

Dealing with Anxiety

Thesis: The Lord has given us weapons and skills to destroy strongholds and default ways of being that hinder us from living life the way we were designed to live.

Text: Philippians 1:6, 2:12-13; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6; 1 Peter 5:5-7

The Lord is actively at work in our lives to transform us and to change us in order that we might experience the wholeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord will finish what he has begun in us (Philippians 1:6).

As we journey with the Lord, he will put his finger on places in our lives that need to change or that fall short of what he intends.

1. The Lord can show us areas that he wants to change as we spend time with him and pursue him. He will touch us with his Spirit, give us revelation, or speak to us about a place of growth and change.
2. Sometimes, we are in conversations with others. As we hear their stories, we become aware of what we did not know. Something gets triggered or pinpointed in us and we realize that we need to change.
3. At other times, the Lord will use another person who actually points out a place of brokenness or need in us that the Lord wants to touch.
4. Then, there are times of testing, trial, and trouble that cause issues to surface that the Lord wants to deal with.

These are just a few of the ways that the Lord can use to help us become aware of something that needs to change in our lives.

Question: Once God puts his finger on an area, how does the Lord bring change and wholeness into our lives?

Sometimes the Lord touches us with a miracle and instantly heals us and makes us whole. We cry out to the Lord and he hears and moves on our behalf. These are divine power encounters that result in significant transformation and freedom. These encounters of miraculous transformation can take place in our personal prayer closet, in a ministry team, in a conference or sermon, or in a myriad of other places.

But a lot of the Christian life is lived out in a process (Philippians 2:12-13). God has a part; we have a part. We cannot do God's part. The Lord will not do our part. He wants us to work out what he is working in us.

In this context of process, let's read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. The Lord has given us weapons and skills that are divinely powerful for the pulling down of strongholds, every pretension or thought lifted up against the true knowledge of God.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 6 And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete (2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

According to 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, the Lord wants us to partner with him in the power of the Spirit to demolish strongholds or vows in our lives, ways of being that aren't according to his best for us. The Lord has given us weapons and skills to destroy default ways of being that hinder us from living life the way we were designed to live.

A lot of the Christian life is lived in a process called sanctification: experiencing the transforming presence of the Lord in the process of walking with God and others. A lot of the Christian life is working out what the Lord is working within us (Philippians 2:12-13).

Today, I want to help us to deal with anxiety. I am praying for divine encounters where we are set free from fear and anxiety. And, I am sharing skills that we can use in partnership with the Lord to disempower fear and anxiety in our lives and in the systems in which we participate.

The Lord tells us to cast all our cares upon him, because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:5-7 ESV).

Over and over again the Lord commands us and tells us, "Don't be afraid. Don't fear. Don't give in to fear."

Definitions of anxiety:

1. Apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill
2. An abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt

concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it

3. A strong desire sometimes mixed with doubt, fear, or uneasiness

Why does God command us to not fear? There are many reasons, but here are three:

1. Living a life with unresolved fears and anxieties destroys our lives. Left untended, anxiety and fear lead to physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual brokenness and breakdowns. It is not workable.
 - a. Anxiety hurts your body. I have known many people in whom stress has shown up in their physical being in many different ways: paralysis like a stroke, high blood pressure and heart problems, headaches, and other pains.
 - b. Fear robs you of joy, steals courage, and causes emotional storms.
 - c. Anxiety brings mental confusion and sabotages clear thinking. When we are anxious, our brain shuts down and we get stupid, as one psychologist puts it.
2. When we fail to see and manage anxiety, it can affect relationships. When we get triggered or when others get triggered, if we don't recognize the work of anxiety, it can lead to relational breakdowns, offenses, or over reactions.
3. Fear is a legal highway for the enemy to traffic our lives, to torment us, and to destroy us.

Two Kinds of Anxiety (from Faithwalking (FW) 201 www.faithwalking.us)

There are two kinds of anxiety, and the untrained brain doesn't distinguish between them.

Acute anxiety occurs when there is a real, time-dated threat. Your child is in the street or your house is on fire. Your brain, bypassing your prefrontal cortex, processes the threat in a nanosecond; you leap into action and solve the problem. Your brain eventually returns to a more normal state as the threat is removed.

