

Anxiety and Fear

This is a huge topic with relevance whatever age and stage we are at in life, but with some specific applications to those of us moving in to the second half. The Bible has much to say on this subject, as do many Christian and secular writers, so it is quite a challenge to edit it down for the purpose of our discussions but we will give it a go! Please feel free to bring anything to the group that you think would help. We are conscious that for some, if not all, this subject could touch difficult and painful areas from the past or present struggles, so we would want to be aware and sensitive to each other as we share and discuss together.

The Psalms are full of the experiences of God's people going through times of great anxiety and fear and how God helped them at such times. A psalm that has helped me in the past is Psalm 34, so perhaps we could spend some time meditating on that psalm.

To understand the context of the psalm and the predicament that David, the author of the psalm, is in, we need to look first at 1 Samuel chapters 20 and 21. David had just fled for his life from Saul, with the help of Jonathan, since Saul had declared that he definitely wanted David dead. David had fled to Nob, a sanctuary site, and to Ahimelech the priest. David tried to convince Ahimelech that he was on a secret mission for Saul, and that was why he was alone, without food and without a weapon.

In response to his request for food Ahimelech gave David the Bread of the Presence, normally only eaten by the priests. This was God's provision for him. He also asked for a weapon and the only one available was the sword of Goliath, with which David had cut off Goliath's head. Was this a reminder from God of His help in another desperate time?

But what does David do? He goes to Achish, King of Gath i.e. Goliath's home town, with Goliath's sword! He must have been desperate, foolish or confused. He was well known there and ended up detained and in serious danger of his life. He was truly afraid with good reason. But David had a plan to feign insanity. His acting must have been very convincing, since Achish sent him away declaring that he was surrounded by enough mad men and didn't need one more.

So David escaped to the cave of Abdullam, and at some point wrote Psalm 34 as his personal testimony to God's deliverance from all his fears, to praise God and to encourage *us* to call on the Lord in our fears. Psalm 34 was written after the event, whereas Psalm 56 was written during the event recorded in 1 Samuel. This psalm expresses the extent of his emotional and spiritual anguish and fear, but in v4 captures his decision to trust, to put his faith in God based on the word of God. Because of that trust he was able to say "what can mortal man do to me?" it is as if his faith in God puts the fear of man into its right perspective.

Psalm 34 was written to express David's relief, gratitude and rejoicing for a miraculous escape from death and deliverance from fear. Derek Kidner divides the psalm up into two sections – v1-10 Rejoice with me and v11-22 Learn from me.

V1-10 Are very clearly David's personal testimony and thanksgiving to God. He begins by affirming that he will praise the Lord "at all times" in other words, giving thanks whatever

happens, since our times are in His hands. This thought is echoed by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5v18 "Give thanks in all circumstances." This is a real challenge for us. When circumstances are difficult and our minds become consumed with anxiety and fear, we tend to focus on the circumstances and how to change them, not on thanking God for them!

V2 and 3 David boasts, glorifies, magnifies and exalts God's name, he testifies how much he has to praise God for and as an encouragement that others might praise Him also.

V4 He goes on to relate his experience of God's deliverance from his "Fears" – this kind of fear is akin to "terror" and "dread" not the reverential fear of God of v7,9. When David sought the Lord for deliverance what was his expectation of deliverance? Compare the experience of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as they faced death in the fiery furnace for refusing to worship an idol in Daniel chapter 3v16-18 and their faith and trust in God even if He chose not to save them from the terrible death they faced. How do we seek God's deliverance, with only one acceptable answer in mind, or can we say "But even if He does not....." and still trust Him?

V5 According to Kidner the word "radiance" speaks of both delight and glory; a transformation of the whole person. It is the release of the grip of fear, in spite of the danger and a change of attitude rather than of circumstances. The picture is picked up in 2 Corinthians 3v18 of the believer being transformed from one degree of glory to another as he contemplates on and reflects Christ.

V6 As David cried to God in his extremity, he describes himself as poor. By this he does not mean material poverty, but the cry to God of one who recognises that he is without resources to bring about his own deliverance or to secure his own life, safety or wellbeing and so is completely dependent on God. Perhaps God allows such times of extremity to help us to understand how utterly dependent we are on Him.

V7 Is a favourite verse of mine to pray for the family – that "the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him and He delivers them." Like Elisha praying that his servant would see the armies of God between them and the enemy in 2 Kings 6v15-16. He said to him "those who are with us are more than those who are with them". It reminds me that what comes to us can only come with God's permission.

