

The Problem with Anxiety: Part 5

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[0 : 0 0] Alright, so we are doing a series on anxiety, and in this series we're talking about God and anxiety.

And I put those things together, God and anxiety, because we're talking about God and how God speaks to the issues of the psyche, the soul.

So God doing theology, thinking about what God says about himself according to his own revelation and asking how does that matter for the issues that human beings face in their psychology, what's going on in their soul.

And one of the big problems that we all face, and that many of us face more acutely than others is the issue of anxiety. And so we're talking about the problems of the inner life, specifically what the Bible calls the heart, which is the seat of our intellect, will and emotions.

The Bible uses the word heart, we've said every week, to describe all of what we are. It describes the totality of our being, the core of our self, where our self-consciousness is seated.

[1 : 1 3] When we talk about, when we say the word I, and we're aware of ourselves, we're revealing our heart. That's what we really are at the bottom of everything.

And so the Bible tells us that the heart can be wounded, depraved, is depraved, anxious, hopeful, sorrowful, yet rejoicing, down but not out, cast down but not destroyed.

The heart can be in all sorts of conditions. The state of the soul can be joyful while the circumstances on the outside are destructive in every way, or your circumstances can be amazing and yet the soul be entirely cast down.

And so the heart is susceptible to all sorts of conditions, the Bible tells us. And one of the most significant of our age is anxiety.

And we mentioned the first couple of weeks that W. H. Auden is a famous poet that wrote an epic poem in 1947 called The Age of Anxiety.

[2 : 2 3] It opens up with four people sitting in a bar in New York City trying to drink away their post-war time sorrows. And the real legacy of that poem is not the poem itself, but the fact that almost every sociologist, every psychologist, every theologian, whoever it might be that's thought about the issue has said Auden was right.

The 20th and 21st century is the age of anxiety. People are more anxious now than ever and we looked at statistics for that in our second week and I won't rehearse those today. But what we're doing tonight is exploring once more what it means to be lifted up in heart, meaning to have a heart that's buoyant even when your circumstances are troubling, to have a heart that can stand above the water line even when everything in your life is trying to pull you down below the water line.

And so we said a couple times already that 1 John 3 is an important text, God is greater than your heart, the Bible tells you. God is greater than your heart, meaning God knows your heart, knows you better than you know yourself.

And so one of the things we're doing here is praying, the prayer that I've mentioned a couple of times from St. Augustine. Augustine prays a prayer and it's a little bit complicated to just hear it for the first time, but it's this, oh God, may I know you, may I know you God, that I might know me even as I am known by you.

Augustine, God, may I so seek your face, may I so know you, may I so dwell in communion with you and know your attributes and be able to commune with you in a meaningful, powerful way that I know who I am in the light of what you say about me so that I could even know myself as God knows me.

[4 : 20] Could I turn and see myself in the way that God sees me? And in that way, we can actually get down to what's going on in the depths of our heart and see the smoke that's burning in the little temples in the midst of our hearts and know what really is driving our anxiety.

We have to know ourselves in the light of God to be able to find that out, to be able to really penetrate down and find our idols. Now we've said every week that anxiety is a type of fear and it's a type of bad fear.

There are good fears and fear is an emotion. There are good fears. The fear of God is good, the fear of the Lord, or the fear that protects you when you need to be protected from something that's trying to threaten you or kill you.

That's good fear, but there's also bad fears and there's all sorts of types of bad fears and anxiety is one of those. Anxiety is a subset, a type of bad fear.

And that's why fear not is the most common command in all of the Bible. It's the command that gets repeated more than any other command. Fear not because there are so many different bad fears that we can face.

[5 : 31] And so anxiety is not like good fear. Good fear is short lived. It strikes your autonomic nervous system and you react in good moments of good fear.

You save yourself, you flee, you fight, you do what you need to do to survive. But in bad fear, anxiety, you're dealing rather with a lingering fearfulness that lasts many, many days over and over and over again.

It keeps coming up. And anxiety is a specific fear that's targeted at hypothetical circumstances that don't exist, that could exist in your future, but are unlikely, particularly with the object of fear directed to losses, losing things that you love, losing things that you have not yet gained, never becoming what you want to be or losing that which you have become.

So it's fearing hypothetical losses that may or may not exist in the future and letting those fears become fearfulness or angst in the heart.

That is like a constant daily drizzle on the heart. And it does similar things to the body that immediate fear does to the body.

