

Jesus and Anxiety

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Introduction.

There can be no doubt that we live in anxious times. On a national level, our country is currently entangled in two wars, dealing with the aftermath of the worst recession since World War II, and wrestling with decisions about health care that will have a profound impact on us for generations to come. On a personal level, few of us are as well off financially as we would like right now, the constant pressure of bills and taxes isn't going to go away anytime soon, and all of us face an uncertain future that almost certainly holds all kinds of unpleasant and expensive surprises. Even the things we do to relax aren't very relaxing these days. I suspect, for instance, that all Bears fans would say that their beloved team has been much more a stress source than a stress release. All of this takes its toll on us. There are some mornings these days when I wake up with my head and my jaw hurting because I've been clenching my teeth as I slept.

None of this is a new problem. Two thousand years ago, the common people of Galilee were under just as much stress as we are. We have war and taxes and hard times to worry about, but guess what? They also had war and taxes and hard times to worry about. About the only improvement that we've made is that we have bad football to worry about too!

As a result, the words of Jesus about anxiety are just as relevant and just as shocking today as they were when He first uttered them. Let's see what He says in Matthew 6:25-34. He tells us that all the time we spend worrying and stressing about this life is time spent focusing on the wrong thing. We don't have to fret about protecting ourselves through life's challenges because we can be sure that God will always protect us. He's the One who is in control, not we ourselves. This is always a timely message, but never more so than now. Let's consider, then, Jesus and anxiety.

Priorities, Birds, and Lilies.

This begins with Jesus' thoughts about **PRIORITIES**. They appear in Matthew 6:25. Notice first of all that He begins with "Therefore". As always, this refers back to the preceding context, the one we looked at last week about treasure in heaven. With this "therefore", Jesus is telling us that the reason why we don't worry is because we can't serve both God and wealth. Either we love God and despise money, or we are devoted to money and we despise God. If we worry, then, it is actually a sign that some portion of our hearts is given over to the worship of wealth. Here's why: Like all of the tools of Satan, materialism is a cruel god. It promises us on the one hand that once we accumulate enough stuff, we will be happy and protected, but on the other hand, it makes us feel like we never actually DO have enough. When we worry, it's a sign that we're buying into that materialistic mindset, that we're relying on ourselves instead of on God.

That's why Jesus tells us NOT to be anxious. Worry leads us into the worship of Mammon, which is ultimately the worship of self, of our abilities to care for ourselves. Notice the repetition of "what YOU will eat" and "what YOU will drink" and "what YOU will put on". Jesus doesn't mean here that we shouldn't work for those things, or for any other things that are a godly reward for labor. One of the ways that God provides for us is by giving us what Deuteronomy 8 calls "the power to make wealth". If we misuse that by not working, we are wasting God's gifts.

However, it's not our responsibility to worry about them. If we do, that puts us in the same boat as the worker on the assembly line who starts stressing about whether the CEO has gone with the right advertising campaign. It's above his pay grade, and worry about all the materialistic details of our lives is above our pay grade too.

Instead, we should focus on the things that are important to us, that we can control. As Jesus says, life is about more than stuff. You can put a doggie sweater on a dog, you can feed him and fill his water bowl every day of his life, but despite being fed and clothed, he's still just a dog. As human beings, we're better than Rover, and our lives mean more than his. What makes us significant, what makes us unique, is that we are free moral agents. We can choose to do right, to love God and love our neighbor. The impact of our moral decisions will continue to resonate long after the earth and its works have been burned up. Service to God, not the trivia of material existence, should attract our concern.

To illustrate the pointlessness of worry, Jesus turns to **THE BIRDS**. He discusses them in Matthew 6:26-27. When Jesus says, "Look" here, He's most likely being literal. As He's speaking, he's probably pointing out actual birds that are flying over the heads of His listeners, like visual aids with feathers. Birds are not very bright creatures. That's why if we call someone "bird-brained", it's not a compliment. Birds don't have much concept of the future. You don't see birds engaging in agriculture, nor building little bird barns to keep their harvests in. So that means that this winter, all the birds are going to starve to death, and we won't have any next year, right? Obviously not. Even though birds aren't very smart, and even though birds aren't very good planners, God still loves them and still takes care of them. His planning and His providence are so good that I confidently expect that birds will endure as long as the earth does.

And yet, despite all that, despite all the care that God has taken to provide for the birds, there is not a single one of them that is worth as much to Him as we are. God never sent His Son to die for anything with wings. We can be

assured, then, that if He cares for the less important, He will care for the more important. He will care for us. Even if we don't believe that, even if we say, "I'm going to be anxious for myself anyway", it's not going to do us any good. The truth is that there is no outcome in this life that we can guarantee. We can't worry ourselves taller. We can't worry ourselves shorter. We can't worry ourselves rich. We can't worry ourselves long-lived. God always has the final say, not we ourselves. And yet, people worry about all of those things and a million more besides. Sadly, it's pointless.

