

Fear, Worry, Anxiety - Week 1

Imagine you are out hiking, enjoying the beautiful nature around you, and suddenly a bear crosses your path. Your heart starts to pound, your breathing becomes rapid and shallow, and your fight, flight, or freeze response kicks in. You are afraid.

You might be tempted to think you could take on a bear, or that you wouldn't be afraid if one crossed your path, but both of those thoughts would be foolish. Seeing a bear anywhere outside the safety of the zoo should make you afraid. That is your God given system warning you of danger and it is meant to keep you safe. Fear is a good thing when all is working properly.

The problem comes when fear becomes something we can't turn off. When this happens, fear becomes worry or anxiety.

In this four week study on how to deal with anxiety in our lives, we must first start with fear, worry, and anxiety and define those terms so we are well equipped to move forward with our study and understand what the Bible has to teach us.

Fear - the God given response to danger. This can be healthy when in its proper place. We need fear responses to keep us safe. However, we often let fear expand into areas where we need to give up our sense of control and trust God with whatever we are fearing.

Worry - Throughout this study, we will use the word worry to connote a spiritual problem of turning healthy fear into unhealthy fear. Worry is often shown in the Bible to be a lack of trust in God to take care of our lives.

Anxiety - The word anxiety will be used to speak about the physical aspect of fear. It will be used to describe what is happening in our bodies when we have an overabundance of fear, whether that is created by worrying or by a physical ailment causing the body to create the hormones that cause anxiety.

Discussion question: Which one of these three categories do you most commonly experience?

A very common phrase in Scripture is the admonition to not fear or worry. We see memes and Instagram posts telling us there are over 365 references to not fearing, therefore we have one for every day and fear should be automatically banished from our lives. You might be thinking, "If only it were that easy!"

While these Instagram posts are technically true, they can seem trite because they don't take into account things like physical anxiety disorders and more importantly, they're missing the main point of these verses. Let's examine several together.

Deuteronomy 31:6

Be strong and courageous; don't be terrified or afraid of them. For the Lord your God is the one who will go with you; he will not leave you or abandon you."

1 Chronicles 28:20

Then David said to his son Solomon, "Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Don't be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He won't leave you or abandon you until all the work for the service of the Lord's house is finished.

Psalms 23:4

Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

Psalms 46:1-3

God is our refuge and strength,
a helper who is always found
in times of trouble.
Therefore we will not be afraid,
though the earth trembles
and the mountains topple
into the depths of the seas,
though its water roars and foams
and the mountains quake with its turmoil.

Isaiah 41:10

Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be afraid, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you; I will help you;
I will hold on to you with my righteous right hand.

John 6:20

But he said to them, "It is I. Don't be afraid."

John 14:26-27

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.

“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don’t let your heart be troubled or fearful.

Hebrews 14:5-6

for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you. Therefore, we may boldly say,

The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can man do to me?

Discussion question: What is the common theme in these verses? Why are we not to fear?

While the admonition to not fear is a common theme, the most important thread tying these verses together is the promise of the presence of God. These are not commands from God to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and will ourselves into not fearing. These verses are admonitions or reassurances that we do not have to fear because of the presence of God. This is not something we accomplish on our own, this is an acknowledgement of someone far greater than us, someone who’s comfort and protection we desperately need in order to feel safe.

God repeats this theme over and over throughout Scripture. Why is this? It’s because he knows us so well. He knows we are prone to fear and worry. That many things throughout our lives here on earth will cause us to fear because the world is often a hard, unsafe place and we have to deal with that our whole lives. But the best news is, we don’t have to navigate it alone.

God also repeats himself when it is important. He wants us to truly get this concept - we are not alone. No matter our situation, no matter how many humans are around us at any given time, we are never truly alone. That is a difficult concept to grasp when we can’t see God’s presence. But we can trust his word when he tells us it’s true, no matter how we feel. When we learn to trust God sees and knows and is with us, it changes everything about our outlook.

