

Keep your Lamp Burning: help for the anxious  
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Anxiety is a growing epidemic in America today. By almost every metric and in almost every population group, more people are reporting that they suffer from some sort of anxiety disorder. That's not a good trend. But maybe what's most alarming is that anxiety is going up and up in the lives of the youngest among us. More children are struggling with anxiety, too.

Since about 2009, there's been a sharp increase in 12-17 year olds reporting depressive episodes and anxiety. It's not just what kids are self reporting; there's also been a sharp increase in both minor children and college age men and women being admitted to the hospital because of the harm they have been inflicting on themselves due to anxiety and depression. It's also relevant to me that this sharp increase of self-harm and depressive and anxious experiences correlates with the rise of their use of cell phones and social media; that's worth thinking about if you are a young person or a parent.

While none of this is good news, I have some good news for you: God has a lot to say about anxiety in his word. God knows about anxiety; he's aware that we are particularly susceptible to anxiety. And maybe most importantly, he has help for anxiety. He has grace and truth to see us through a world where anxiety is a close, but unwelcome friend.

You wouldn't know that God and the Bible talk about anxiety a lot by observing how few people turn to the Lord when anxiety builds. Unfortunately, God is one of the last consulted and leaned upon when anxiety strikes. The general population and even many of those who attend churches are much more likely to try a psychologist, medicine, Yoga, and even new diets to find some relief from anxiety before consulting the Lord. I want to encourage you to flip that script; make God your first source of help with anxiety. Now, that doesn't mean you won't include in your battle against anxiety medication, exercise, counseling, and new diets. I am not and neither is the Bible against these forms of help; in fact, God would want you to make some of these activities steps of faith in your battle against worry and anxiety. But here's what I think needs to change: rather than seeing these other aids as the primary help for your anxiety and God and faith merely as supplemental, instead, we should see God as the primary help to our anxiety and these other tools like medicine, healthy eating and exercise, counseling as supplemental to the path he has for you. In fact, I would argue that recent developments in remedies for anxiety actually show God's way should be your primary source of help. Let me see if I can illustrate this for you.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has become standard psychological treatment for those struggling with anxiety disorders. In fact, some of the core principles of CBT according to the American Psychological Association (APA) are listed this way:

- Psychological problems are based, in part, on faulty or unhelpful ways of thinking. That's what God says in his word. God says we remain trapped by bad thinking. And by his

grace and with his word, God changes the way we think. And when we start thinking differently we can start living differently including finding help with anxiety.

- Psychological problems are based, in part, on learned patterns of unhelpful behavior. Again, we'd say the same thing. The Bible refers to this as *slavery to sin*; that because of our sin problem we remain in bondage to ungodly habits and patterns of thought and action that keep us trapped.

APA continues by highlighting a few strategies of CBT to help with anxiety disorders; some of them are...

- Learning to recognize one's distortions in thinking that are creating problems, and then to reevaluate them in light of reality. In light of reality - what's that? Truth! Who's the truth? Jesus is the truth. That's exactly our strategy; we want to help people see the truth about God, about life, themselves, about this world and others according to the scriptures and then reevaluate the problem in light of that truth and when we do that we will get help with our anxiety.
- Using problem-solving skills to cope with difficult situations - One of the biggest misconceptions we Christians have about our faith is that we think it's kind of like pixie dust. That becoming a Christian is supposed to just automatically make everything in life easier. But that's not what the scriptures teach. Instead, here's how our faith works: God gives us wisdom and commands to follow in faith and as we do we experience the blessing of his way even in the face of difficult situations. Of course, we'll make mistakes, but Jesus died to forgive our sins and we always have the chance to repent and change our direction to back on the kingdom-path.

What I'm trying to show you is how advances in psychological research to help people in their times of anxiety actually have already been revealed in the pages of scripture. What I hope that does in you is increase your confidence that now, as we turn to the Bible, you are turning to real help and with real help comes real hope.

We are going to spend 3 weeks talking about anxiety partly because it's such an important topic, but also because Jesus has so much to say about it. I would guess that every single one of us is touched by anxiety. Many of us struggle with anxiety ourselves; who doesn't worry some? We all don't struggle with anxiety to the same degree, it's a universal human challenge. Many of us live with people who struggle with anxiety; that means we should understand it and God's help better. And as I shared earlier, anxiety is an exploding epidemic for our young people. So, we should all be concerned about it and hopefully you are ready to hear from Jesus on this important topic (READ Luke 12:22-34)

Do you see that Jesus' opening statement starts with *therefore*? That's a key word that helps you see that Jesus' teaching on anxiety is connected to what we learned from him about money and possession, saving and giving away. If I said to you, "Therefore, I'm moving to Florida," you'd feel like you don't have all the information you need to understand my plans. You'd be hungry to hear more... "why are you moving to Florida, Brian?" But if I said to you, "I'm sick and tired of this snow. Therefore, I'm moving to Florida," you would get it; you'd say, "Yeah, I totally understand; I think I'll join you." Jesus just told his followers not to store up more and

more; he just told them that life is not found in the abundance and accumulation of money and possessions. Instead of building bigger barns to store more items, we should give them away and be rich toward God.

But what's going to be a new temptation as we follow Jesus during times of opposition? What might we struggle with? Anxiety! How do I know I'll have enough? How will I secure my future? What do I do if I run out of food or money? Jesus knows exactly where our mind goes when we think about giving stuff away instead of storing them up for ourselves - our minds will get anxious.