[6 : 55] Immediate fear triggers adrenaline in your nervous system to react. And anxiety does that too. And that's why anxiety can be so bad for the body because it does something over long periods of time that the body's not meant to do.

And so oftentimes we have physical symptoms before we ever even know we're actually anxious. We know we're anxious because of the physical symptoms that are manifest in the midst of the anxiety.

So four things that we've said so far. What we're doing, what I've been doing is offering theological habits.

I'm calling them for a peaceful heart, meaning there's all sorts of physiological answers for anxiety. There's all sorts of counseling issues that need to be talked through.

There's all sorts of reasons a person might be anxious. But all I can do, because I don't have any ability to talk about the other domains at all, is to say that the Bible also offers some theological helps, helps that are given to us by God.

[8 : 01] And each of these are habits, they're spiritual habits. So they work well when they're performed daily. And this is what we've said so far.

Whenever fear, fearfulness begins, anxiety creeps into your life. Talk to your heart about God.

Do theology to your heart immediately. Tell your heart the domain of fearfulness, who the God you serve is. And specifically it's talk to your heart about the lilies of the field and about the birds of the air.

And this is what Jesus says in Matthew 6, meaning you've got to tell your heart how powerful and in control your God is and how much he cares and how much he's upholding the world by the word of his power at every moment.

And how you're in the image of God and so he cares for you so much more than the birds and the lilies. So that's the first thing. Talk to your heart about God. Secondly, pray your fears.

[9 : 00] So not only do you have to talk to the heart, but you've got to lift the heart up. You've got to pray your fears. As soon as fear creeps in, you've got to pray and lift up your fears before the Lord.

Thirdly, as you make plans in your daily life, and of course you have to do this, as you make a one day plan, a week plan, a year plan, a five year plan, James 4 says you better say Lord willing.

Meaning you've got to be God conscious of your plans. Meaning that you've got to say, I will only do what I hope. I'll only become what I hope.

I'll only do this even today if the Lord wills. The Lord is in control of my life. And so I'm giving my plans to God knowing that it's probably going to be the case that what I've planned is not going to happen exactly.

So we're called to be God conscious in the way we make plans to say Lord willing. That's three. And four is focus on today. There's a repetitive theme throughout the New Testament.

[9 : 59] Matthew 6 is very clear. Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will have trouble of its own focus on today. Today is the day that exists. Tomorrow doesn't exist and yesterday no longer exists at all.

All that exists is right now, today. And so yes, you have to make plans, but don't let the future become the enemy of the present. Meaning today is the day to be obedient to the Lord.

Today is the day to repent of your sins. Today is the day to commune with the living God. Today is the day to love God and love neighbor. Today is the day for action.

And so there has to be a real focus on today. Now I'm going to give you the last one tonight and we're going to do something a little different next time. And the last one is to come back to Matthew 6, but to consider actually again Psalm 27.

And at the very end of Matthew 6, we're told instead of being anxious, I mentioned this last time, instead of being anxious, seek first the kingdom of God.

[10 : 59] So in order to not be anxious, we have to seek the kingdom of God first. And we said last week that that really means that we have to make sure we don't love something in this world more than God and His kingdom.

But let's get more specific because there's something very specific in Psalm 27 about what it means to seek first the kingdom of God. But if you have a Bible, come there with me and if not, then just listen.

Excuse me, sorry. So I'm going to read Psalm 27 one more time for us. The Psalm of David. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? The evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes. It is they who stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I have 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.

[12:13] For He will hide me in His shelter in the day 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 above 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. Heer, O 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. Hide 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 risen 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.

[13:15] Wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord. Now we said last time that David here is listing all of these potential losses in his life.

And we know that actually because of some of the ambiguity of the way the Hebrew text is translated, he's saying, if or when in the future my enemy rises up against me.

Or, if my Father and Mother forsake me. He's talking about hypotheticals. And we see David very actively, as God's Word, struggling with anxiety.

And the beginnings of the moments of fearfulness rising up. And so we saw what he did last time. We said he prayed. He immediately feared Godward. He turned his worries Godward.

There's another big emphasis in the midst of that prayer that makes sense of what it means to seek first the kingdom of God. Okay. And he says it in verse four very clearly.

[14:13] One thing that I asked of the Lord that I will chase after, I'll seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. Why?

To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire into his temple. Now we know here that he is talking about the temple, the tabernacle, the temple, yes.

But he's also talking about more than that. Because he's not only saying that I could enter into the temple of God and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord all the days of my life. But at the very end he says that I might see the face of God in the land of the living.

