

The Problem with Anxiety: Part 6

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[0 : 0 0] Let me start us just by reading a passage from Philippians 4. We've been in this passage a couple times already and we won't be camping out really on it tonight, but I wanted to at least open up with Scripture and with another famous text of Christ talking to us about anxiety or Paul, God, Christ, through Paul, I should say.

Of Philippians 4 verses 4 to 7, 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.

So this is a series on God and anxiety, right? And we've been talking about how theology, talk about God, helps us with one of the most common problems of the inner life, and that's the problem of anxiety, which is a pervasive problem, and increasingly so since World War II. And the Bible we've seen every week has so much to say about human psychology, about the psyche, about our soul, what the Bible calls the heart. And if we could summarize it all, it's to say this, that Jesus and Luke in the book of Luke, Luke chapter 10, puts his hand on the shoulder of a disciple and says, do not be anxious, little flock. And that's Jesus combining a command, don't be anxious, with the pastoral love and care of the Savior who's come to help you, putting his hand on your shoulder and saying, this is something I've come to walk alongside you with, little flock. And so he puts it like that. Another Old Testament passage we haven't mentioned yet, that does something very similar,

Psalms 94 verse 19, when the cares of my heart are many, your consolations, oh God, cheer my soul. So on this very last night, I just want to say God wants to help and deal with the problem of anxiety. And he comes across the six passages of scripture that we've dipped into and says, I'm here to help to walk alongside you, I'm here to send the Holy Spirit to help you with this great problem. And at the same time, it is not a quick fix. And that's because humans are complicated and sin is devastating. And so the problem of anxiety, Jesus Christ offers great help and it's not a quick fix. It's an aspect of slow growth, a slow burn in this life. And so because we had originally planned to only do four weeks, I skipped what I'm going to talk about tonight. And so this is actually normally day, week one, this is intro material. But I want to come back to it at the very end and then rehearse what we've said and pull it all together at the very end of this talk tonight. And that's to address first the question, why is the problem of anxiety so complicated? So that's the question that we need to address tonight. And then we'll once again rehearse the theological habits that treat that complex issue of anxiety just briefly as we close. Okay, so let's let's dig into this first, the complexity of anxiety. There's a very important book that was published a few years ago by a guy called Matthew LePine. And it was his PhD dissertation that was then published by Lexan Press. And it's called The Logic of the Body.

And in it, he uses anxiety as a case study for the relationship between the human body and the human soul in both theology and psychology. Now I want to use that book and give you an example that he gives of chanted a little bit, but this is a very familiar. There's a woman we'll call her Mary. And she's a new mother. And ever since she became a mother, she's got increasing anxiety that didn't exist prior. And she didn't struggle too much with the uncontrollable nature of her worry until she was caring for this baby. This is LePine's example. And one of the issues for her is safety concerns. You know, she's always checking and rechecking little things to do with the safety of the baby. She's coming back to the crib multiple times at night when the baby's sound asleep to see is the baby still breathing?

[4 : 54] This was me when we first had a child, more than my wife, probably adding to my anxiety. And she's finding herself worried about her child at all times, over time, even when there's no clear reason to. And it becomes consuming. Now Mary, she doesn't communicate that really to her husband in any verbal way. He can see signs that this is taking over little things like she clearly doesn't feel comfortable with other people caring for her baby. She doesn't want to take her child as it gets older to places like a crash. And many people have pointed this, after you read books on anxiety, this term comes up. There's a German word from some German philosophers in the 20th century. And the word is Gavorfeneit.

And if there's one thing you should remember tonight, it's that term, Gavorfeneit. That was a joke, but it's okay. Gavorfeneit, it's a great word though. And what it means, it's not really translatable to English, but it comes from a verb in German that means to be thrown into something. And the meaning they used it for is to describe this unshakable angst, this unsettled dread that comes upon us when we struggle with pervasive anxiety over and over again. A feeling that something is always wrong, or that something bad is always about to happen. It's always on the horizon. And of course, that typically, as we've talked about many times already, manifests in physical symptoms. And for Mary, let's say hypothetically, she's got this great concern and it's snowballing, but then she gets physical symptoms from the anxiety, and those start to be part of the concern as well.