Chronic anxiety is more like background noise. You carry it around with you, and it can be triggered by any number of experiences or events. Generally, chronic anxiety has some tie to your vows. As a child or adolescent, you learned to deal with real threats to your physical or emotional wellbeing by vowing to be a certain way in the world. At the time, the vow helped you to manage the anxiety posed by that very real threat. However, now that you are older, you may find that many things may trigger the memory of that vow (FW 201 pps. 110 – 111).

Anxiety in Systems

In any collection of people (a family, a church, a workplace, a missional community) both kinds of anxiety occur. Breakdowns occur, people mess up, and promises are not kept. Invariably, acute anxiety is everywhere. Depending on the emotional maturity of the group, the acute anxiety is more or less easily dealt with as group members solve the problems that they face.

In these same groups, chronic anxiety is also at work everywhere. The challenge is that, though its power is real, it can't normally be "seen" the way acute anxiety can.

This gets even more complicated because, in any collection of people, we are emotionally hard-wired together. One person's anxiety impacts another person. Eventually, the anxiety of one person will be passed through the entire group. A system is like a spider web. Individuals in a system are invisibly connected through the transfer of their anxiety to other individuals in a system. Anxiety, left to run its normal course, actually flows through the system.

The presence of anxiety is like gravity. It's not a good thing or a bad thing. Like gravity, it just is (FW 201 pps. 107 – 108).

As we've said, anxiety is a normal reaction that is hard-wired into our brains and can even work to our advantage. But left unexamined, unchecked chronic anxiety can undermine an individual's and a community's ability to know and do the right things.

So, while you can't eliminate anxiety, you can learn to manage yourself in the midst of anxiety (p. 108).

Imagine that, through the practice of the spiritual disciplines, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and with the help of a coach or another person, you can effectively manage yourself when anxiety ripples through the system. Rather than simply passing it along to others in your community, you can contain the anxiety in a way that allows you to thoughtfully and intentionally respond on the basis of your beliefs and principles. Now, take one further step and imagine that a growing number of people in your system discover that they too have the capacity to interrupt the flow of anxiety (FW p. 108).

Learning to See Anxiety

How do you learn to see anxiety? How do you learn to recognize when your family, your workplace, your church, or your missional community is vibrating with anxiety? (We use vibrating as a metaphor for what happens when anxiety takes control.)

When people begin to vibrate with anxiety, they tend to fall into predictable patterns or postures. I encourage you to become familiar with each of these and learn to recognize the presence of any of them as an indicator of the presence of anxiety.

1. **Conflict** emerges when the desire to maintain unity collides with all-or-nothing thinking. People with the conflict response push into opposition. When someone disagrees with them, they seek to aggressively change the other person's opinion to match their own. They can't bear to be wrong or to lose, but are unwilling to change themselves, so they instead bully or dominate others in the system. When both parties respond in conflict, the result is usually a heated argument and, if things escalate, physical violence occurs. (Note: Persuasion is a mild form of conflict.)
2. **Distance** occurs when people cannot tolerate conflict in relationships. As anxiety rises, they create distance between themselves and others. They may literally disconnect from the group by leaving the room or avoiding meetings, phone calls, or emails. They may withdraw emotionally, keeping the relationships peaceful but superficial or remaining physically present but disengaged. In groups where peacekeeping is a high value, this can look like a more mature response. In reality, it has the same negative impact on the group's functioning as conflict. Extreme expressions of distancing are called "cutting off."
3. **Overfunctioning and underfunctioning** happen when an individual in a system responds to anxiety by allowing/encouraging one or more persons to take responsibility for the whole system. When people take on more responsibility than is reasonably theirs, they are overfunctioning. Likewise, when people take on less responsibility than is reasonably theirs, they are underfunctioning. When overfunctioning is present, underfunctioning must also be present. It is a relational reciprocity. People may overfunction or underfunction around tasks—when 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work, for example. People also overfunction and underfunction around emotional process. Overfunctioners manage anxiety by taking responsibility for the feelings of others, while underfunctioners refuse to take responsibility even for their own feelings.
4. **Triangling** occurs when anxiety arises between two people and one (or both) of them "triangle in" a third person to offload some of the anxiety he or she is experiencing. This pattern takes many different forms.... When two young siblings are fighting (conflict), they often triangle in one of their

parents to settle the argument. When anxiety is present between a husband and wife whose autopilot is to distance, they may overfocus on one of their children and come to see the child as the source of the problem, rather than their relationship with each other. Venting to a third party is also a form of triangling. Any time someone tries to cope with an anxious relationship by turning to a third party instead of dealing with the problem directly, a triangle is present (FW 201 pps. 109 – 110).

