

Freeing the Anxious Heart

Internal: Our Relationship with Ourselves

“Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.”

Adapted from A. S. Roche

Do you worry? Are you stressed and anxious? A pilot named Gregg Warren may have the solution to your problems. The idea is to write down your worries on a piece of paper, burn the paper, and send him the ashes. Then, for just \$5, Warren will toss your ashes out of his plane over the town of Carefree, Arizona. Most likely, the ashes will actually come down somewhere in New Mexico, but the important thing is that they’re released over Carefree. At that point, presumably, you’ll be free of your worries forever.

Sounds silly, you say? It wasn’t to the five thousand people who paid Warren \$25,000 during the first six months of his business.¹ Other than easing Mr. Warren’s financial concerns, I doubt anyone involved achieved a lasting change in their stress levels. The story *is* a sign, though, of how pervasive the problem of anxiety is today.

We are a stressed-out people. Technology pushes us to move at a faster pace. Economic upheaval threatens our jobs and our security. War and other conflicts abroad demand our attention. The threat of terrorist attack, when we travel and even when we’re at home, is a disturbing addition to our ever-increasing list of concerns.

The results are apparent. *Harvard Business Review* has reported that stress-related symptoms account for 60 to 90 percent of medical office visits.² Anxiety disorders as a group are the most common mental illnesses in the United States, with more than 40 million adults affected by these debilitating illnesses each year.³ At least one recent survey showed that a third of the U.S. population experienced a panic attack during the previous twelve months.⁴

One person who understands that terrifying feeling is Lori Mangrum, a mother in Indiana. She still remembers the night she woke up in her bedroom gasping for breath, her heart racing. When she tried to stand, nausea overwhelmed her, and she collapsed on the floor. It was another in a series of debilitating panic attacks. They got so bad that she couldn't even drive to the grocery store.

A physician eventually discovered that Lori had a heart condition that contributed to the attacks. But that wasn't the only cause of Lori's anxiety. For years, she had been a "fixer," always working to solve other people's problems and ignoring her own. The physician recommended therapy and anti-anxiety medication.⁵

You may not be dealing with panic attacks, but we're all familiar with feelings of stress. Our physical and emotional condition certainly contributes to our anxiety level. When we're deeply worried and stressed out, we can ease our burden through exercise, better diet choices, and confronting the causes of our emotional duress. Sometimes we are simply trying to do too much, and cutting back on activities brings some relief.

No matter how hard we work to reduce stress in our lives, however, we'll never succeed in eliminating it. Even when we're at our best physically and emotionally, the next crisis is always just around the corner. A relationship falls apart. A job is downsized. An illness attacks unexpectedly. A close relative dies. We can't escape the inevitable calamities that are part of life. As Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). And when trouble strikes, our hearts are so often ensnared by feelings of anxiety.

You can take steps to lower the stress in your life. Ultimately, however, the solution to freeing an anxious heart is not physical or emotional. It's spiritual.

Pay Attention to the Tension

Merriam-Webster defines anxiety as "painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated ill." A dictionary definition for worry is "to torment oneself by disturbing thoughts." When we're anxious and worried, we turn our focus away from the present and toward what is coming—or what *may* be coming. As Mark

Twain once said, “I’ve seen many troubles in my lifetime, only half of which ever came true.”

The English word *worry* comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning “to strangle” or “to choke.” Worry and anxiety choke the life out of us. They are a waste of time, thought, and energy. They spoil our dispositions, damage our relationships, and steal our optimism.

Max Lucado has described worry and its effect on our thought life:

Worry divides the mind. The biblical word for worry (*merimnao*) is a compound of two Greek words: *merizo* (to divide) and *nous* (the mind). Anxiety splits our energy between today’s priorities and tomorrow’s problems. Part of the mind is on the now; the rest is on the not yet. The result is half-minded living.

There’s a problem when we divide our thoughts this way. If half of our thinking is on getting by in the present and the other half is spent worrying about the future, we crowd out the One who should be the real center of our attention. Anxiety is a sign that we’ve taken things into our own hands rather than trust in the Lord.

A friend once told me, “Pay attention to the tension.” It was wise advice. If we have tension in our lives, it means we’re flying solo. We’ve shoved the Lord out of the captain’s chair and are attempting to act as pilot, copilot, and control tower, all at the same time. Guess what? If you keep that up, you’re headed for a crash.

Here’s what happens when you and I push God aside and allow anxiety to rule our hearts:

- We become the center of our universe. We’re not free because “it’s all about me.”
- We deny Christ’s power and promises. Jesus says, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31–33).

- We forget our personal relationship with the Father. We are not orphans! He will support the life He gives.
- We abandon our faith. Jesus is talking to worriers when he addresses “you of little of faith” (Matthew 6:30).
- We become distracted and divided. Our focus is on potential problems instead of the Lord.