And then it's snowballs and it's snowballs and worry compounds both about her child safety, but then her job performance and finances and the health issues that she's being seen about but nobody seems to really be helpful with. And it all snowballs and becomes long term chronic anxiety. Now, the question that Lapine asks is, what is the source of the problem in all of this? What is the source of the problem? Of course, as Christians, we say, well, this is undoubtedly the product of the fall. It's the sin-cursed world that we live in produces situations like this. And absolutely, that's true. But if we try to get down more specifically within Mary's life, within my life, within whoever's life it is, your life that struggles with something like this, what is the source of the problem? And let me overstate a dichotomy on the answers that might be given to the source of the problem.

Okay, so one, Mary goes to her pastor. She's a Christian. She goes to her pastor. And what does her pastor say? Well, he says a lot of the things we've been saying in here. She's like, you know, look, you've got an idol in your life. And actually, your love and concern for your child is much greater than your trust in God and His plan and His control over all things and His, and His, the fact that He's the creator of your child, right? You're not resting cognitively in faith. You're not trusting enough, right? And so it's an issue for the pastor of belief. And he tells her, you know, anxiety is a negative emotion. And we've been saying that and that's true. Emotions are the product of the will. Emotions are the product in this view of your will, of your desires, of your beliefs, your deepest beliefs. And so if you have sinful will, if the beliefs that you hold at the very bottom of your heart are disordered and broken, then that's going to manifest in broken emotions, negative emotions.

Now that's quite a common evangelical way of dealing with something like the problem of anxiety. Okay, now, and it's not untrue. It's actually affirms a lot of the things that we've said. It's true in many ways. The Bible is very clear that the negative emotions, like anxiety, have a moral quality about them. And that we're told, do not be anxious. That's what Jesus tells us. Anxiety is not good. It's the product of the fall of a sinful world.

[9 : 34] The will can be reshaped. Our desires can be reordered to love God more than the things of this world and fight against the problems of anxiety. We say yes to all of that because the Bible says yes to all of that. But at the same time, what happens with Mary? Mary, she works on this and she prays and she seeks counsel and friendship with Christians and she's in worship and she's soaking in the means of grace and she's still struggling over time.

And it's maybe improved a little bit, but the fight and the struggle and the anxiety is still there. And she's starting to question actually the work of God in her life. And then questions about assurance starts to come in. Am I part of the people of God? Is this an issue that I don't even have basic faith? And so all sorts of things start to snowball because here, the evangelical standard historically has been that emotions, and here's a definition, emotions are a mental state that arise when a deep belief is elicited into consciousness.

Let me say something about it. In other words, emotions are a product of our truest, deepest beliefs coming out, coming out whenever we're in a circumstance that brings them out. And that means emotions are as malleable, as changeable in this view as your beliefs themselves. In other words, the idea is that if you would believe more and trust more and get yourself together cognitively, then you would not have the negative motion of anxiety any longer.

And that means that we are being called here to repent of false beliefs and desires so our emotions will change. Now, let me flip it around to the opposite side and say that instead Mary goes to a psychologist, a therapist who is also an atheist and a materialist.

And what does he say? And here's one scholar named LeDoux who talks about what he would say in this situation. And he would say this, anxiety is something that happens in the brain and the nervous system. Brain transmissions to the amygdala from the sensory thalamus and the sensory cortex, parallel tracks in the brain that form images of a sensory world.

[12 : 15] One is more realistic, one is more crude. Part of your brain adjusts your body to inputs of fear by elevating your heart, activating your autonomic nervous system and your adrenaline.

Anxiety therefore is a bodily reaction that conditions us for context of danger. LeDoux says that sometimes that trigger goes haywire, construes new neuro pathways where no matter what you do, you can't break the cycle. And so you see what LeDoux is saying. LeDoux is saying in all that complicated biological data that I don't understand. LeDoux is saying that anxiety is completely a product of biology. That it's an issue of neuro pathways being rewired and then your brain essentially going haywire and responding to all circumstances as circumstances of danger or threat, your body reacting in those ways. So on the one hand the pastors might say, this is an issue of your faith, of your trust, of your belief.