Making Meaning

Regardless of how your anxiety is expressed—conflict, distancing, overfunctioning / underfunctioning, or triangling—one thing that almost always happens when you get anxious is that you make up a story to help you manage your anxiety. You interpret your experiences to try to make sense of the world, and the meaning that you make will determine what actions you take moving forward (p. 111).

The stories you tell have great impact on your life because they shape the way you see the world and, consequently, how you respond.

Here is an example of what we are talking about:

Event: I'm moving to a different apartment across town. I send an email to my small group asking if they'll help me pack up my stuff and move. It's been a week, and no one has responded.

Possible meanings:

- That was too big of a request. I shouldn't have asked them to help me. I should just hire movers instead.
- They must be annoyed with me about something. Maybe they are frustrated that I haven't been very consistent in attending our meetings.
- I bet they're all busy that day, and they feel bad telling me they can't help. This must be their way of telling me "no."
- We must not be as close as I thought we were. I guess "doing life together" means something different to me than it does to them.
- I guess they've all been really busy. They probably meant to respond and just forgot.
- I wonder if the email addresses I used aren't the ones they check regularly. They must not have seen the email yet, because I know they care about me; if they'd seen it they would've responded.

As you can see, identical circumstances can be interpreted in any number of different ways. The important thing to see here is that none of these meanings is inherently more correct than the others. Each of these stories represents certain judgments and assumptions being made about other people's thoughts, motives, and intentions—

things that cannot be known apart from directly asking the people involved. And yet you likely do this constantly! (FW pps. 111 – 112).

Then, take this thinking one step further. Imagine that you do the work of clarifying whether your interpretation of the facts is accurate and you determine that it is, but the clarity also brings you pain. For instance, from the examples given above, you determine that indeed the people in your small group are annoyed with you because you haven't been consistent in attending the meetings. It's painful to hear this, but it gives you a deeper sense of what's real. In your pain, you could make the meaning that you are a bad person who deserves to be treated this way. Or, you could make the meaning that your friends in your small group are self-righteous and judgmental. Either of those are possible meanings that you could make.

The question to ask yourself is, "Do either of those meanings empower me to be in action to live the life I was designed to live?" It's an important question to ask, because the meaning you make is what gives you your experience of your life. If either of those meanings are disempowering—and it seems like both would be—then you have the possibility of making a new meaning. You might make the meaning that you want to be a better friend, and that this feedback, though painful, gives you much-needed insight into how you are being experienced by your friends in your small group. Is that meaning more empowering than the two previously listed? What other possible meanings could you make from an experience like this one that would be more empowering?

To be clear, we are not suggesting that it is wrong to interpret your experiences. Humans are "meaning-making machines." We all live in a story. It's how we make sense out of our lives. What we are suggesting is that you can begin to pay attention to the meanings you make, to consider that they might not reflect reality, and to hold them loosely. And if they do reflect reality and that reality is painful, making more empowering meanings is an option that is available to you.

Consider this transformational truth: you are in charge of the meanings you make (FW 201 pps. 112 – 113).

If you want to learn to manage your anxiety in a more healthy way, one way to do that is to grow in your ability to be a calm observer. Rather than reacting to what you "think or feel" is happening, you can watch what is actually going on. Who is doing what, when, where and how? In other words, get a clear read on the facts. Sometimes you know the facts, and at other times you don't. There will be times, like in the story above, where you will need to gather the facts to more fully understand a situation. This will require clear, direct, honest communication.

You must also learn to be attentive in observing what's going on inside of you. As you start to feel anxious, notice yourself starting to make up a story. What is the genesis of that story? How is it rooted in your first formation and in your negative vows? Rather than accepting the initial story as reality, manage your own anxiety and stick to the facts. Then, based on the facts, decide for yourself what empowering meaning you want

to give to those facts. With discipline and practice, you can learn to see the stories you're telling and to determine for yourself whether they empower or disempower you.

