

Speaking of Anxiety...

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Scripture Readings (NIV):

Psalms 94:19, "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy."

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

Introduction

A medical article I was reading spoke of anxiety as a "normal and often healthy emotion." The American Psychological Association speaks of anxiety as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure."

Has anyone, apart from me, also felt this way? Raise your hand... A quick question then, when we, as Christians, experience anxiety, does it mean that our faith is failing?

I Belong

My question is also big. In fact, it can cause anxiety.

Right up front, I need to say that your victory over anxiety is not from controlling what happens to you, but by choosing how to respond to the story of your life. As Christians, our story of life is framed by belief in Jesus Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism (question 1, sentence 1), for example, asks:

- "Q: What is your only comfort in life and death?
- A: That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ..."

Romans 8 gives us clear assurance nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even life or death. We, therefore, respond to anxiety from a position of belonging, to God because He is very concerned with our well-being. Anxiety cannot separate you from God; He is always with you.

Let's turn to Psalm 94:19, "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy." While the NIV speaks of anxiety, the CEV speaks of being burdened with worry, the KJV speaks of a multitude of thoughts and the ESV speaks of many cares of the heart. So while the description of anxiety is full of insight, God's response is described as consolation and joy (NIV), comfort and security (CEV), comfort and delight (KJV) and consolation and cheer (ESV).

In other words, God's answer to our anxiety is to address the root of it. The delight, the security, the consolation is so life-changing and is a powerful testimony to this. To put it another way, a Christ-focused approach is called for. "Christ-focused" is the lens through which we engage life's challenges, including anxiety.

Philippians 4:6 essentially gives us the answer. It says to do something else instead of being anxious. Let's pull things apart and have a closer look:

Firstly, the Emotion

Do not be anxious. Anxiety stems from the way we humans interpret the world. This speaks to thinking and distraction, which anxiety does to one. The sense that I get here is that one has to regain control over allowing anxiety to share, occupy or dominate your mind. The key is to manage the divisions in the mind created by anxiety itself.

Secondly, the What

About anything. Some translations say "nothing." Anxiety hijacks your thoughts, so stop the hijack!

In every situation. This speaks to the situation. The circumstances of our worry. Thus: thoughts + circumstances calls for a response, but an appropriate response!

About anything and nothing are definitive in that there can be no confusion. "Every" is also definitive. Here we have the wonderful realities of anything, nothing and every. No, they are not in opposition to one another, rather, they complement each other and in so doing help us to get our head around the fullness that comes with belonging to God.

Thirdly, the How

This speaks of how to respond to anxiety, worry and negativity!

By prayer and petition. Now we are getting to the “how.” Paul, in the use of the word “prayer” literally links it to earnest worship because God is always near. What I am sensing that in supplication (a petition) there is a conscious decision to turn attention away from anxiety and toward God.

With thanksgiving. Paul uses the word “*eucharistia*.” Paul is speaking about the gratitude that flows forth from the work of Christ and how that influences our heart and then reflects through our life.

Fourthly, the Release

Biblically speaking, God can release you from your anxiety when you instead, worship (focus on) Him. Worshipping Him is our “normal” mode of life. Now, the act of releasing can be instantaneous or progressive. Let’s touch on 3 “progressive” releasing techniques:

1. Since anxiety makes predictions, we can query our prediction because they are not yet a reality, nor has it been tested against the Word of God.

Ask yourself if your anxious-based prediction the only possible outcome and just how likely is that outcome? In reality, many other things can happen that will alter your prediction.

Having said this, experts tell us that most of our anxious predictions probably won’t happen anyway.

For example, how many things were you were anxious about in the last 10 years? How many of your predictions came true – exactly as you predicted? If in the unlikely event something came true, was it as disastrous as you predicted? de Montaigne wrote, “He who fears he will suffer, already suffers from his fear.”

The Bible says, “do not be anxious.” It’s simply not worth your effort given that there many other things that are much more deserving of your attention, i.e. your life in Christ – a life of worship.

2. Since anxiety causes us to avoid the things we fear, the avoidance in itself creates even more fear. At the end of the day, avoidance is a false sense of relief that can cause you to miss out on positive experiences as well. Fear and avoidance can trigger further complications.

The Bible speaks of “prayer and thanksgiving” which is God centred and therefore, more powerful than fear. In this sense, face your fears in the power of God and your anxiety levels will drop, knowing that you can expect back from God, consolation, joy, comfort, delight and security.

Psalm 27:1, “The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?”

3. If anxiety is about fearful future predictions and imaginations, then rather stay here in the present. In this way, anxiety will struggle to survive. De Aguiar wrote that “Fear can, though it is not God, create something from nothing.”

Being in the present asks for a reality check where the unknown is embraced, safe in the knowledge that God is in control and we are His. Psalm 125:2 reads, “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.”

Therefore, we can open ourselves to present realities because God is a present reality.

Jesus prayed, in Luke 11:3, “Give us each day our daily bread.” Each day is where we are and each day is far more deserving of our fullest rather than future-focussed anxiety. The work of Christ is presently influencing our heart and ours is to reflect this present reality in our daily living.

Important

Counselling, medication and a prevention program are highly beneficial in reducing anxiety. There is no need to be a hero going it alone, and there is no shame in seeking assistance. “With assistance” is one of those ways in which strong people move forward.

Conclusion

So, is anxiety a failure in our faith? No. Feelings of anxiety are a growth opportunity into Him. As Sproul said, "Christ told his disciples not to be anxious about tomorrow, but he never said not to consider tomorrow. Intelligent problem solving demands careful consideration of the future effects of present solutions."

Jesus is our only hope. Snicket wrote, "To hear the phrase 'our only hope' always makes one anxious because it means that if the only hope doesn't work, there is nothing left." Jesus is our only hope and plan B is not needed when Jesus is involved because God Himself guarantees the outcome, and we belong to Him.

Amen.