When we remember his presence, fear and worry push us back towards Christ. It helps us to look away from the thing we are fearing or worrying about, and to put our gaze back on the one who protects us, takes care of us, provides for us, loves us, and walks with us. It causes us to remember who is the one in charge, who has our best interests at heart, and who is a good God. God is to be trusted. God’s word is to be trusted when he says he is always with us. And his presence can trump every fear and worry we have.

Discussion questions:

In what situation do you need the comfort of God's presence right now?

How does God's presence change what you worry about?

How does God's presence make you strong and courageous?

What areas of fear are healthy and what ones do you need to give over to God?

Anxiety and the Body - Week 2

There's an important part of your brain called the Amygdala. This part of your brain is responsible for the activation of your fight, flight, or freeze response. When activated, your Amygdala takes control, effectively shutting down the logic centre of your brain. It starts pumping adrenaline and cortisol into your body, making your heart race, your breathing become shallow, and can cause many more physical symptoms.

This response is God given. We need this response to kick in when we encounter the bear in the woods we saw last week. We need to run and run fast. We might need great strength if we choose to fight, so the adrenaline pumps and makes us strong. God made our bodies to protect us from danger, so the Amygdala takes over so we don't spend too much time weighing our options, we just go by instinct. This is the perfect response to real danger that needs a quick response. But we live in a world affected by the fall, therefore our bodies don't always work the way they should.

Genesis 3:8-19

SIN'S CONSEQUENCES

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. So the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"

And he said, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

Then he asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man replied, "The woman you gave to be with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate."

So the Lord God asked the woman, "What have you done?"

And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

So the Lord God said to the serpent:

Because you have done this,
you are cursed more than any livestock
and more than any wild animal.
You will move on your belly

and eat dust all the days of your life.
I will put hostility between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.
He said to the woman:

I will intensify your labor pains;
you will bear children with painful effort.
Your desire will be for your husband,
yet he will rule over you.
And he said to the man, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about
which I commanded you, ‘Do not eat from it’:

The ground is cursed because of you.
You will eat from it by means of painful labor
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow
until you return to the ground,
since you were taken from it.
For you are dust,
and you will return to dust.”

Our bodies are not the same as they were created to be. So now, just as we deal with other illnesses, we sometimes deal with anxiety as an illness. This could be an Anxiety Disorder, or excess adrenaline could be caused by another illness or medication. You could be experiencing anxiety or panic attacks.

Discussion question: In what ways do you see the results of the fall in your body?

This Amygdala response can also kick in from worry. We are bombarded every day with messages telling us to worry, from the news to social media to other worried people, we can start to feel we're not worried enough. Our lives can carry genuine fear because there are people and situations that are important to us and it's hard not to fear danger for the people you love or fear other situations such as financial or medical problems. The problems start when we try to control those situations instead of trusting in the Lord.

Matthew 6:25-34

“Therefore I tell you: Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothing? Consider the birds of the sky: They don’t sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth more than they? Can any of you add one moment to his life span by worrying? And why do you worry about clothes? Observe how the wildflowers of the field grow: They don’t labor or spin thread. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was adorned like one of these. If that’s how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, won’t he do much more for you — you of little faith? So don’t worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. Therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

This passage clearly shows us that God knew we would worry and even worry ourselves into anxiety. Jesus’ words to us are both an admonition to greater trust and faith in his ability to take care of us, and a comfort. This comfort reminds us how important we are to the Father. Think of the birds and the wildflowers and how many of us spend so much time observing, photographing, and appreciating them. They are fed and adorned beautifully by the Father who takes care of them. How much more does our Father take care of us?

Discussion question: How have you seen God’s loving care in your life lately?

You’ll notice all the worries in this passage are about the future. These are not bear in the woods situations where a sudden onset of fear would be healthy. On the other hand, these are also important things - what we will eat, drink, and wear. It would be natural to worry about these things, yet we are admonished to leave them up to our Father because he knows what we need. This takes a great deal of faith and practice. We must train ourselves to trust in God, grow our faith, and train our minds to dwell on his goodness and trustworthiness instead of on our worries.

