

EDWARD T. WELCH

MEDITATIONS ON FEAR, WORRY, AND TRUST

A SMALL BOOK FOR THE

ANXIOUS

HEART

A Small Book for the Anxious Heart:
Meditations on Fear, Worry, and Trust

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There is no question that the problem of anxiety is a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our whole mental existence.

Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

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Anxieties remain among my top bugaboos. My own grappling with them is different than it was even a year ago, but I see so much more that is available, so much room for growth.

In this book I will raise some themes from books on fear that I have previously written, but I will also introduce new themes and, I hope, add the benefit of additional experience.

Consider going slow with what is ahead. Read one day, then talk about it with someone else. Each day will end with suggestions that you can think, write, talk, and pray about. Consider keeping a journal where you record your responses. That will slow you down too, but in a good way. Usually when we are anxious, we would prefer to sprint to a magical answer. Yet our worries are best engaged at a more deliberate pace.

Day 1 Welcome

Could there be a more important topic? Our lives are full of uncertainties. We never know what the day will bring. Worries, fears, and stress are part of daily life.

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that Scripture says so much about it, and that what it says is both attractive and helpful. The Lord responds to our fears with words of comfort, which he is pleased to repeat again and again.

His words to us cluster around two themes: your God is very near, and he gives the grace and power you need for today. The aim of this book is to help us become more skillful in how we identify our fears and anxieties, hear God's good words, and grow. You could say that our goal is wisdom. *Wisdom* is another name for skill in living.

If there is a rap against wisdom, it is that wisdom takes time. Anxieties, of course, prefer relief now. But what wisdom can do is set out a path that leaves you a little different with each step. Over time you notice the changes. A little farther down the road and others notice. As you walk, you will learn much about the paradox of strength in weakness, and you will feel more fully human and alive.

The rhythm of your journey is simple: You speak and God listens; God speaks and you listen.

You put your fears into words—he will help you if you don't even know where to begin. He takes your fears and anxieties to heart without ever minimizing them. Then he speaks. You "treasure" what he says (Proverbs 2:1). You think about it, act on it, and talk about it. And the conversation continues. When you feel lost, you speak to the Lord. He listens to you. When you are stuck, you "call out for insight" (Proverbs 2:3). He answers you.

Through it all is closeness to a person. That makes this path different from all others. God never intended us to bear the overwhelming burdens of life by ourselves. Instead, he gives himself—just the right person to bear them with us.

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything. (Philippians 4:5–6)

Whenever God speaks to you about your fears, you can be sure he will say something about being close. He even patiently *persuades* you that he is close. He piles up the evidence. Still, you can be blind to that evidence when fears are close and anxieties ring loud. The process of letting anxieties go takes practice that engages with God himself—which means you will engage with Jesus.

Response

1. Has anything been helpful for dealing with your anxieties in the past? If yes, write down what those things were.
2. Talk to someone about what you are reading.

Day 2

Descriptions

A general rule about fears and anxiety is that they will not lose their power unless examined. As you do that, the more words the better. In general, the more words you have for something, the more you understand it.

The following words can give you a start.

Fear. Fear can possess us. It is loud and visceral. If you listen, you can usually identify its reasons. It says that there is a real threat. Something or someone you love is in danger: your money, your reputation, your body, your soul, or the life and well-being of someone you care about. And you are not in control.

Maybe the fear is right in front of you. Maybe you are predicting it.

Anxiety. While fear usually has its reasons, anxiety might be less articulate. We can decipher some of its language, but anxiety seems less precise than fear. It is harder to locate a specific cause. It's as if your body remembers something but is not divulging all the details. Or anxiety might have *too many* reasons, and you have no idea where to start. The basic theme is the same: danger, threats, something foreboding that demands action—an action that you can't identify. So you pace, flit from one thing to another, feel like you are jumping out of your skin, and/or want to scream.

Panic attacks (a.k.a. anxiety attacks). These are more common than ever, and descriptions continue to stream in. Some are intense and sudden with shortness of breath, chest pains, rapid heartbeat, nausea, dizziness, and other physical experiences. Often it feels like you could die.

Other panic attacks are quieter. They might overlay vague physical symptoms that can range from chest tightness to numbness in fingers or toes with restlessness and irritability.

Since physical symptoms play a large role in panic attacks, if you experience any of these symptoms, please be checked by a physician.

