

The Problem with Anxiety: Part 4

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Date: 26 January 2022

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[0 : 04] All right. We are doing a series on God and anxiety, and it's on God and anxiety because it's talking about theology and the problems of the heart. And theology, remember, is just speech, talk, thinking about and considering God in the light of the way God has revealed himself and the way God has revealed himself in the way God has revealed himself through historical events, through Scripture. We can see over and over again that God has chosen to speak directly about the problems of the heart, about the problems of the human psyche, that modern psychology, which addresses these issues, is just a development of a very ancient practice. And that's the way wisdom traditions address the issues of the heart.

The Bible is one of the oldest and the greatest of all wisdom traditions that addresses the issues of the psyche, of psychology. And so that's where we're coming to look. And remember, we said on week one that when you look across the Bible and you say, well, what is a person? What is the core of what a human being is? The Bible uses one word over 800 times, and it's the word heart.

The heart is the Bible's metaphorical term for what I am, what you are, our self consciousness, our soul, our center, the seat of our intellectual life, our emotional life and the life of our desires. The Bible uses the term heart. We've adopted that into English, as most languages have adopted Hebrewesque way of speaking. We don't just talk about hearts that pump blood. We talk about giving our heart to somebody else.

And that's from the Bible. That's from the Old Testament. That's a Hebrew way of speaking. And that's why in the early Church, for centuries and centuries, if you would have gone to a worship service well into the time of the Reformation and afterwards, one of the things that they often did if the Lord's Supper was being celebrated was the Minister would say, let us lift up our hearts. And then the people would respond and say, we lift them up to the Lord.

And that's actually exactly what we're doing in this series, because what we've said is that the way the Bible addresses psychology, the problems with the heart, particularly anxiety, is us coming and saying, let me lift up my heart and give it to the Lord. And let the Lord lift it up to the point where the Bible offers to the Christian over time the possibility of the heart being protected, the soul being at peace on the inside, even when every single circumstance on the outside is pulling you down, the heart can be lifted up even while you are being pulled down in any possible circumstance. And that's why we'll see tonight in Philippians Four. The promise is a piece that surpasses understanding. When somebody looks at your life and says, I don't understand how they could have peace and joy in the midst of what they're facing well, that's exactly the hope and the promise of the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

[3 : 19] We lift up our hearts to the Lord, and the Lord lifts up our heart, gives us a peace that surpasses understanding. And so that's exactly what we're doing in this series. One, John three, God is greater than our hearts. And that's very good news for people who are struggling like me with anxiety, because it means that God knows us better than we could possibly know ourselves. And God is greater.

He tells us who we are, even more than what our hearts say to us about our own selves. He knows us better. He knows what we really are, and he can heal the heart. Augustine this is the last word I'll say of intro. Augustine, the famous theologian of the fourth and fifth centuries in his famous book *The Confessions*.

At the very beginning, one of the things he says, he offers a prayer as he begins to write, and he says, oh, God, may I know you, that I might know me even as I am known by you. Oh, God, may I know you as you know me, even as I am known by you, meaning my prayer. We've got to say the same thing. We can maybe say it a little more simply than Augustine said it. He's saying, There, Lord, may I know what's going on in my own heart, the problems of my heart in the way that you know them, the way that you speak about them through scripture, so that I can know myself as I'm known by you.

And in that way, we walk through the process of lifting up our hearts, of having our hearts lifted up. Now, anxiety. We've said that anxiety is in a negative emotion, and it's a negative emotion of fear. And there are, of course, very good types of fear that we all experience. The fear of the Lord is the greatest of all fears that's present from the beginning of human history.

There is a steady good fear, but there's also bad fears as well, and there's all sorts of bad fears. But one of the bad fears and the bad fear we're focused on is the negative fear of anxiety. And we've said that anxiety is a fear that is in some sense the opposite of the good fear of immediacy. Immediate fears are when you are facing something that's actually going to harm you and your fight or flight mechanism instincts trigger and you fight or you flee your life is in danger or whatever it may be, that's good fear. But anxiety is in some sense the exact opposite of that.

