

Fight the Good Fight: Anxiety

Clint Sheehan

CCRC, February 7/2016

As we continue our look at practical strategies for overcoming our struggles we should remind ourselves of what we as Christians are called to (1 Tim. 6:12) and why it is that we will ultimately succeed (Phil. 2:13): "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called ... for God is the working one in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure". With that in mind, today we will look at how to fight the good fight of faith against anxiety.

Consider the following story;

A woman wakes up in the middle of night to the sound of her husband pacing around the room.

She says. "What's wrong with you? Come back to bed!"

He replies, "I can't sleep. Tomorrow I'm supposed to pay Fred the \$15,000 I borrowed from him and I don't have it. I'm worried sick."

"You owe Fred money and you're worried?" she asks.

"Yeah, I can't sleep," he says.

"Silly man," says the wife. "Come back to bed. Let Fred worry."

We can all laugh because that's not us in the story, but the fact is that every one of us does struggle with anxiety, some more than others. The trials of life are real but as Charles Spurgeon notes anxiety not only does not help us in our trials, it makes things worse;

"Our anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strengths."

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us why we should not have anxiety, and then he reveals the reason we still do have anxiety even though we should not. First we will consider why as Christians we should not have anxiety. Jesus identifies four reasons we ought not to have anxiety.

1.) We need not have anxiety because Jesus gives us the promise that if we make serving God our top priority, He will meet our needs;

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:24** "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. ... ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

God knows what our needs are, and as long as we place Him first in our lives He promises to meet all of our needs. At this point we should be careful to distinguish between our wants and our needs. There are many things we may want, but the promise extends to those things that we truly need. God often does provide us with our wants as well, but the promise here is that our needs will never go unmet if God is first in our hearts.

2.) We need not have anxiety because as Jesus points out, if God can give us life in the first place then He most certainly can sustain it for us by providing what we need;

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:25** "... Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Many interpret this saying to mean that our life itself is of the highest importance and so even if we find ourselves short of food or clothing at least we have our life so we should not worry about food or clothing. That interpretation however contradicts the very promise of Jesus in verses 32 and 33 where he assures us that God does know we truly need those things and that He will provide them for us if we seek first His kingdom. The only interpretation that makes sense is that Jesus is pointing to the fact that God is the giver and sustainer of life. As humans we can harvest food and make clothes but we cannot give nor sustain life, only God can do that. Therefore, if God is able to give us life in the first place, which is more difficult, then He most certainly is capable of giving us the necessities to go along with it, which is much easier.

3.) We need not have anxiety because as Jesus reminds us, God meets the needs of plants and animals and they are worth much less than us;

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:26** Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ... ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, ...?

Collectively these three things teach us that we should not have anxiety because God is ready, willing, and able to provide for all that we need. On top of those great promises Jesus adds a fourth, more pragmatic, reason we should not have anxiety.

4.) We should not have anxiety because as Jesus notes, it doesn't help anyway;

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:27** And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ... ³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Nobody can debate that those are four very good reasons why we should not have anxiety, and yet we still do anyway. Jesus is well aware of this fact and He identifies the root cause of our struggles with anxiety;

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:30** But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Jesus identifies unbelief as the root of our struggles with anxiety. If our goal today is to become better equipped to deal with anxiety, being told our underlying problem is unbelief hardly seems to

help. In fact, it almost feels like we have gone out of the frying pan and into the fire because now we have something even bigger to suffer anxiety over, unbelief. On the contrary however, this is the best possible news. We have previously identified a combination of lack of knowledge of God's word, and unbelief, as the two chief sources of all of our struggles. Thus the diagnosis issued by Jesus here confirms we are on the right track.

At this point then we have some good news in that we have correctly identified the root cause of our struggle with anxiety. There is further good news, struggling with anxieties is not necessarily a sign of spiritual failure, as we might try to convince ourselves, but rather it is a normal part of our spiritual growing pains. Consider what C.S. Lewis says on the matter;

“Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree at all. They are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the Passion of Christ”

John Piper explains this very well by way of an analogy;

“Suppose you are in a car race and your enemy who doesn't want you to finish the race throws mud on your windshield. The fact that you temporarily lose sight of your goal and start to swerve does not mean that you are going to quit the race. And it certainly doesn't mean that you are on the wrong racetrack. Otherwise the enemy wouldn't bother you at all. What it means is that you should turn on your windshield wipers and use your windshield washer.

What I mean is this: when anxiety strikes and blurs our vision of God's glory and the greatness of the future that he plans for us, this does not mean that we are faithless, or that we will not make it to heaven. It means our faith is being attacked. At first blow our belief in God's promises may sputter and swerve. But whether we stay on track and make it to the finish line depends on whether we set in motion a process of resistance. Whether we fight back against anxiety. Will we turn on the windshield wipers and will we use our windshield washer?”

In other words, the fact that we find our faith being challenged by circumstances which can lead us to struggle with anxiety is ironically evidence that our faith is real and that we are on the right track. So how then do we practically fight back against anxiety? We do so using the exact battle plan we have developed over the past two weeks: in other words; grow in our knowledge of God's word, grab on to the relevant promises in faith, and preach those promises to ourselves repeatedly.

As Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed, if we don't take control of our own minds then they will take control of us and the way to take control of our minds is to continually preach God's word to ourselves. This however is harder to do in the case of anxiety than with any other struggle because anxiety attacks at the very core of our faith in God's promises themselves, potentially neutralizing them. Consider by way of example the great promise delivered through Peter;

^{NIV} **1 Peter 5:7** Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

There is not a more to the point promise with respect to our struggles with anxiety than this. The problem is that the unbelief of anxiety subtly tries to undermine this. We tell ourselves that we fully

believe the truth of this promise itself but then we question whether this promise actually applies to us. God cares, but does He really care for *me*? Unbelief can undermine God's promises in this way one by one. This tells us that the promises of God's love and care alone may not always be enough to lead us to victory. The struggle with anxiety is a big job and we need the right combination of tools to succeed. I've been casually looking at grounds keeping equipment for our property. There are some really nice 3 point snow blowers and rotary cutters that would make short work of the snow in the winter and the grass in the summer. If I find a good deal on a 3 point snow blower, will purchasing that help me clear my driveway? No, it will sit there in the weeds gathering rust unless I get a tractor to power it. Similarly, the best rotary cutter in the world will not cut grass without a tractor. On the other hand, a tractor without a blower or cutter will not get the jobs done either. Only the right combination will get the job done, but it will do so very powerfully and efficiently.

Spiritually, when it comes to dealing with anxiety, God's promises are like the implements and our relationship with God in Christ is like the tractor. Just like you won't clear snow with a 3 point blower if it's not connected to a PTO, you won't defeat anxiety with God's promises if you don't keep them connected to your personal relationship with God in Christ. It is when we reflect on the nature of God's relationship with us that His promises begin to become effective in delivering us through our anxiety. So let's look at what we know about our relationship with God.

1.) Our relationship with God is a covenantal relationship which is rooted in His calling and election;

^{NAS} **Isaiah 41:8** "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, seed of Abraham My friend, ⁹ You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its remotest parts, And said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 1:5** he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—

^{NIV} **1 John 3:1** How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ...

This chops way most of the roots of the unbelief of anxiety. Our relationship with God depends on Him, not on us. We are His children because *He* has chosen us to be so and *He* will preserve us as such. Knowing then that our relationship with God depends on *His* mercy and not on *our* efforts takes away the fear that somehow we will sever our relationship with God and fall out of His favour. The apostle Paul plainly states this;

^{ESV} **Romans 9:16** So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

2.) All that God does for us is so that we will know Him, love Him, and glorify Him as *our* God;

^{NAS} **Isaiah 41:20** That they may see and recognize, And consider and gain insight as well, That the hand of the LORD has done this, And the Holy One of Israel has created it. **16** ...you will rejoice in the LORD, You will glory in the Holy One of Israel.

^{NAS} **1 Peter 2:9** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God's* own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

^{NAS} **2 Thessalonians 2:14** And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We must never lose sight of the fact that God not only knowingly chose us in spite of our weaknesses and tendencies to fail but that above all else, what God wants from us is for us to know Him as our God, and to love Him fully, and to glorify Him always.

3.) God most fully accomplishes these purposes by delivering us through our troubles;

^{NAS} **Isaiah 41:10** 'Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. **13** "For I am the LORD your God, who upholds your right hand, Who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.' **14** "Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel; I will help you," declares the LORD, "and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. **17** "The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none, And their tongue is parched with thirst; I, the LORD, will answer them Myself, *As* the God of Israel I will not forsake them.

^{NIV} **Hebrews 13:5** ... because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." ⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. ..."

^{NAS} **John 10:27** "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ "My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ "I and the Father are one."

This ultimately is why we should not yield to the unbelief of anxiety when it tries to neutralize God's promises by telling us that they may be true but they do not apply to us. Our struggles with anxiety do not cut us off from God, instead they give God the opportunity to reveal Himself more fully to us as He exercises mercy, compassion, and love on us when we are weak and helpless. In turn we know God more fully, love Him more deeply, and glorify Him more consistently.

In light of these facts about our relationship with God, we can add in the situationally specific promises which now have teeth. The promises are the individual tools for the different specific jobs and the relationship itself is like the tractor which drives them. Anchored in the context of our relationship with God in Christ we can preach to ourselves the promise that fits the trigger for our anxiety. Here is a small list of some examples of specific promises to fight back against specific anxiety triggers;

Weakness: ^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 12:9** But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Future decisions: ^{NAS} **Psalm 32:8** I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.

Health: ^{NAS} **Psalm 34:19** Many are the afflictions of the righteous; But the LORD delivers him out of them all.

Aging: ^{NAS} **Isaiah 46:4** Even to your old age, I shall be the same, And even to your graying years I shall bear *you*! I have done *it*, and I shall carry *you*; And I shall bear *you*, and I shall deliver *you*.

Dying: ^{NAS} **Romans 14:7** For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are

the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived *again*, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Falling away: ^{NAS} **Philippians 1:6** *For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

^{NAS} **Hebrews 7:25** Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

To conclude, when we grab onto the promises of God in faith, in light of our relationship with God in Christ, and when we repeatedly preach them to ourselves, then we will increasingly live out the victory over anxiety promised by Paul;

^{NIV} **Philippians 4:6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.