

The Problem with Anxiety: Part 1

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[0 : 00] Okay, when we talk about anxiety, we are talking about psychology.

And psychology in older ancient times is a little bit different than the modern field of psychology. And the Bible has so much to say about psychology, about who we are and what we are and how we think and how we feel and how we act.

Psychology is just the study of the psyche, which is the soul, which is me, that's the self. And we know the Bible has a lot to say about it because the word psyche, the Greek term, shows up all sorts of times in the New Testament.

But if there's a term that really gets at the Bible's big emphasis on psychology, it's the word heart. Heart is the term throughout the scriptures appearing seven, eight, nine hundred times.

And you know, as Bible readers, that the word heart does not refer in the Bible to that internal organ that pumps blood, right? We actually, in English and other languages, have adopted very commonly the way that the Bible talks about the heart into our normal patterns of speech, you know, when two people who become romantically involved see each other the first time across the room, we talk about their heart fluttering and then the engagement comes in the wedding day and the groom gets up and he says, from the first moment I saw her, she stole my heart, right?

[1 : 38] And actually that manner of speaking is exactly the way the Bible talks because the Bible doesn't use heart to refer to. And we're going to use this heart to refer to what the groom is talking about.

The groom is saying, she stole every aspect of what I am. You know, I gave her my intellect, my emotional life, and my desire.

And that's what the heart is. The heart is actually the term. It's the psyche, it's the soul across the scriptures. And so we're talking about that. The Bible deals with it all the time and if we were to state the problem that we're really dealing with in this short little series we're doing this month, we live in what's been called the age of anxiety.

Anxiety is endemic, it's pervasive, and it's much more pervasive today than it was a century ago and it was much more pervasive a century ago than it was a century before that and so on.

And we're going to do next week a consideration of why people are getting more and more anxious every decade, which is statistically the case. But we're going to reserve that for next week. The goal, if that's the problem, if anxiety is so endemic, the goal of this series, you could state it as 1 Corinthians 4-1 states it.

[2 : 50] It says, because of the mercy of God we do not lose heart. Let me say this, there are all sorts of ways to deal with the problem of anxiety and medication is absolutely one of them sometimes.

And all I'm going to do, because I have no ability to talk about medication, is talk about how the Bible deals with anxiety. Not neglecting the fact that there are a multiplicity of ways that it has to be dealt with quite often in people's lives.

But we're just going to deal with the way theology, scripture, the Bible, God, and Jesus talk about it. What we're told is because of the mercy of God, it is possible for a Christian, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to not lose heart, which is another way of talking about anxiety, which that means is verse 8, we can be afflicted but not crushed where in heart.

We can be perplexed but not driven to despair, which is a synonym for anxiety. We can be struck down by the world and the circumstances of the world but not destroyed where, not physically.

We know that there it's talking about somebody who might be struck down physically because of their faith, but yet not driven to ultimate despair and destruction where inside, meaning what we're talking about here, the goal is that the Christian has the resources and scripture in relationship with

Jesus Christ to find themselves in a place through time, over time, not all at once, but over time where you can find a real peace and buoyancy in the heart even when everything on the outside is bad.

[4 : 31] And that's exactly what the texts that talk about anxiety throughout scripture talk about. Now in the past I've done this series before, this is a focus of mine that I've worked on actually the first time I ever taught on anxiety was here at a conference and I'm working on a book right now on it and the past couple of times I've done this, I've done it over eight weeks and I've had about 45 minutes per week.

So this time we're going to do it in four weeks with about 30 minutes or less. So what we're going to have to do is get to the meat and talk about the main thing. So today we're going to ask what is anxiety.

Next week we're going to ask why are we so anxious, why are modern people so much more anxious than pre-modern people, which is a fact. Third week we're going to talk about how Christ came to deal with our anxiety.