Then there is a theme of good:-

V8 the Lord is good

V10 those who fear Him lack no good thing

V12 those who desire to see many good days

V14 will turn from evil and do good

Perhaps this is because from The Fall the temptation we face in the hard times is to doubt God's goodness or to doubt either His desire or ability to do us good. But the promise of v9, 10 that "those who fear the Lord lack no good thing", is not an empty promise to the affluent, but an assurance of God's responsible, fatherly care for us.

V11-14 continue in a fatherly tone, with the stress on the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. This kind of fear is the fear that is the motivation for living a righteous life.

V12-16 are quoted by Peter in his first letter to the early Christians scattered and under persecution in Asia Minor. He was writing to encourage them to seek to live godly lives even under unjust suffering.

V15-16 God's face is toward the righteous - His eyes see what we don't see, so He knows our needs before we call and His ears are open to us, because He longs to hear us pray.

V17-19 Recognises that those seeking to live godly lives will face all kinds of troubles and at times extreme suffering, yet God cares, He does not take it lightly and He never loses control.

V20 Echoes the crucifixion of Christ (John 19v36) and reminds us of the One who bore our suffering.

V21-22 Perhaps man's greatest fear of death and judgement are referred to in these verses. In v21 condemnation means to make them bear their own guilt (cf Ps 5v10) the end of those who reject Christ and His saving grace and forgiveness. But as Paul affirms in Romans 8v1, 33-34 "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, whom God has justified." The Lord redeems the life of his servants – this is the true and ultimate deliverance for all believers in the gospel. "No one will be condemned who takes refuge in Him" and for that we can truly rejoice and be eternally thankful.

Defining the terms:-

Fear – The Oxford Dictionary describes fear as a painful emotion caused by impending danger or evil. It causes alarm and dread. We become afraid, hesitant, shrink back from doing something and in some cases terrified and frightened. This is the kind of fear that the scriptures mean when we read the many commands to "fear not" or "do not be afraid".

The Bible Dictionary describes holy fear as God given, enabling men to reverence God's authority, obey His commands and to hate and shun all evil. Jeremiah 32v40-41 says "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul."

The fear of the Lord is the beginning or principle of wisdom according to Proverbs 9v10 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." And in Psalm 110v10 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow His precepts have good understanding."

A right fear of God helps us to turn from evil and to seek righteousness as in Proverbs 8v13 "To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behaviour and perverse speech."

Vines Expository Dictionary speaks of this reverential fear of God "...as a controlling motive of the life, in matters spiritual and moral, not a mere fear of His power and righteous

retribution, but a wholesome dread of displeasing Him, a fear that banishes the terror that shrinks from His presence and which influences the disposition and attitude of one whose circumstances are guided by trust in God, through the indwelling Spirit of God.”

(2 Corinthians 7v1, 1 Peter 1v17)

Psalms 147v11 is a lovely verse that tells us “The Lord delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love.”

Perhaps we think of the reverential fear of God as just an Old Testament view of God. According to the Bible Dictionary in the O.T. true religion was regarded as synonymous with the fear of God. In the New Testament the emphasis is on a God who is loving and forgiving, One, who through Christ, gives us the spirit of sonship (Romans 8v15) and not of a dutiful slave. It teaches us that through Christ’s death and resurrection we can face both life and death without fear (Hebrews 2v15). But reverent fear remains, for the awesomeness of God has not changed and there is a day of judgement (2 Corinthians 5v10). Godly fear stimulates the believer to seek holiness (2 Corinthians 7v1) and is reflected in our attitudes to fellow believers (Ephesians 5v21)

Timothy Lane in his book “Living without worry” speaks about this kind of right fear:-

“In the same way that the Bible commands us not to worry or be anxious, it also calls us not to be afraid or fearful in an ungodly way. Instead we are to rightly fear God or be in awe of Him, because He is awesome, great, gracious and powerful. In fact when you fear God in this way, it will enable you to face all your fears, anxieties and worries in new and liberating ways.”

Dr Marion Ashton in the book “A mind at ease” quotes Bishop Stephen Neill who sees three great enemies of man – fear, frustration and resentment.

Fear – some of the first words of fallen man in Genesis 3v10 were “I was afraid”, ever since then fear has dogged the human race and there is no human being who does not know fear in many varieties and forms. Fear may vary in degree, it may simply be a protective instinct which is good and useful or it may become terror and grip the person in such a way that he is quite paralysed. It may become an obsession that is always present, eating away at the personality of the one concerned and even if forced into the background, is always ready to spring out and take possession of the mind.

