



# **FIRE** **IN MY MIND**

*Personal Insights &  
Practical Help  
for Severe Anxiety*

— *Paula J. Marolewski* —



# Fire in My Mind

Personal Insights & Practical Help for Severe Anxiety

Paula J. Marolewski

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## Dedication

To Carole Murphy

whose wise and insightful counseling guided me on my journey to wholeness.

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## Introduction

Anxiety is all too often a hidden cancer in our midst. Not the ordinary “Sure, I’m stressed, too” level of anxiety or worry or stress that everyone lives with – but the anxiety that destroys a person from the inside out, eating away at them, hollowing their lives, devastating their faith.

Anxiety that is so severe that the sufferer feels a tumult of emotions: shame and guilt for having such anxieties, fear that they are going crazy, terror that others will reject or condemn them if they knew the truth, anger at their seeming inability to conquer the worries that gnaw at them, doubt that God knows, cares, or can do anything to help.

Such anxiety can sometimes be a sign of, or lead to, true anxiety disorders. Medication may be necessary to reclaim mental and emotional balance. And there, resistance rises again: “Surely, Christians don’t have anxiety problems like this! I must not have enough faith! Medication ... for my mind? No!”

On the other side, those who do not suffer from this level of anxiety often cannot understand what is happening inside their friend’s or relative’s mind and body and soul. They make assumptions based upon their own experience, often minimizing the pain and serious nature of the problem because they simply cannot conceive of the upheaval the other is experiencing.

Naturally, therefore, they may not know how to effectively comfort, support, strengthen, and build up the one who is suffering. While completely well-meaning and spoken in love, their words can wound instead of heal; devastate rather than encourage.

*Fire in My Mind* is written to address both sides of this issue. Primarily, it is written for the sufferer. You are not alone. Other Christians suffer along with you – and have experienced grace to address their anxieties. You can experience that grace, too.

Secondarily, it is written for the sufferer’s friends and support group. You play a vital role in extending God’s grace to the sufferer. Your words and actions are of paramount importance and can make the difference between despair and hope, sickness and health.

In order to accomplish these two goals, each chapter of *Fire in My Mind* has four sections. First, there is a personal narrative called *Inside My Mind*. This section describes what it is like for the sufferer – it reveals the nature of their anxious thoughts and details what happens inside mind, emotions, body, and soul as anxiety takes hold.

The purpose of this section is three-fold:

1. to reassure the sufferer that they are not alone,
2. to give the sufferer words to explain what is going on inside of them, and
3. to give friends and family a glimpse inside the sufferer's mind so that they can better understand what it looks and feels like to be tormented by anxiety.

It should be understood that this section is intensely personal in nature and reflects the author's own experience. Others may have differing experiences, but this section can provide a basis for discussion and increased understanding.

The next section is called *Practical Matters*. This gives rubber-meets-the-road advice for the sufferer, and explains how the friends and family members who make up the support group can best reach out to and support the sufferer. It often addresses common mistakes and shows why they are harmful.

This section is, necessarily, limited in scope. It discusses key points the author has found particularly helpful or pertinent. It is not designed to be comprehensive in nature. Both the sufferer and the support group should engage in extensive reading and counseling to learn about anxiety and to gain the tools and techniques to overcome it in their specific circumstances. *Practical Matters* is a springboard to get you started in the right direction.

The third section, *Truth from the Word*, is a series of five biblical meditations designed to walk the sufferer through vital scriptural truths that address the topic of the chapter. These meditations can be read one-per-day as daily devotionals, or all together in a single sitting, as the reader prefers. They often build on one another, however, so they should be read in order.

It is important to understand the place of Scripture in an individual's struggle to overcome anxiety. Put simply, Scripture is only one part of a person's healing. Severe anxiety (whether or not the person has an actual "anxiety disorder") is a problem that impacts body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Healing must therefore address each and every one of those aspects. That may include counseling, medication, lifestyle changes, and more.

The biblical meditations in the *Truth from the Word* section are tools to help the spiritual aspect of anxiety. They were created to give the sufferer a solid spiritual framework in which healing can then take place. The author highly recommends that individuals suffering from severe anxiety seek professional help in order to address fully all the various aspects of anxiety.

The final section of each chapter, *Prayer from the Heart*, contains a written prayer that the sufferer can use as an aid in talking with God about their anxiety. Oftentimes, it is difficult while within the throes of anxiety to find the words to pray. It is hard to look up when there is so much pain within. It is hard to keep a true theological perspective.

These prayers were created to help the sufferer put their pain into words and to then move on from the pain to affirm the principles discussed in the *Truth from the Word* sections.

It is my earnest hope that *Fire in My Mind* will help individuals who suffer from anxiety to move into health and wholeness, and will help the Church to better love, support, and encourage them along the way.

**Important Disclaimer:** *Fire in My Mind* is a personal and biblical study of anxiety. It is not and does not claim to be a psychological or medical treatise on the topic, nor should it be used as such. The advice provided here reflects principles the author has personally found helpful. Depending on the level and type of anxiety a person suffers, other or additional techniques may be necessary. The author shall not be held liable for any damages or injury to any person resulting from access to this book. This book is not a substitute for medical or therapeutic intervention by qualified professionals. Individuals suffering from anxiety are advised to seek professional medical advice from an expert. The author does not diagnose or prescribe, or give out information regarding medication. Additionally, individuals who support a person with anxiety may benefit from seeking professional advice on how to address their particular circumstances.



## The Mind, the Body, and the Brain

Before proceeding to the first chapter, please read this important section. In my personal experience with severe anxiety and in my discussions with others who suffer from anxiety, I have become aware of a large area of general ignorance: that is, a lack of understanding regarding the interactions between the mind, the body, and the brain; and how those interactions produce and affect anxiety.

I am not an expert in either physiology or psychology, and therefore recommend strongly that those suffering from anxiety and those who support them read materials written by the professionals in this area. A good place to begin, and a book I highly recommend, is *The Anxiety Cure* by Dr. Archibald Hart, a noted Christian psychologist.

I will only touch on the most basic level of this topic here, as I understand it.

Imagine for a moment driving a car over and over and over the same dirt road. The car's tires make tracks, then deep ruts. After some time, it is very hard for the car to drive anywhere *except* in those ruts. Getting out of the rut requires skill, time, and effort.

That is what happens when a person is subject to stress. Stress produces certain chemical messengers in the body and in the brain. Those chemical messengers in turn produce their own effect on the body and the brain, and also on the mind and the emotions.

When someone does not have an anxiety problem and the stress is temporary, those chemical messengers do their job, then dissipate when the source of the stress goes away. The person then returns to their normal mindset and bodily balance.

But if someone suffers from an anxiety problem or from continual stress, the chemical messengers keep getting pumped into the body and brain, forming a "rut" of physical, mental, and emotional responses. Severe anxiety is one of these responses.

In order to get out of this "rut," the sufferer will have to take serious steps, which may include learning techniques to control anxiety, changing the circumstances that are causing the anxiety, and taking medication to mitigate the anxiety. In every case, such steps will require skill, time, and effort. In many cases, professional help may be beneficial and even essential.

It is vital that this relationship between the mind, body, and brain be understood so that the sufferer and the support group:

- ☞ Realize that there is a physiological component to anxiety. That means that the body itself is involved, not just the mind and the emotions.
- ☞ Identify what is inside and what is outside the sufferer's control. For instance, emotions themselves cannot be controlled, but a person's response to those emotions can be controlled.
- ☞ Accept the fact that medication may be necessary to break or control this dangerous chemical cycle.
- ☞ Recognize that the sufferer cannot simply "snap out of it." There are aspects that are under the sufferer's control, and there are aspects that are not. Only time, skill, and effort will effect a lasting change.
- ☞ Understand that that this is not simply a "spiritual" problem. As humans, our body, mind, and spirit are integrated. What affects one aspect affects all parts to some degree. So when the body's chemical balance is off, mental and emotional anxiety can result; and when mental and emotional anxiety is present, it has an effect on the body's responses.

For a complete understanding of this topic, I encourage you to read *The Anxiety Cure* by Dr. Archibald Hart.

## Fire in My Mind

### *Slowing Down Racing Thoughts*

#### *Inside My Mind*

It is an endless cycle. When I wake, it is as if I never slept. My thoughts pick up on the very sentence where I fell asleep the night before – as if there was no break, not even an ellipsis to denote a time of unconscious oblivion.

Fatigue overshadows me so that – for a few moments – my thoughts are sluggish. Dully staring at my fears. Feeling the weight of my worries. Then, as I recognize that these same enemies are still here with me, my heart begins to pound. Adrenaline rushes through me, and I curl up with a moan on my bed, unwilling to face the day, unable to cope with yet more hours of the ceaseless spinning of my thoughts.

My thoughts scream into a whirlwind, mounting with force as I go over and over and over and over and over the same ground again and again and again and again. My mind picks up such speed that it aches and hurts with the effort.

Then comes the fire.

The speed and intensity of my thoughts, my anxieties, bursts into flame inside me. My very brain feels as if it is physically burning. My vision darkens, contracts, and the world closes in around me as my veins catch the fire, rippling through my body, forcing my heart to race, my breath to come fast and shallow, my skin to burn with an internal heat I cannot control.

It is consuming and agonizing. A hell within my own mind complete with fire and brimstone and sulfur. And still, I cannot control the thoughts that race with flame through my mind, burning with a fury that cannot be contained, cannot be quenched, cannot be satisfied ...

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer**

Part of the terror of anxiety is the force and power of the racing thoughts that accompany it. Adrenaline reaches a fever pitch, sending the body into pure fight or flight mode.

Two things are essential at this point: to *slow down*, and to *focus on something outside of yourself*. To slow down, because your mind and body are running at breakneck speed; and to focus on something external, because the whole power of anxiety is that it wraps you up inside yourself and turns your mind into a prison cell.

Here are four practical steps to take to begin to slow down and shift focus:

**Reach out.** It is natural to retreat from others during the peak of anxiety: while you hate your racing thoughts, they are all-consuming. However, retreat is actually the worst thing you can do, because it makes it even easier to focus on your thoughts. This is the time you need to reach out to your support group. Call one of your friends or family members and tell them the substance of your racing thoughts. Be detailed. Get it all out on the table. Since you speak slower than you think, your mind will slow down as you verbalize your thoughts and fears.

**Change locations.** If possible, move to a different location: if you are in the house, get out. If you are at work, take a break and walk around. Physically changing location can assist you in mentally changing direction.

**Work out.** The problem with anxiety is that it tends to breed apathy: you want to sit and chew your fingernails, figuratively speaking. It will often take an act of will to physically get up and get moving, but it is worth it. Physical exercise releases endorphins into your body and brain, which can help you to feel better. Additionally, working out can distract you and therefore break the thought cycles in your mind. A competitive sport may be especially beneficial (i.e., racquetball rather than jogging), since it requires your mental attention in addition to your physical attention.

**Be creative.** Engage in an activity that will take up brain and thought space. You can't think about two things at once, so you want to try to shift your thoughts toward something positive and pleasant. As mentioned above, sports can fill that role. Hobbies are another primary source of creativity. Volunteer work may do the trick. Your job may draw upon your creativity. Whatever it is, try to give it 100% of your attention.

### **For the Support Group**

As the friend of the sufferer, you may never have experienced the terror of having your thoughts race out of control. Here are several points to be aware of as you reach out in love to help the person suffering from anxiety:

**Be ready to listen.** As stated in the previous section, the sufferer needs to talk out their thoughts – therefore, they need someone to be there to listen. That person is you. This is not, however, a five-minute conversation. It may take an hour or more for the person’s thoughts to even begin to slow down. It is vital that you do not short-circuit this process. Don’t rush it. Encourage the person to talk, and to get it all out on the table.

**Watch for mental circling.** The challenge with listening is to discern when talking becomes mental circling. The sufferer needs to talk out all their thoughts and fears. But *repeating* all those thoughts and fears multiple times is counterproductive. Therefore, be patient while they talk, but if you begin to hear the same things again and again, gently point out that now it is time to move forward. Recommend an activity, or change the focus of the conversation.

**Suggest an activity.** If at all possible, get together with the sufferer and do something active with them. Competitive sports, hobbies, etc., are very helpful. Be careful to avoid passive pastimes, i.e., TV or movies, because the sufferer can “tune out” whatever is on the screen and simply continue their previous thought cycles. If you can’t get together personally with the sufferer, recommend something they can do on their own that will be engaging.

**Take the initiative.** Because anxiety breeds apathy, the sufferer may resist engaging in an activity. Part of them really does want to sit and stare at their anxious thoughts. They may literally not have the energy or the willpower to get up out of the chair by themselves. You may need to supply the energy and willpower they need, either by insisting that you engage in an activity together, or by literally encouraging them verbally until they get up and take the first step toward action.

