

REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE

Recognizing Ingrained Fear by Examining the Consequences

I ONCE KNEW A YOUNG man who regularly watched the *In Touch* television program with his grandmother. They lived in Atlanta, but whenever he would ask her to visit First Baptist with him, she would respond the same way, "I'm sorry son, I don't like big churches. