

Coping with anxiety

*All your anxiety, all your care,
Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there,
Never a burden He cannot bear,
Never a friend like Jesus!*¹

Early in His ministry, the Lord Jesus gathered His disciples around him on a mountainside and taught them (Matthew 5-7). The content of the “Sermon on the Mount” was astonishing and revolutionary. In one famous passage, Jesus commands “Do not worry about your life” in particular food, clothes and health (Matthew 6:25-34 NIV). Many other translations say “Do not be anxious”. This was going to be particularly relevant to the disciples who had left jobs and homes to follow Him, so faced great uncertainty, but it is a message for us all.

The Greek word used is *merimnao*, meaning to worry anxiously – the frame of mind which gives us careworn days and sleepless nights. Jesus is not forbidding prudent forward thinking and planning. He is telling us not to let ourselves engage in the pointless fretting that cannot change the past and may even make us literally sick with worry as we contemplate all kinds of terrible things that might occur in the future. This kind of worry can hinder our judgement and decision-making.

Anxiety may become severe, and anxiety disorders are common, well recognised mental health problems. Anxiety and depression may feed off one another. Persistent worry can steal and destroy our Christian joy.

When we think of the past, it should be to look at what the Lord has done, and seek to regain our equilibrium by remembering how He has rescued us or others. The downcast psalmist ordered himself to remember God (Psalm 42:6). John Newton wrote in his hymn *Amazing Grace*: “Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

What the Bible says

Command Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. (Matthew 6:34 ESV).

Commit Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6 NIV)

Calm I want you to be free from anxieties. (1 Corinthians 7:32 NRSV)

Confidence Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7 NIV)

Consider Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? (Matthew 6:27 ESV)

Comfort Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not!” (Isaiah 35:4 ESV)

Cheer Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up. (Proverbs 12:25 NIV)

Jesus sets out seven points to help us quell our anxiety.

1. God gave us life itself. Therefore we can trust Him for the lesser things that support life. If He can give us the miraculously complex human body, He can also provide food and clothes for it. (Matthew 6:25)
2. God cares for the birds, so He will surely care for us who are made in His image. (Matthew 6:26)
3. Worrying is pointless. It does not change the situation. (Matthew 6:27)
4. The beauty that God gives to flowers, for their short lives, shows His lavish generosity and

abundance. He will not run out of resources to help humankind, whom He has made “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5-8) and put to rule over the rest of His earthly creatures.

(Matthew 6:28-30)

5. Worry is natural, even logical, for those who do not know they have a loving, all-powerful heavenly Father. It should not be natural for Christians. (Matthew 6:31-32)
6. Focus on the Kingdom of God. Let that dominate our thoughts. If we fill our minds with God’s purposes and glory, there is little thinking-time left for anxious pondering. (Matthew 6:33)
7. Live one day at a time. Sometimes we might need to make this “Live one hour at a time.” But, either way, trust God and His perfect will. Leave the future to worry about itself. (Matthew 6:34)

The bottom line is that Christ’s followers should be people marked by serenity and contentment, whatever their circumstances. For worry is a characteristic of pagans (Matthew 6:32). If we can lay aside anxiety, we will find not only greater peace of heart but also greater power to live effectively for the Lord and to build His Kingdom.

George Müller (1805-1898) never requested funding for the orphanages he established in Bristol, UK; he only prayed that God would provide. Sometimes it looked as if the orphans would go hungry, but always a gift of food or money was received just in time. Müller said, “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety.”

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