**Point the way to God.** It is important to remember that when a person’s thoughts are racing, they are essentially self-focused. Every sense is turned inward. Therefore, the sufferer cannot “see” God: they only see themselves and the things they fear. Draw their attention to God and away from themselves by directing them to verses that speak of God’s might and power, his holiness, his love, his grace.

## *Truth from the Word – You Are Not Alone*

*“Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, ‘Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, “A boy is conceived.” May that day be darkness; let not God above care for it, nor light shine on it.” Job 3:1-4*

Job’s thoughts must have raced, threatening to consume him, an ever-present fire in his mind. He had lost wealth, property, children, and health. God appeared to have abandoned him. His pain was perpetual, and his anguished cries went unanswered from the heavens.

It is this anxiety, this depression, this unfathomable stress that we hear in Job’s voice when – pushed to the breaking point – he curses the day of his birth: “Let the day perish on which I was born! ... May that day be darkness!”

This is a strange passage in which to look for hope, but it is here, nevertheless. And this is the hope that this despairing cry of Job brings: *You are not alone.*

It is easy to feel alone in this world full of rhetorical “Hi! How are you?” “I’m fine, thanks!” exchanges.

It is easy to feel alone when every TV station, movie, and magazine says life should be full of fun, pleasure, adventure, and prosperity.

It is easy to feel alone when perhaps those nearest and dearest to you really don’t comprehend what is happening inside your mind.

And you think ... “I am the only one who has ever felt this way. No one understands my suffering. It is too much for me. I will be crushed under it.”

But you are not alone. From Job’s experience at the dawn of history to today’s teeming billions, others have suffered and are suffering as you are now. And here is the reason this is a word of hope: Job did not end his days in despair. He finished them in blessing. Likewise, millions of people today who have struggled and suffered to the same depth as you are now have come through to a place of blessing.

☞ What does it mean to you to realize that others have suffered like you are suffering now – and have come through that suffering to a place of blessing?

☞ Take a deep breath. And as you exhale, say softly: *I am not alone!*

## *Truth from the Word – Remember Who God Is*

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth! Tell me, if you have understanding. Who set its measurements, since you know? Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” Job 38:4-7*

Into the midst of Job’s anxiety – his grief, his despair, his anger – God finally spoke. But what is at first baffling is this: God did not answer any of Job’s questions! Not one! In fact, Job *never* received an answer as to “Why?” and “What happened?”

Instead, in Job 38-41, God guides Job to consider the full extent of his power, his wisdom, his creativity, and his authority as it is demonstrated in the physical creation. Before Job’s wondering eyes are displayed the vast expanses of the sea, the brilliance of the dawn, the glory of the Milky Way, and the intricate interplay of the animal kingdom.

Why would God respond in this way? Quite simply, because Job needed to have his perspective renewed. He needed to *remember who God is*.

Anxiety causes us to turn our thoughts inward. Our perspective narrows until we see only ourselves, feel only our pain, and hear only our racing thoughts. If we want to slow our thoughts down, then it is important to turn our eyes outside of ourselves. One way to do that is to actively remember who God is.

Here are three exercises that can help:

- ☞ Read through Job 38-41. Imagine that you were Job, and God spoke in this way to you. What would you think? Feel? How would you react? What would you do?
- ☞ Pray a prayer using Job 38-41 as a guide. Using your own words, acknowledge specific examples of God’s power, creativity, wisdom, and authority. Be objective in this prayer – don’t use examples from your own life’s circumstances; keep your thoughts outside yourself.
- ☞ Choose something natural as a reminder of God’s creative power and authority: a rock, a shell, a nut, etc. Keep the object on your desk or kitchen counter. Whenever you look at it and handle it, remind yourself, “God is the Almighty Creator. He created the whole world, including this thing. He holds all the power in the Universe. I will worship him, because he alone is God.”

## *Truth from the Word – God Knows What You Are Suffering*

*“O LORD, You have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
You understand my thought from afar.  
You scrutinize my path and my lying down,  
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before there is a word on my tongue,  
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.”*

*Psalm 139:1-4*

Think of it: God himself knows the full scope and content and horror of your racing thoughts. Look at the words: God has:

... searched you  
... known you  
... understands your thoughts  
... scrutinizes your path  
... is intimately acquainted with all your ways

This is no detached or distant God. He is involved intimately with us every day, and every moment. When you suffer from anxiety, it is easy to feel that God has abandoned you: this psalm is your shield against those frantic thoughts that tell you that you are bereft of God’s assistance. And it starts with this reassuring promise: *God knows what you are suffering.*

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that God understands your thoughts – even your most anxious, racing ones?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to know that you can say whatever is in your heart and mind to God, since he knows it all before you even speak a word?
- ☞ Acknowledge each of your anxieties to God, naming them one by one. Don’t seek for answers at this time. Simply tell God where you are at, what you are thinking, and how much it hurts.
- ☞ Affirm that God has heard you and knows your every thought and the pain that you are experiencing.
- ☞ Thank God for hearing you, and for knowing you so intimately.



## *Truth from the Word – God Is Always With You*

*“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,  
Even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me.  
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night,’  
Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day  
Darkness and light are alike to You.”  
Psalm 139:6-12*

God not only sees and understands your racing thoughts – he cares. And because he cares, he is constantly on guard: protecting you, guiding you, watching over you.

When you are struck with anxiety, it is easy to think that you are beyond God’s reach. That God doesn’t know where you are, and perhaps doesn’t care. Or that God has withdrawn himself from you and abandoned you.

The above verses proclaim such thoughts a lie. The truth is that *God is always with you*: if your thoughts are great – he is with you. If your thoughts are terrible – he is by your side. If your racing thoughts take you far and wide – he is watching over you. If you are terrified that you are falling into the blackest darkness – he is guiding you through.

No matter how fast and how far your thoughts race, you cannot race faster or farther than God’s hand, and you are never outside of the love of his heart.

- ☞ What does it mean to you to know that God is all around you, protecting you on every side, even when you cannot “sense” his presence?
- ☞ The psalmist affirms that no matter where he goes, God is with him: leading him, guiding him, and laying hold of him. Think about the worst your thoughts and anxieties have ever been – and then realize that God was there with you at that very moment, leading you through. How does this change your perception of those dark times?
- ☞ Anxiety is suffocating and dark. In these verses, the psalmist affirms that though we cry out in fear that we are drowning in the darkness, our deepest darkness is not dark to God. He sees clearly all the time. What hope does this give you?

## *Truth from the Word – God’s Grace is Sufficient*

*“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

In the throes of anxiety, when your thoughts are racing out of control, it is natural to pray desperately that God would “take this problem away.” We want it gone. Out. Finished. Over.

Sometimes, God grants that prayer in a miraculous fashion. Much more typically, however, he calls us to a longer, harder road: the road of grace. The road where we learn to work through the problem by studying the causes of our anxiety, developing coping skills, seeing specialists, setting up a support group, etc. The road where the problem never really “goes away,” but where we learn to live a full life that includes our weaknesses because *God’s grace is sufficient*.

Now, when we hear that God’s grace is “sufficient,” we may feel that that means we will eke out an existence, struggling every day, having just enough energy to make it through to tomorrow. Not so: “sufficient” means “all we need to live to the fullest the life God has planned for us.” A life that will be characterized by God’s power flowing through us and through our weaknesses as we rely on his grace to meet our every need.

- ☞ Read Psalm 139:13-16 and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. How might these passages together affect how you view your anxiety?
- ☞ Affirm to God that you will trust him with your anxiety problem: to resolve your anxieties, help you through them, walk beside you as you struggle with them, comfort you as you suffer with them, or give you victory over them, just as he deems best.
- ☞ Thank God that he works everything for the good in your life as you trust him and seek to do his will (Romans 8:28). Affirm that this includes your struggle with your anxieties. Ask him to redeem your struggle and use it for good: to strengthen your character, help others, and bring glory to his Name.

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

I cannot begin to describe to others  
the spinning blackness of my thoughts.  
The pain as the fire in my mind rages out of control.  
But you, O Lord, already know.

I am comforted by the intimacy of my relationship with you -  
That you enclose me behind and before.  
That you know my anxious thoughts.  
That my darkest imaginings are not dark to you.  
That my farthest flung anxieties are well within the bounds of your care.

I can rest in your power.  
I can rest in your love.  
I can rest in your grace.  
I can rest in your presence.

Help me now to lift my eyes away from myself  
and up to you.

I affirm the splendor of your magnificent creation:  
whether I look at the aurora borealis  
lighting the sky with cosmic brilliance,  
or I cup a ladybug in my palm  
and feel the tickle of her tiny feet.  
In everything, I see your hand at work.  
Your creativity.  
Your care.  
Your control.

You created me, and I worship you.  
You care for me, and I love you.  
You are in control of my life, and I trust you.

In the name of Christ, whose grace is all-sufficient for me,

Amen.

## The Pounding of My Heart

### *Escaping the Clutch of Fear*

#### *Inside My Mind*

I didn't realize at first that my heart was pounding. Not until the fifth or sixth time my hand crept up to my chest, my fingers digging in around my breastbone as if physical pressure could somehow slow a pulse gone wild.

My breath comes shallow, increasing my tension even as it drains my strength. Most fears shift and change day by day, a cacophony that plucks my nerves to the breaking point. But there are two that sound like constant bass notes, thrumming through my chest:

I am afraid, terribly afraid, that I am losing my mind. *Crazy*, my brain whispers. *You're going crazy. Nobody sane feels what you feel, thinks what you think. You've snapped - and if you haven't snapped already, it's just a matter of time.*

And I am afraid, terribly afraid, that I will never be well again. Never whole. Never healed. Never happy. Despair is like the wail of an out-of-tune oboe, playing high above the never-ending low-voiced throb of fear.

Fear paralyzes. I feel as if I literally cannot move. When I lift my hand, I can see it shaking. When I walk, my steps drag and my shoulders are bowed.

I try to hear you when you speak to me, but all I can hear over and over in my mind is that desperate cry of fear - I am afraid, terribly afraid, terrified and afraid ...

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer and the Support Group**

I suffered from severe anxiety – and its accompanying fear – for a long time before I could put a name to it and learned tools that could help me confront it. Because I did not understand anxiety and how it worked in the human body, brain, mind, and spirit, I did not comprehend what was happening. All my life I had had a firm grasp on things: been cheerful, optimistic, level-headed. To suddenly find my mind and emotions spinning out of control was terrifying. I literally felt that I must be going mad.

Hear me very carefully: **Anxiety is not insanity.** The two are entirely different in nature, as well as in treatment.

A huge part of my fear sprang from my ignorance of this simple fact. I did not understand either anxiety or insanity, so I allowed my fear to assume the worst: that I was going crazy.

To counter this natural fear, both the sufferer and the support group need to become informed about severe anxiety, panic attacks, and anxiety disorders. Learn causes, symptoms, effects, and treatments. Become familiar with the interactions between the brain, body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Study the different therapy methods available, explore various relaxation techniques, and learn what medications could potentially be helpful. We fear what we do not know or do not understand, therefore, **knowledge is a powerful antidote to fear.** To become informed:

**Research on the Internet.** There are many sites on the Internet that offer quality, professional advice. A few to check out are:

☞ **The National Institute of Mental Health**

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>

☞ **Anxiety Disorders Association of America**

<http://www.adaa.org/>

☞ **MedLine Plus**

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/anxiety.html>

**Read books.** Dr. Archibald Hart's book *The Anxiety Cure* is a great place to start, and there are many more. Don't shy away from reading entire books on the subject: information is a key component to overcoming anxiety.

**See a professional.** See a doctor, counselor, or psychologist and get a professional opinion. *Particularly if anxiety is severe, constant, and life-impacting, it is important not to self-diagnose.* Professionals have the training and tools needed to overcome anxiety and panic.

When I didn't understand severe anxiety, its effects were both terrible and terrifying. Once I understood what caused anxiety, how my body responded to it, how my brain worked, etc., its effects were still *terrible* but were no longer *terrifying* – the fear element was removed. Eventually, then, I was able to learn tools and techniques to confront the anxiety itself and address the problem at its root cause.

### **For the Support Group**

It is important to remember that fear can be both rational and irrational. Knowledge will help address the rational side of the sufferer's fears. Knowledge helps the sufferer understand intellectually that they are not going crazy, and that they are taking positive steps to address their anxiety, and that things will change for the better over time.

But there will always be an irrational side to this same fear – the sufferer may not believe in their heart what they know in their head. That is why they will need your **reassurance and affirmation** for their emotional support.

When you offer reassurance, state specifically that the sufferer is not crazy, not insane, not mad. Use those words – they are the words that are hammering through the person's mind. By confronting them and bringing them into the open, they lose a portion of their power. Remind the sufferer of what you have both learned about anxiety.