And then the psychologist comes and say, actually this is entirely biological and there's nothing you could do to get out from underneath it. And he says anxiety for the psychologist is a hypersensitivity to the possible presence of danger. And it's when danger is not present but your body acts like it is. So we've got two extremes, if you will. On the one hand the issue is entirely an issue of cognitive faith, belief. And on the other hand the issue is entirely material. It's about what's going on in your body. Now what I want to say, this is again, this is introductory material. So we're walking back here. What I want to say is for Christians, for Christians this is a distinction not a dichotomy. For us that it's a false dichotomy to say one or the other. And actually you don't have to study biology to be able to say that. Because theology gives us the tools to say that this is a distinction not a dichotomy. It's a false dichotomy. If we separate the two too far from each other, why? Okay, two reasons. That the Bible tells us that we've got to listen to both people quite often. That we've got to be open to both perspectives. That they're not fighting against each other actually. And here's the one. The Bible teaches us very clearly that human beings are psychosomatic wholes. Meaning soul and body, psychosomatic soul and body wholes. Now this is very important because in Western culture a lot of the formal high art and things that have come down to us, even though most of us probably aren't going down to the National Museum and looking at the portraits regularly. I know I'm not. Nevertheless, in Western culture there's an idea that's crept in from philosophies of old and from philosophies of old mixing with Christianity. That human beings really are just souls. And now ultimately the most important thing is the soul and the body is a take it or leave it aspect of what a human being is. And that is actually what we call a Platonic idea.

An idea that comes from the philosopher Plato and got mixed into Roman Catholic theology. And then you see all these paintings of souls being anywhere and everywhere and angels having very different features than the Bible actually teaches that they do. Now the reform theology, the Protestant theology, the Bible does not teach that at all. Instead what the Bible says is that we are, what is a human being? A human being is an embodied soul, period.

An embodied soul. Meaning that it's not as if God took a soul that he created and made and then stuck it into a body like a man being put inside of a machine. So that whenever the soul is removed from the body you're still wholly, fully you. No, anytime the soul is separated from the body that is a death condition. That is a death condition. Even in the intermediate state before Jesus comes back and our souls are separated from our bodies and Christ does give us life in that season. Nevertheless, that is not full salvation. Full salvation is what? The resurrection of the body. It's when I am me embodied soul. Embodied soul.

[17:14] That's what we are. Meaning that the body is incredibly important when it comes to God's understanding, God's telling us of what we are. And so we've got to take the body very seriously when it comes to issues of the soul. When it comes to things that are going wrong with our souls, the body is very important. And we have to pay attention to it. There's no dichotomy there. It's a false dichotomy. If we draw a dichotomy, just one little example of this. In the very beginning of Scripture, Adam, the first man, his name is Adam, he's made from and for the ground, we're told. So Adam is a product of God breathing life into something that he raises up from the ground. And Adam's an even made for the ground, for the earth to till it, to take dominion over it, right? Well, the word in Hebrew for ground earth that gets used there is Adamah, A-D-A-M-A-H. So in the Hebrew text it says that Adam came from the Adamah and was made for the Adamah. The stuff, that's what the word Adamah means, the stuff, the material, that humans are dirty and they're supposed to be. They're raised up from the dirt, they're made for the dirt, they're made for the stuff, and to be human is to be physical. And so we see that emphasis very clearly that the body is so important to the life of the soul and the life of the soul is so important to the life of the body precisely because that is what we are. That's what a human is and embodied soul. The second reason that we can't draw a dichotomy between these two things is because of common grace. So what's the doctrine of common grace? Common grace says that God, even after sin, shows to bless the world and everybody living in the world, no matter what you believe in, Christian or not, with an amazing amount of gifts. And so we often, the best proof that common grace is real is to say, sometimes my non-Christian neighbor is nicer than me as a Christian. And how is that so? Because God has blessed that person with common grace. He's given everybody in this world gifts. The first is life itself, the ability to wake up and breathe. But many other intellectual gifts and cognitive gifts and artistic gifts and all sorts of things. And that means that Christians can never spurn the work of culture when it's not sinful. That we can look out into culture, into art, into science, into development, technology, whatever it might be, into music and say, that is good. If it is not committing sin, if it's beautiful, if it's got an aspect of goodness to it, then it's good. Then I'm willing to use it. I'm willing to learn from it. I'm willing to say that this is actually, without you knowing it, the product of the gift of