In the final week we're going to talk about theological habits or habits, Christian habits to help you fight for a peaceful heart against anxiety. So it means you're going to have to come back the whole series to get to the things that are actually practical.

The fourth week of the helps. Okay. All right, so let's do that. I'm going to read two passages to start. Matthew chapter six verses 25 to 34 and then Philippians four, four to seven.

[5 : 51] So this is a very famous passage. If you have a Bible, feel free to turn there with me if not just listen because you'll be very familiar with it and listen for anxiety, anxiousness obviously.

Therefore I tell you Jesus says, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear is not life more than food and the body more than clothing.

Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?

And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you even Solomon and all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

But if God so close the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, a you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear for the Gentiles seek after these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them all.

[6 : 54] And seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. And then if you have a copy of the Bible, turn over to Philippians chapter four, verses four to seven.

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 request be made known to God.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Okay. Ed Welch, who wrote a book on anxiety a couple decades ago, points out that when you read those two passages, which are the two most famous passages about anxiety in the New Testament, you get the command three times, do not be anxious.

And when you hear Jesus say that and Paul say that, if you're like me, and the reason I've worked on this a lot is because of my struggles with anxiety, if you're like me, then you say, as Ed Welch points out, I don't want to be anxious.

[8 : 11] So why is it that Jesus is turning and saying to me, don't be anxious? It's a command. How can it be a command? In the same way that he tells me, do not murder, do not commit adultery.

Those seem to me so different than the command, do not be anxious. And you say, how forceful and assertive of Christ to come and offer a command like this.

And of course, the thing to point out is that simultaneously what Jesus is doing here is both giving a command and doing so in a totally different way than those other commands.

He's not coming as a drill sergeant trying to teach you about the moral order exactly here. He's doing something a little bit different. The reason we know that is because in Luke 12:32, it's a

parallel passage.

And in Luke 12:32, he uses the synonym in the New Testament for anxiety, which is fear. It's one of the synonyms. And he says this, do not be afraid, little flock.

[9:14] And that's how he speaks. He says, do not be afraid, little flock. And the same tone is happening in Matthew 6. He says, do not be anxious, do not be anxious. But the tone is of a father putting his hand upon a child's head and shoulder and saying, don't be anxious.

I've come here to both give you this command and help you at the same time. I want to heal you. I want to help you grow up out of this. And so we've got to recognize that Jesus is saying, I've come here to be your savior in this, to help you.

And at the same time, it is a command. It's different, but it's also a command. And it's a command in this sense. It's a command because being anxious is not good.

And we'll get into this later down the road that there is such a thing as sinful anxiety. And I think, I think at least non-sinful anxiety, that you can be a passive recipient of anxiety in a way that is not sinful, but anxiety can also very much be sinful.

There's both. Nevertheless, what we can say is that in both, anxiety is not good. It's a fallen condition. It's an aspect of a fallen condition. It is derivative of a broken world.

[10:26] It comes about because our relationships with God and with other people and with our own selves and with nature have been disturbed and disrupted by sin. It's a fallen condition.

And so he's coming and saying, don't be anxious. It's not good. It's not good for you. Fight to not be anxious. And so we've got to ask them, what is it? And let me just start.

Let me just get at the definition first by considering just one verse about psychology, where the Bible deals with our psyche and just to introduce this.

Proverbs 14:13 says this, even in laughter, the heart may ache and the end of happiness may be grief. A similar 14:10 just before the heart knows its own bitterness and no stranger can share its joys.

Now, you see what the text is saying here again, even in laughter, the heart can ache. It's saying that our psychology is very complex.

[11:24] And the way that a person appears on the outside does not necessarily reflect what's going on on the inside. Even in laughter, the heart may be aching.

And Tim Keller, preaching on a number of Proverbs, says this, that you can be as gentle as a kitten on the outside, but angry as a moccasin. That's a snake. We have those in Mississippi. I'm not sure if you're not.