If anxiety is prevalent in your life, it is worth taking a look to see if worry is the cause. But for many people, anxiety is caused by a physical ailment. The same admonitions and Scriptures can apply, but further investigation is needed. Seeing a doctor to get a diagnosis or to rule out other physical ailments is a must. Medication for anxiety or for the underlying physical ailment might be needed. And counselling should always be an option for dealing with anxiety. A good Christian counsellor will help you differentiate between fear, worry, and anxiety, give you the tools you need to deal with all of them, and help you increase your faith in God in the process.

Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship.

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

When you learn something new or practise something over and over, you create a new neural pathway in your mind. We see this especially in children as they are learning new skills at a rapid rate, but the ability to build new pathways does not go away even as we age. Just as patients who've had a stroke can go through therapy to build new pathways, relearning how to walk and talk, so we too can build new pathways around old ways of thinking.

Worry can create well worn pathways in our thinking so that every time we come to a certain subject, we are automatically on a path to worry and anxiety. As we increase in our knowledge and grow our faith, we can learn to redirect our thoughts toward trust in God, renewing our minds. The Bible tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is a sometimes long and arduous process, but worth every second of effort. Bible reading, meditation on Scripture, memorization of verses, prayer, and professional help are all ways we can renew our minds. Scripture is supernatural and essential to the process of renewing our minds in the journey of dealing with worry or anxiety.

Discussion questions:

Where do you experience anxiety?

Is it time to see a professional?

How can you give your worries to God?

Who can you enlist to help you on your journey with fear, worry, and anxiety?

What specific steps can you take to renew your mind?

Listening to your anxiety - Week 3

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable — if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy — dwell on these things. Do what you have learned and received and heard from me, and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

We often hear “Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” quoted but without the important phrase, “The Lord is near” quoted before it. Remember back to our first week together when we looked at the admonitions to not worry and how they give us the reason for not worrying. God's presence.

This famous passage in Philippians has the same reminder. The Lord is near. Paul then continues on to give us some practical ways to deal with worry and anxiety.

The first is prayer. If we truly believe in God's presence with us in the midst of our difficult circumstances causing worry or anxiety, we will be more prone to talk to him. Prayer is an important way to sit in the presence of God. Being in God's presence can regulate us, helping us to calm our body's nervous system. More on that next week.

Prayer helps us to notice God's presence with us and calm us, but it also helps us to pay attention. When we start to pray about our anxiety, we have to think it through. We start to notice what makes us anxious. What we are worrying about. What is consistently on our minds. When we pay attention, we begin to understand what is important to us. This is so important because it helps us start to understand the motivation behind our anxieties and worries. Are we worried about our loved ones? Our finances? Our health? All important things in life! But when we understand what is important to us, what the motivation is behind our worries, we can start to move forward to ask the Lord's help with these important areas.

Discussion question: What areas of life cause you the most worry?

Returning to our Philippians passage, we see the next step is petition. To petition someone means to go to someone with authority with a formal request. Once we have listened to our anxiety and

figured out what is important to us, we can go to God with our requests concerning those essential things. Our requests can be for more financial security, healing for a friend, safety for a loved one and much more. We can also request that God help us overcome our worry or take away our struggle with anxiety. The important part to remember is we have a good God who loves us and always has our best in mind. This is hard to remember when struggling with worry and anxiety. Sometimes God chooses to grant our requests, and sometimes he doesn't. The reality is that you may have a generalised anxiety disorder for the rest of your life. He may choose to heal you and he may not. But our faith grows each time we trust God is good no matter the answer to our petition.

And that leads us to thanksgiving. We can present our petitions in a demanding way that will only be satisfied if God does exactly what we asked. Or we can realise how God's ways are above ours, he is working for our good, and just how good of a God he is. When we realise this, we bring our petitions with thanksgiving instead of demand. We learn to thank him for the struggles we go through because they bring us closer to him. We learn to thank him for the medication we need and the counselling we receive for our anxiety. We ask for help overcoming our worry. We have a heart of thanksgiving no matter God's choices.