God given to you. And so even as somebody like Ladoo's research, Ladoo is incredibly wrong about worldview, about materialism. He doesn't know what he's talking about. And yet at the same time, he may very well have found something very true about the human biological effect of prolonged anxiety that we've got to pay attention to at the very same time. Now, theologians of old did an even better job actually of talking about this than we have in the Christian church in the West for the past 100 years or so.

And so if you go, just for an example, people like Saint Augustine and John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas has a section in one of his famous books, 200 pages just on the complexity of the emotions and how they relate to the body. And he lived in the 12th and 13th century. Or if you come up a little more recent to Jonathan Edwards, people have often called him the theologian of the emotions because he talks so much so often about affection and emotion and how complex it is and how much our physical habits play into our emotional life and the possibility of our anxiety. And so I've mentioned this already, but let me just say it very quickly again, and we'll move things towards the close. And that's this Thomas Aquinas, we mentioned this, I think in week three, Thomas Aquinas, right?

He had a really helpful account of this. He said that when you think about who you are and what kind of gifts God has given you, what kind of abilities God has given you, God has given you a rational, the gift of rationality, intellect. You can think, you can make decisions, you can do math problems, and you can decide what type of tea you want at the store. That's all an aspect of the intellect. It's your decision making faculty, right? And in it, you are very active. You are the one doing the thinking. You are the one working things out. You are the one making decisions. On the flip side, the opposite side, God has given each of us completely involuntary aspects of what we are as embodied creatures, right?

You can't help the urge to sleep and to eat and all sorts of other drives that we all know that we have, right? As human beings, because we're embodied. And those are things that have been given to us by God, yes, corrupted by sin, but nevertheless created by God, right?

[22 : 54] And so there's the voluntary life when you think, you make decisions, you solve problems. There's the involuntary life, but then there's something in between that, what he called the sentient life. And the sentient life is this arena in which you have an active part to play, but at the same time, you can't quite control it. In the main category, there's many things he put there, but the main thing he put there is what? The emotions, right?

The emotions are indeed, to say yes to the pastor earlier, a product of many of your decisions over the course of time. We are captains in some sense of our emotional life, yet at the same time, our emotions are at least halfway involuntary, right? They arise in us in circumstances, not through us thinking, I want to get angry. It feels more like it happens to us, right? And so Aquinas pointed out that the emotions are changeable, but they're very difficult to change, that both of those things are true at the same time.

Anxiety is a negative emotion, and that means it's very changeable and it's very difficult to change, and the body plays into it, and the soul plays into it, and your cognitive life plays into it, your belief systems and idolatry plays into it, but also trauma from things that might have happened to you in the past play into it, and also shifting neuro pathways in your brain that I know nothing about, play into it, we're told. And all sorts of factors combine to create a situation of negative emotion that arises in the case of anxiety.

Now, we'll close by saying this, and that's that Ladoo actually talks and others about how physical biological aspects of something like anxiety, negative emotion, can also be changed through the habits of the soul. So there's all sorts of factors that play into it, but it's also been seen very clearly that habits of the soul, so the way we believe, the way we think, the way we may pray, actually can have both spiritual and physical impact at the same time, because we are psychosomatic holes, because we are embodied souls, and so it always works both ways, right? Medicinal needs might be at play that have an impact on the body first, but also on the soul, but also changes in the life of the soul can have an impact on the body as well. And we know that's true, because oftentimes anxiety in our soul over perhaps maybe an idol in our lives that's causing it can create long term physical change in us, physical damage in us, and many, many people can tell that story, right? And so it works both ways, and that's why we've got to then see Aquinas said the great solution to changing the emotions and the negative emotion of anxiety, he said is the biblical virtue of self-control. And when he talks about it, he says the biblical virtue of self-control is when the intellect, your reason, your beliefs, your theology, what you know about God, and your desires for God meet together to change you over time by the way of habits, spiritual habits, spiritual as we call them today, disciplines. And that's why we've been talking about theological habits that lead over time to a peaceful heart. So let me just finish by reviewing them. And this is what we've said, these are them. These are, these are by my estimation, all the ones I can find so far in the Bible, that God gives us very directly. And on most of them, I've tried to literally just name them by the phrases that God has given us in Scripture. So these are God-given, Scripture-based theological habits for fighting for a peaceful heart over time. Okay? And if you've been around, you've already heard them all. But here they are again, first. And I'm just going to rattle them off because we're out of time. First, remember, look at the birds Jesus says, which is, you've got to, when fear strikes, you've got to talk to your heart about God. You've got to apply theology to your heart every time that fear starts to creep up. You've got to preach to your heart in the face of your anxieties. That's one. Look at the birds.