And there he's talking about life after death. And so he's saying, Lord, my greatest prayer in the midst of my fear is that I could see your face.

And the answer to anxiety, I think, the ultimate answer that the Bible gives is the beatific vision.

[15 : 18] Now I used the more weighty theological term there, the beatific vision. What is that? That's what Christians have called throughout century and century the hope of seeing, vision, actually seeing the living God.

And it's beatific because it's blessed or beautiful. And David very clearly throughout Psalm 27 over and over again says in the midst of his fearfulness, the great joy that I have in the midst of my anxiety is that I might see the face of God.

And then he prays, Lord, help me to seek your face. Help me then to desire that your face would be the thing that I want to see more than anything else.

And even more than that, that I could see that face in the land of the living. All right? Now, you probably weren't thinking that the question, are you struggling with anxiety?

The answer is beatific vision. But it is. And that's exactly what the Lord gives us, I think, in this passage. And I think that's what Jesus is saying ultimately, seek first the kingdom of God.

[16 : 33] In other words, seek first the king of the kingdom. And everything else will be put in its place. But the ultimate answer to anxiety is the vision of God.

Now, the problem, let me flesh this out, the problem with the vision of God is that we're told very clearly, multiple times in Scripture, that nobody can see God and live.

And so the Israelites desire to see God at Sinai, and even Moses, God's greatest servant wants to see God. And what does God say?

He says, well, I'll put you in the rock and you can, I'll pass by and you can catch a glimpse. But not even Moses could see the face of God and live.

And that's because God is holy and we are sinners. And for sinners to stand in the presence of the holy God and to see God as he is, to behold him is to be judged.

[17 : 32] That's what our sin does. It puts us at enmity and breaks communion, deep abiding communion with the living God. We're told in the New Testament, he dwells in Timothy, an inapproachable light.

His light is that which is inapproachable for a human. We cannot get close to it. And then in the New Testament, you start to hear things like this, 1 John 3, Dear friends, what we shall become has not been made known.

But what we do know is this, we shall see him as he is. Now what's the difference? We're told all throughout the Old Testament and in some ways this is the great tension of the Old Testament that Garden of Eden, we were made to commune with God in such a way that we walk with God and see him.

And yet the entirety of the rest of the Old Testament is telling us over and over again that no one could see God and live, that he dwells in an inapproachable light and not even his greatest servant, Moses, could come and approach him face to face.

And then the New Testament opens up this horizon that says, here's the promise, you shall see him as he is. And of course, that which stands between the two is the incarnation, is that God became man, is that we do see the living God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[19 : 03] And we see the living God hung upon the cross, dying in our place, judged for us, for those who were meant to walk in the Garden of God with God hand in hand.

Jesus Christ has opened up the Garden to us. He has removed the cherub that's guarding the gate of Eden, and pushing us East of Eden by the work of the cross so that we are enabled to see the living God by the power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You see why anxiety and the vision of God are related. And it's this, you see why David's praying that he would not only get to see God, but want to see God.

And that's because we are scared, we are fearful to the degree that the things we desire most can die.

We're afraid our fears correspond, they're proportionate with the degree that that which we desire can be lost, can die.

[20 : 12] And if everything that you love the most can ultimately be lost, then it's going to make you scared. It's going to make you fearful all the time.

And when we say instead in prayer, Lord, I want to see your beauty in the land of the living more than anything else.

In other words, the prayer is God, will you make yourself the greatest desire of my heart? And that which you truly desire most can never be lost.

And everything else is then put in its place. Seek first the King and his face and everything else will be added to you in its proportionate way.

It will be put in its place. So as we come to a close.

[21 : 10] The theological habit today is to fight to desire God more than anything else. And I just want to say something about that briefly and more generally.

And that's this Christianity offers all sorts of benefits. Intellectual benefits, historical benefits, emotional benefits, physical benefits.

I think that Christianity's power is endless because it's true. And one of the ways of talking about those benefits today is we often talk about the therapeutic benefits of Christianity, right?

And Christianity does offer immense therapeutic benefits and people are often quite attracted to Jesus because of the hope of those therapeutic benefits. What are therapeutic benefits?

They're things like this. Jesus Christ offers you a way of dealing with the internal guilt that you may face over past sins in your life.

[22 : 10] And Christianity comes and says, Jesus, if God is willing to forgive you for everything you've ever done because of the cross, then you've got to be willing to forgive yourself because you can't set up a standard that's higher than the cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness.