But a water moccasin, a rattlesnake on the inside. In other words, human beings cover broken hearts with smiles quite often.

And that means that even if you're here today and thinking, I'm not really a person who regularly struggles with anxiety, chances are that if you don't know somebody that has deep anxiety problems, that struggles with anxiety, which has been me in the past, then it may very well be the case that you just don't know the person sitting next to you.

And the truth of the matter is, is we don't fully know anybody. That's the beautiful, bright thought for today. We don't fully know anybody. And actually, I think scripture teaches we don't fully even know ourselves.

[12:32] We don't even know the depths of our own self. We can be surprised. Sometimes anxiety creeps up on people and they're anxious and they're not even aware of it. They have to be told, this is your issue.

You're struggling with anxiety. And so Saint Augustine in the fourth century, when he opens up his famous book, The Confessions, he says, the twin objects of my devotion, his life, he said, I dedicate my life to this, knowing God and knowing my soul in the light of God.

Just to properly even know what's going on in our own soul, we actually have to see the face of God. We have to look at God in order to know who we are properly. Calvin opens up with that line in his famous institutes at the time of the Reformation.

So step one, I think, in fighting the problem of anxiety, if you struggle with it, is actually just getting a really good grip on what it is.

Actually, being able to define it well can be the big first step in the road to healing. So let me break through the barrier here, because there is no barrier.

[13 : 39] We're Protestants. There's no barrier here. And ask a question of you and see if anybody will respond. What do you think of when you think of anxiety?

Synonyms, associations, just one to three words is enough, anything, just a couple of people before I give the definition I've written.

Sorry? Worry. Yeah, so classic synonym is worry. And we're going to talk about that. Yeah. Panic attacks.

Okay, so physical manifestation, absolutely. Yeah, we're going to talk about that. Maybe one more. Anybody? Yeah, absolutely.

Yeah, so those are really good. Those are right on the line of what we respect. Let's go to the definition from the experts first.

[14 : 34] And then I'll give you another definition as well. The DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychology, is the international standard textbook for defining all issues in relation to the field of psychology.

The DSM, I think sometimes gets it wrong and sometimes gets it right, but on anxiety it's pretty helpful and this is what it says. Fear is the emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas anxiety is an anticipation of future threat.

So here's the distinction they draw. Fear, there's a type of fear that is what other psychologists have called normal fear.

Normal fear is responses to immediate threats. It's your fight or flight mechanism, your instinct. You are crossing Princess Street and you realize that you mistimed the distance between yourself and the bus that's coming.

And immediately God gives you a gift, good fear. And what does good fear do to you? It tells you if I don't act, I'm going to die. And you run straight across.

[15 : 50] And that's instinctive. It's actually one of the common grace gifts of God to humanity in a fallen world. Every time you're afraid and you should be afraid, that's a gift of God.

So that's good fear. That's what they're talking about here. But then they say, right after that, if I can find the definition again, here it is, anxiety is an anticipation of a future threat.

Now yes, but no, I think that some nuance needs to be had there a little bit. Let me give you a definition I've written and then we'll break it down.

That's all, I think the DSM is almost there. But anxiety is a bad form of fear where we use the capacity of the human imagination to construe hypothetical circumstances of loss, which then manifest in both soul and body as angst and various forms of physical illness.

All right. Now I know that's a mouthful, so let's break it down a little bit. The DSM was right that there is a good fear, an immediate type of fear that happens to us when we're in danger.

[17 : 01] When your child is about to stick a fork into an electrical socket, good fear raises up in you and your autonomic nervous system triggers in you, race over to try to help the little one so that they're not injured.

Anxiety is bad fear. When we use our imagination to play the prophet.

And in playing the prophet, we imagine hypothetical circumstances that do not exist, but may be possible.

And those circumstances typically contain images, thoughts of deep loss, death to ourselves, to someone we love, losing the things that we love most in life, whatever it may be, it could be anything.