Stress. Stress usually has the circumstances of life in view. You feel stressed when you bear responsibility for things that are very challenging, very important to you, or too numerous. You think that perhaps a weekend, a drink, a babysitter, or a vacation away from people and all your digital devices might help. Life and death is rarely at stake. The threat is that you could fail or disappoint others, which might seem worse.

Your task is to accumulate words and descriptions for what you experience and then speak to the Lord. If you haven't spoken to your friends and family, speak with them too. The words will probably come quickly as

you speak with family and friends. It might be more difficult to actually speak to the Lord.

Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! I am restless in my complaint and I moan . . . My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest." (Psalm 55:1-2, 4-6)

Your fear and anxieties want action steps, and this prayer might not be what you had in mind. Human contact, in which we speak our anxieties to a kind and compassionate person, is near the top of the list of most helpful treatments. These human conversations are so helpful because they imitate the even more important conversation with the Lord.

Response

1. What other words identify your experience with fear and anxiety?
2. Do you have any hesitation about speaking to the Lord? What are those hesitations?
3. Take a moment to speak (or write out) to him those doubts and hesitations.

Day 3

God Speaks

Fear and anxiety are like other kinds of suffering in that, of all the times for God to be silent, this is the worst. Yes, he has given us Scripture, but we want something more seeable, hearable, touchable.

“I have already tried that,” said a friend about Scripture. He wanted something more. God, it seemed, had not said very much to him in the Bible. But he has.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Scripture is the words of men who “spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21). It can be introduced by, “the Spirit says . . .” (Hebrews 3:7). It is the voice of Jesus. His words come to us today with even more clarity and power because we have the Spirit of Christ (Hebrews 1:2). As his sheep you can hear his voice (John 10:1–18).

Jesus himself heard his Father’s voice in Scripture. He knew that “man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Notice what happened when he needed to hear that voice more than ever. While starving in the wilderness and being tempted by Satan, his response to Satan was, “it is written . . .” (Luke 4:1–12). Jesus heard the words of the Father in the same way that we do—in Scripture—and there can be no doubt that he enjoyed the closeness of the Father through those words. So, even if we have already tried Scripture, we try it again, and again. Our goal is to persist in listening to God’s words until we really hear them and they speak God’s comfort and healing to our souls.

Often it can seem like Scripture is too hard to understand and too far removed from our daily life. But it is a treasure that yields more and more as you go further in. Yes, it takes perseverance. *Anything* of value comes through perseverance. So listen, and keep listening. You will find well over three hundred places in the Bible where God speaks directly to your fears, and, with practice, you will hear his words to you on every page. Here is just one of those three-hundred-plus verses:

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1, NIV).

Then came the conversation. God had promised Abram both land and a family that would fill it, but Abram was losing confidence in the promise. God

responded by taking Abram for a short walk, just outside Abram's tent. Such a walk would become God's habit with his anxious people. On this walk he showed him the stars.

"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he [Abram] believed the LORD. (Genesis 15:5-6)

Has the Lord ever used something in his creation to illustrate his care for you? If not, he will.

Talk to the Lord, and listen to his words in Scripture.

Response

1. In Nehemiah 8, Scripture was read and explained and the people listening were changed. Something similar happened when it was found almost by accident in the temple and read to King Josiah (2 Kings 22). Today we have more. We see the fulfillment of Scripture in Jesus and we have the Spirit who can explain it to us. What is your typical response when you hear or read Scripture?
2. What are the two reasons we can trust God that the Bible mentions in Genesis 15:1. Describe a time in your life when you have experienced one of those reasons.
3. What passage of Scripture has been especially meaningful to you in your struggle with fear and anxiety?

Day 4

Psalm 23

There were many reasons to be afraid in early Israel. One way the Lord helped his people was through inspired songs and hymns. Each day the temple opened and closed with a psalm. Today, Psalm 23 is on the schedule.

Psalm 23 is one Scripture of many that speaks comfort to God's anxious, worried people. Here it is rewritten in a way that can bring you closer to the psalm's pace, which is that of a long journey.

Jesus is my shepherd

Nothing do I lack—I am content in his provision.

In green pastures he makes me lie down,

Beside calm waters he leads me,

My life he restores—it returns to me.

He guides me in paths of his righteousness for his name's sake.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I will not fear evil, because

You are with me

Your rod and your staff, they calm my fears.

You prepare a table before me opposite my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and love will pursue me every day of my life,

And I will return to him—to the house of the LORD for long days.