Paul tells us to present these prayers and requests to God. He's repeating himself here, which means he thinks this is an important point to drive home. So often we are hesitant to come to God with our prayers and petitions. We wonder if our worry and anxiety disqualifies us from coming to God but Paul assures us the opposite is true. It is essential that these are the very times we come to God. We need to let our struggles remind us of the presence of God in our lives, pushing us closer to him and growing our faith.

It is then the peace of God, which is beyond understanding, guards our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. The world can be a scary place, full of situations that cause worry and anxiety. It would be so easy to be overcome by it all. And yet, we as Christians can live with peace. Not a false peace that comes from burying our head in the sand and ignoring our problems, but one that looks those problems face on and says, "I can handle this because God is with me." We can have peace even in the middle of anxiety because of the presence of God. We can have peace that helps us give our worry over to God. We can have peace that accepts whatever God has for us.

Discussion question: Share a time you had peace that passed understanding.

Paul's next step is to dwell on good things. If we were to run everything through this list, we would have to throw a lot of them out. Paul gives us an amazing picture of what a great thought life looks like and leaves us with concrete examples for us to check our thoughts against. Last week we talked about creating new neuro pathways and this list here in Philippians is a great way to start that process. Are your worries true and lovely? Even in the middle of panic

and anxiety, we can choose to dwell on what is praiseworthy and true. Short prayers and phrases from the Bible can be of great comfort during panic attacks and while struggling with anxiety. While we can't always choose our body's reaction to certain stimuli, we can choose what we dwell on and we can choose this list from Paul.

Discussion question: What short prayer or phrase from the Bible would be most relevant to your life right now and how can you incorporate it into your daily life?

How Paul ends this passage is essential for us to end with. He tells us the result of incorporating all these practices into our daily lives, and oddly enough, the result is not that we will stop worrying, or that we will never experience anxiety again. We might be tempted to think that would be better. Wouldn't it be lovely to have a proven formula and never have anxiety again? But that is not the promised result of this passage. What we are assured of is, we will know God's presence. The God of peace will be with us, or in other words, we will understand and realise he was there all along. This passage from Philippians is not a guarantee of immediate deliverance from anxiety, but a way through. An antidote to worry and a path of peace, no matter what your body is going through.

Discussion questions:

Do you tend to listen to your anxiety or do you try to ignore it?

What is a passage of Scripture that has helped you with one of your worries?

Are you hesitant to bring your specific worries and anxieties to God?

How has this passage in Philippians changed your outlook on prayer?

The presence of God, co-regulation, and anxiety - Week 4

If you've ever met a newborn baby, you instinctively understand co-regulation. Think of the last time you held a newborn. If that baby fussed, you didn't stand still and simply tell the baby to calm down. No one expects babies to have full regulation of their bodies. We know they will cry when they are hungry, tired, wet, upset, not feeling well, any number of reasons and sometimes, it seems, for no reason at all. We don't expect them to regulate, so we co-regulate with them. We bounce them, soothe them, speak to them in a calming voice, and generally try to regulate their nervous system for them. Over time, over many years of helping them co-regulate, we see them start to grow up into kids who begin to regulate themselves.

We might be tempted to think that people grow out of the need to co-regulate, but in actuality, we never do. Have you ever had your day changed completely because of someone's presence in the middle of it? Has your mood changed because someone smiled at you? Have you ever found yourself in desperate need of a hug? When we find ourselves in these situations, it's because we have allowed ourselves to co-regulate with someone. We've borrowed from someone else's nervous system and they've helped us calm down, just like the newborn baby.