I know that worry is unhealthy, you say. I know God doesn't want me to do it. I know it's a spiritual issue. But I can't seem to stop. What am I supposed to do?

Let the Great Physician prescribe the remedy.

God's Antidote for Anxiety

Scripture is clear about the Lord's antidote for anxiety. It is presented to us through the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

Fortunately for us, this life-changing passage of Scripture does not stop with the words *Do not be anxious about anything*. We are given not only a command, but also the means to obey the command: *in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God*. The message can be paraphrased this way: Pray about and give thanks for *everything*!

God desires a relationship with you. He wants to hear from you—not just during times of crisis, but during the mundane moments of your day. Nothing is too small to trouble Him about. If it's big enough to bother you, it's big enough to talk to Him about it. As Peter says, “Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what

happens to you” (1 Peter 5:7 NLT). Notice Peter doesn’t say “just the big worries.” His instruction is to pass on *all* your worries to the Lord.

Most of us understand that there is value in prayer. We want to spend time with the Lord. We mean well. Yet somehow, in the crush of daily responsibilities, God gets put on hold. Too often, the best we seem to do is an “arrow” prayer before we climb into bed at the end of another exhausting and stressful day: “Lord, please help me finish my project on time tomorrow. Thanks. Amen.”

God wants more than that. If we want to experience His power, presence, and peace in our lives, *we* need more than that.

I know it isn’t easy, but I recommend carving out a regular time each day for conversation with the Lord. Early morning, before the demands and distractions of the day begin, is often most effective. If that sounds like a challenge, start small. Even ten or fifteen minutes with the Lord when you first get up can set the right tone for the rest of your day. Tell Him about what’s on your mind. Share your concerns and frustrations. Realize that nothing is too great for His power, and nothing is too small for His fatherly care. Remember also to listen for His response. When you quiet your heart and mind long enough, you will hear His answer.

Your prayer time need not end in the morning. Why not continue the conversation over the rest of the day? The Lord is not someone we leave at home in our “prayer closet.” He is with us every place, every moment: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). We can pray about our troubles at the very moment they happen and be reassured that He hears what’s on our hearts and has our best interests in mind.

An Attitude of Gratitude

There’s another requirement to Paul’s admonition to pray: “...in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving* [emphasis mine], present your requests to God.” We must do more than commit time to pray. We must also commit to the proper approach to prayer. We’ll find peace if we address the Lord with an attitude of gratitude.

Most of us are great complainers and grippers. When we're at a restaurant, we don't like waiting for our dinner to be served. We don't like it if the food is cold when it arrives. And heaven help the poor waitress if we find a fly in our soup!

Some of us can find something wrong with everyone we meet and everything we experience. It's as if we've taken God's antidote for anxiety and turned it on its head:

Do not be calm about anything, but in everything, by dwelling on it constantly and feeling picked on by God, with thoughts like "and this is the thanks I get," present your aggravations to everyone you know but Him. And the acid in your stomach, which transcends all milk products, will cause you an ulcer and the doctor bills will cause you a heart attack and you will lose your mind.⁶

This isn't how the Lord wants us to live! Rather, Scripture tells us to "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

All circumstances. Not just the good days, but the days when you lose your job, when your kids yell at you, when you're handed a speeding ticket. You may not be able to see it yet, but God will find a way to make good use of your present trouble. When we trust Him to do that and thank Him even for our hardships, we find our hearts moving toward a place of peace.

When we adopt an attitude of gratitude, we find:

- It adjusts our outlook on life.
- It brings our will into harmony with God's will.
- It affirms God's sovereignty, love, and wisdom.
- It pleases God.
- It releases the generosity of God.
- It reminds us of the past.
- It defeats the enemy.
- It dissipates fear and anxiety.

- It relaxes us.
- It is a statement of faith.

What does this look like in real life? Here's an example. Matthew Henry, the eighteenth-century English clergyman and author, was robbed one night. He later wrote in his journal, "Let me be thankful—first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my wallet, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."⁷

That is an attitude of gratitude, and is the kind of perspective God asks of each of us.

Incorporating a thankful attitude does not come easily or naturally to most of us. To improve your "thank you" reflex, I suggest giving thanks to the Lord for His love, provision, blessings, and guidance whenever you pray. You also might make a daily practice of writing down the things you are thankful for in your life. Do it after your prayer time in the morning, during a coffee break at work, or just before bed. Those little reminders can make a big difference in our attitude.