Accept that you will need to offer reassurance again and again. You may think to yourself, "We've been over this ground before and he/she felt better about everything – why is it coming up again?" Simply because fear can be irrational. When that happens, as often as it happens, the sufferer needs a hug and a listening ear. Your physical presence and emotional support will calm their fears so that they can remember and accept the intellectual facts once again.

## *Truth from the Word – Wisdom Provides Protection*

*“For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;  
discretion will guard you, understanding will watch over you.”*

*Proverbs 2:10-11*

A constant sidekick to anxiety, fear strikes when our resources are already at low ebb, hammering at the door of our soul, threatening to break down the walls of our weakened resistance.

If you are in that place of fear, I have good news for you: God has given us the tools we need to strengthen the walls that guard our heart and to protect us against the relentless attack of the enemy. Those tools are wisdom, knowledge, discretion, and understanding. Consider these definitions from the American Heritage Dictionary:

**Wisdom** is an “understanding of what is true, right, or lasting.” Considering that fear tells us lies, distorts our thinking, and traps us in anxieties about the past or future, what better protection could we have than a firm grip on the truth, on the good, and on the eternal?

**Knowledge** is “familiarity, awareness, or understanding gained through experience or study.” Fear blinds us. It tells us that we cannot understand it, cannot escape it, cannot control it. But God promises that knowledge will make us aware of ourselves and of how our fears work, and will give us an understanding of how to overcome them.

**Discretion** is “freedom of action or judgment.” Fear not only blinds us; it binds us. It paralyzes our choices, freezing us in place. God’s answer is discretion: he himself reaffirms our choices, providing us with freedom of action and judgment.

**Understanding** is “the quality of comprehension; discernment.” Part of the power of fear is confusion. When we are afraid, we cannot think straight, and so things seem much worse than they often are. Understanding grounds us, providing us with a foundation under our feet so that we can discern the right path to take.

☞ We gain wisdom, knowledge, discretion, and understanding through studying Scripture, praying, reading books on spiritual matters and about anxiety issues, receiving counseling from professionals, and talking with family and friends (to name just a few methods). What are you doing now in these areas? What new means can you try?

## *Truth from the Word – Do Not Be Afraid of Fear*

*“Do not be afraid of sudden fear, nor of the onslaught of the wicked when it comes; for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.”*

*Proverbs 3:25-26*

I remember the first time these verses really stood out to me: I was caught by that strange, paradoxical statement “Do not be afraid of sudden fear.” But that is, indeed, a vital key to recovering from anxiety: do not be afraid of fear.

Fear often feeds itself in an ever-strengthening cycle. We are anxious, so we become afraid. The fear itself increases our anxiety, which then increases our fear. And so on, and so on.

God gives us this command to break into that cycle: “Do not be afraid of sudden fear.” For the person suffering from anxiety, it is an acknowledgment that fear is indeed the constant companion of anxiety. It recognizes the fact that fear can appear seemingly out of nowhere, terrorizing us. But it then puts up a STOP sign: “Stop the cycle! Yes, you have anxiety. Yes, you are afraid. But don’t be afraid of the anxiety. Don’t be afraid of the fear. Don’t let it go any farther.”

The command itself would be useless if it were not for the next verse: “for the LORD will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught.” Stop the cycle – do not be afraid of the fear. Why? Because God is on your side. Because when you can’t trust yourself, you can trust your Shepherd. Because when you can’t see the way forward, the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life will guide and guard your steps.

“Trust Me,” God whispers. “Don’t be afraid of fear. I’m right here with you. Take the next step forward.”

- ☞ When fear and anxiety strike, practice deep breathing from the diaphragm, focusing on your breathing. Repeat to yourself as you inhale and exhale, “Breathe in. Breathe out. Relax. Slow down.” Or, “Relax. Slow down. God is here. I am safe.”
- ☞ Memorize two or three verses, such as the ones above, that you can turn to when fear rises.
- ☞ Decide not to let fear dictate your actions or responses. Fear tends to paralyze us or cause us to act irrationally. When fear hits, slow yourself down, think carefully, and deliberately choose how you will respond and what you will do next. Make it *your* choice, not your *fear’s* choice.



## *Truth from the Word – Seek the Lord*

*“I sought the LORD, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.”  
Psalm 34:4*

I am ashamed to admit it, but the fact is that when I am afraid, I often forget to pray.

God’s name should be first on my lips when the fear hits. He should be the One I turn to immediately. But instead, all too regularly, I forget. Instead of calling on him, I try to rely on myself. Instead of turning to him, I turn my whole gaze inward, focusing on the fear, focusing on my lack of strength, focusing on me, me, me, me, me. No wonder fear gets such a strong grip on my soul!

The psalmist knew better: “When I was afraid, I sought the Lord. He’s the one I turned to. He answered. He delivered.”

Now, a word of caution here: deliverance is not always immediate. God’s answer may come in the form of counseling that may take months or years. God will definitely call you to give it your 100%. God may require that you make changes to your lifestyle to relieve your overall stress level. God might ask you to look certain fears dead in the eye that you have avoided for years.

God doesn’t promise a timeframe around deliverance. He just promises that it is a sure thing.

So seek the Lord. When the fear hits, when anxiety is tangling you up inside – seek him. Pour out your needs before him. Ask him for his help. For his strength. For his resources. For his deliverance. “For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened” (Luke 11:10).

- ☞ What is your first response when fear hits? What do you do? Why?
- ☞ Do you truly believe that God is willing and able to deliver you from your fears? Why or why not?
- ☞ Have you ever, in essence, demanded or expected God to work a miracle – and when he didn’t do so, you became disappointed in him and apathetic about further prayer? If so, address this with God in prayer. Seek counsel if necessary.
- ☞ What resources has God given you to help you overcome your fear?
- ☞ What further steps might God be calling you to take in order to overcome your fear?

## Truth from the Word – God is in Control

*“When He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus Himself was asleep. And they came to Him and woke Him, saying, ‘Save us, Lord; we are perishing!’ He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?’ Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. The men were amazed, and said, ‘What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?’” Matthew 8:23-27*

Fear attacks like a storm. We feel as if we are a tiny boat in the midst of a huge, roiling sea, our emotions sliding up one side of a wave and down the other, and everything darkness except for flashes of terrifying panic.

And in the midst of that storm, Jesus speaks:

***“You will not perish.”*** Fear blows everything out of proportion. Ground yourself in the truth: you will not die; you will survive. You will come through the anxiety and out into the freedom to be found on the other side.

***“You need not be afraid.”*** No matter how much your emotions are in a tumult, no matter how fierce the anxiety, no matter how paralyzing the panic attack, Jesus calls you to look to him and keep your faith and trust in him. You *can* bring your emotions back under control, you *can* learn to relieve the anxiety, you *can* escape the threat of panic attacks.

***“I am in control.”*** Why do we look to Jesus? Because he is in control. In the words of the old hymn, “The waves and winds still know his voice who stilled them while he walked below.” Does he always bring instant relief? No. In fact, not typically. But he is in *control*: he knows how much you can handle, he is extending his grace and resources to you, he is charting the course to bring you out the other side as you trust in him step by step.

- ☞ When fear blows everything out of proportion, it can be very helpful to ground yourself. For instance, pick up a rock or shell or flower and study it carefully: note its texture, shape, color, etc. By focusing on something real and tangible, your fears will diminish in scope and strength.
- ☞ One of the biggest lies that feeds our fear is the belief that we *cannot* change. That nothing will *ever* improve. When that fear rises, look it in the eye and affirm, “God is in control. And because he is in control, I *can* change and life *can* improve.”

## *Truth from the Word – Look at the End Result*

*“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.” I Peter 5:8-10*

Fear causes us to suffer. It is painful to be afraid. It hurts. That’s why we cringe when we are fearful.

Hope is the antidote to fear. Hope fills us with life, and gives us the energy to move forward. And here is a great word of hope: *all* your suffering – *all of it* – can be redeemed through God’s grace.

Peter is very clear in these verses about what the redemption of suffering looks like: we will be perfected, confirmed, strengthened, and established.

**Perfect:** God will take the fragmented pieces of our lives and make us whole and complete.

**Confirmed:** We will understand fully who we are in Christ and the freedom that brings.

**Strengthened:** We will be able to stand firm in our faith and strengthen the faith of others.

**Established:** We will become the very best that God has called us to be, bringing forth abundant fruit.

While this redemptive process will be fully completed in heaven, it begins *now!*

- ☞ Do you know who you are in Christ? Consider doing a study of the verses where the term “in Christ” appears.
- ☞ Do you know anyone who is suffering from anxiety or fear? How could you reach out to help them?
- ☞ Positive action and serving others are excellent means of countering fear. What are you currently doing to use your spiritual gifts to serve others? What else might you do?

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

You are my Rock, O my God.  
Bedrock under my feet,  
and a fortress around me.  
I affirm, I declare, and I believe that  
I shall not be shaken.

You buttress my mind with wisdom.  
You strengthen my faith with truth.  
You undergird my commitment with hope.

I acknowledge that you never promised  
freedom from fearful situations:  
the valley of the shadow of death is very real,  
and we all walk through it.

But you consistently encourage us to  
*"Fear not!"*  
Not on our own strength -  
but as we rely upon you.

Give me the courage  
to face my fear.

Give me the determination  
to learn, to grow, and to change.

Give me Your Spirit  
to make the impossible, possible.

Let the light of your Truth  
shine into the darkness of my fear.

In the name of Jesus, the Light of the World,

Amen.

## No One Must Know

### *Removing the Burden of Shame*

#### *Inside My Mind*

I put on such a smiling face. Chatting in friendly fashion, shaking hands, mingling with others. Yet within, I am holding on with a death grip. My mask must not slip.

Sometimes business calls on me to put on this mask. Sometimes going to church makes it a necessity. Sometimes I put it on just to go to the store.

No one must know. If only I suffered from a broken leg – I would not mind walking with a crutch. If only I was plagued by diabetes – I could offer thanks for my insulin. But there is something wrong with my brain, my mind, the deepest part of myself. And I can hear the voices that cause me shame:

*“Christians don’t suffer from depression, anxiety, or mental or emotional problems.”*

*“You’re anxious? You just need to trust God more!”*

*“You’re being disobedient – the Bible says, ‘Be anxious for nothing.’”*

*“Just let go and let God!”*

*“Besides, what do you have to be anxious about?”*

Do you think I haven’t tried? Do you think that I have not sought God’s word, agonized in prayer, and put forth every ounce of effort into my faith?

When someone is physically ill, we pray for healing but understand that God does not always answer “yes.” Sometimes the person remains ill, struggling for years with chronic disease or pain. And though we are deeply saddened by God’s choice, we recognize that healing or not healing is his choice, and that all is done to his glory.

Yet when I am bold enough to confess my deepest shame – that there is something wrong with my mind, that my emotions are running haywire, that anxiety has taken hold – then it is somehow my fault if I am not healed. I don’t have enough faith. Or prayer. Or belief. Or trust. Or whatever. *What do you mean, you still struggle with anxiety?*

Do you not understand? This is my deepest shame – and now I have guilt as well ... guilt because I don’t measure up to your Christian standard. Guilt because I fall so often, need help so many times. Guilt because I have not been healed ...

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer and the Support Group**

The most important fact to grab hold of is that **anxiety itself is not a sin**. Consider:

- ☞ If you are a parent and your child is very sick, it is natural to be anxious. There would be something seriously wrong with your parental instincts if you were not.
- ☞ If you lost your job and your money was running out, you would be anxious. It would be superhuman not to feel such anxiety.
- ☞ If you had a serial killer loose in the neighborhood, you would be anxious. You would be foolish not to be.

**Anxiety in and of itself is a warning:** a warning that there is something wrong or dangerous in our lives. As such, it is God-given. How we *respond* to anxiety-producing situations is where the dividing line comes in: if we let the anxious situation produce *constant worrying* – worrying that is characterized by a “lack of trust in God and a failure to fully understand His plan and provision for us” (*The Anxiety Cure*, Dr. Archibald Hart, p. 16) – then we are doing what the Bible condemns when it says that we should not worry.

If, however, we take the anxiety as a warning sign and seek to *do something constructive* about the situation (i.e., seek medical attention for the child, pursue job-hunting with increased vigor, or lock your doors at night, to go back to the above examples), and *commit the results to God's care*, then we are on solid ground. We will probably still be concerned or even anxious about the situation, but we will not be worrying about it. There is a definite difference.

