

A N X I E T Y

KNOWING
GOD'S PEACE

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

PAUL TAUTGES

DAY 1

Anxiety Distracts Us

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt. 6:25)

ANXIETY IS SO much a part of our lives that it’s natural for us to talk about it frequently. However, *defining* it, and understanding how it works, sometimes seems like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. Anxiety is an emotion—but it’s more than a feeling. It often includes a physical reaction—but it’s more than that, too. So what *is* anxiety, exactly?

The writers of the New Testament employ two different, but related, words to refer to the experience that we call anxiety. They combine the noun *merimna*, which is usually translated “care,” with the verb *merizo*, which means to draw in different directions or distract. To be anxious, then, means to have a *distracting care*—to have our minds and hearts torn between two worlds. We see this in Jesus’s warning about thorns choking out the Word of God, which is intended to produce faith. He identifies these thorns as “the cares of the world” (Mark 4:19) or “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14). Anxious cares are typically tied to our earthly lives and are most often temporal, not eternal.

These distracting cares divide our mental energy and cloud our spiritual vision; they keep us focused on the here-and-now instead of on the future-promised-but-not-yet. They form cata-racts over our spiritual eyes and hinder us from keeping heavenly things in clear focus or from keeping diligent watch for the Lord’s return (see Luke 21:34).

Anxiety diverts us from what is most important. It causes our eyes to see only what is before us at that very moment. Our

worries exert great effort to keep our vision fixed on the *horizontal* (the things of the world) instead of on the *vertical* (the things of God).

In today's passage, Jesus commands us not to be anxious about our food or drink or clothing. He then immediately directs us to "look" somewhere else (Matt. 6:26). By looking at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, we shift our focus to the heavenly Father who promises to provide even better care for us than he does for them.

Instead of allowing our minds to be distracted by the troubles of today, Jesus tells us to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). As we renew our minds and discipline our hearts to keep eternal matters as our central priority, we learn to rest in God, who has promised to meet all our needs. Therefore, even when our personal responsibilities require a certain amount of our attention, we can always look to the Lord with confidence rather than being fearful.

Reflect: What earthly cares are currently distracting you? What preoccupies your mind?

Reflect: Anxiety distracts you with temporal matters, but Jesus reminds you to keep eternal matters central.

Act: In a journal or notebook, write down everything you are currently anxious about. Then turn this "care list" into a "prayer list"—take each care to the Lord and ask him to show you which of them relate to your responsibilities, which you need to act on, and which you need to entrust (release) to him in faith.

DAY 2

Anxiety Weighs Us Down

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:28)

YESTERDAY WE SAW that anxiety can be defined as “distracting care.” Today Paul introduces us to another way of viewing it. In 2 Corinthians 11:28, the apostle describes his anxiety as *pressure*—as the burden of the physical or mental distress he feels “for all the churches” he has helped to start or shepherd. We can only imagine how many people and needs this would have entailed. And if that weren’t enough, this “daily pressure” comes *on top of* “other things” he has already mentioned—including “imprisonments” and “countless beatings,” being shipwrecked and surrounded by all kinds of dangers, and personal hardships such as sleeplessness, hunger, and thirst (see 2 Cor. 11:23–27). Pressure on top of pressure. Talk about anxiety!

Paul’s pressures were sometimes accompanied by despair (see 2 Cor. 1:8). This shouldn’t surprise us, since many people experience depression alongside anxiety. But Paul always knew where to turn—to “the God of all comfort”—and so he assures us that God “comforts us in all our affliction” (2 Cor. 1:3–4). This truth is for *all* believers throughout *all* time.

Paul wrote this comforting promise while in the furnace of personal affliction. His mental suffering was so extreme that he and his companions were “utterly burdened beyond [their] strength” and “despaired of life itself” (2 Cor. 1:8). Nevertheless, these servants of God turned the eyes of their hearts to Christ.

Perhaps you are thinking, “I’m not an apostle. How does this help me?” Let me show you two ways that it does.

First, Paul reminds us that God graciously orchestrates

suffering to strip his children of self-reliance—of the pride that feeds so many of our other sins and hinders our usefulness. In the case of the apostle and his friends, God used overwhelming pressures to accomplish their Christian growth and perseverance. “That was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead,” they said (2 Cor. 1:9). Setting our hope on God alone, not on the lessening of our pressure or on the improvement of our circumstances, is the ultimate remedy for anxiety.

Second, the example of Paul and his friends directs us to discipline ourselves to look to Jesus. Their testimony was that “on him we have set our hope” (2 Cor. 1:10). Hope delivers us from the crippling effects of anxiety, because it helps us to cling to an immovable anchor: the truth that God is for us in Jesus Christ (see Rom. 8:31). The promise of ultimate deliverance in Jesus breathed life into the suffering apostles so that they could press on in the midst of unbearable pressure. The same is true for you and me. When we have moments of panic, we can stop, take control of our thought processes, and choose to believe that God’s love for us in Christ is greater than any pressure that tries to hijack our peace.

Reflect: What might the God of providence be seeking to accomplish in your heart through your current trials?

Act: Memorize Romans 8:31. As you review this verse, meditate on God’s love for you and on the eternal security you possess in Christ.

Act: What are some of the “other things” in your life that contribute to the pressure you are feeling? Talk to the Lord about these things.

DAY 3

We Are Embodied Spirits

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. . . . My strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach. . . . I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. (Ps. 31:9–12)

PSALM 31 ILLUSTRATES the interplay of our bodies and souls in our suffering and acknowledges that our frailties make us susceptible to emotional struggles like anxiety. Look at the layers of trouble that were all heaped on King David at the same time, which resulted in his having a heightened level of anxiety:

- physical weakness (“my strength fails . . . my bones waste away”)
- a conscience that was troubled by sin (“because of my iniquity”)
- hostility from his opponents (“because of all my adversaries”)
- abusive treatment from others (“I have become a reproach”)
- betrayal by his friends (“I have been forgotten like one who is dead”)

No wonder his soul and body—his whole person—were in “distress”!

The word *distress* implies mental strain or stress that is caused by danger or trouble and is impacting the body. It’s a vivid picture of the powerful effects of anxiety on a person’s inner and outer strength. It’s also a reminder of the way that challenging circumstances outside the body can aggravate anguish in the soul.

Because of his distress, David needs help and assurance from God that his whole person—both his body and soul—are in God’s caring hands. And so he prays.

“Be gracious to me, O LORD” is his simple yet bold cry. Though he is helpless, David’s desperate prayer reveals that he still has hope that God will eventually come to his aid. Clearly his faith is feeble in the moment; he finds it difficult to rest in God—to trust him as he slowly crawls through his personal fog. And yet he still calls out to God. He consciously moves from anxiety to assurance by personalizing the Bible’s truth—by choosing to hide by faith in God, who is his “rock of refuge” and “strong fortress” (Ps. 31:2). Later in the same psalm, David reiterates his dependence on the Lord—which, while unavoidable, he also makes a choice to submit to: “But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God. My times are in your hand’” (vv. 14–15).

In what ways might anxiety be affecting your body or sense of strength? Are you reaching out to God for the empowering grace that you need today? Do you see yourself moving from anxiety to assurance?

Ultimately, security and peace come from the Lord—from knowing and trusting the character and love of God. So don’t let your anxiety lead you away from God. Run to him today.

Reflect: When you are anxious, do you cry out to God or fight your anxiety alone? Why?

Reflect: Durable faith reaches for joy, even in the midst of distress: “I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction” (Ps. 31:7). How can you choose the path of joy?

Act: In a notebook or journal, write out a prayer that admits your needs and asks for grace.