Being embarrassed in some type of public forum. Hypothetical imagination, prophesying future circumstances of loss that we allow to snowball into restless fear.

[18 : 14] This is actually, and the reason I want to distinguish that a little bit from what the DSM said. The DSM says anxiety is the anticipation of a future threat. However, in Chavon brought this up, I think there is a difference between good fear, yes, anxiety, that type of fear, and worry or stress, which stand actually in between anxiety and good fear.

What's the difference? Worry and stress is fear of maybe non-immediate threats, but actual threats. So if your boss tells you, it's Monday and he says, you are going to give the presentation on Friday to the board because so and so has got COVID.

And you say, okay, and you start to get stressed and you start to get worried and you work harder than you've ever worked and you stay up all night, three nights in a row to try to get it done. That in the way I'm defining it is not actually anxiety.

That's concern and worry and stress placed on an appropriate object where there are real circumstances because if you fail, you might get fired.

[19 : 29] Or to put it another way, and this is why the DSM definition doesn't work exactly, because let's say you're there with your beloved one, your spouse, your child, your grandparent, whoever it may be, and the diagnosis comes, a bad diagnosis, a stage four diagnosis.

The threat is not that you're going to lose them today or tomorrow, but you start to think what's a year look like from now? What's two years look like?

What are all the things that we've got to do to prepare in early grief sets? And that's worry and concern and it's appropriate and it creates stress. And in a broken world, it's to be expected.

That is different than what we're talking about when we talk about anxiety. Now, let me show you, we talked about the experts and I gave a definition. Let me show you briefly, and we'll start to turn towards the close for today, briefly that actually this is how the Bible talks about anxiety.

So let me give you just one example, because we're going to come back to Matthew 6 in Philipians 4 later, not this week, but in the coming weeks. This is from Jeremiah 17-8, and this is a bit of Hebrew poetry.

[20 : 38] And Jeremiah is working with Psalm chapter one here, and he's talking about how the healthy and holy and happy person is like a tree planted by water.

We know that from Psalm chapter one, and this is what it says. He is like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream, and he does not fear when the heat comes.

So fear when the heat comes. Or its leaves remain green, and he is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

That's a bit of Hebrew poetry, and if you put it out in the way it's written in the lines, you would see that does not fear when the heat comes, and is not anxious in the year of drought, or parallel lines. They're meant to be read as the same exact thing. In other words, fear is the synonym there of anxiety, and heat is the synonym of drought.

[21 : 42] Meaning when bad circumstances come, there is a way of responding in life that is bad fear or anxiety as the Bible puts it there.

Now we'll close with this. Some of Tim Keller's writings on anxiety, he points to one middle of the 20th century psychologist, Roland May, who summarizes all this really well.

This is what he says, just to give a summary definition again. He says that normal fear is like crossing the street when the bus is coming faster than you thought.

Your autonomic nervous system triggers, your adrenaline pumps, you haven't run in a year, but you're faster than ever, that particular moment. What happens is your stomach comes up into your throat, and it takes you 15 or 20 minutes, maybe to calm down, but then eventually you do.

Neurotic fear, as Roland May calls it, bad fear is lingering fearfulness with no specific immediate danger in view that becomes restless angst.

[22 : 52] Keller comments, and he says, and you'll all love this, he says, normal fear is like a thunderstorm, it comes, the lightning crashes, the immediate threat is there, and it leaves, and you calm down.

Anxious neurotic fear is like Scottish weather. This is Keller's quote. It rains a little bit every single day, and that's how it is on your soul.

Neurotic anxious fear is lingering restlessness, like it's always raining on the soul a little bit because of fear of hypothetical circumstances of loss that are out in front of you that do not exist.

Now if you read existentialist philosophers, I don't know why you would, but if you did, or middle 20th century psychologist on this, Roland May, people like Heidegger or Kierkegaard, they will talk about anxiety in the same way as bad fear, and they will say, why are we so anxious?