Now turn to the question of a severe anxiety problem. As we discussed in the section entitled “The Mind, the Body, and the Brain” at the beginning of this study, prolonged stress – *from any source or combination of sources* – can generate anxiety because it affects the chemical balance in the body and the brain. Therefore, this anxiety again is *a warning sign*: a warning that there is something out of balance in your life that must be addressed. **The anxiety itself is not a sin.** You can make a choice: you can fall into perpetual worry about your anxiety (which the Bible forbids), or you can take positive steps to address the situations that are causing the anxiety, and learn tools and techniques to cope with and/or overcome the anxiety. You do your part, and commit the results to God.

### **For the Sufferer**

Once you recognize that anxiety is not a sin, you can begin to approach it objectively. I liken it more to an illness, an injury, or a physical condition. I have poor eyesight, so I wear glasses. They focus my physical vision. I have an anxiety disorder, so I use certain techniques to help me cope with life. They focus my mental and emotional vision.

You can use examples like this to explain your situation to people who don't have personal experience with anxiety. For instance, "A person with diabetes needs insulin to regulate their blood sugar. I have an anxiety disorder, so I take Lexapro to regulate my serotonin levels." Or, "You know how your knee aches from that old injury every time a weather change comes through? Well, sometimes circumstances trigger pain in my mind - it comes out in the form of anxiety."

Because anxiety is not a sin, **you should not feel guilty because you have anxiety.** You wouldn't feel guilty because you have bad eyesight, diabetes, or a bum knee. Neither should you feel guilty for having an anxiety disorder. We are human, we live in a fallen world: therefore, we suffer from many conditions that are less than optimal. Physical problems are one of them. Mental and emotional problems are another. These are simply facts of life. We can learn to cope with both, and by God's grace we can rise above both - even if we are never "healed" entirely while in this life.

Another aspect to remember is that **you should not feel guilty because you need help.** Again, a person in a wheelchair needs help with certain tasks. As much as they might find that personally frustrating, they don't have to feel any guilt because of it - even though they will need help with those tasks for the rest of their life.

Likewise, when you learn to look objectively at your anxiety issues as a condition in life that you have to deal with, you will likely see that there are certain times and situations in which you need help. Like the person in the wheelchair, you simply cannot manage those times or tasks on your own. You may find that personally frustrating, but it should not engender guilt, even if you have to ask for help in those areas for the rest of your life.

### **For the Support Group**

If I had to give one word of admonition, it would be this: **Watch your tongue!** You cannot fathom how wounding it is to the person who is suffering from anxiety to hear thoughtless, off-the-cuff remarks and pat answers such as:

*"Christians don't suffer from depression, anxiety, or mental or emotional problems."*

*"You're anxious? You just need to trust God more!"*

*"You're being disobedient – the Bible says, 'Be anxious for nothing.'"*

*"Just let go and let God!"*

*"Besides, what do you have to be anxious about?"*

The fact is, Christians suffer from all sorts of depression, anxiety, and mental and emotional problems, even when they are trusting God with everything they've got and are doing their best to be submissive and obedient to his will. If you're ever wondering about whether something is appropriate to say, substitute a physical ailment for the anxiety and see if the statement still makes sense. For instance:

*"Christians don't suffer from diabetes, broken legs, or heart trouble."*

*"You're deaf? You just need to trust God more!"*

*"You're being disobedient – otherwise you wouldn't have tendonitis."*

*"Just let go of your Parkinson's disease and let God handle your life!"*

*"Besides, why should you have high blood pressure?"*

You can see how each of the above statements is ridiculous, and how offensive it would be to the sufferer to hear something like that said to them.

Next, I encourage you to **be upfront, open, and matter-of-fact** about the sufferer's anxiety problems. Don't talk around it, or use euphemisms to disguise it: that just makes the person feel that there is something shameful about their anxiety. You can ask bluntly, "How is your anxiety level today?" or "You sound worn out – are you having a panic attack?" By calling it what it is, without apology or embarrassment, you remove the stigma that they naturally might otherwise feel.

Finally, **reassure** the sufferer that you are there to support them whenever they need help. Remind them that it is okay to need help; we all need help at various times and in various ways – everybody is in the same boat. This is part of what it means to be the family of God.



## *Truth from the Word – All Creation is Fallen*

*“For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Romans 8:20-21*

When we think of “the Fall” in Genesis 3, we tend to think of it in terms of sin entering the world. What we sometimes forget is the full extent of the Fall: because of sin, the whole creation fell. The whole creation was “subjected to futility.” The whole creation was “enslaved to corruption.” Everything from screw-ups in our DNA to global warming is the result of the Fall.

Why is this important to understand? Because many times, people draw a distinction between physical problems and mental or emotional problems. They accept that people can have physical problems all their life, but expect and demand that mental or emotional problems be completely addressed and healed – otherwise, the sufferer obviously doesn’t have enough faith or prayer or will power, etc.

But the fact is, the Fall affected our entire being. It led to the too-busy, too-stressed lifestyles that bring on severe anxiety. It led to the genetic predispositions some of us have to anxiety disorders. It led to the irrational beliefs that aid and abet anxiety (such as the belief that “I must be perfect or I will be rejected” or “I must be in control at all times”).

It’s bittersweet, but important to swallow whole: the bitter is the need to acknowledge the fact that because of the Fall, you and your life are not perfect. Anxiety is one of the many problems you will face. It is not a matter of condemnation: it is a simple fact.

But the sweet is the realization that everything – every aspect of this fallen world that impacts you – will be redeemed. You will be set free in full. It begins now, and one day the great and glorious work will be completed.

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that your anxiety problems are the result of a fallen creation?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that your anxiety problems are not, in and of themselves, sinful?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that God is doing a good work in you, and will one day perfect and complete it (Philippians 1:6)?

## *Truth from the Word – The Truth Sets Us Free*

*“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” John 8:32*

The shame associated with having anxiety problems is based on a series of lies. The devil, “the father of lies” (John 8:44), keeps us tangled up in these half-truths and untruths to keep us from getting the help that we need. If we don’t get the help that we need, he knows that we will never be all that God intends for us to be, and that we will never be able to help others in turn. If he can only keep us *down*, he can keep us *out* of the game.

Here are some of his favorite lies – and the truths that can set us free:

**I should never be anxious.** As we stated earlier, anxiety is a warning sign that something is wrong. As such, every healthy person should feel anxiety at certain times.

**I shouldn’t take medication for my anxiety.** Why not? The truth is that anxiety has a physiological component: your body is producing chemicals in response to stress. Those chemicals have an effect on your brain, and your brain in turn has an effect on your mind (your thoughts) and emotions. Therefore, if medication can help your body regain a lost chemical balance, you should feel free to take it, just as you would take insulin to control diabetes.

**If I just would pray more or had more faith, I would get better.** Not necessarily. Stress and anxiety aren’t simply spiritual in nature. They affect body, brain, mind, emotions, and spirit. As such, healing has to take place in each of those areas, too. That may mean counseling, medication, lifestyle changes, behavior changes, thought changes, etc.

**I should become completely free of this.** Again, not necessarily. This is difficult to say, but consider: some people live for years – perhaps their entire lives – suffering from physical pain. Why would emotional or mental pain be any different? That may seem very depressing, until we realize that people suffering from physical pain can learn to rise above their pain to live fulfilling lives that satisfy them and glorify God. Likewise, you can learn tools and techniques that can bring you to a better place than you are now, though you may never be completely free during this lifetime of the pain anxiety brings. *But you can learn to rise above your anxiety to live a fulfilling life that will be satisfying to you and glorifying to God.* It is a matter of choice – and choice is always free.

☞ What lies do you believe about your anxiety? What steps can you take to live in the truth?

## *Truth from the Word – No Condemnation*

*“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1*

No condemnation. Think of it:

**No condemnation** because of your anxiety, since it is the by-product of a fallen world.

**No condemnation** because of your anxiety, since anxiety in and of itself is not sin.

**No condemnation** because of your anxiety, because even if you sin as a result of your anxiety (i.e., by excessive worrying or by speaking or acting inappropriately), you can be forgiven in Christ Jesus!

Hold on to this truth with both hands: God does not condemn you, so there is no cause for shame!

- ☞ Say the following out loud, in private: “I have an anxiety problem. It’s serious. It affects every part of my life. I am not ashamed of having anxiety. God does not condemn me for having anxiety. I can get help for my anxiety. I am free to talk about my anxiety with others. I can help others who have anxiety.” Which parts were easy for you to say? Which parts were difficult? Why?
- ☞ Some people, of course, will – from ignorance or malice – condemn you for having anxiety. They will spiritually abuse you, claiming that you are an inferior sort of Christian if you suffer from anxiety. Accept the fact: this will happen to you. Decide now: How will you respond? What, if anything, will you say? What will you do to ease the pain their hurtful words and actions will cause? Plan now for these things, so that when it happens you will be able to recover your balance swiftly, rather than letting such thoughtlessness and lies send you into a tailspin.

## *Truth from the Word – God Works Through Weakness*

*“And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” John 9:1-3*

Does God ordain sickness, whether physical, mental, or emotional? God is in complete and sovereign control, yes; but, because of our free will, he also allows many things to happen that are not part of his perfect will – sin, war, crime, etc. Sickness, too. It’s all part of being in a fallen world. So my opinion is that he doesn’t ordain these things, but he does allow them.

But this I do know for a fact: *he works through everything in life, if we turn it over to him.*

Think of the blind man. Think of his shame as the oh-so-superior words were spoken right next to him: “Who sinned? Him, or his parents?” The disciples simply assumed that sin was the cause of his blindness.

But Jesus turned that assumption on its head: “*NEITHER.*” In that one word, he lifted the shame off the blind man. And then, he went on to fill the void the departed shame left: “this was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Hope replaces shame. That is the magnificent message Jesus brings. Not only are we to have no shame because of our anxiety, but we can have great hope, because God can display his tremendous power and love and grace in and through our lives ... not *despite* our anxiety, but *because* of it.

- ☞ How can your struggle with your anxiety make you more Christ-like?
- ☞ How can your struggle with anxiety be helpful to others?
- ☞ How can your struggle with anxiety bring glory to God?
- ☞ How does this word of hope change your attitude toward your anxiety?

*Truth from the Word – Share the Good News*

*“And as He was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was entreating Him that he might accompany Him. And He did not let him, but He said to him, ‘Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone marveled.” Mark 5:18-20*

Let me be very, very firm here: if you are anxious it does *not* mean that you are either possessed or oppressed by demons. Period. End of statement. We can be quite anxious all by ourselves; we don't need any outside help!

However, this passage can be helpful to us, because the demon-possessed man probably felt something we have struggled with: *shame*. Shame that for so many years he was wild, mad, and tormented. If I put myself in his shoes, I imagine that he not only wanted to go with Jesus because Jesus had healed him, but because he didn't want to go back to his own people. Why? Because of shame. He probably wanted to start somewhere new, where no one would know his past and his deep, dark secrets.

But Jesus sent him right back to the people who knew his past, and told him to shine the light on those deep, dark secrets. What a tough commission! But Jesus knew that:

**Personal testimony is powerful.** People will ignore philosophy. They will overlook theory. They will yawn through ideas. But when you confront them with *your story*, they will sit up and pay attention.

**Personal testimony is compelling.** Many times, people who are suffering from anxiety may know what they need to do, and may even have read up on it, but can't summon the energy to get up and try. Your personal testimony can be a vital stimulus to help get them on their feet.

**Personal testimony is glorifying.** If God brings you great help and healing and you never let anyone know about it, how does that bring encouragement to others? Only when you open your mouth and tell of the wonderful things he has done for you does God receive his due praise and glory.

☞ Keep a journal of where you see God at work in your life, particularly in your anxiety. Include in it resources and friends he puts in your life to help you, and the changes you see in your thoughts and emotions. Prepare yourself to share *your story* to *God's glory*!

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

Through Jesus, you demonstrated your great love:  
For the blind, sick, and lame.  
For sinners, harlots, and convicts.  
For the poor, the unclean, and the helpless.

Jesus never turned anyone away.  
He removed the shame.  
Removed the stigma.  
Removed the curse.

And he still does so today.

I can breathe a deep sigh of relief,  
knowing that Jesus' hands reach out still -  
to touch  
to comfort  
to heal.

Thank you for the freedom that comes from your love.  
Let me take this indescribable gift  
and treasure it every day of my life.  
Let me take this indescribable gift  
and pass it on every day of my life.

Take all that I am:  
the best and the worst  
the strongest and the weakest  
the successes and the failures.  
May my life always and forever  
be for your glory.

In the name of Jesus, my Healer,

Amen.

## The Crazy Cycle

### *Facing Irrationality*

#### *Inside My Mind*

Turn your head. Look at something. Feel your eyes focus on the object, bringing it into clarity. Clean outlines, fine edges, sparkling detail.

Now imagine that object distorted in a funhouse mirror. The outline stretches out and dips in, the edges blur, the details bulge and recede.