My attitude of gratitude was lacking some years ago on the day I was in Brazil and flew to meet an old and dear friend in Sao Paulo. I expected to have just a couple of hours with him, but I was eagerly looking forward to it. After I got off the plane at the Sao Paulo airport, I found myself stuck in a long line, waiting for my passport to be checked. The line wasn't moving. I checked my watch, clenched my jaw, and fumed. I really wanted to see my friend, and our time was slipping away. I began to think, *Who in this line can I push out of the way?*

I realized my thoughts were running out of control. I took a deep breath. *Okay, Dennis, what's going on here?* I thought. *You're angry and anxious. Is this how the Lord wants you to handle this situation?*

I recognized that there wasn't much I could do about the slow-moving line. I remembered that God is in control. I recalled the Lord's command to be anxious for nothing, to pray about everything, and to give thanks in every situation. So, right there in

line, I prayed to the Lord and thanked Him for my life at that moment and for whatever He had planned for me. Slowly, I felt the tension drain from my body. It was replaced by a wonderful sensation of peace.

A few moments later, a woman standing next to me in line spoke up. I'd been so wrapped up in my problems I hadn't even noticed her. "Excuse me, sir," she said. "Can I ask you a question? This may sound a little strange, but do you believe in angels?"

I was surprised by the question. "Yes," I said. "But why do you ask?"

"I see a lot of light around you," she said.

Now I was even more surprised. "Any light you see around me is Jesus Christ," I said. "He's the light of the world."

We began a discussion about faith. This woman was an author who traveled around the world speaking about the New Age movement. Yet she seemed to be sincerely seeking God. We had a wonderful conversation and I had the opportunity later to send her material about angels. It was clear from letters she sent back that God was working in her heart.

If I hadn't followed the Lord's prescription for anxiety that day in line, I would have endured a miserable afternoon and missed an opportunity to share His truth. How many other opportunities have I missed over the years? Too many to count, I'm sure. But during that moment, at least, I obeyed the counsel the apostle Paul gives to all of us: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...And be thankful" (Colossians 3:15).

I Will Glorify Your Name

There's one more important and very effective way to cultivate an attitude of gratitude: worship. The Lord clearly desires our adoration. He knows it is for our benefit. As Jesus said, "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23). When we get in the habit of regularly praising God for His love and provision, we move the focus away from ourselves and our problems and onto the source of our joy and peace. As author and pastor Rick Warren wrote, "When God is at the center, you worship.

When He's not, you worry. Worry is the warning light that God has been shoved to the sideline."⁸

Worship is the full extension of a thankful heart. David wrote, "Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. I will praise you, O LORD my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever" (Psalm 86:11–12). When we fill our hearts with praise, there's no room for worry and anxiety.

Worship connects us to God's peace by enhancing our prayer life. When Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, he began with words of praise: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). As our conversations with the Lord grow longer and deeper, we understand just how capable He is of taking care of us and our troubles. Our problems seem less imposing. The anxiety falls away. Our trust in Him grows. And we discover the joy Paul talked about in Scripture: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

Remember His Promise

What happens when we apply the Lord's antidote for anxiety to our lives? The answer is right there in Scripture: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

We're talking here about a profound peace, a supernatural peace, standing guard over our hearts. Picture Jesus as a sentinel, striding back and forth before the portal of our inner life, blocking the path of all intruders. He knows that "A heart at peace gives life to the body" (Proverbs 14:30). He won't let anything interfere with that peace. That's the peace we want and need every day of our lives. It's the peace that is more powerful than any crisis we'll ever face.

Remember Lori Mangrum, the Indiana mother who struggled with panic attacks? Through therapy with a Christian counselor, she discovered that she continually tried to fix others' problems because it made her feel loved and accepted. She wanted to be seen

as strong and competent. On the inside, however, her stress level was shooting off the chart. She was far from the Lord's peace. She lived daily with an anxious heart.

Lori recalls the turning point:

I was driving home one afternoon following a session with my counselor, feeling so overwhelmed at the reality of my situation and utterly hopeless. I cried out to God, "I can't do this alone, it's too hard. If you're really there, then show me, and I will trust you!" In the stillness God's answer was clear: "Trust me first—then I will show you." And he did.⁹

Lori realized that the Lord never intended for her to be strong and competent every moment. She began focusing more on pleasing Him instead of everyone else. The panic attacks, and her fear of the attacks, began to diminish. Slowly, she began to rediscover the joy and peace of an untroubled heart.

You will have trouble in this life. I can guarantee it. But that doesn't mean you have to settle for an anxious existence. God offers you so much more. If you trust Him with your concerns, you'll discover a Friend greater than your worst problem. Remember His instruction and promise: Don't be anxious about anything. Pray about everything. Pray with thanksgiving. When you do, He will stand guard over your heart and mind, and grant you peace.

Does that make more sense than tossing ashes over a town in Arizona? I think so too.

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A Thought to Remember

Pay attention to the tension!

A Verse to Review

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." 1 Peter 5:7

A Question for Reflection

Will you apply God's antidote for your anxiety?