Secondly, cast your cares upon him. Right? First Peter, also Philippians 4, which is to say, as soon as fear strikes, do theology on your heart, look at the birds, then immediately cast your cares upon him, pray your fears. That's number two. Number three, we've got to say, Lord willing. Remember James 4, we've got to include God in every single plan that we make. Meaning we've got to be God conscious when we pull out our diary and our calendars and our little sticky pads to make notes about what our day is going to look like. Even that has got to be an object of devotion where we're prayerfully doing our one day goals, our one year goals and our five year goals. So we say, Lord willing, whenever we make plans, we're God conscious of our schedule. Number four, Jesus tells us very clearly,

[28 : 51] Matthew 6, focus on today. He says, don't let hypothetical happenstances of tomorrow be the enemy of today. Meaning today is the day to devote yourself to the Lord. Today is the day to fight your temptations. Today is the day to get back on the horse and seek the face of God. Tomorrow doesn't exist. You can't do anything today about tomorrow's commitment to the Lord. Today is the day that you can do it. And so there's a very clear imperative to focus on today. Number five, seek first the kingdom of God, Jesus says.

And this is back to what the pastor, the evangelical pastor told us, right? Seek first the kingdom of God does mean examine your anxieties to figure out what is burning on the altar of your heart. Chase the smoke of your anxiety, anxiety is smoke. You feel the symptoms of it. You follow it all the way down to the heart and ask, what is the idol that's burning in the altar of my heart to create this? What am I so afraid to lose or never gain that is causing such restless fear? And I've got to prayerfully seek first the kingdom, meaning I've got to love, I've got to seek and fight to love God more than whatever the thing is that I'm putting everything into. And then finally, finally, from Psalm 27, seek the face of God, we're told, David in the midst of anxiety, he said, Lord, give me the ability to want you more than anything else. Specifically, he was saying, make my greatest hope actually seeing the face of Jesus Christ in the end of the world. That's utter salvation, if you will, what we were truly made for, full and final salvation to see Jesus Christ himself in the land of the living. And so when we pray, Lord, help me to seek your face, we're saying, give me the desire to want you more than everything else. Final word, the X factor that Ladoo especially cannot account for, and that we haven't talked about yet is this, that in all this, the biblical promise is even bigger. And that's that God says in Philippians 4, that He will gift you the Holy Spirit. And that the Holy Spirit is the one who will raise you up out of anxiety. And so by the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of these spiritual disciplines, here's the promise, 1 Corinthians 4-1, because of the mercy of

God, we do not lose heart. Christians have the power to not lose heart. Verse 8, we can be afflicted but not crushed. We can be perplexed but not driven to despair. We can be struck down by circumstances but not destroyed in heart. And that's what Jesus means when He says, don't be anxious, little flock. I want to help you learn what it means to have peace that surpasses understanding. Let's pray. Father, we give thanks that you address this issue for us so acutely throughout Scripture. And so we ask tonight at the end of the series that you would take these habits and shove them deep down into our desires and that we would be moved by the Holy Spirit whenever we do fear to pray our fears and to talk to our hearts about God and to make our plans according to your will and thinking about your power and that we would want you more than we want the things that we love in this world. And so rearrange our desires tonight, we ask, as we go to prayer. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.