That is what happens to my thoughts. Instead of clarity and perspective, reality is pulled like Silly Putty, stretching to the snapping point then gobbing together into an amorphous ball.

I know what's true. I know what's right. I know what's rational. But when the panic hits, they all disappear. I see only the monsters of my own brain, hear the crazy cackling of my own wild accusations, collapse under the weight of logic gone terribly wrong.

My thoughts are irrational. My fears baseless and absurd. Everything I think I know gets turned on its head.

In desperation, I try to answer these thoughts. Reason through them. Confront them with the truth.

But because they are irrational, they cannot be answered. Because they are absurd, they defy logic. And the more I try to answer them, the more panic-stricken I become when they refuse to disperse.

Then I fear all the more, because maybe they are true. Maybe they are real. But they can't be, so I try again to answer them, try again to reason with them, try again to refute them ...

But they just distort all the more ... hellish grinning faces in a funhouse from which I cannot escape.

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer**

This can be tough, but here are some practical techniques that work very well:

- ☞ **Don't react to the irrational thoughts.** That's right – accept them, acknowledge them, admit that they're there. Admit that they're ugly and even upsetting. But imagine your thoughts like a river – flowing into you, through you, and out the other side. By not attaching importance to the thoughts – for instance, by not freaking out because of them or fighting them tooth and nail – you are desensitizing your brain and body to them. You're mentally shrugging and saying, “*So what?*” Your brain and body will learn over time that odd and distorted and irrational thoughts aren't very important, and therefore are not a cause for anxiety.
- ☞ **Don't try to logic your way out.** It is your natural inclination to “prove” that the thoughts are illogical and irrational. *Don't.* If you try to rationalize your way out of the cycle, you are actually just reinforcing the cycle by attributing importance to the thoughts that are troubling you.
- ☞ **Do engage in another thought or activity.** Turn away, physically or mentally, and go do something else. Ideally, something that is 100% engaging. By breaking into the thought cycle with another – non-anxious – thought or action, you will slow the mental circling and decrease its power.

### **For the Support Group**

Here are a few do's and don'ts:

- ☞ **Don't try to combat irrational thoughts with logic.** I know it's tempting to say, “You know that's illogical, don't you?” The fact is, the sufferer *does* know that it's illogical most of the time ... that's not the problem. The problem is that he or she is *obsessing* about the issue – rational or not. Irrational thoughts are not like a knotted shoelace that you can pick at until it's free again. They are a Gordian knot, and the only way to untangle it is to slice right into it.
- ☞ **Do have the sufferer explain clearly what is bothering them.** Part of the fear of the crazy cycle is bound up in a fear of talking it out. The sufferer knows how crazy and stupid their thoughts will sound, so they're afraid to let anyone know. But by bringing them into the light of day, it helps reveal the thoughts for what they are, helps slow down the mental cycle, and helps break into the irrationality.



- ☞ **Do reassure the sufferer.** It is extremely vulnerable to let someone into the irrationality of your thoughts. Take extra care to reassure the sufferer that you love them, care for them, understand that they are not responsible for their irrational thoughts, and that you do not think less of them because they have an anxiety problem.
- ☞ **Do try to distract the sufferer.** You can't think two thoughts at once. So one way to slice the Gordian knot is to encourage (strongly, if necessary) the sufferer to think about another topic with 100% concentration.

## *Truth from the Word – Praise God at All Times*

*“Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines,  
though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food,  
though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls,  
yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.  
The Lord GOD is my strength, and he has made my feet like hinds’ feet,  
and makes me walk on my high places.” Habakkuk 3:17-19*

Habakkuk was being serious: complete drought and famine could hit Israel. This was no exaggeration. But the fact is, the crazy cycle of irrationality does the same thing inside me: I pick a point, and from there, I imagine the worst that life could become, until finally, the worst of the worst is all I can see.

One of the ways out of the crazy cycle is to follow in Habakkuk’s footsteps:

**Name your fears and irrational thoughts.** Habakkuk named his fears: no figs, no fruit, no olives, no food, no flocks, no cattle. He didn’t argue with them, deny them, or avoid them. He named them.

**Move away from your fears and irrational thoughts.** Again, Habakkuk didn’t name and re-name and re-name his fears. He didn’t stay in the place of fear. He said his piece, then moved on to more productive territory.

**Choose to focus on God.** Where did he go? He turned to thoughts of God. Likewise, replace your crazy cycle irrational thoughts with thoughts of the Creator, the Lord of the Universe, your Savior.

**Choose to rejoice in God.** Habakkuk didn’t just think about God: he took action and worshiped him. Worship is a choice. It’s a matter of the will, not the emotions. You can feel terrible, even riddled with anxiety, and choose to praise God for who he is and for what he has done in your life.

☞ Try this sequence right now, whether or not you are obsessing over irrational thoughts or fears. Name your most common concerns or irrational thoughts, then mentally put them aside, focus on the attributes and actions of God, and praise him for them. It will take time and practice to move yourself into this sequence and to see results from it, but begin the discipline now.

## *Truth from the Word – Our Thoughts and Feelings Do Not Define Reality*

*“Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, ‘Alas, my master! What shall we do?’ So he answered, ‘Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O LORD, open his eyes that he may see.’ And the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” II Kings 6:15-17*

We tend to believe that what we think and feel defines reality. If I think you’re mad at me, I will avoid you. If I believe you love me, I will open my heart to you readily. If I feel upset, I believe that my world is crashing down around my ears. If I feel confident, I will act like the world is my oyster.

But actually, in each case, we are making an assumption. The assumption is that we have *fully seen* and *correctly interpreted* reality. Based upon that assumption, we then respond with the thoughts, feelings, and actions that we believe are appropriate.

Unfortunately, anxiety tends to give us tunnel vision so that *we cannot fully see reality*, and it negatively biases our minds so that *our perceptions of what we see are skewed*. The result? Thoughts, feelings, and actions that are irrational; that is, that are out of sync with reality.

What is the solution? From the above passage in II Kings, we see three important guidelines for when anxiety and the crazy cycle hit:

**Affirm** that you may *not* have full or complete understanding of the situation.

**Talk** to someone who has their feet on the ground and ask them for their perception of the situation.

**Pray** that God would give you a clear understanding of the situation.

- ☞ Look back: how many of your fears, worries, and irrational thoughts in the past were proven to have been groundless?
- ☞ Who do you know who has their feet solidly on the ground to whom you could go for a reality check when you are stuck in the crazy cycle?
- ☞ The crazy cycle tends to make us focus inward, making it hard to pray. Write out a prayer that you can use as a starting point the next time the crazy cycle hits.

## *Truth from the Word – Walk in the Truth*

*“Teach me Your way, O LORD; I will walk in Your truth;  
unite my heart to fear Your name.” Psalm 86:11*

Paradoxically, although it is impossible to logic your way out of the crazy cycle, truth is the ultimate antidote to it. Logic wants to answer the frantic questions the crazy cycle brings. Truth avoids the crazy cycle altogether and affirms true, eternal reality: who God is, who we are, and who we are in relationship with him.

Therefore, another method of putting the brakes on the crazy cycle is to spend time in the Word. Learn it. Study it. Meditate on it. Wrap it around your mind like a cloak. Hide behind it as a shield.

When the crazy cycle hits, refute it with the truth. The truth that God is with you. That God is in control. That you don't have to be perfect. That you don't have to be ashamed. That you can change your life. That God's grace is sufficient for you.

But it is not enough to simply refute the crazy cycle with the truth; you have to *walk in the truth*. That means that you have to make decisions based on the truth – not on your irrational thoughts or beliefs. Then you have to act and carry out those decisions, rather than falling into the paralysis of fear.

As you learn to do so, the crazy cycle will slow and stop, and your heart will be united – whole, complete, and at peace – in God.

- ☞ Be objective: how well do you know the Bible (its content, doctrine, promises, stories, etc.)?
- ☞ How much Scripture have you committed to memory?
- ☞ How much time do you currently spend reading, studying, and meditating on the Bible?
- ☞ Do you need to change anything in your life to better know the Bible and the truth it teaches?

## *Truth from the Word – Healing Takes Time*

*“And they came to Bethsaida And they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’ And he looked up and said, ‘I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around.’ Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly.”*

*Mark 8:22-25*

We want miracles. We pray for them. We long for them. We even demand them.

But the fact is, miracles are miracles because they are out-of-the-ordinary. While it is possible that you might may experience a miraculous healing of your anxiety, you probably won't. Most people don't. That doesn't mean you won't experience healing – it just means that you shouldn't expect it to be miraculous, quick, or easy.

The above miracle, recorded in Mark, is particularly appropriate when looking at anxiety. The healing process took the blind man from a completely dark world, to where he could see but couldn't interpret or act upon what he saw, to where he could resume a normal life.

Likewise, the crazy cycle blinds us to reality. We can't see what is real, even though our eyes are open and staring at it. The healing process for most people involves time and effort and the grace of God. First, we begin to see things differently. We don't quite know what to make of it or what to do with what we see, but we see that there's more out there than the black hole we were previously consigned to.

Finally, after more time and effort and grace, we learn to interpret and act upon reality and truth, rather than upon the spinning darkness of the crazy cycle.

Thank God for this two-step miracle, that reminds us exactly how much is involved in the healing process!

- ☞ Do you find it difficult to accept that healing will take time and effort on your part, in addition to grace on God's part? If so, which do you have more trouble swallowing: that healing will take time, or that healing will take effort? Why?
- ☞ How much time and effort have you put into your healing process? Do you have a recovery plan in place? Do you have a support group? Do you have resources you can rely on? If not, what do you need to do to make these things happen?

## *Truth from the Word – Jesus Brings Peace*

*“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.” John 14:27*

Troubled and fearful – how well that describes the crazy cycle! The crazy cycle whispers that if you just answer all the questions that it poses, you will have peace. But the more you try to answer, the tighter and more strangling the cycle gets. Why does that happen? Because the crazy cycle is built on a series of lies:

**The Control Lie.** The crazy cycle says you have to be in control in order to have peace. The Bible says that the recognition that God is in control brings peace (Matthew 28:18).

**The Answer Lie.** The crazy cycle says that if you only had all the answers, you would be at peace. The Bible says that Jesus is the only Answer you need to know to be at peace (John 14:6).

**The Perfection Lie.** The crazy cycle says that things have to be perfect in order to have peace. The Bible says that God is at work in an imperfect world to bring about his will, and therefore you can be at peace (Romans 8:28).

☞ Which lies do you tend to believe, and why?

☞ What verses can you guard your heart with, to remind you where true peace comes from?

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

Thank you that you not only speak truth:  
you are Truth.

Truth is your very nature  
and is at the core of your being.  
And because of that,  
truth sings throughout the universe.

Help me to learn the melodies  
that give the lie to the devil's dissonance.  
Help me to understand the harmonies  
that bring order and balance to life.

When my view of reality becomes distorted,  
bring me clarity.  
When my thought processes becomes skewed,  
give me understanding.  
When my sense of proportion is out of kilter,  
help me turn to you in praise.

Let praise become not only my response to you  
when times are good,  
but my weapon and defense  
when times are bad.

Through praise,  
restore me to yourself  
restore me to myself  
restore me to my world.

In the name of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life,

Amen.

## Shaken Foundations

### *Addressing the Problem of Doubt*

#### *Inside My Mind*

Once I toured Dover Castle. A key defensive position, it was often fought over, but never taken. Walls, ramparts, towers, portcullises ... Dover was believed to be impregnable.

But it came close to falling once. When the enemy dug a tunnel that would have collapsed one of its main gates.

So doubt works in my mind. I am fighting on so many fronts, striving to battle the anxiety, the depression, the fear, the irrationality ... the castle of my inner self is under severe attack, and just when I think it cannot get worse, the gate collapses into rubble and a new enemy assaults from below.

*"Does God really care? If he is love, he would answer your prayers for healing."*

*"God may be able, but he is obviously not willing to help you. And if that is the case, what kind of God is he?"*

*"God has left you. You are alone."*

*"Your prayers ascend no farther than the ceiling – you have no faith."*

*"You are doomed to suffer your whole life in this hell ... and maybe you are no Christian at all, and you will suffer hell for eternity as well ..."*

*"There is no God."*

With these whispers, hope flees. The words on the pages of my Bible become lifeless and sterile. Terror constricts my heart and paralyzes my tongue. Do I know God? Have I ever known him? Will I ever know him?

And if I do not know him, how will I ever survive?



## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer**

The pain of doubt is one of the worst that anxiety brings on, because it snatches away hope. With hope, we can do anything. Without it, we want to curl up and die.

And it is tough not to doubt, when everything inside you seems to be shaken. Plus, you may have been on the receiving end of spiritual abuse by people who told you that if you only had more faith, you wouldn't be anxious (a big lie!).