There are fears for which we know the reason e.g. fear of what people might say, fear of failure, fear of illness, fear of old age, fear of death and many more. There is fear that projects itself into the future in the form of anxiety and worry and fear which cannot get rid of the past and takes the form of guilt. There are fears based on untruths and wrong assumptions. There are fears that appear quite unreasonable. Sudden fear grips the personality without there being any known cause of the fear. This may be due to a forgotten or suppressed childhood experience. Fear may be conditioned and passed on by parental fear.

In this same book the three enemies of fear, frustration and resentment are seen to be dealt with by three friends – faith, hope and love as the Holy Spirit brings them into our lives, 1 Corinthians 13v13 “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.”

The psalms are full of examples of faith dealing with fear, 27v1-3, 34v4-7, 46v1-3, 56v3-4. In each psalm the writer is faced with apparently overwhelming circumstances and cries to God as their only hope, affirming their faith in Him.

Jesus words to Jairus, whose daughter had just died Mark 5v36 “Don’t be afraid, just believe” seem very hard. The pathway of faith is not easy, we cannot say just trust in the Lord and your fears will go away. Faith often has to wrestle before it rests. Faith may have to cast itself in utter helplessness upon the Lord and continue in prayer and seeking His face for a prolonged period of time before fear is cast out. It is faith which casts itself upon God as the only hope, that is the kind of faith which casts out fear.

Anxiety and worry

It is interesting that we all seem to have our own versions of what anxiety is and what worry is. Worry is often seen as the more everyday concerns that everyone has, whereas anxiety seems to be seen as more serious or even in the zone of the clinical. So here are a few definitions:-

The Oxford Dictionary describes anxiety as being troubled, uneasy and concerned. It defines worry as giving way to anxiety, letting the mind dwell on troubles and allowing no rest or peace. Think of the picture of a dog in a field “worrying” a flock of sheep.

Vines defines anxiety or care as “to draw in different directions and to distract”. The same word is used in Matthew 6v25 and 28 - to be anxious about and to have a distracting care.

This is exemplified in the story of Martha and Mary when Jesus says “you are worried and upset about many things – but only one thing is needed” in Luke 10v40-41.

The same word used in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13v22, it is the “worries of this life” that choke the gospel growth.

In 1 Peter 5v7 it is this anxiety and care that we are to cast onto the Lord.

There are many other synonyms that we use to describe this state of mind:-

Concerned, fretful, stress, tension, restlessness, nervousness, disquiet, unease, trepidation, misgiving, brooding, agonising, apprehension and agitation.

Dr Gaius Davies writes about worry in his book “Stress – the challenge to Christian caring”

“It is important to be able to worry in a way that is useful, for fear and anxiety to have a positive role. Worry is really about being afraid and there are times when it is lifesaving to be afraid. None of us would survive life’s dangers without some anxiety - it is part of a built in signalling system which alerts body and mind to be thoroughly aroused to meet an emergency. A proper anxiety about the elements of life, such as water and fire, might have averted many tragedies. When is it alright to worry? I would answer that worry is right

when it is relevant to the circumstances and leads to appropriate action by the anxious person. It then fulfils its function.”

He goes on to explain that manageable anxiety in the short term may increase performance but with high levels of anxiety nothing can be done well. If anxiety cannot be handled it may lead to phobias, obsessions, withdrawal or depression.

Timothy Lane states that “worry and anxiety is a condition common to virtually every human being, in every society, not many people are truly carefree.” So if that is the case perhaps we should just accept it as an inevitable fact of daily life? Why do the scriptures constantly tell us not to worry?

According to Dr Marion Ashton worry and anxiety has detrimental effects on us in many ways:-

Physically – loss of appetite, fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, stiff neck, clenched jaw, increased heart rate, difficulty swallowing, digestive disorders, nausea, dry mouth etc..

Mentally – Insomnia, lack of concentration, mind going round and round, memory loss, sense of apprehension beyond the circumstances, possibly depression.

Even if there are no obvious “symptoms” of anxiety, the person will be hindered from being their best both mentally and physically and since the person is robbed of the rest and quietness of heart, which is so essential to close communion with God, there will also be spiritual effects. If our fellowship and knowledge of God are hindered, our fellowship with others can be hindered by becoming irritable, easily upset leading to misunderstandings and strained relationships.

She would say that the causes of stress, tension and anxiety are within us, due to some conflict in our personality and that external circumstances may precipitate and expose it but are not the main cause. She goes on to quote from a medical research paper:-

“It isn’t so much what happens to a person that matters, so much as how he reacts to what happens to him, and how he reacts will be determined by his inner resources of heart and mind, his fundamental philosophy, his innermost religion and what he really believes.”

