

Bible Basics for the Fearful and Anxious



by EDWARD T. WELCH

Anxiety intrudes into so much of our lives. You can find it with fear, its counterpart, just about everywhere. The old label *neurotic* was essentially fear *and* anxiety, and we were all considered neurotic. Even today, the most common psychiatric diagnoses concern fear and its anxiety-riddled kin (e.g., obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, phobias, PTSD, generalized anxiety, etc.). Each of these has its own unique characteristics, but fear and anxiety coalesce around feelings of vulnerability, especially about the future. What will happen next? Am I in danger? Even depression usually includes fear—fear that has turned hopeless. And notice how fear and anxiety are embedded in so many common struggles. Guilt is often accompanied by fears that God condemns us. Shame is the fear of being exposed before others. Anger says that something important to us is at risk, which is the same message as fear.

And the list continues. Suffering of all kinds can be accompanied by fear that it might never stop, or if it does, that it will recur. This kind of suffering is where we find trauma. Trauma means that your world has been particularly unsafe. It was unsafe in the past, and it still feels unsafe now. The idea that time heals all wounds is a myth. Though there are old

Edward Welch (MDiv, PhD) serves on the faculty and counsels at CCEF. He is the author of numerous books including A Small Book for the Anxious Heart: Meditations on Fear, Worry, and Trust.

pains and hard events that we are able to forget, many others continue. The culprits include intrusions of evil and victimization from which there was no escape, brushes with death, witnessing a violent death, or losing a loved one unexpectedly. You are left feeling fragile and expecting the worst. If unattended to, these experiences *will* affect your close relationships. Intimacy and traumatic fears cannot coexist. You have to do something with them.

What is the best way to help those who struggle in these ways? There are many specific skills and methods you may employ, but what is at the crux of your counsel to the anxious? What foundational supports do you rely upon from session to session, informing your counsel and your prayers for the fearful person?

My thoughts about how to counsel out of a clear, simple foundation are laid out below. These are not new ideas. They are basic truths from Scripture and exactly what we need to build each other up in faith in the face of ongoing fear and anxiety. I find myself returning to these again and again.

Bible Basics

In Scripture, there are two recurring themes that can help fight fear and anxiety. First, and most important: *the Lord is near*. Though we might feel like we are alone and that God is far away, it is not true. He is with us—always. Reminders of this are found throughout the Bible.

“Do not be afraid or terrified..., for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”
(Deut 31:6)

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” (Isa 43:2)

The challenge is to believe these words are true. The second recurring theme that helps with fear and anxiety tells us how to live based on the first: because the Lord is near, *attend to today and leave tomorrow to him*. Only God knows what will happen in the future. He calls us to focus on today and trust him for tomorrow.

Both of these truths are fully formed by the time of the exodus from Egypt when Israel had good reasons to be afraid. God countered those

fears with his presence as a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud during the day. Then, he fed them with manna that was available only one day at a time. When we are confident that there is enough food in the house for tomorrow, we tend to trust in the cupboards rather than the Lord.

Notice how Jesus' words "do not be anxious about your life" also follow this pattern (Matt 6:25–34). He is certainly with his people. He is near and present. He is talking face-to-face. His Father, too, is near and he hears. He is attentive to flowers and animals; he will certainly be attentive to his children. Then, these children are told to not run into tomorrow because it is the Father's job to care for the future. Today is where our attention should lie.

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The well-known passage in Philippians 4 follows the same format.

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication with
thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
(Phil 4:5–6)

God is saying: I am with you; do not be anxious. Focus on today and how to live now—and pray.

The essence of all of these passages is that the Lord is near. If we develop skills to help with anxiety, and these skills do not rest on this truth, they become a version of self-help, which is the opposite of what God intends. He invites us to trust *him*. So real help will focus here. How can we grow in knowing the God who comes near? And how can we help others to know this God? Here are a few ways.

Remember that the Lord is near, even though you can't see him.

The difficulty in knowing that Jesus is near is that he is physically absent. He is at the right hand of the Father in heaven (1 Peter 3:22), but because heaven and earth are partitioned, we cannot see him with our eyes or touch him with our hands. Yet, Jesus *is* genuinely with us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit dwells in us and is so uniquely coupled with Jesus that he is called the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9). We are, then, in Christ—and Christ is in us (Col 1:27). The Spirit works through Scripture to

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