But what you also notice from Jesus' teaching in our passage is even though that is true, we are not slaves to anxiety. It's not a foregone conclusion that you will be anxious just because you don't have a lot of stuff, or that you give money away to be rich toward God. That's exactly why Jesus gives us this teaching on anxiety; so that we wouldn't be anxious.

So, here's something you need to understand about anxiety: while there may be times that make anxiety more likely, our life situations do not cause anxiety (REPEAT). Meager times don't cause anxiety; stressful situations don't guarantee worry and fear.

Get this: research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that anxiety is more prevalent in rich countries than in poor countries. For example, countries that are relatively poor in the world like Nigeria, Poland, and Romania reported anxiety disorders impacting less than 1% of the population while wealthy countries like the USA, Australia, and New Zealand reported anxiety disorders for as much as 8% of the population. You might think the poorer the country with fewer possessions and food supplies would equal greater anxiety and the richer the country with more possessions and food supplies would equal fewer reports of anxiety, but it's the exact opposite. Why is that? Here's the answer: anxiety has more to do with what you think, what you expect, how you live, and what you believe than how much money you have or how prosperous you are or how little you possess (REPEAT).

So let me summarize this point this way: there are real circumstances that increase the likelihood of anxiety in our lives. And some of us are even prone to anxiety more than others. But we don't have to be passive victims to it; there's something we can do about anxiety. There are behaviors we can change; we can think differently than we do. We can adjust our expectations. And for some of us, anxiety is such a real problem that we need the help of medication and other things God has created. But we don't have to remain passive victims to anxiety.

There's another keyword I want to show you; it's the first word in vs. 31. Look at Jesus' first word there: *instead*. "Instead of doing that, do this!" Jesus says. Now, to understand what Jesus is getting at you have to see what he's contrasting. In the immediately preceding verses, Jesus is giving a negative command. He's saying, "don't be like these nations who don't know God; who don't know or understand that God provides and cares for you. They seek food, they

seek shelter; they seek all kinds of things to try and avoid the anxieties of life. Instead....” What he’s describing in vs. 30 is the kind of life that invites or makes anxiety more likely. Seeking, seeking, seeking these things that we think we need. There’s a different way to live that helps us with anxiety. That’s when Jesus says *instead*.

Look what he says in vs. 31: *Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you*. What are these things? They are the stuff we worry about. Food, clothing, money, where we’re going to live, will people accept us and welcome us. The stuff that people who don’t know God seek to avoid anxiety. Jesus is saying, “I’ll give you that stuff; don’t worry. Don’t seek after those things because when you do you’re going to be anxious always wondering if you’ll find them, always wondering if you have enough. Instead, seek my kingdom.” Friends, that is the key to overcoming anxiety. Preoccupy your mind and heart and your time and your life with the matters of the kingdom; your anxiety will go down as God provides you with all the things you need.

Now, I want to suggest to you that this makes sense. This isn’t Christian magic; this isn’t some miracle that we won’t be able to understand until we get to heaven. That when you seek the kingdom God sprinkles some of that pixie dust we were talking about early. It actually makes sense. Let me show you by reading for you a passage from 1 Corinthians 7:29-31. Now, the context of this passage is different than ours in Luke 12. Paul is trying to help the Corinthian church members understand how marriage should fit into their Christian lives on earth. He’s also trying to help single people as they wait for a spouse. Listen to what he says (READ).

Let me explain what Paul is trying to say here; he’s saying, “Live in the world in such a way where the earthly situation you’re in isn’t the most important thing in your life - live like Christ is the most important thing in your life. Don’t live like marriage is the most important thing in the world, live as if Christ is the most important thing in the world - because he is! If you’ve got reasons to laugh or cry, if you’re rich or poor in this world, don’t live like those things are the most important; live like Christ is the most important. The world is passing away, but Christ isn’t. We are all going to see him soon, so make sure he’s at the center.” That’s what he means when he says, “If you’re married, live like you’re not.” I don’t know about you, but that sounds an awful lot like Jesus’ words *instead, seek his kingdom* - make Christ, make the kingdom your #1 pursuit.

Now, this blows my mind: listen to the very next sentence that Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 (vs. 32): *I want you to be free from anxieties*. How cool is that! Here’s “the magic” behind Jesus’ way and wisdom: the more you get your eyes on him and on his kingdom way, the less anxious you will be about the things of earth. And it makes perfect sense, right? When your vision isn’t dominated by what you will eat and what you will wear, where you will live and how others are going to treat you, you’re not going to be very anxious about those things, right? Anxiety increases about stuff the more you think about it. That’s why anxiety isn’t primarily about your circumstances, it’s about what you think about and what you focus on. That’s why I brought up to you the strategies of CBT: anxiety is based, in part, *by faulty and unhelpful ways of*

*thinking*. And the biggest mistake we make with our thinking is failing to set our minds on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

I'm so hopeful to God for you, my good brothers and sisters. I know a good number of you struggle with anxiety quite frequently. I'm sympathetic to your struggle; I know it's not an easy battle and I certainly know you can't just snap your fingers or pray it away. But I'm struck by Paul's words in 1 Cor. 7, "I want you to be free from anxieties." That's what God wants to help you with, my friends. And he has help for you. That help is in the form of truth and teaching that redirects your focus to the kingdom. The more you focus on the kingdom, the more God will lift you from the anxiety that you struggle with.

Whenever I think of this truth, I'm reminded of the song, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus." This song captures exactly what the scriptures teach; let's sing it together.

Key vs. Lk 12:31

#### Questions for the week

- On a scale from 1 to 5 how anxious do you get on a daily basis? How much does anxiety trouble you?
- Do you think that anxiety is something you can control? What did you hear today that might give you an answer to that question?
- What is the most important thing you heard this morning?