We are all reluctant to accept that the stress and anxiety we face is primarily caused by our own personality, but want to think that it is due to the difficult circumstances we are faced with and if we could only change the circumstances we would be fine. But we have not been promised easy circumstances and to a large extent we cannot control the circumstances and pressures that come into our lives. If we make our peace of mind dependent on circumstances then we will end up running away from them, giving way under pressure or seeking some way to numb the pain. We also deny the possibility of personal growth and change.

Timothy Lane suggests that although there are a number of factors involved in worry, that in reality it is a spiritual issue and ultimately a response to life lived in God’s world and thus to God Himself. He goes on to differentiate between what is good responsible concern and what is over concern and becomes worry. He calls this the spectrum of concern.

Right concern – this is not worry and should be characterised by taking wise action and praying dependently. He focusses on Matthew chapter 6 where Jesus tells us not to worry, and explains that Jesus is not telling us not to be concerned for our family, finances, health, safety etc. but not to be over concerned. Godly fear and concern for one's own safety and the safety of others is not the same as the worry that Jesus is commanding us to avoid. The following are some biblical examples of right concern:-

1 Corinthians 12v25-26 Right concern for other members of the body of Christ.

2 Corinthians 11v28 Paul experienced the pressure of responsibility for the churches.

Philippians 2v20 Paul commends Timothy for his concern for the welfare of the churches.

Philippians 2v28 Paul's concern for the health and welfare of his fellow worker, Epaphroditus.

1 Timothy 3v4-5 Church leaders are to care for both their family and the church.

1 Timothy 5v8 Right concern for financial provision for one's family.

Under concern- This is being disengaged or indifferent and is not the antidote to worry. It is characterised by taking no action and failing to pray. God does not want us to become merely passive, just expecting Him to provide while we do nothing. In Matthew chapter 6 God provided the birds with food, but they had to work hard to get it. Acts 18v17 is an example of when under concern is just a dereliction of duty.

Over concern – This is the essence of worry, when we think and act as though everything is up to us or is completely out of control. The result is unwise actions and praying desperately, if at all.

Timothy Lane would say that in the context of Matthew chapter 6 worry or anxiety occurs when we have a divided heart and divided loyalty between our own kingdom and the kingdom of God. He would say that worry is to be over concerned about something other than the kingdom of God.

Are we living life as though this life is all there is, or are we living life for the Kingdom of God? Worry begins when a person is trying to love equally both the Creator and something in creation, or when we have replaced Him with something in creation.

Matthew 6v24 "No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

The essence of worry is in attempting to find your ultimate hope, comfort, and meaning in something that is temporal and fleeting. It happens when one treats something in creation as a "god" and relies on it. This sets us up for worry since nothing in creation lasts and nothing in creation has everything under control (including ourselves!). Whenever you place your ultimate hope in anything in this world you will struggle with worry.

1 Timothy 6v17 says “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant or to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

Worry is over concern that results from “over loving” something i.e. loving something more than God.

Concern results when you love something in a proper way and not more than God.

Indifference is a lack of love – it is the opposite of worry, not the antidote for worry.

Points to ponder:-

Do you recognise Tim Lane’s spectrum of concern?

How do you respond? Do you disengage or do you react as though it is all down to you?

How can we distinguish that fine line between what is right concern and over concern?

What do you most frequently worry about? Is it family, job, health, finances, reputation, your performance or failures and mistakes? What might this tell you about what is most important to you and could fall into this area of “over love” since it has begun to give you your meaning and worth?

Worry and your past

Tim Lane looks at the past from the position of both the unbeliever and the believer. He recognises that even as believers, who acknowledge God’s cleansing grace in Christ, we can still be disturbed by the memory and consequences of past sins and this can be a trigger for anxiety. It is possible to feel deep shame for something we have done or was done to us, leading to a sense of guilt and unworthiness. He encourages us to focus on God’s mercy and forgiveness, refusing to let past sins and failures to define us, since we are forgiven, cleansed and loved in Christ. The most important event in our past now is the cross of Christ.

He also speaks about the danger of memories of past trauma, fears or suffering living on in the present provoking anxiety. This is beyond the remit of our discussion but it is good to remember that God knows, cares and understands our suffering and that Christ identified with our suffering as He suffered for us on the cross. We cannot change the past, but what we can do is to begin to work out how to live now in a way that is not in the grip of those memories and allows us, with God’s help, to experience peace in the midst of past suffering.