Jesus continues in a similar vein in His discussion of **THE LILIES**. This appears in Matthew 6:28-30. Once again, these are probably literal lilies that He's discussing. He sees the flowers scattered around the hillside where He is sitting, and He points them out to His disciples. We know that flowers don't make any effort to be pretty or well clothed. After all, they don't even have brains to make decisions with. And yet, Jesus says that the greatest Israelite king, in all of his costly royal robes, was not so beautifully clad as they are. That sounds like hyperbole, but in truth, it's not.

It reminds me, in fact, of a custom that many parents follow in Texas. Every spring, parents, especially parents of newborn or very small children, will take them out for a photo op in the most beautiful setting they can imagine. They don't go to some upscale department store and photograph them against the clothing racks. They don't take pictures of them at fashion shows. Instead, they bundle the kids in the car, go for a drive up I-45, stop at some random overpass, and take pictures there. Why? Because in Texas in the springtime, this humble little wildflower called a bluebonnet starts blooming profusely along the roadsides, and even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like a field full of bluebonnets.

It amazes me, brethren, that God provides not merely what is necessary, but also what is beautiful, in overwhelming abundance. There are breathtakingly beautiful flowers blooming right now that no human eye will ever see. There are flowers that no one will consider because some mower or reaper is going to come along and obliterate them without a second thought. It seems wasteful to us for Him to spend so much effort perfecting something so inconsequential, and yet, that's who God is. He sees to it that even the weeds are clothed in beauty. If God takes such care of even the humblest elements of His creation, how can we think that He will not take care of us? If God remembers the grass of the field, then surely He will remember us too. We need only have faith and trust in Him.

The Kingdom and Tomorrow.

From there, Jesus points us to what our focus ought to be in His emphasis on **THE KINGDOM**. Consider with me Matthew 6:31-33. He begins here by reiterating some points He explored earlier, and from there moves on to more reasons why we shouldn't be anxious. Just as was true for the Jews of 2000 years ago, one of the big problems we have with being anxious is all the people around us who are anxious. They are determined to be the fastest rat in the rat race. They want more, more, more, but their ambitions only lead them from misery to misery. They bought McMansions in 2005, and they lost their jobs in 2008, and now they're stuck. Anybody who thinks money can buy happiness has never watched anyone who tried. And yet, despite the bankruptcy of the materialistic approach, it keeps seeping into our way of thinking too. Like the ungodly around us, we fall into the trap of excess. It's not enough that we have a functioning kitchen; it has to be done up in the latest styles too. It's not enough that our car gets us from Point A to Point B; it has to be nice enough that people on the street stop and watch us go by. Sooner or later, that's the road to ruin.

Jesus tells us, though, that God knows what we need. I suppose that by implication, He also knows what we don't need, and we ought not get to fussing at Him when He doesn't give us what we want. The way that we get what we need, though, is by seeking the kingdom. Some folks say that the kingdom is the same thing as the church, but it's actually a broader concept than that. We can think of the kingdom as the dominion or rule of God. When we work in the church, we are seeking the kingdom, yes, but even when we engage in our private battles against sin, even when we work every day to submit our will to the will of Jesus, that's seeking the kingdom too. Jesus tells us that when we seek the kingdom first, that is, when God is the first priority in our lives, what we need will be provided to us. Our responsibility is to lead lives that are pleasing to God. When we take care of that, we can be certain that He will take care of us.

This is true not just for today, but also for **TOMORROW**. Look at what Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:34. Certainly, we all know what it's like to worry about tomorrow, and sometimes, we worry about tomorrows that are years or decades in the future. I caught myself thinking the other day about how I was going to pay for Baby Zoë's college tuition, and the poor kid isn't even out of Mommy's tummy yet! Certainly, it's wise to be prudent about the future, but worrying and fretting about what might or might not happen 20 years from now is even less useful than worrying and fretting about the here and now. There's no guarantee that I'm going to see 2029, and there's not even a guarantee that the planet Earth is going to see 2029. If the Lord comes back tomorrow, what a waste all of our worries will be!

Instead, Jesus tells us almost whimsically that we should let tomorrow worry about tomorrow. That's hard advice, but good advice. I'm naturally a worrier by trade—if things are going badly, I worry about that, and if things are going well, I worry about how I'm going to keep them going well. Of all of my worries, though, I can rest assured that most of them will never come to pass, and for the ones that do, I can deal with them by letting God take care of things. There's no need to try taking control away from Him, and there's even less need to borrow trouble from tomorrow.