Jesus is my Shepherd. I am taking a small liberty with the psalm by updating it in a way that David would certainly have approved. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). When you put your faith in him, then Jesus is *your* Shepherd. You need a Shepherd; he is pleased to be your full-time, night-and-day Shepherd. As you let go of self-trust and personal strategies for self-protection, you put your trust in him instead.

"Look at me," says your Shepherd. Skittish sheep can never be calmed merely by the green grass or still waters around them. They always keep an eye on the shepherd. He is why they are calm; their trust has its reasons.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32)

Jesus, you are with me. This is the centerpiece of the psalm. Notice how the subject changes. You begin the psalm by talking *about* Jesus, but now you talk *to* him. Though Jesus is seated in heaven, he is with you by the Spirit. The Spirit is the same one who connected Jesus with the Father while Jesus

walked among us. The Spirit maintains our intimacy with and closeness to Jesus.

Jesus is now so close that you can pray silently and he hears. No mere human could ever be close enough to know your very thoughts (Psalm 139:1–6). His presence will be your comfort.

You anoint my head with oil. The image has changed from shepherd to host. You are now an invited, honored guest who comes for a lavish meal. Jesus identified this custom when he was invited to a Pharisee’s table to be tested instead of honored.

“You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.” (Luke 7:46)

Jesus is your shepherd and more. He is also your benefactor, provider, and host who lavishes his enthusiastic care on you. He knows you—sins and all—and he still honors you by anointing, washing, and simply being present with you. He is close because that is who he is. He does not come close because you are having an especially morally upright day. He comes close because that is his pleasure, and he created you for such closeness.

Where are your enemies and threats, including death? They are opposite you—separated from you rather than near you.

Response

1. Psalm 23 makes no requests. It is a declaration of truth to your soul and a confession to the Lord. Like all psalms, it is also a prayer that you can modify to the contours of your own soul. Rewrite it for yourself. Or simply speak it to the Lord in your words.
2. “You are with me” is the center of the psalm. What else do you hear that gives you hope?
3. Are there any other songs that would be good to sing?

Day 5

A Warning

Worries can leave you spiritually vulnerable. Jesus warns us about this in his story of a sower and seeds.

A sower scattered his seeds, and the seeds fell on different types of soils. One soil was a bit thorny.

They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. (Mark 4:18-19)

“The cares of the world” are your worries. These are not potent enough to drag you away from Jesus, but they can leave you stagnant and unfruitful. Notice how our worries tend to imagine a future without God in it. Without God we have to prepare for those future threats on our own. Life gradually gets smaller. Our mission to trust Jesus and love other people gets temporarily lost amid our future preparations.

There are some things you can do.

“Listen.” Jesus starts his parable this way (Mark 4:3). Everything he says is important, but there are times he really wants your attention because he knows we are distractible. It is like a parent saying to a child “Look at me” before giving directions. Otherwise the child might hear the words but be occupied with other things and not really listen. Listening does not come naturally.

Let’s say you were feeling anxious and someone alluded to Psalm 23. You might not *really* listen because you already know Psalm 23. It didn’t magically calm your fears in the past so there is no reason to think it will now. You think you need something new and better. But much of wisdom is about remembering what we know instead of discovering fresh insights.

Speak. The evidence that you are listening is that you will speak. The threats of life leave two options. We can either turn in on ourselves, be paralyzed by them, have minds racing with the worst scenarios, or we can simply cry out to the Lord.

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. (Psalm 56:3)

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him.
(Psalm 62:8)

How can you “trust in him at all times”? You “pour out you heart to him.” Trust is expressed in this very practical way. That’s what happens when you have burdens and are with a trusted friend. In my own marriage, trust means that we share what is on our hearts. When I keep my worries to myself, my wife has good reason to feel like an acquaintance more than a trusted confidant.

The most basic version of this trust, when spoken to the Lord, is “Help me.” “Jesus, help.” “Father, help.” “Spirit, help.” “My mind is reeling. I feel like I can hardly function.” Simply speak this to the One who listens and speaks to you.

Response

1. What opportunities do you have to listen to the Lord? Sermons? Worship? Personal Bible study? What is a friend learning about Jesus? What are you hearing? List some ways that you can listen to the voice of your good Shepherd. The more ways you have of hearing his voice, the better.
2. Speak your cares to the Lord. You can make a list of these as well. Or you can just whisper them to your good Shepherd. He will hear you.