How to Minimize the Impact of Anxiety

As stated earlier, anxiety is. Sometimes it works to your advantage—like when you are in physical danger and can react quickly, or when it gives you the energy to complete a task. However, left unchecked, it is a miserable companion and can have a devastating effect on your health and well-being. Recognizing that it can be both helpful and harmful, and recognizing that it is all around you all the time, you want to learn to manage anxiety as it comes rather than to prevent or eliminate it. As you learn to see anxiety in yourself and others, you can begin to take steps that diminish its intensity, so that you can respond in a clear, thoughtful, value-driven manner. This minimizes the negative impact of anxiety on you and the systems in which you participate. This requires a lifetime of learning, but here is a primer that can help you get started.

1. **Learn to see your own anxiety.** Pay attention to what's happening in your body. Heart racing? Palms sweating? Knot in the pit of your stomach? Face flushed? Sensation of needing to get away or escape? What are you feeling—mad, sad, glad, or scared? Notice it. Name it. Step back and examine it.
2. **Release your anxiety by venting with a safe person** (like the Lord or someone usually outside of the system). Say what there is to say—don't judge yourself in the venting process. Journaling, prayer, and meditation are other practices that help alleviate anxiety. Good eating habits, getting enough sleep, and a regular exercise program are also helpful in keeping it from building up.
3. **When you are calm (or calmer), ask yourself, "What do I believe is the right thing to do in this circumstance?"** What are my core convictions and guiding principles? What do I value? Is there any place that my guiding principles are in conflict? When you are anxious, you'll be caught up in making up a story about the situation, about the motives of others, and about what it all means. The more anxious you are, the less realistic this story will be. When you calm down, however, you can look for the facts and begin to think about your beliefs and values. For instance, imagine that your friend lied to you about something, and you discover the lie in a casual conversation with another person. At first, you may be tempted to obsess about the lie, to make it mean something, to place most of your attention on your friend and what he or she has done. As you calm yourself, however, you will draw your attention back to yourself and focus on your own ability to respond consistently with your beliefs and values. You will ask yourself, "What do I believe is the right thing to do in this circumstance?" Getting to this question is crucial, so stay with it until you get clarity.

4. **Once your core convictions and guiding principles are clearer, imagine what it would look like to live these principles with integrity.** (Or even better, talk through this vision with your coach or a counselor.) Rehearse this in your thinking several times, and then go back to the setting that triggered the anxiety and practice living out of your principles.
5. **Share this process with others in your system.** As anxiety becomes less intense and less likely to become transmitted throughout the group, the processes of thinking, believing, and valuing become clearer. Eventually, the emotional maturity of the whole group increases.

If you are not highly practiced at seeing and managing anxiety, you will have to be very intentional and systematic in following this process. Over time you will develop an unconscious competence that will flow out of you in a wide variety of settings. When you take action to calm yourself, anxiety will have less capacity to cause you to live out of your vows, and you will have more capacity to live into your true self. Over time, you will increasingly be able to experience the peace that Jesus extends to us.

Jesus declared, “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid.” – John 14:27 (FW 201 pps. 114-115).

Practicing the Discipline of Reflection

1. **Write a journal entry that describes an encounter in which you experienced anxiety. Complete the following:**
 - a. Who was involved?
 - b. What happened? Write it down in narrative form.
 - c. What did you think but did not say?
 - d. Describe your feelings during the experience? Describe your feelings after the experience.
 - e. In what way did your vow(s) or defensive routines get triggered?

2. **Once the entry is done, set aside 30 minutes to be still in the presence of God.**
 - a. What do you hear? What Scriptures come to mind? What memories get triggered?
 - b. Where did you see symptoms of anxiety in the encounter? In you? In others?
 - c. How do you want to show up in situations like the one you described? What would it be like to show up as your best self?

3. **During this week, share with two or three people what the Lord showed you and ask for them to pray for you:**
 - a. That you would be able to see and manage anxiety
 - b. That you would be able to show up like you want to show up
 - c. That you would change by the grace of the Lord at work in your life