So here are three truths to hold on to as the storms of doubt cause you to be tossed about:

- ☞ **Doubts do not mean lack of faith.** Imagine your faith as a solidly built ship. Your doubts are the waves crashing against the ship, tossing it here and there. But this is exactly what the ship has been built to withstand, so you are safe and secure. You may *feel* frightened – but you *are* safe. Why? Because the ship has been built by a carpenter named Jesus. *He* is the “Author and Perfector” of your faith (Hebrews 12:2).
- ☞ **God can handle your questions.** Don't be ashamed to come to God with your doubts. He knows what you are thinking and feeling. Keep the lines of communication open with God by praying, reading the Word, and acting in obedience to him – he will see you through.
- ☞ **Don't expect answers to your doubts delivered on a silver platter.** I know – I have sought the Scriptures many times, hoping to find that *one verse* that would clear up all my doubts so that I would never question again. You won't get it, so don't expect it. What you *will* get, as you seek the Lord and study his Word, is wisdom and character. And that, ultimately, is far better than any single answer.

### **For the Support Group**

When doubt hits, it is devastating. Here are four key ways you can support the person suffering from anxiety who is in the throes of doubt:

- ☞ **Listen.** Encourage the sufferer to talk out his or her doubts. Doubts get magnified when they are kept inside. Exposing them to the light helps take away the “bogeyman” aspect that is so terrifying.

- ☞ **Affirm.** Affirm the sufferer's faith. Affirm their Christian walk. Affirm their past service to the Lord. Affirm their calling in life. Affirm them as they pray, however faltering it is. Affirm them as they read the Scriptures and as they read other helpful books. Affirm their insights. Doubts tear down – affirmations build up. So keep affirming them in every way you can.
- ☞ **Pray.** At this point in time, the sufferer doesn't have a lot of energy to pray for themselves, or confidence that God will respond to prayer at all. So step up your prayers, and *let the sufferer know that you are doing so*. Knowing that someone else is praying for them can be a lifeline, both because it spurs them on to pray themselves, and because they know that God is being petitioned on their behalf – this knowledge alone can give them renewed confidence and strength.
- ☞ **Assist.** When doubts assail, it can be hard to read the Bible – it often seems lifeless and dead. Help the sufferer by passing on verses, insights, passages from other books, etc. Keep it short, keep it simple, and keep it coming. Your involvement can significantly help in keeping their hope alive.

## *Truth from the Word – Jesus is the Truth*

*“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life...’” John 14:6*

When I am doubting, I want answers. I want specific facts to lay to rest my specific questions.

But over time I have learned that facts are not where truth really lies. I know this, because no matter how many facts I have on hand, my doubts never fully disappear. I doubt the new facts as they appear, and new answers only give rise to new questions.

Instead, truth – and its companion, peace – is found in relationship with the One who *is* the Truth: Jesus Christ.

When I am focusing on my relationship with Jesus, I can be content to know that *he* knows the answers to my questions – I don’t have to have all the answers myself. I am comforted to know that he loves me and cares for me and protects me – in and through my doubts. I am perfectly safe from the storm of doubt when I know and have confidence in the Captain who stands at the helm of my ship. The storm may still rage, but I know that he will see me safely to shore.

- ☞ When you are struck with doubt, be sure to spend time reading the Word. Not reading to “find an answer” to your questions, but reading to understand God better.
- ☞ It can be hard to pray when you are doubting, especially if you are doubting the existence or love of God himself. Write out a series of verses that talk about God, Jesus, and his love for you. Read the verses aloud before you enter a time of prayer, and use them as a springboard for praying. For instance, John 3:16 might unfold into a prayer like this:

*“God, I affirm that you loved this fallen world so much – and that includes me – that you sent your very best to save it. That very best was your Son, Jesus. Thank you for giving your very best, even when you knew I would doubt him and you. Jesus, thank you for coming and dying on the cross to save me, even though you knew that I would doubt you now. Your love encompasses and transcends my doubts. You have given eternal life to me because I truly believe in you, regardless of what my doubts are now whispering inside me. Help me to know you better through this period of doubting, so that my faith in you and my love for you would grow even stronger.”*

## *Truth from the Word – The Holy Spirit Reveals Truth*

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth...” John 16:13*

To understand that Jesus embodies ultimate Truth does not mean that we should not think through our doubts and questions. We serve a rational, orderly God who, in creating us in his image, gave us the gift of reason. It is appropriate to think through doubts and questions to seek for answers, as long as we acknowledge and accept that some matters will always be beyond our reach and understanding. Many times our faith will be strengthened and deepened as we seek to apply our reason to our doubts.

Here, in John, we see the affirmation that God will guide us into all truth. He, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, will reveal all the knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and insight that we need.

That is very comforting, indeed! We serve a God who is truth, and therefore he reveals truth. While we do indeed walk by faith and not by sight, our faith is grounded solidly in revealed truth.

But here is a key point: it is the *Holy Spirit* who reveals truth to us. Once again, we are reminded that truth is found and revealed only through our relationship with God. We cannot achieve or attain truth solely on our own.

- ☞ Spend some time considering the Holy Spirit as he is revealed in the following verses: John 14:26, Romans 8:14, Acts 8:29, Acts 13:4, Romans 8:26-27, Ephesians 4:30, I Corinthians 6:11, John 14:16, Romans 8:2, Genesis 1:2, II Peter 1:21, John 3:5-6, II Thessalonians 2:13.
- ☞ It is easy to be so frightened by doubts that we sit and worry and do nothing. What positive, proactive steps can you take when you are doubting?

### *Truth from the Word – Doubting is Human*

*“Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream with water that is unreliable?” Jeremiah 15:18*

You need not be ashamed of your doubts. Doubting is very human. Even great prophets like Jeremiah, whose lips had been touched by God himself, doubted.

Here, Jeremiah was doubting God’s goodness and reliability. He knew God existed and had called him, but God seemed to have let him down. God didn’t appear to be providing either the resources or the results his prophet expected.

In your struggle with anxiety, you are very likely to have the same doubts at some point – perhaps at many points: “Where are you, God? Do you care? Where are your resources? What happened to your promises? Where is your presence? I feel so alone – so abandoned.”

When you have these doubts, take this for comfort: even the great prophets of old had those questions. You don’t need to be ashamed because of your doubts. Acknowledge them. Admit them.

And remember this: ultimately, God never let them down. The same will be true for you.

- ☞ What kind of doubts do you struggle with most frequently?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that men and women of great faith through all the millennia have doubted as you are doubting now?

## *Truth from the Word – Move Forward Despite Doubt*

*“Therefore, thus says the LORD, ‘If you return, then I will restore you – before Me you will stand; and if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman. They for their part may turn to you, but as for you, you must not turn to them.’” Jeremiah 15:19*

When I first studied this passage – and even since then – I have struggled with God’s response to Jeremiah’s doubt and despair. Here, his prophet poured out his heart to God, asking if God was really with him, if he cared, if was going to act. And God’s answer is almost brusque: “Get your relationship with me right, do your job, and stand up.”

Not exactly comforting. But sometimes, the fact is that we don’t need comfort. We need a kick in the pants. Doubt can mire us down – as it evidently was doing for Jeremiah. Plus, he had apparently let his doubts draw him away from God. On all fronts, he was stuck.

God knew that this was a time for tough love, so he pointed out the problem, and commanded his prophet to get his act together and do his job. Likewise, we sometimes need this tough love. It’s as if God is saying to us, “Yes, you’re doubting. Yes, things are hard. Here’s my answer: get back on your knees and start praying, then stand up and do your job, doubts or no doubts. It’s time to get your priorities straight.”

No pity parties allowed. Stand up, and move forward.

- ☞ How do you tend to respond when someone rebukes or reproves you? Why?
- ☞ What happens to your faith if you focus on your doubts?
- ☞ What do you need to do right now to move forward despite your doubts?

## Truth from the Word – Obedience Strengthens Faith

*“Then I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; and though they fight against you, they will not prevail over you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you,” declares the LORD.” Jeremiah 15:20*

God didn't stop with his rebuke to Jeremiah. After delivering a solid, “Stand up and get with the program,” God gave a powerful promise: “I will make you a fortified wall of bronze – I will make you so strong that nothing and no one will prevail over you. And if that is not enough, I give you my oath that I will be with you, I will save you, and I will deliver you.”

That is some promise. It takes at least a little of the sting away from the kick in the pants God just gave Jeremiah.

But notice what precedes the promise: that little word “then.” This is a cause-and-effect promise. *If you return, then I will restore. If you do your job, then I will strengthen. If you obey, then I will save.*

What's going on here? God is declaring a great truth: *obedience strengthens faith*. Doubt can draw us away from God, if we let it. Obedience is the conscious act of turning toward God. It can seem counterintuitive to turn toward the One whom we are doubting, but this is the key: *obedience is an act of the will*. We can always choose to be obedient, doubts or no doubts.

When we act in obedience in the face of our doubts – when we turn to God despite the fact that we feel like we hardly know or understand him – he gives us this tremendous promise in turn: “Your doubts will fade. Your faith will be restored. Your spirit will be strengthened. Your life will be transformed. Nothing and no one will be able to batter you down, because *you* will have learned to stand firm and because *I myself* will do battle for you.”

- ☞ How do doubts try to impede your obedience to God?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that obedience is an act of the will?
- ☞ How might struggling with doubts and learning to be obedient in the face of them strengthen your faith and your character?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that God will deliver on this great promise if you choose to live in obedience despite your doubts?

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

I drag the words from the depths of my being:  
Are you there?  
Do you care?  
What is real?

I affirm the truth through sheer faith and will:  
You are here.  
You are love.  
I will survive.

When I read your Word, it seems dry and stale.  
May it still be the bread of life that keeps me alive.

The ever-living stream has vanished,  
leaving only my ever-flowing tears in its wake.

Yet I will stand.

Spirit, guide me  
though I cannot sense your presence.

Jesus, protect me  
though I cannot see your hand.

Father, love me  
though I cannot see your face.

I have nothing to offer except the grim determination  
to carry on despite my doubts.

It is a gift of blood, and sweat, and tears.

In the name of Jesus, who always lives to intercede for me,

Amen.



## The Rage Within

### *Calming the Violence of Anger*

#### *Inside My Mind*

I have a deep secret that few know. Beyond my shame at my anxiety is something even more frightening. A secret I feel I must hide at all costs.

And that is the secret of my rage within.

It is not always there. But when it comes, it breaks on my brain like a tsunami.

Sometimes failure triggers it.

Sometimes exhaustion triggers it.

Sometimes shame triggers it.

But the rage comes, violent and angry: I hate myself. I hate my mind and my brain. I hate what is happening to me. And I hate God for letting it happen.

I feel like screaming, and I want to beat my head against the wall to drive out the crazy thoughts, to pound the anxieties into a pulp, to injure myself to unconsciousness – as if that might give me an hour's surcease from the tumult in my brain.

I hate what anxiety does to me. I am furious that I have been victimized by my own brain and body. I despise myself for failing every day. I want to pound on the doors of heaven to demand deliverance – and if God will not deliver me, I want him at least to answer my questions – *Why? Why me? Why now? Why this? Why, God? Why?*

I hold tight to self-control. Holding myself rigid and still. Waiting for the rage to pass.

I must not give in.

I must not.

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer**

Be aware that this chapter addresses only the anger you feel at your anxiety problem itself. Underlying issues of anger or rage, perhaps because of past hurts, are outside the scope of this study.

First, then, recognize that **anger itself is not sinful**. You should not assign any blame to yourself because the feeling of anger rises within you.

Second, realize that **anger is a natural response**. Not only is your anger not sinful, but it is completely understandable. You are struggling with complex and interrelated issues that touch every area of life, you have suffered for months if not years, you may have faced scorn or lack of understanding from others, etc. A person would have to be superhuman not to feel anger at the pain, the trials, and the difficulties encountered.

Third, focus on the fact that **anger can be channeled into positive or negative actions**. For example, a negative action would be inflicting harm on yourself or another person (or even on an inanimate object). A positive action would be choosing to use the energy anger provides to take an active step forward in your recovery. Anxiety breeds apathy, but anger floods us with energy. In that regard, anger can be a blessing in disguise: use its energy wisely!

### **For the Support Group**

The advice above is so important that I will re-state it here for the support group:

- ☞ **Affirm** the sufferer's right to be angry.
- ☞ **Seek** to understand their pain.
- ☞ **Help** them channel their anger into appropriate positive action.

## *Truth from the Word – Anger is Part of the Image of God*

*“His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime.” Psalm 30:5*

Time and again throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God is revealed as experiencing anger. Therefore, we can state with sureness that anger is an appropriate part of God’s character.