Right? That's a therapeutic benefit. You are objectively forgiven at the cross, therefore you've got to let go of the guilt of your past life, right?

Or another therapeutic benefit would be something like this. Jesus Christ gives you an identity that cannot be shaken in the midst of a world that tells you to constantly rebuild your identity.

The Bible ultimately says, no, if you believe on the cross, you are in Christ and that's who you are. And that is sure and founded. And so subjectively, therapeutically, you've got to rest in that.

You've got to cast your identity upon Him, founded in Him, or a third, final, one of the great ones. Christianity builds a community unlike any other and can really care for anybody that's lonely out in the world.

[23 : 17] Jesus Christ offers you a path out of loneliness through the church, through the community that's founded, right? Amazing therapeutic benefits. And they're often a person's first step into the world of Christianity.

However, Christianity primarily, not at the expense of the therapeutic, but right along with it, before it, foundationally, in order to give the therapeutic, Christianity offers God.

That's the true point of it all. Jesus Christ came into the world to give us God, to reconcile humans to the living God, so that we could commune ultimately with the maker that we were made for.

That's really the point. And so even, even, even saying the forgiveness of sins, the forgiveness of sins, you can't see God without the forgiveness of sins, but the forgiveness of sins is not the point.

Jesus came to forgive us our sins at the cross so that we could get to God, so that he could reconcile us to God. And so God, communion with God, relationship with God, seeing God is the end-all be-all of our religion, of Christianity, of the work of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 35] And it really, that means that it has to be the greatest hope and help of fighting the problems of anxiety in our life. Now, I'll just close with this.

How do you do it? Ultimately, Jesus has to combat. So you can't do it. The return of Christ is cataclysmic.

It's an entry into the world that we can't bring about. We will see the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We celebrated the Lord's Supper on Sunday to remember the future promise that we will die in with him one day.

But now we've got to do what David does. And that's first, we've got to pray what David prayed and say, Lord, I long to seek your face.

Give me the presence of the Holy Spirit and help me to want you more than I want the things that I'm afraid of losing. And it has to be a theological habit.

[25 : 35] It has to be a daily prayer. Living in desire for God himself is really the secret of the Christian life.

Secondly, we've got to meditate on God as we read Scripture. Meaning, our Scripture reading can't be information gathering.

So morning Scripture or evening Scripture, whenever it may be, is different actually than a Bible study. So I'll say something, let me be controversial maybe and say, don't do a Bible study in your morning readings.

Don't do a Bible study in your evening readings. Leave Bible study for Bible study time. The church can schedule that. But in Scripture reading, don't gather bits of information as much as commune with God.

So use Scripture actually to meditate on God throughout your reading. Read and pray simultaneously. And as you read and something's unveiled before you about God, pray it to God.

[26 : 47] And so try to work on focusing your reading Godward the entire time rather than as information or Bible study, as information gathering exclusively.

Last thing is this. In verse 13, David pulls it all together and he says, I believe I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord where in the land of the living.

I believe, he's doing theology here, I believe I will look at the goodness of the face of God in the land of the living. And that means David here is talking about the resurrection.

And from the very beginning of the series, we've said that anxiety really exists because we read the fact of non-being, death, the end of the road backwards into every little loss that we have in life.

Every little loss that we experience is like a little death that's preparing the way for our death ultimately. But David comes, Jesus Christ, the greater David, David's great son who we're looking at on Sunday evenings right now.

[28 : 03] He comes and he says that, this is the last word, he says the cross, the cross is God's pronouncement that he would not leave you in the midst of your sin, ultimately forsaken and unable to approach him.

He would not leave you in that state. When you look at the cross, that's what he says, I love you and I will not leave you outside of the Garden of Eden.

And then in the resurrection, he turns and says that there is a way out of angst absolutely and a way out of anxiety forever because death is the originator of all anxieties.

So the resurrection says to us that because death is dying in the Son of God, anxiety will die with it.

You will, if you believe tonight, you will see the face of God one day in the land of the living, in the face of Jesus Christ. And the degree to which we can desire that more than anything else, we will be able to really push back against our daily fearfulness.

[29 : 18] Let's pray together. Father, we ask now that you would make your face the great desire of our hearts.

And you tell us Lord, in the erotic benediction, we say, may the Lord make his face to shine now on you and us. And so we say that benediction as a prayer.

Would you turn your countenance to us, your face, Lord, that we might see you in glimpses even now and that we might long for the hope of the coming of Jesus all the more.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.