[5 : 54] It's when there is a lingering fearfulness with no immediate object of threat in view. But where that lingering fearfulness has the object of some hypothetical circumstance out in your future that probably won't happen, may or may not ever happen. And we play the role of the Prophet in thinking about all the ways we might lose X, Y, or Z, the thing that we love or we might never gain X, Y or Z, the thing that we've always hoped in. And so there's all sorts of objects that we can be anxious about. But anxiety is a lingering fearfulness about a hypothetical circumstance that likely or may never actually take place.

And we quoted Tim Keller about this. He says that good fear is like a thunderstorm. It comes in the lightning strikes, but the winds are blowing so fast that it leaves quickly and your body calms down. Anxious fear is like Scottish weather. It's a little bit dull every day and it rains a little bit every day.

And that has an effect over time to create a restless, angsty heart and actually manifest in big physical consequences as well as consequences in the soul. What we've done the last two weeks is to offer theological habits, what I've called theological habits for a peaceful heart. Habits, Christian habits that help us fight for a heart of peace. And this is what we said they are. We've talked about three of them and I'll just rattle them off quickly and we'll get to a fourth.

1st we said that we've got to listen to Jesus when he says, do not be anxious. Rather look at the birds, look at the lilies, and what he's saying there is that whenever fear strikes us, we've got to talk to our heart about the God that we serve. We've got to be willing to lose control of our life and say, God, I'm contingent. You are absolute and rest on the attributes of God. So we've got to talk theology to the heart.

That was the first habit. The second habit was from James four. We've got to say, I should say this. We've got to say whenever we make plans about the future, because our anxieties often arise in relationship to our thoughts about the future, we've got to be willing to be God conscious about those plans. We've got to say, Lord willing, I'm going to do such and such.

[8 : 35] I hope that this will be my five year plan. I hope to be married by this time. I hope to have this type of relationship. I hope to accomplish these goals. I hope to make this much money.

I hope for our Church to be this far along and these avenues, whatever it may be. That could be a ministerial anxiety. We've got to make plans, yes, but we've got to be God conscious, not God. Forgetful and say, only if the Lord Wills. Only if the Lord Wills.

And everything that we make plans to do, whether that's the daily plan or the ten year plan, only if the Lord Wills. It's a part of losing control. It's got to be habitual. It's got to be habits form the spirit, and so it's got to be habitual. The third thing we said last time finally.

Was there's a consistent, persistent focus across the New Testament that caused us, I think, to focus on today more than tomorrow. So we have to make plans. But there are numerous texts across the New Testament. We looked at two last week where Jesus turns our hearts and says, but yes, you have to make plans, but focus on today because you don't know what tomorrow is going to bring. You don't know the trouble.

Today has enough trouble for itself. Focus on today. We see it in the Lord's Prayer today. Lord, give us this day. Give us this day our daily bread, and I'll ask for daily bread for tomorrow.

[9 : 55] Tomorrow. There's this persistent focus because tomorrow does not exist and yesterday does not exist. What exists is the present in the present. This moment is the moment of obedience. This moment is the moment of submission.

Today is the only day in which I can give myself over to the Lord. I can't do it yesterday and I cannot yet do it tomorrow. Today is the day that I can submit. And so we talked last time about how overthinking about the future can often be the enemy of the present, of actually letting today be the day of obedience and letting today be the day of real submission before God. All right.

Those are the three habits we talked about. Let me give you a fourth night and we'll do a fifth and we'll do a 6th. Well, I should say that I've announced that we're actually going to extend this series in February. So I'm going to do two more after this and we'll have Citigroup next week, and then we'll be back again. Let me give you the fourth tonight.

We'll do the fifth, the second week of February, the 6th, the final week of February.

To do that, I want to flip over and read from Psalm 27. So if you have a Bible, it would be great to turn to Psalm 27. And if not, it'll be on the screen as well. So let's read the Psalm together. Psalm of David The Lord is my light and my Salvation.

[11 : 15] Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid when evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes? It is they who stumble and fall. Though an army and camp against me.

My heart shall not fear, though war arise against me. Yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the Lord that I will seek after that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the days of trouble. He will conceal me under the cover of his tent.

He will lift me high upon a rock, and now my head shall be lifted up and my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy. I will sing and make melody to the Lord Hero. Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me. You have said, Seek my face. My heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek.

Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help, cast me not off forsake me. Not, O God, of my Salvation, for my father and my mother have forsaken me. But the Lord will take me in. Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Give me not up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have arisen against me, and they breathe out violence. I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord and the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord. This is one of the best passages in all the Bible that basically plays out the habits that we've been talking about.

[13 : 06] This is David struggling with fear, with fearfulness and with anxiety, and Psalm 27 and doing most of the things that we've already talked about, plus a couple more that we're going to talk about. So the fourth habit tonight that David exemplifies for us, I think in this passage is to take the language of Philippians four to cast your cares upon him. So we've said that we have to talk to our heart about God. When we have fearfulness, we have to do theology to the heart. Of course, the reciprocal is also true.

We not only have to talk to the heart about God, we've got to turn at the same moment and talk to God about the heart. We've got to turn and talk to God about our fears. We've got to cast our cares upon him because he cares for us. So this is a call. One of the things we see David do very clearly in this passage is turn to prayer immediately as anxiety strikes them, as the first moments of fearfulness start to arise.

Now I want to say a little more about that. Remember we talked about in week two, how the word for anxiety anxiousness in the Greek text in the New Testament is this word *Marima*, that Jesus uses, and it very literally means to be cut up, to be divided into multiple pieces. And there are synonyms that are used, like in the case of Martha in the book of Luke, when she's divided over too many Masters she's hosting, but also wanting to sit at the feet of Jesus. It's a synonym of anxiety. And when Jesus uses it, it means to be overwhelmed by too many Masters.

And that fits exactly in the context of Matthew chapter six, which says, you cannot serve God and Mammon or some other God at the same time, one of them has to be your ultimate master. And so it cast anxiety into the language of idolatry, of being split between too many Masters. Now, there are all sorts of reasons that anxiety can arise in a person. Sometimes they can be almost entirely physiological. And I can't speak to those at all.

I don't have the qualifications. But what we're talking about here is the way Jesus talks about it. Right. And that's common anxieties that often do arise. Not all anxieties do, but common anxieties often do arise through the issue of having too many Masters, of loving something in your life, some creature, so much that you become restlessly, fearful about losing it or never getting it.

[15 : 49] And so that item becomes the object of anxiety in your life. And Jesus, remember in Matthew six, gives all these sets of negative commands. And positive commands. Don't fast like the Pharisees, instead fast like this. Don't pray in public like the scribes, instead, pray like this.

The Lord's Prayer, do not be anxious instead. And what is the positive command? Well, yes, he says, look at the birds. Yes, he says, look at the lilies. But he actually gives the command at the end.

And it's what seek first instead of being anxious. Verse 24 25, verse 34. Seek first the Kingdom of God. That's the positive command. And so he's saying there, instead of serving multiple Masters, instead of having that object in your life that you love more, you're struggling and you're fighting not to, but you're loving more than the Creator himself.

Seek first and foremost, place the full weight of all your hopes upon the Kingdom, upon the King of the Kingdom. Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything else. The objects that you do love will be added to you, meaning they'll be put in their place. You'll be enabled in that moment to have appropriate affection for those things that's subordinate affection to God. But because you've submitted, you've sought the Kingdom, so you've submitted those things to him.

You say, But I'm not absolutely I'm contingent, and I only can possess this if the Lord will, and he's in control. And so I'm willing to prayerfully work on my heart to give up these things as little gods in my life. And so that's how Jesus cast the idea. Now, we might put it very simply and say, well, what is the most basic way to seek first the Kingdom of God as an act of submission and saying, I've got to fight in my life to make God my King above any other potential object. And it's simply casting your cares upon him in prayer.

[17 : 56] It's every single moment that fear, that object, that thing that you're afraid to lose or to never achieve or to never get or whatever it may be, strikes the command is Philippians Four, cast your care upon him, pray your fear, take it to the Lord and make it habitual. Remember we said last time that theological education does not equal spiritual formation, that having your spirit formed into the desire for God himself is taking theological education and practicing spiritual disciplines with that education. Turning your face toward the Lord every single day and praying your anxieties. Praying your fears may be one of the simplest daily activities to heed the command to pray, ceaselessly. If there's an easy way to pray, ceaselessly it's to simply pray your fears every time your fears arise.