In times of great stress, anxiety, grief, and more, we will be in need of this co-regulation. The presence of someone else calms us and there is much science behind this concept. While the studies behind this are relatively new and we are learning more about co-regulation all the time, the Bible contains this concept already. In I Corinthians 12 we are introduced to a bit of this concept of co-regulation.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body — so also is Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and we were all given one Spirit to drink. Indeed, the body is not one part but many. If the foot should say, “Because I’m not a hand, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I’m not an eye, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted. And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” Or again, the head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable. And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable,

we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, which our respectable parts do not need.

Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, next miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, leading, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all do miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But desire the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way.

Every member of the body of Christ is to be concerned with the wellbeing of the others. If one member suffers, all members suffer. If one is honoured, we all rejoice. In other passages of the Scripture, we are told to weep with those who weep, mourn with those who mourn, to love one another, to bear each other's burdens, to encourage one another, and bear each other up. Even the command for a holy kiss was a physical sign of affection, love, and belonging and greeting people this way would give much the same feelings as when we receive a hug today. All of these commands require presence, knowing someone, and caring for them in the way they need. And all of these commands are ways we can help someone to regulate.

Discussion question: When is a time someone helped you co-regulate and what difference did that make in your life?

One last thought from I Corinthians 12. We may think that needing co-regulation, needing compassionate care and relationship from someone else makes us weak, like that newborn baby. And we may be tempted to think that in some way disqualifies us from being a vital part of the body of Christ. Two thoughts on that. First, we are all weak. We all need other people, our whole lives, whether we admit it or not. Second, Paul calls the weaker parts indispensable. Think of what that word means about it. No matter your emotional state, no matter how much you need to depend on others, you are indispensable to the body of Christ. What a comfort for those of us who struggle with anxiety.

While we need other people in our lives, the most important presence is that of God. We can be sure He understands our state, our needs, and has compassion on us. That feeling of safety with someone, allowing our nervous system to regulate, is at its best with God. He is the most safe relationship in our lives. With him we are fully known, and fully loved and we can truly rest with

him. The psalmists understood this, knowing the effect God's presence had on them both spiritually and physically.

Psalm 16

Protect me, God, for I take refuge in you.
I said to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
I have nothing good besides you."
As for the holy people who are in the land,
they are the noble ones.
All my delight is in them.
The sorrows of those who take another god
for themselves will multiply;
I will not pour out their drink offerings of blood,
and I will not speak their names with my lips.
Lord, you are my portion
and my cup of blessing;
you hold my future.
The boundary lines have fallen for me
in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
I will bless the Lord who counsels me —
even at night when my thoughts trouble me.
I always let the Lord guide me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad
and my whole being rejoices;
my body also rests securely.
For you will not abandon me to Sheol;
you will not allow your faithful one to see decay.
You reveal the path of life to me;
in your presence is abundant joy;
at your right hand are eternal pleasures.

At the beginning of this psalm, David is expressing his fear. He's asking for God's protection and David often had real reason to fear. He continues on to express trust in God no matter the circumstances. He continues on to express his anxiety, telling us his thoughts trouble him at night. In verse 8, we see the co-regulating presence of God - "Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken."

He continues on to talk about both his inner man and outer man - his spiritual and his physical. David says his heart is glad and this heart is the word for the inner man. Spiritually, he knows God's presence is what brings him joy. He is able to grow his faith and rejoice even while he is fearing for his life.

Next he says his body rests securely. The word body refers to the outer man or the physical. The presence of God brings rest and regulation to his body. What an amazing concept - the God of the universe sits beside you and brings rest. He cares so much about your fear, worry, and anxiety that he wants to help you regulate, to strengthen your faith in him, and to alleviate your suffering.

You will never stop finding something you can fear. You may have a medical condition that produces anxiety for the rest of your life. And the battle against worry is a long one. But through it all, the presence of God will never leave your side. The constant admonition to not fear throughout the Bible is a comfort because it reminds us of the presence of God in our lives.

Discussion questions:

What is something new you learned from these lessons that changed your outlook?

Do you often think about the presence of God beside you when you're fearful, worried, or anxious?

Have you ever felt your body calm down because of God's presence?

How can you function differently in the body of Christ knowing how much we all need each other?