But now we need to move one step further: because we are made in God’s image, *anger is an appropriate part of our character.*

God’s anger is against sin and unrighteousness. Our anger, unfortunately, tends to be a lot more wide-ranging, and often includes things we have no right to be angry about. Another problem is that, while God always demonstrates his anger in appropriate ways, we often do not.

Because we are often angry at inappropriate things or act our anger out in inappropriate ways, people sometimes tell us (or we tell ourselves) that “we should *never* be angry.” “Never”? No, that is a lie of the devil. We have every right to be angry at the things that make God angry. We have every right to demonstrate and act on our anger as long as we do not sin in doing so.

Rather than being ashamed of your anger, it is time to hold it up to the light, examine it, reject what is sinful, and embrace what is good.

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that anger, in and of itself, is part of the image of God within you?
- ☞ What parts of your anger at your anxiety are justifiable? What parts are not?
- ☞ What is an appropriate way of addressing or demonstrating your anger? What is not?

*Truth from the Word – Be Honest with God*

*“Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur,  
and He will hear my voice.” Psalm 55:17*

David was angry. A close friend had betrayed him, with bitter results. So what did he do? I could say that he called upon God and prayed. David himself was more blunt: “Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur.”

Complaining. Murmuring. David was being devastatingly honest with God: about his situation, about the pain it was causing, about his despair, and about his anger. Without apology, he brought it all before God night and day, complaining and griping about what was happening.

We see two important truths from this psalm:

**It is all right to be honest with God.** God can handle your anger. Pour it out to him. Let him be the first one you turn to, and hold nothing back.

**Honesty with God brings resolution.** If you read through Psalm 55, you will see a progression. David pours out his pain and expresses his anger, but then the tumult of his emotions begins to calm down. He reaffirms his trust in God, culminating with the verse, “Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).

If you are honest with God about your anger, you will find that he will help you to think through the situation and to place your trust in him. But he can only work with what you bring him, so bring him everything.

- ☞ What were you brought up to think about anger and being angry? Were these ideas true and scriptural or not?
- ☞ Do you feel comfortable being completely honest with God about your anger? Why or why not?
- ☞ What are you most angry about? Spend time in prayer telling God about the situation, and about your anger.

## *Truth from the Word – God Will Help You Change*

*“His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness.” II Peter 1:3*

Part of the anger generated by anxiety is the anger caused by feeling trapped. I feel as if I am being victimized by my anxiety, by my brain, and by my body. That I am powerless to change.

But the fact is, God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. What does that mean? Does it mean that we are assured complete healing and happiness? No. It does not. We may recover completely, or we may struggle to a greater or lesser degree with anxiety for the rest of our lives. This promise of God's, however, transcends our circumstances and situation to assure us that *whatever life holds*, we can experience:

**Power.** We don't have to rely on only our own resources; God will empower us to accomplish what he desires in our lives (I Corinthians 2:3-5).

**Fulfillment.** We need never be trapped in a purposeless existence, because God has planned good things for us (Ephesians 2:10).

**Contentment.** We can come to terms with our situation, whatever that situation may be (Philippians 4:11-13).

**Growth.** We need never stay where we are; we can grow and change for the better (I Timothy 6:11-12).

**Peace.** We can experience the peace that passes understanding, because we know the Person who is in complete control (Philippians 4:7).

Trapped? No. Not us. Not with a Deliverer named Jesus.

- ☞ When and why do you tend to feel trapped?
- ☞ Where do you see God's power at work in your life right now? Where do you want to see him work? Pray about your needs and desires for change.
- ☞ What makes you feel fulfilled?
- ☞ Who do you know who is contented, despite difficult life circumstances? What can you learn from them?
- ☞ Where do you need to grow? What proactive steps will you take toward that end?

## *Truth from the Word – Express Anger Appropriately*

*“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.’ So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, ‘Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?’ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’” Numbers 20:7-12*

Moses was rightfully angry at the Hebrew people. They griped and complained at every turn, and continually turned away from the Lord. Yet again they needed water, and yet again they didn't trust God for it. Nevertheless, God was willing to meet their needs one more time, and he gave specific instructions to Moses.

Moses, however, let his anger control him, instead of the other way around. And as a result, he himself would never see the Promised Land. From Moses' example, we see that when we are angry, we should:

**Honor the LORD.** Anger tends to make us very self-focused. Even if you have “righteous indignation,” keep your eyes off yourself and on God.

**Watch your tongue.** You can positively hear Moses' scathing voice, “Listen now, you rebels!” Regardless of how angry you are, don't throw around insults and epithets.

**Control your actions.** When you are fit to bursting, you want to lash out. Sometimes a physical expression of anger may be appropriate, but most of the time it isn't. While you should not internalize your anger, you should control your outward expressions of it.

- ☞ How do you express anger? Are you in line with Scripture with what you do and say?
- ☞ Looking back at times when you were angry, what words or actions fed your anger so that it increased, and what words or actions addressed your anger so that it decreased?

*Truth from the Word – Let the Past be the Past*

*“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;  
You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,  
That my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent  
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to You forever.”  
Psalm 30:11-12*

Another aspect of anger is the anger at the years and joys anxiety has stolen away. This is, again, very understandable and natural. The great promise of God, however, is that he can turn your grieving into dancing. He can take the sackcloth of your life and clothe you with gladness. He can replace your anguished cries with songs of thanksgiving.

But there is a catch.

You have to be willing to let go of the past.

As long as you stay at the graveside of lost years and dashed joys, you will never move out into freedom of the dance.

As long as you refuse to get out of your sackcloth, you will never put on the silken robes of gladness.

As long as you sit and focus on what anxiety took from you, you will never be able to rejoice in all God is giving you in the present.

You have to let the past be the past. Otherwise, you will never experience life in the present.

It is your choice.

- ☞ What parts of your past do you have trouble letting go of? Why?
- ☞ Anger sours to bitterness if it is not expressed and addressed. Do you struggle with bitterness? If so, about what?
- ☞ What steps can you take to let go of the past and any anger you may have about it, and move forward into the present?

*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

I feel trapped.

Trapped by you,  
because you could have prevented this suffering.  
Trapped by me,  
because I cannot seem to overcome this suffering.  
Trapped by the past,  
because all I can see is the loss caused by this suffering.

And because I feel trapped, I am so angry.

But the fact is,  
I am not trapped by you:  
Yes, Adam's sin ripples down right to today and right into me.  
But your grace is sufficient for the depth of my need.

I am not trapped by me:  
Yes, I have both struggled unsuccessfully and succumbed passively in the past.  
But none of that has any bearing on my future and on what I can do and become.

I am not trapped by the past:  
Yes, my anxiety has caused me to forfeit a great deal of joy and contentment.  
But you call me to live in the present, for you are the great I AM.

Help me to use my anger wisely. Appropriately. Usefully.

Let it no longer be a weight around my neck,  
but a tool in my hand to accomplish great things.

I acknowledge that it is a strange tool, and a powerful one.  
Give me the self-control to use it for your glory and my good.

In the name of Christ, the KING of kings and the LORD of lords,

Amen.



## Gasping for Breath

### *Finding the Strength to Carry On*

#### *Inside My Mind*

Think of the marathon runner. Hour after hour, her feet pound out the beat. Mile after mile until the miles blur and all she can see is the finish line, fixed in her mind's eye. Her chest breaks the tape, and she throws her arms up in victory – then she collapses to the tarmac, lungs heaving for air.

Now imagine no mile markers. No finish line. No victory.

An endless race where sometimes you run, but then weakness overtakes you and you slow to a jog, then to a walk. Imagine the shoes run off your feet, and the asphalt turning to jagged rocks under your soles. And still you must run. Or walk. Or crawl. Bloody step by bloody step. And there is no end.

That is the battle in my mind. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, month after month, season after season, year after year. Sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, but often – oh, so often – crawling through the day, gasping for breath, trembling on the brink of exhaustion.

I have gone so many miles – I feel I cannot stumble one more step.

Sometimes I know things I ought to be doing, but I simply do not have the strength to try.

I know that success is getting up one more time than I fall down, but you cannot believe how many times I have fallen.

*One more time, my mind whispers. Or is that God's voice? You must get up one more time.*

And I groan, and put bloody palms to the ground, and will myself to stand one more time.

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Sufferer**

I can't tell you how many times I have reminded myself that "Success is getting up one more time than you fall down." That itself has prodded me, groaning, to my feet. But in addition to applying pure and simple willpower, here are some other ways of gaining strength:

- ☞ **Make sure you keep the lines of communication open between you and God.** Praying, reading the Word, and engaging in worship are vital to your survival. No matter how small the prayers, no matter if you can only take in a single verse a day, no matter if one song leaves you exhausted – keep the lines of communication open. God will honor your faithfulness with his unending grace.
- ☞ **Learn more about anxiety.** Don't believe Satan's lie that you are trapped forever in anxiety. Read books, research on the Internet, and engage in professional counseling. Learn the facts, tools, and techniques to help you get *out*.
- ☞ **Believe that you can change.** I cannot stress this enough: people often stay in anxiety because they think they *cannot* change. That is a lie. *You can change*. Your life can change. You do not have to stay where you are now. When you truly embrace that truth, it will fill you with new energy ... the energy called *hope*. The race is *not* interminable – there *is* a finish line, and you *can* reach it.

### **For the Support Group**

Here I need to address you as the support group very seriously. Listen carefully:

*Anxiety is a long-term problem and requires long-term support.*

Read it again. Don't just nod your head and pass on lightly – this is serious business. Long-term support might mean:

- ☞ Providing *years* of consistent encouragement – not just days or weeks or months.
- ☞ Growing in both knowledge and understanding of the sufferer's issues.
- ☞ Supporting the sufferer through difficult life-changes that may be essential to relieving their long-term stress.
- ☞ Being patient as the sufferer addresses the same issues repeatedly.
- ☞ Praying consistently for the sufferer.

Quite frankly, we aren't that good at providing long-term support in our culture today. We're too busy, too self-centered, and too used to instant results. But supporting someone with an anxiety problem turns all that on its head: We have to slow down, because someone who is hurting needs our help. We have to be other-focused, often sacrificially. We have to realize that true healing may take years of work and effort.

Sacrificial giving means being there for the other person. When it's convenient and when it's not. Year in and year out. Accepting, reassuring, lifting them up, sometimes prodding them forward. Does that mean that you are to be treated like an endless well of resources that is there only to be sucked dry? By no means! Appropriate sacrificial giving is also *wise* giving – that means that you have to take care of yourself in order to take care of the other person. It means that you learn about the other person's condition so that you can respond appropriately. It means that sometimes you have to deliver tough love to help the other person embrace positive change. It means that – on rare occasions – you need to step back or even out of the picture if the other person is more interested in pity than in recovery.

But for the sufferer who *is* interested in change, who *does* want to recover, who *is* doing everything in their power to move into a place of wholeness – *they need you*. You can be an integral part of providing the sufferer the strength they need to carry on. Anxiety is exhausting – terribly exhausting. They need your help. But for you to help, for you to strengthen them, *you have to be there*. The most important thing you can give is your presence: *be there* for them. You will never know the hope and strength and courage you provide simply because they know that they have a friend who is on their side.

## *Truth from the Word – God is Compassionate*

*“And Elijah was afraid and arose and ran for his life .... He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, ‘Arise, eat.’ Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, ‘Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you.’ So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.” I Kings 19:3-8*

This passage is, to me, one of the most tender images we have of God. We see Elijah – the strong, courageous, faithful prophet – exhausted. Completely done in physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. He actually begged God to let him die in the wilderness.

Does God rebuke his prophet? Get irritated and demand that Elijah stand up and get with the program? Tell him to snap out of it?

No. God comes to him. In person. This is “the angel of the LORD” – the preincarnate Christ. And God makes him a meal, bids him eat, and tells him to go back to sleep. And when Elijah wakes up, God has again been in the kitchen, and has made him a second meal. And as he eats, God says softly, “I know how hard this is. I know this is a tough journey. Take your time. Regain your strength. I’m here.”

- ☞ Imagine God coming to you in your pain and exhaustion and comforting you as he did Elijah. Take the time to imagine in the scene in detail. How does it make you feel?
- ☞ One of the places that God meets with us to extend us his comfort and his strength is during our quiet time: time we spend reading his Word and talking with him. How is your quiet time right now? What do you tend to do during your quiet time? How long do you spend? Are you spending enough time to actually be able to quiet your heart to hear God speak?

### *Truth from the Word – Follow Jesus' Example When Tempted*

*"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came ..."* Matthew 4:1-3

The reason Jesus can be our merciful and faithful high priest (Hebrews 4:14-15) is because he suffered as we suffer, and he was tempted as we are tempted.

Consider: Jesus wasn't tempted by Satan right after coming up out of the water of baptism, right after being announced as the Lamb of God, right after hearing the voice from heaven and seeing the Spirit descend as a dove. Temptation then would have been easy to overcome: Jesus would have been feeling great.