Make it part of your spiritual habit, your habituation, your discipline to pray that fear in the moment. Right then, immediately I think that's what we're being called to. Now, if you look just for two minutes at Psalm 27, notice that this is a live example of this David in verse two, he just starts rattling off all of these scenarios of suffering that he might face. And he says, verse two, when this can be translated, by the way, When's in Hebrew is, if evildoers assail me. You see, he's thinking hypothetically.

Now, we know that there is many times in David's life that evildoers did assail him. There were also times in David's life that he was the evildoer that I sinned someone else. But here he's thinking hypothetically in verse two and saying, if an evil doer sells me and what does he do just before that? He says, The Lord is the stronghold of my life. I will not be afraid.

So what does he do? He's talking to his heart about God and saying, hypothetically, these are the situations I might face and I'm afraid of them. And the very first thing he does is he says, The Lord is my stronghold in my life. He does theology and he talks to his heart about God. And there's a bunch more.

Verse three. He says, if, though, if an army encamps against me, my heart shall not fear. Now he's saying that because his heart does fear, if an army encamps against me, I will not fear. He's talking to his heart and saying, I need not fear because I have God. I have the absolute.

[20 : 31] God is the stronghold of my life. You see him playing out the habits that we've been talking through. Verse ten is a really interesting one. He says, for my father and my mother have forsaken me. We have no story in the Bible where we see David's mother or father forsake him.

We don't know that Jesse his father ever forsook him. And the ambiguity of the proposition at the beginning for can also mean when or if so, he's not necessarily saying that my father did. He's putting out a circumstance and saying, Even if my father and mother have forsaken me, the Lord will take me in. And so you can see him doing this habit, talking theology to his heart and all these circumstances of fear. But then, of course, in the middle in verse seven, he turns and prays and says, Hero, Lord, when I cry aloud, when I cry out and express my fears before you hear me and answer me, you've said, seek my face.

And we're going to talk about his prayer, that he wants to see the face of God in our 6th week. But here's the secret. And David nails the secret, offers us the secret, if you will. We've got to name our fears. We've got to let actually the reality of anxiety when it crops up, when it comes up in our life, we've got to follow the breadcrumbs down into the heart to find where the fire is really burning, what's really sitting on the altar.

We got to trace the smoke, we've got to follow the breadcrumbs to find the house where that little idol is actually sitting in the depths of our heart. And we've got to name it, name the fear, name the object, name the idol. Every day as we struggle with it, and we've got to name it Godward, we've got to turn it towards the Lord and ask that he would cast it away. Now to close on this, I just want to jump over, over to Philippians four to seven, just a few verses and just say that Paul says the exact same thing and he offers the same help as Psalm 27, but he gives a little nuance to it and we'll close just with this nuance. Flip I'm four versus four to seven.

We read this passage in week one, and this is what it says, rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, Rejoice, let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with Thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds.

[23 : 24] And Christ Jesus. Now it's all there. Everything, all the habits, they're all right there. Rejoice always. And then he says something.

Did you catch it? That's incredibly fascinating and difficult and in some sense shocking about casting your cares upon him because he cares for you, doing exactly what David did in Psalm 27, praying your fears, naming your fears. But this is what Paul adds and he says this. But in these prayers, do not be anxious, but in everything, in every moment of anxiety and in everything that you are afraid of, he says prayer supplication with Thanksgiving. And so, in other words, what Paul adds to the command to cast your cares upon him as a habit is that that casting of cares, that prayer regarding your taking your fears to the Lord needs to be bathed or it needs to begin with a prayer of Thanksgiving.

You need to say, Lord, I give thanks to you for everything. And now this is what I'm afraid of, and I'm here to bring it to you. And you see that seems almost contradictory. It seems odd to pair the moment of casting your fear to him or your fear of some circumstance that you feel like will drown you, but also to cast it in the light of a prayer of Thanksgiving. And what that is doing is it's conditioning the heart and praying, a reality that CS Lewis offered very well through the mouth, through the book, the line of witch and the word rub.

