

Bug off: Coping with mosquitoes

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

The wet spring in many parts of the country, including ours, produced mosquito-nurturing ponds. Now the mosquitoes are here. Their presence prompts Bible-believers to see where these annoying insects fit into the cosmic scheme.

Unfortunately, mosquitoes do not get mentioned in the scriptures at all. That seems strange, since the biblical authors do pretty well at locating and describing most creatures that plague humans. Deuteronomy 14:19 comes generically close. In its law we find that “all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten.” That command should help us resist the temptation to munch on mosquitoes. We simply have to endure their females’ attempts to eat us. We have to turn the other cheek for a second bite.

The laws in Leviticus, laws which condemn almost everything, also come close to being relevant. Chapter 11:20-23 approaches the subject: “All winged insects that walk upon all fours are detestable to you.” But there is an escape clause: “Among the winged insects that walk on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to leap on the ground.” Who wants to get close enough to test their joints? But we do learn, Leviticallly, that we may eat the locust, the bald locust, the cricket and the grasshopper.

Biblical literalists might revise their menus when they read about the confusing rights and wrongs of insect-eating. Though the Bible calls some four-legged creatures insects, it is silent in respect to rules about the six-legged arthropods of the class Insecta, to which mosquitoes belong.

I bring all this up because of conflicting counsels I received last summer from the *Chicago Tribune* (August 7, 2001). A way “to avoid going slap-happy is to use a fan outdoors to create a breeze. ‘Mosquitoes don’t fly very well,’ [expert Phil] Nixon says, ‘and will avoid windy areas.’”

On the other hand, on that very same day the *New York Times’s* Jane E. Brody wrote: “Movement attracts mosquitoes, so swatting at them is a good way to get them

swarming around you.” Who wants that? Should we use a fan to create a breeze and then not swat those mosquitoes that still fly well enough to penetrate our missile defense shield?

Somehow mosquitoes do reach and bite most of us. Taking vitamin B1 is supposed to help repel them, says Brody. But at attack time it’s too late to build up that shield. So what to do? Get this! “A time-honored technique for reducing the attack rate is to hang out with someone more attractive to mosquitoes than you are.” Astonishingly, Brody couples this advice with: “Another approach is to eat lots of garlic.” But, she admits, “that’s a technique more repellent to people than to mosquitoes.”

Bottom line: you have to find some fatalistic, non-garlic-eating, swatting-prone, non-breeze-creating avoider of Vitamin B, and hang out with him or her.

Something theologically awry is tucked into Brody’s advice. If you hang out with someone more attractive to mosquitoes than you are, the mosquitoes will first be tempted to bite you, but they will then move on to the better victim near by. That victim will suffer more than he would if you did not hang out with him. If the victim suffers without complaint, call it vicarious sacrifice. Odds are, however, that the attractive potential victim will forget about theology and generosity and be tempted to swat you instead of the mosquitoes.