

THE
CLOUDS
YE
SO MUCH
DREAD

HARD TIMES AND THE
KINDNESS OF GOD

Hannah K. Grieser

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The Clouds Ye So Much Dread

Foreword

by

N.D. Wilson

Hannah Grieser (formerly Atwood) is one of those people whom I feel as if I have always known. There are a few of those folks around in this small town where we both grew up. In Hannah's case, I don't remember when I met her, but I know it was in elementary school. In 1996, we graduated from Logos School together in a class of only seventeen students. (Classes that size get to know each other pretty well.) After college and graduate school, I worked under her father at New Saint Andrews College. Later, I co-taught college freshmen alongside her husband. Rory,

my eldest son, entered kindergarten with Jonah, Hannah's eldest. For years, our families lived one block apart on the same street, and I have many memories of our sons' lively conversations in the backseat during carpool. I watched them together in school plays, in spelling bees and speech meets, on baseball diamonds and basketball courts. As I write this, I am keeping one eye on the clock, knowing that I will soon jump in my truck and drive to watch the first basketball game of our boys' sophomore season.

Many of the memories I have of our long cohabitation of this small town have gone murky, but one Saturday stands out perfectly clearly. Our sons were playing in a summer lacrosse league together, and the day was perfect; flocks of brightly lit clouds were migrating through our vast Idaho sky, above our small, battling offspring. I was standing on the sideline with Hannah's husband, talking about nothing important. While it must have been warm, hot even, I only remember a cold and certain knowledge of wrongness creeping up inside me. Rory, always a mulish defender, was himself. But Jonah, normally quick and slippery on attack, a certainty to score, indefatigable, was not himself at all. He looked exhausted, beaten, even limp. I asked his father what was wrong. He told me that it might be mono. But I had seen mono before, and Jonah's transformation struck me as far more extreme. Not too long after that Saturday, we heard the terrifying news. Jonah had been diagnosed with leukemia.

Preface

This book is not a theological treatise. This book is not a memoir. This book is not exactly a collection of essays, either. This book, I suppose, falls somewhere into the cracks in between.

It's true that this book is about me. (It's hard to avoid that when writing stories from my own life.) But this is also a book about trials big and small—about cancer, about suffering, about death—and especially about the temptation to fear. Sounds like a real downer, I know. But let me assure you that, while these frightful things are the *reason* for this book, none of them is the *point* of this book. The real point is God Himself and the comfort

that His fearful and afflicted children can find only by trusting Him.

However, while attempting to write the pages that follow, I didn't begin with a clear point in mind. I started by simply going through tidbits I'd already written—blog posts, journal entries, notes jotted on the backs of receipts, looking for ideas and recollections, or even turns of phrase that struck me as significant. At first, I rolled along down the well-worn ruts of memory lane, pausing at a familiar landmark here, enjoying a favorite view there. But eventually, I found myself steering toward old byways that I hadn't especially wanted to revisit and turning over long-forgotten stones where I rediscovered some darker bits that I had hoped never to unearth. A lot of disparate memories surfaced, and none of them seemed to have anything, other than *me*, in common. This turns out to be a rather weak premise for a book: a few memories about cancer and world travel, plus some anecdotes about health fads and a handful of miscellaneous thoughts on money and childbirth. No unifying principle. No theme. I couldn't even pitch that book idea to *myself*.

However, I wanted to write, and I had agreed to write, so write I did, praying that I could find a thread that would tie this whole scattered hodge-podge together.

Then, early this year, I was asked to join a small panel discussion at the local Christian college on the topic

of feminine strength, which is not a subject to which I'd really given much thought. What *does* it mean to be a "strong Christian woman"? Later that week, as I was reading 1 Peter 3:6, the description of Sarah jumped out at me: "Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening." So often, the focus—and the attendant controversy over submission—centers on the first half of that verse, while the second half gets lost in the skirmish. But as I read, it was the second half that stood out: "You are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening."