Why do people get anxious? Why do we struggle with this? And what they all say, and I think this is right, they say, anxiety is actually reading the reality of ultimate loss backwards into the present, meaning we all know that we have to face death.

[24 : 23] And anxiety is like little Ebenezer, he's the old word, little memorials that come up in our life in the present, knowing that there is an end of the track, there is a death out in front of us, an ultimate loss out in front of us.

And so anxiety is this angst and restlessness and this snowballing fear, this dread that can be placed on littler losses all throughout our life, little ways that it's like we experienced little, little, little deaths until the final end actually comes.

And when that happens, the reason it's so bad for us is because we are both body and soul together, and everything that happens in the spirit impacts the body, and everything that happens in the body impacts the spirit, and when you are afraid, it triggers your autonomic nervous system, but when you're anxious, it triggers your autonomic nervous system.

Your stomach drops, you have all sorts of symptoms, but it doesn't stop, you don't let the fear subside, it keeps going and going and going, and so it slowly starts to literally eat away at you, and different people experience all sorts of different symptoms from that, and I've sat down with person after person over the years and talked about it with them, and they'll have this set of symptoms, and I'll have that set, and it manifests in different ways, but that's how it happens over time.

Now, the last word, most pastoral books, Christian books on anxiety actually say that besides getting a good, robust definition of what's happening when we're anxious, like we've tried to do today, the first step to actually take is to step in to the vulnerability, not to fight it, and that's exactly what Jesus pushes in Matthew 6.

[26 : 15] He says, why are you anxious? Yes, I'm calling you to, He's calling the disciples to go forward. He's calling them to go forward in poverty, in real loss, to go forward, and He's saying to them very first century concerns that they have, what am I going to eat?

What am I going to wear? Where am I going to sleep? These aren't the same concerns we have, but we have common concerns in our day, in our context, just like they had common concerns in their context, and He's saying to them, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be out of to you.

Don't be anxious about today. Seek first the kingdom. In other words, He's saying, you've actually got to lose control. Look at the birds. They're not in control and they're not anxious, but you've actually got to step in to the vulnerability.

It's actually part, I think, of daily prayer, daily meditation on Scripture to say, I am contingent. I'm not absolute. I'm not in control.

There will be losses. Today, there might be losses. Whatever happens, God, you are good.

Stepping into the vulnerability, just like repentance from sin every single day, we've got to wrestle, I think, every day with our contingency with the fact that we're not safe.

[27 : 32] We might very well lose today. Today might be the day of deep loss. We have to surrender our whole selves to the reality of God, the one who takes care of the birds, the one who takes care of everything.

Jesus is saying, walk with me in this issue and it will be no magic pill, but in time, the Holy Spirit can grow us up into buoyancy that can pop you up to the surface, no matter what the circumstances are.

Sunday night this week, we'll start doing something new, just a little bit new on Sunday nights and we'll have a time for the children to come forward, trying to encourage more kids to get back on Sunday evenings and we'll have a children's catechism that we're going to do corporately.

This week says, so appropriate to what we're saying, and it's the New City Catechism, which is written from the Heidelberg Catechism. The question is, what is our only hope in life and death?

The kids' version, which is a lot easier than the paragraph of the original, is that I am not my own, but I belong to God. That's really the first confession of actually fighting the problem of anxiety.

[28 : 47] Next week we'll consider the question, why are we so anxious? Why are 21st century people so anxious? Let's pray. Father, we give thanks that your word speaks to the issues that we really do face, the issue of anxiety.

We ask, Lord, we've taken just a baby step and defined it, that's all. We ask today that even defining the issue, you would take that and use it in our lives and you would help us to be aware as we struggle with anxiety what's happening.

And that you would use that to open our eyes, open our heart, help us to rest in your power, sovereignty, your control as we face hard circumstances. So we ask for this help in Jesus' name. Amen.