No. Instead, Satan waited. Waited until the Son of Man had become exhausted in the wilderness. Waited until forty days and nights of fasting had taken their toll. Waited until the pain, the sunburn, the blisters, the dirt, and the fatigue had accomplished their dreadful work on the body of the incarnate Word.

Then, Satan struck.

*"Why don't you take the easy way out?"*

*"Why don't you give in to pride?"*

*"Why don't you forget about God?"*

Satan whispers such dreadful temptations to us when we are exhausted, too. But we have an example we can follow: our Savior, Jesus Christ. The same Word that he turned to is available for us, every day.

- ☞ What temptations do you most commonly face when you are exhausted?
- ☞ What Scriptures can you turn to to resist these temptations?
- ☞ Who can you turn to to help you resist these temptations?

## *Truth from the Word – God Will Not Let You Be Destroyed*

*“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...” II Corinthians 4:4-7*

Afflicted. Perplexed. Persecuted. Struck down. Anxiety does all those things to us, sapping our resources and our strength.

That is reality. It happens. The suffering is real, and intense.

But here is the greater reality: despite the affliction, through the confusion, regardless of the exhaustion, God will never let you be destroyed. He knows that we are fragile earthen vessels, and he extends “the surpassing greatness of his power” so that we will always survive, no matter what life – or our anxiety – throws at us.

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that intense suffering is part of this life – for everyone?
- ☞ Look back over your life: How has God’s power kept you from being crushed? How has his truth kept you from despairing? How has his presence reminded you that you are not forsaken? How has his grace prevented you from being destroyed?

*Truth from the Word – Rely on Your Father*

*“For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out ‘Abba! Father!’”  
Romans 8:15*

Consider the contrast we see in this verse as we apply it to anxiety:

**Anxiety makes us slaves.** God makes us sons and daughters – individuals free to choose and to act.

**Anxiety leads to fear.** God leads us to security as we trust in him and gain the courage to move forward in life.

**Anxiety isolates us.** God welcomes us into his family with open arms.

**Anxiety robs us of our resources.** God makes all his resources available for the asking.

When we crumple with exhaustion, when we feel our anxiety has beaten us down, when we are afraid that we will not make it, when we have nothing left to give, we need to do one thing: *rely on our Father.*

- ☞ How can a better understanding of our identity in Christ help us address our anxiety?
- ☞ What do you have trouble trusting God with, and why? What steps can you take to begin entrusting these matters to God?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that God is your Father – always welcoming you, always loving you, always ready to help you?

## *Truth from the Word – God is a God of Hope*

*“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13*

With hope, we can get up one more time, no matter how exhausted we are. Hope brings determination, courage, and confidence. And the good news is: *God is a God of hope.*

Where do we find hope to carry on when we are exhausted? Here are four sources of hope that God provides:

**Hope from the Word.** As we study the Bible, we learn to trust in the character and promises of God, giving us a solid foundation of hope (Romans 15:4).

**Hope from the resurrection.** Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we can be confident that God is at work in our lives now (Romans 8:11).

**Hope from the Spirit.** God has set his Spirit in us! One of the activities of the Spirit is to fill us with hope (Romans 15:13).

**Hope from the future.** Can the future be a source of hope? Absolutely! Romans 8:23-25 reminds us that we will one day be completely redeemed: body, soul, and spirit. In that day, anxiety will be no more!

- ☞ We often think of hope as a feeling, but the actual definition of hope is “a desire accompanied by some confident expectation” (American Heritage Dictionary). Therefore, we may *feel* terrible or exhausted or anxious, but still *live* in hope. Compare your understanding of hope with this definition: do you need to adjust your thinking about hope?
- ☞ What aspects of your anxiety are most troubling to you right now? What hope does the Bible provide you with regard to those specific matters?
- ☞ Spend time in prayer, asking God to fill you with hope through his Spirit.



*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

My soles are bloody from the hard road,  
and my soul is bleeding.

How can I continue on?

Will anything ever change?

I lost hope a long, long time ago.

Thank you that I can come to you,  
trusting the tenderness of your love.

Thank you that I can come to you,  
trusting the effectiveness of your Word.

Thank you that I can come to you,  
trusting the resurrection of your hope.

With you at my side,  
I can continue.

With you at my side,  
I can change.

With you at my side,  
I can live.

In the name of Jesus, the Suffering Servant,

Amen.

## A Whispered Cry

### *Admitting the Loneliness of Pain*

#### *Inside My Mind*

When the rage passes and the exhaustion is not at its peak; when shame is temporarily in abeyance and my mind has a moment of stillness – then I can hear my own whisper. Sitting on the edge of the bed, or curled in my chair:

*I am so lonely, Father.*

People can see a physical hurt, but they cannot see my pain inside.

They can understand the loss of a loved one, but they cannot comprehend my grief at what I have lost in the years anxiety has taken.

It has been such a lonely road. The hardest battles I have fought have been silent, and internal.

I have been blessed by loved ones who have stood beside me, held my hand, and comforted my heart. But there is a place where even they cannot go, and where I must walk alone.

*I am so lonely, Father.*

Why have you placed this burden on me? Why let it remain for so long, why let me suffer so much?

Is it so that I can hear something in the stillness?

See something I might never have seen?

Know you in a way I would never have experienced?

*Speak, Lord. I am listening.*

## *Practical Matters*

### **For the Support Group**

This time, I will address the support group first. Please do not make light of the suffering the other person is experiencing. It is excruciating. And along that same line, do not make comparisons such as “Well, look at *that* person – they have it much worse than you. You shouldn’t feel so bad!”

I have learned over the years this truth: *any* pain is all-consuming. It doesn’t matter whether I just hit my thumb with a hammer, or just had my leg amputated. When I’m in pain, it takes all my attention, and it really, really *hurts*. And when I’m hurting, I feel terribly *alone*.

So please – be the shoulder to cry on. Be the strong arm that encircles the sufferer with strength. Be the hand that lifts them up. Be the friend who walks beside them.

And when the loneliness hits at its worst, when the pain drives to the deepest depths, recognize that there is a place you cannot go, even though you yearn to offer comfort. Just be there for them, and pray. And be assured that the One who cried from the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” will go where you cannot. He, and only he, is Jehovah Shammah: *the God who is Present*.

### **A Final Word for the Sufferer**

This is so important that I will say it three times:

- ☞ **You are not alone.** You have a support group of friends and family who, even if they have not suffered with anxiety themselves, love you and care for you.
- ☞ **You are not alone.** Literally millions of others have walked and are now walking this road. In addition to your family and friends, you may benefit from the fellowship of an online or physical support group of fellow sufferers. People who really know what’s it’s like, who have been there, who know the ropes and who know the pain.
- ☞ **You are not alone.** Yes, I know: in the final analysis, no man or woman can literally share your pain with you. But the great, freeing, glorious truth is this: *God can*. On Calvary, Jesus’ hands were scarred with your pain. His feet bled from the road you are now walking. His head bent under the suffering you are now enduring. He knows, and he is with you so that *you will never, ever be alone*.

## *Truth from the Word – Friendship is a Gift from God*

*“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” Proverbs 17:17*

It is easy to cut ourselves off from others when we are suffering from anxiety. Anxiety makes us fear. Fear makes us doubt. Doubt makes us ashamed. Shame makes us hide.

But God whispers to us, “This is what I created friends for. Trust me. Trust them. Reach out.”

Friends stand by us when we are anxious. They support us when we are afraid. They bolster our faith when we are doubting. They remind us that they love us, no matter what.

But your friends need to know you are struggling if they are to help you. They need to know where you hurt in order to comfort you. So don't hesitate. Reach out. Your true friends will reach back.

- ☞ Who are your best and closest friends?
- ☞ Do you ever avoid reaching out to your friends for help? If so, why?
- ☞ Have you told your friends about your struggle with anxiety? Why or why not?

## *Truth from the Word – Loneliness Brings Blessing*

*“Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.’ But he said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.’” Genesis 32:24-28*

Anxiety is a wrestling match. We wrestle with our anxiety, with ourselves, with the devil, and with God. Much of that struggle is internal – and terribly, terribly lonely.

But Scripture reminds us repeatedly that being alone is essential to growth and blessing. Jonah had to be alone to repent of his sin. Jacob had to be alone to be transformed into Israel. Elijah had to be alone to hear the still, small voice of God.

And then we see Jesus. Coming alone into a virgin's womb. Going alone into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Staying alone on the mountain to pray. Traveling alone up the hill of Calvary.

There is no denying the pain of loneliness. But there is also no denying the blessing God brings from it.

That is the meaning of grace.

- ☞ When does loneliness hit you the most and hurt the worst?
- ☞ How do you react to your feelings of loneliness?
- ☞ What have you learned or how have you matured from being lonely?

## *Truth from the Word – Jesus Understands Loneliness*

*“And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” Mark 15:34*

There has never been greater loneliness than the loneliness on the Cross. Jesus, who from eternity had been one with the Father, was separated from him. The weight of sin crushed him, causing him to be accursed. And at the height of his pain and suffering, the Father appeared to abandon him.

And while my heart breaks because of what Jesus suffered for me, I am so very, very glad that he did. Because it means that he understands. He is no distant God: immovable, unshakable, removed from the world he created. He came and walked this earth and suffered and died so that he could truly say, “Yes, I understand the pain. I understand the loneliness. I understand the grief. I have walked the same road that you are on now.”

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that Jesus not only intellectually understands pain and suffering and loneliness, but that he has *experienced* it?
- ☞ Jesus’ suffering isn’t the end of the story. His suffering qualified him for a very special role. Hebrews 2:17 affirms, “Therefore, Jesus had to be made like his brethren in all things, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest ...” What does it mean to you to realize that Jesus is extending mercy to you, is faithful to you, and is interceding for you all the time?
- ☞ Likewise, your suffering isn’t the end of the story. Your suffering qualifies you for a very special role. Ask God to use your loneliness and suffering to increase your sense of compassion and mercy for others, and to deepen your ability to serve them.

## *Truth from the Word – God is Always With Us*

*“Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.” II Corinthians 1:21-22*

Here is the glorious truth: *because* of the unfathomable loneliness and separation that happened at the Cross, *you and I will never be alone!* When Jesus rose victorious from the dead, he sent his Spirit to live in our hearts so that he himself would be with us always.

Think of it – because God himself is living within us:

**You never have to worry about your limited resources,** because the Spirit is within you with all of God’s power (Romans 8:11).

**You never have to worry about your prayers bouncing back from the ceiling,** because the Spirit is within you, listening to every whisper of your heart and interceding on your behalf (Romans 8:26)

**You never have to worry that your anxiety will separate you from God,** because the Spirit is within you, guaranteeing your place in God’s love (Romans 8:35-39).

- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that the Holy Spirit is always living within you, regardless of whether or not you “feel” his presence?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that the Holy Spirit is interceding for you constantly?
- ☞ What does it mean to you to realize that *nothing* – not your anxiety, fear, doubt, shame, irrational thoughts, etc. – can separate you from the love of God in Christ?

## *Truth from the Word – Comfort Others*

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” II Corinthians 1:3-4*

“So that.” Those two little words in the above verses pack a powerful punch. When we have been the recipients of God’s comfort, we have a responsibility: a responsibility to pass on what we have received.

That means that we cannot sweep our struggle with anxiety under the rug and hope no one goes poking around and finds it. Be honest: it’s often what we want to do. We want to pretend like nothing is wrong; pretend like nothing has ever been wrong. But that is actually one of the many faces of pride. We are, in essence, being too proud to admit that we have had a problem; that we have been in need of God’s grace.

On the other hand, when we obey God’s command to pass on his comfort, it takes humility. We have to admit our humanity. Our weakness. Our struggle. Our doubts. Our fears.

But by the amazing grace of God, our very humility and humanity become the source of comfort, wisdom, strength, faith, and courage for others.

So reach out. You have been given great gifts by God during the course of your struggle with anxiety. Don’t hold those gifts to yourself. Pass them on.

- ☞ How has God comforted you in your anxiety?
- ☞ How has God provided for you in the midst of your anxiety?
- ☞ What wisdom have you gained from your struggle with anxiety?
- ☞ How can you pass on what you have received to help others?



*Prayer from the Heart*

Father,

Thank you for the loneliness.

Thank you, because it has caused me to rely on you alone.

Thank you, because it has deepened my sense of compassion.

Thank you, because it has been the soil where wisdom has grown.

Now, I offer back to you  
my increased faith  
my increased love  
my increased understanding.

Use them for your glory  
and for the good and healing of others.

Help me to gently lead others  
through the loneliness  
to the Cross  
and from the Cross  
to the fullness of resurrection.

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God,

Amen.