Do not fear anything that is frightening. This assumes that some things we face *are* frightening, including, one would think, being married to a man like Abraham. (How massively would *you* have freaked out when word of that whole sacrifice-of-Isaac incident reached you?) So the apostle Peter holds up Sarah's fearlessness as something for us to aspire to—#goals, anyone? With the question of "What is a strong Christian woman?" in mind, I realized that fearlessness is one of the chief traits of all the great women in Scripture: Sarah following Abraham's call from God to pursue some seemingly crazy and dangerous endeavors, which required letting go of fear and instead trusting God's promises. Rahab hiding enemy spies because she had heard and believed in the power of the God of Israel. Deborah marching out with the armies of Israel—and

their weak-kneed commander—against the iron chariots of Sisera. Jael, “most blessed of women,”¹ inviting the enemy king into her tent to pound a stake through his skull. Ruth, leaving everything she had known to follow Naomi and Naomi’s God into a land where Moabites like her were despised. Abigail, both undercutting the tyrannical folly of her husband and confronting an armed and angry future king David at the same time. Esther, taking her life in her hands to approach the king with the words, “If I perish, I perish” on her lips. Mary, Jesus’ mother, bravely and joyfully receiving the news of a pregnancy that could lead to public ridicule and to rejection by the man she planned to marry. And so many more.

These women had courage. They had *chutzpah*. They had guts. But more fundamentally, they had *faith*—faith in God, faith in His promises, faith in His goodness, faith in His justice, faith in His saving power. These women did “not fear anything that is frightening.” Fear² would mean hearing God’s promises and then calling Him a liar. Fighting fear and learning to trust God is, for me, a constant struggle. But these women were strong because they

1 Judges 5:24, from Deborah’s song of praise after the defeat of Sisera’s army—a phrase that almost exactly mirrors the words of Elizabeth to Mary in Luke 1:42: “Blessed are you among women!” Jael and Mary are both called blessed by these mothers in Israel, and both used powerfully by God to crush the head of the serpent.

2 By which I mean fear of that which is *not* God.

C H A P T E R 1

*A Spirit
Not of Fear*

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

Age twenty-two was, if not the best of times, at least the most optimistic. My college diploma had scarcely begun to collect dust, my job as a graphic designer at a magazine was filling my nine-to-fives (and then some) with just the kind of duties I had planned toward for four years, and I had recently celebrated my first wedding anniversary to a handsome, hard-working man who was beginning his senior year of college and already sending out job applications in anticipation of a career as a teacher.

My husband, Jayson, and I lived on a quiet street in a sunny little basement apartment filled with shiny new wedding gifts. We enjoyed a lovely little circle of friends. We attended a thriving church. We watched our modest savings grow, little by little, each month. We even had a retirement account, for pity's sake. And, looking ahead, I envisioned an unbroken succession of picture-perfect years stretching before us like a lush expanse of suburban lawn. At twenty-two, my life—and the life I imagined—were as sweet, as simple, and, in some respects, as substantial, as a cloud of cotton candy.

Then, one day in September, I learned that I was pregnant. And suddenly my spun-sugar prospects seemed to dissolve.

This pregnancy had not been unexpected; we had planned for this. We had prayed for this. We had wanted this. And, although I'd been apprehensive, I assumed that when the day came, I'd be ready to face it with courage, dignity, and grace. But when the reality of the news finally sank in, I stared into the bathroom mirror, gripping the edge of the counter, and could feel only one sensation: terror.

As soon as those two little lines showed up on the pregnancy test, Fear came knocking, and I foolishly flung wide the doors of my heart and invited her in. I'd met her before, on many occasions, and she had sometimes visited for a day or two—maybe even for a couple of

weeks—as an uninvited guest before I sent her packing. But this time, Fear had arrived with a moving van and had quickly filled and redecorated every corner with her collection of sharp objects and heavy furnishings. In the process, she had unceremoniously torn down most of the light fixtures, shuttered the windows, tossed my faithful friend Joy onto the curb with the trash, and settled in for an extended stay.

Long before Fear's official move-in date, I'd already anticipated the huge adjustments that would be in store for me as a mother. Before the arrival of my first child, I had struggled at times with worries about almost everything to do with motherhood—the nursing, the diaper changing, the lack of sleep, the social adjustments, the decisions about education, the discipline, and so on. I had invested very little of my imaginative resources on the joys of motherhood and the blessings children could bring. I don't remember playing much with baby dolls as a child. I played doctor. I played store proprietor. I played orphan. I played Lego architect. But I don't remember my childhood aspirations inclining toward playing the role of "mommy." As I got older, young children often struck me as more of a bother than a blessing, and as a high schooler, after a particularly horrid babysitting episode, I had gone so far as to announce that I never wanted to have children. At the time, I absolutely meant it.

Later, when I started college, I remember taking one of those personality tests to help determine a course of studies best suited to my natural gifts, and do you know what career type I scored lowest on? Caregiver. My “natural gifts” were, apparently, *least* suited toward taking care of the weak and helpless. And if that’s not a perfect description of what a young mother (and, let’s be honest, every Christian) must do, I don’t know what is.