Worry and your future

We worry about the future because it is uncertain – the “what ifs”. We think about “worse case scenarios” and then worry about them, although they haven’t happened. Uncertainty is the breeding ground for the roots of anxiety to take hold in our lives. We live in a scary world, where bad things happen and good things are not always guaranteed. Even considering the week ahead can cause feelings of anxiety. We worry because we can’t control the future:-

- Will people like me and accept me
- Will I be too old to employ
- Will the kids turn out well
- Will we have enough money to retire
- Will we succumb to cancer or some other life threatening illness
- Will we develop dementia or become dependent on others for our care
- Will we be lonely

What are your biggest worries for the future?

The bible is brimming over with hope and with promises for our future as believers. What happens to us in this life cannot compare with where we will spend eternity. 2 Corinthians 4v16-18, Revelation 21v1-4. Remind yourself of the truths about our eternal future and eternal glory with Christ. Thank God for them and let the things that you naturally worry about be in their proper perspective.

Worry and your present

We need hope to face present challenges and we find that hope through the promises of God:-

- That God is at work in us making us like Christ 1 John 3v2-3, Philippians 2v13
- That God is faithful to provide help in trials and temptation 1 Corinthians 10v13
- That God's grace is sufficient for us in each days trials 2 Corinthians 12v9
- That God will give us His peace as we pray and trust Him John 14v27, Phil 4v6-7
- That whatever we go through we are not alone, He is with us Matthew 28v20
- That God loves us as His child 1 John 3v1, Romans 8v15-17, Ephesians 1v4-5
- That when we confess our sin He will forgive us 1 John 1v9
- That God will never leave us or forsake us Hebrews 13v5-6

The list goes on and on. God is not going to ask us to do today anything we cannot do with His help. This does not mean it will be easy or that He will relieve all painful circumstances. One of the most challenging things that we struggle with in dealing with worry is the confidence that we will have all the resources we need on a daily basis. If it depended on us, we wouldn't, but God has promised to provide all that we need each day. I love this quote by John Newton:-

"I compare the troubles we have to undergo in the course of the year, to a great bundle of sticks, far too large for us to lift. But God does not require us to carry the whole bundle at once. He mercifully unties the bundle, and gives us first one stick, which we are to carry today; and then another, which we are to carry tomorrow, and so forth. We can easily manage our troubles, if we would only carry the trouble appointed for each day. But the load will be too heavy for us - if we carry yesterday's burden over again today, and then add the burden of tomorrow to the weight, before we are required to bear it."

Coping with anxiety and fear

- Having faith in a loving Heavenly Father, who knows what we need Matt 6v25-34
- Trusting in God's promises and allowing them to shape our emotions rather than being overwhelmed by our circumstances 2 Peter 1v3-4
- Recognising the sovereignty of God, that what comes to us is only by His permission and allowing even difficult circumstances to drive us to God, not away from Him
- Cultivate an attitude of gratitude and thank God for all the good things He brings into our lives
- Keeping an eternal perspective and focusing on the hope of heaven
- Making God's Kingdom our priority and seeking our treasure there
- Remember how God has helped you in the past and how He has brought you safely through times of fear and worry and did not let you down
- Remember that we are in a spiritual battle. Satan is the propagator of fear and guilt and our minds are often the place that he tries to attack – pray protectively
- Re-affirm truth; the truth about who God is and all He has done to make us His son or daughter. Re-affirm God's love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, His sovereignty and goodness. Re-affirm that Christ has paid the penalty for your sin and taken your judgement, as your substitute (Romans 8v31-39) oppose the Devil's lies with truth
- Live in community with other believers who know you well, love you and have great wisdom to bring you encouragement, strength and to pray with you and for you
- Follow the example of the Psalmist and pour out your heart to God, no matter how you feel Psalm 62v8
- Step back from the situation to give time to assess it properly, with perspective and to consider the available resources to allow you to act appropriately
- When demands are made, be honest and assertive about your capacity, be willing to set appropriate boundaries and to say "no" when necessary
- Although fear and anxiety are the enemy of refreshing sleep and rest, try to work on adequate rest, relaxation and sleep – it can make the world look a different place
- Regular exercise is a great stress buster
- In Matthew 11v28-30 Jesus said to His followers "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." This is the place of real rest, not just for the body, but rest for the soul. "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" 1 Peter 5v7
- As Paul tells us in Philippians 4v6-7 (The Message) "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life."