When Mr. Beaver says, Aslan is good, but he is not safe and God is good, but he is not safe. In other words, you're saying, I'm going to give thanks to you for whatever you may be doing in life, in my life, whatever may come, I know that you are good and I know that you're not safe. This calling I've been given, this Christian calling is not one of running towards comfort, not at all. And I know that this world is full of sin, the world of flesh, and the devil is broken in every way.

And we expect suffering and we expect losses and we expect hard circumstances. Absolutely. And when we cast our fears to the Lord, we've got to say, you are good, and I give thanks for whatever you may be doing that I do not understand. And that's not an easy prayer, but that's exactly the prayer that we've been commanded to offer, a prayer of Thanksgiving and gratitude in the midst of the prayer regarding our anxieties, that whatever God may be doing, he is good, he is good, and life is not safe. Life is not safe.

[26 : 32] The promise here is the peace from the Holy Spirit that surpasses all understanding. And on this side of the grave, that is never absolute for us, but nevertheless it is a promise. And we are called to pray and seek after and long for God and toward God, appealing to him and saying cast the peace that surpasses all understanding upon me as I cast my cares upon you because you care for me. One of my favorite books is Marilyn Robinson's book. Gilead first read Gilead here because Marilyn Robinson came once when I was here before in Edinburgh.

And it's about a small town American pastor, Presbyterian, in fact, John Ames in the middle of Gilead, Iowa. And of course you say, well, you're going to like that. Of course I would like that book. It's about a Presbyterian pastor. In fact, I was in a meeting with a man in a previous Church that I respect a ton.

He's probably the best read person I think I've ever known, especially in fiction. And so I respected his opinion about fiction so much. And I was one of the pastors of the Church. And so he said, well, let's give each other a book recommendation. So I said, Gilead, Maryland, Robinson's, Gilead.

And he gave me a book. And the book he gave me was fantastic. And we met back together to discuss the books that we had read. And I say, this is one of my absolute favorite books I've ever read. And we came back together and he told me that it was terrible.

So now I don't know if I have horrible taste in books. I'm not sure anymore because I trusted this man's opinion so much, but I'm sticking to it. I think Gilead is one of the great pieces of literature over the past 100 years or so. In Gilead, John Ames is a Presbyterian pastor and it's a trilogy. There's three books, Gilly at Home, a book named Lila, and then the third book named Lila.

[28 : 51] It's about his wife, Lila, and it was a second wife. He had lost a wife in his earlier years, and he marries Lila. And Lila is a much younger woman than John, and she becomes the pastor's wife. And you get the sense in the letters that they write in the book that she sort of falls into Christianity by falling into this relationship with John. And John has passed away by the time you're reading the third book and Lila's is writing letters and you're hearing her own voice and she's reflecting on her time with her former husband.

And at one point this is what she says. She says, I meant to ask John before he died, what is the difference between worrying about stuff and prayer? I can't really seem to find it. She said, what is the difference between just worrying about stuff, worrying at the curtains and worrying at the ceiling in your bedroom and worrying letting these thoughts, your voice spill over with worry? What's the difference in that in prayer?

And it's a great question. David Paulson, a Christian counselor in America, in his book on anxiety, he answered it, and this is what he said. He said prayer. The difference in worry and prayer is that prayer is simply worrying Godward, never letting worry and anxiety foster internally, but instead worrying Godward, never letting anxiety and fearfulness bed down, but simply casting worry and anxiety Godward, as you struggle with it. And that's the fourth habit, and maybe it should be the first.

Pray, pray your fears as soon as they come. Let's pray. Father, we ask now that you would actually help us to pray to worry Godward, that you would give us.

We pray a prayer of desire. We ask for the desire to pray, especially when we're afraid. And we ask, Lord for the mindfulness to pray when we're afraid. And we ask that we would have the virtue that Paul commands, the virtue of praying ceaselessly. And so we ask, Lord, that you would bless us with the spirit of prayer and hearts of prayer, especially as it relates to the things that we are anxious about and fearful of.

[31 : 53] We do again as we've prayed the past three weeks. I do again pray for the many here and the many that can't be here and for those especially in our Church family that wrestle and struggle and fight this issue of anxiety more often than others and simply pray Lord, that you would bless them with a peace that surpasses is understanding and that they would know this very week the presence of the spirit that gives peace like that. And so we pray that in Jesus name Amen.