This is one of the reasons I bristle a bit when Christians talk about our “callings” as if they were nothing more than the career choices that correspond with our natural talents and desires. In order for someone to be called, someone else must be doing the calling. And that Someone calls us to love our crooked neighbors and to bless those who hate us and to lay our lives down—regardless of whether we would be more naturally inclined to do precisely the opposite. In fact, none of us is naturally gifted at these things; we must be *supernaturally* gifted. When we are called, it is sometimes to do the very things that most clearly expose to us how inadequate we are in our own strength and how much we need the Spirit of Christ to fill and equip us to do the hard things that He requires of us. For me, one of those hard things was learning to be a mother.

This new role was going to be the biggest stretch—emotionally, spiritually, and physically—of any I’d yet experienced. I was in for a challenge. That much I knew. I had no delusions about what creature comforts, what

social connections, and what career opportunities I'd likely be setting aside when I became a mother, and it frightened me. I was, in short, afraid to lose my life as I had known it. But even these concerns paled in comparison to my fear of just one solitary thing: giving birth.

I was aware that this wasn't an entirely rational fear. I knew that, while childbirth throughout much of the world—and through most of history—was fraught with deadly dangers, childbirth in a twenty-first century American hospital was overwhelmingly likely to result in both a healthy mother and child. My own mother had experienced two very uneventful pregnancies and two healthy births, and so had most of my aunts and cousins. We come from “good breeding stock,” as one of my aunts once put it. So it wasn't that I believed I was destined for a tragic birth story. If pressed, I could have rattled off any number of reasons to look forward to a safe, uncomplicated “birth experience.” But as my due date drew nearer, I just couldn't shake the sense of impending doom.

MY HUSBAND AND I DUTIFULLY ATTENDED A childbirth class at the local hospital, filling out our worksheets, reading the recommended books, and raising our hands to answer questions. If I had been asked to take a quiz about the step-by-step progression of labor and delivery, I don't doubt that I could have aced it. I studied

so much, I could probably have written a textbook-ready essay, with scientific accuracy, on the distinct stages of childbirth and the various comfort measures that would ease the process. I was one hundred percent academically ready to give birth.

However, when it came to facing the real-life challenge I'd so diligently studied, head knowledge seemed worse than useless: the more I learned about what was coming, the more I feared it. I had been around plenty of sweet, joyful young mothers, but even that turned out to be less than encouraging since it was some of those same ladies who had unwittingly helped to plant the seeds of fear in the rich soil of my imagination in the first place. What is it about proximity to infants that gives women an almost irresistible desire to share the worst possible birth stories in a sort of sick parlor game of one-upmanship? "Oh yeah? That's pretty awful. But, let me tell you about the time my sister hemorrhaged so badly she *almost died!*" Over the years, I had listened at baby showers to so many older women share tales of horrifying, blood-and-guts exploits in the delivery room that my mental picture of childbirth had gradually come to resemble the opening scenes from *Saving Private Ryan*.

One evening, about halfway through my pregnancy, when our birth class gathered to watch a video depicting several different women in the throes of labor, I very nearly fainted. And I am not one who faints. I can laugh

about it now, but I literally had to close my eyes, drop my head toward my knees, and take deep breaths to keep from passing out during the video, filled as it was with moaning women, shouts of pain, and infants covered in blood and slime. It was ghastly. I could not tell whether the spasms I was feeling in my belly were my baby's active movements or a case of nervous butterflies. No. Not butterflies—*bats*. Bats on crack.

When the fluorescent lights flicked back on at the end of this informative little film, Jayson glanced at my face and then widened his eyes with faint alarm. "You OK?" he whispered in my ear.

"Nope," I whispered back. He later told me that he'd never seen my face so ghostly white. I'm sure I had never felt so frail and afraid. Nor had I ever felt my fear lead so immediately to resentment.

I started to feel bitter on behalf of all the nameless heroines whose flesh had torn and whose lives had ended in order to bring forth the men whose names would go down in history for having escaped battle without so much as a paper cut. *Hail, mighty men of valor*. Meanwhile, the ladies—if they are mentioned at all—seemed to get the historical equivalent of a participation ribbon. Was that fair? Was that right? I wasn't just terrified; I was angry and terrified.

My fear, at root, was a spiritual problem that was all tied up with selfishness and a growing bitterness toward

God for my lot in life as a woman. This kind of fear was built on an unacknowledged distrust of God's handling of my story. Of all the stories. Rather than standing in awe of Him, I was attempting to stand in judgment over Him whose very breath I borrowed to voice my complaints.

Rather than letting my thoughts and feelings about motherhood begin with the fear of *God*, they began with a fear of just about everything else. Fear became the warped glass through which I peered out at the world, distorting whatever I saw or heard or felt. My head could assent to the neatly packaged theological proposition that children are a blessing and that God's promises are true. My heart, however, was a roiling black cauldron of bitterness and terror. In the grip of these bouts of dread, my throat would tighten, and I could hear the *whoosh-whoosh* of my own racing pulse in my ears. I could hardly speak. And speechlessness usually means prayerlessness.

So long as I could bury the thought of labor and delivery underneath other distractions, I was able to function almost normally. I kept busy to keep my mind on other things. But as the prospect of birth came more frequently to mind, fear's choke hold kept me from speaking about it to anybody, least of all to my God.

"The sacrifice is so worth it!" smiling women had assured me. But now, as my belly grew, my confidence in this assertion had shriveled. The sacrifice part I could still understand. It was, in fact, the *only* part I seemed to

understand. It was the “worth it” part that was so hard to believe.

Honestly, the memory of this internal turmoil is something I’d rather keep to myself. These memories pain me, and to write about them—to expose them to public scrutiny—is genuinely mortifying. But what I hope to do is not to revel in the fear and brokenness so that we can all commiserate and make peace with the mess, but to dig out the root of that selfish fear and to kill it right where it grows.

NONE OF US SHOULD BE IN THE LEAST BIT surprised that female fertility is at the center of some of our fiercest cultural battles. It is also at the center of many women’s fiercest internal and spiritual battles. The ability to bear children is simultaneously an awesome strength and an awful vulnerability—an unparalleled superpower that can bring us to our knees.

Pregnancy and motherhood can present more temptations to fear and despair than I can name, so it seems unlikely that *I* could have been the only happily married middle-class conservative Christian woman who has given way to fear and dread over the thought of giving birth to a child.

And, sadly, given the decades-long bloodbath that we have witnessed since *Roe v. Wade*—across the whole economic, ethnic, marital, and, yes, even religious

spectrum of our society—it's also very, very likely that at least a few of these women have let that fear lead them to the knife. Fear, in fact, appears to be the abortion industry's most powerful selling point, which is one of the reasons I felt compelled to bring this ugly chapter of my experience to light.

To a woman who is pregnant and scared, “Care, no matter what” (Planned Parenthood's slogan) is what she most wants, but fear can drive her to look for it in the worst of places. The voices from the abortion industry are masters at giving fear a megaphone and turning up the volume until it drowns out everything else: *What will happen to your friendships? Your reputation? Your education? Your body image? Your love life? Your money? Your career? It will all fall into ruins unless you allow us to cut away the source of these fears!*

These champions of “choice,” adept at convincing pregnant young women that there is no choice, offer only one way to end the fear: bloodshed. But when fear leads to bloodshed, bloodshed also leads to guilt—something that cannot be crushed and extracted with surgical instruments. And the guilt, as many post-abortive women have discovered, gives birth to new and weightier fears that rush in to take the place of the old. Who, dear lady, will care for you—“no matter what”—now? There is no government-subsidized clinic, no pink-hat street rally, no fundraiser fun run to assist you.

I'm grateful that, even on my worst days, the abortion "solution" was never one I considered, though my fear and lack of faith were the same root sins of those who have. I refused to believe in the promises offered by my "right to choose," but despite the lip service I gave to God's kindness and sovereignty, I was refusing to rest in His promises. I felt that I had already surrendered quite enough of my own painless, predictable plans to His, thank you very much. So why was He demanding this, too? Couldn't this quiet life, this painless existence, this familiar, comfortable body be mine and mine alone? God was meddling with something that I desperately wanted to control. (*My body. My choice. Sound familiar?*)

This kind of fear is clearly not unique to me, and it's true that we do need a solution to it. We *need* our fear and guilt and shame to be washed away. It's also true that the only thing that can finally wash it away is the blood of an innocent victim. The abortion peddlers got at least that part of the story right. The question, then, is not *whether* innocent blood is necessary but *whose*?

Unlike those who are offering the other "solution," Christians do not hide the bloodiness of their answer behind clinical language or pink signs or tidy code words. How could we? The blood of Christ is not a political platform. It is our life. It is not pink; it is red as wine. Only when we find forgiveness in Him and lay the weight of our faithless fears at His feet do we finally find the