus on living ever more intimately with God and reap the benefit of His protection.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Psalms: Book Four: He Is Coming!
by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Feast of Trumpets could be considered the opening salvo of the fall feasts, beginning with a blast of the trumpet or shofar, reminiscent of the event on Mount Sinai in which God visited His people, brought the Law, and brought righteous judgment—an event which depicts another judgment coming upon the earth following the Seventh Trumpet and the seven trumpet plagues or bowls of judgment in which God will shake the earth and destroy those whose goal has been to destroy the earth, and a time when Christ will claim His Bride and the Marriage of the Lamb will commence. Psalm 91 anticipates the Day of the Lord, the return of Christ coming for judgment, and destruction, but also putting a protective hedge around His people. Psalm
90, written by Moses, wistfully asks how long it will be before this condition of temporariness can be turned to eternal life. Psalm 91, perhaps also written by Moses, discusses a kind of place of refuge in which the protected saints can view the destruction of Satan's evil system. Psalm 94 seems to reflect the point of view of saints not in a place of safety, anxiously waiting for the end of times of tribulation. The key to weathering these fearful times is drawing close to God with a view of emulating His life and getting to know Him, preparing for rulership in His Kingdom.

From the Archives: Featured Article

**Is God to Blame?**
by John W. Ritenbaugh

The September 11 bombings were certainly tragic and terrible. Some have since asked, "Was God involved? Is He to blame?" John Ritenbaugh soberly answers some of these tough questions, concluding that God certainly allowed them to occur for our ultimate and eternal benefit.

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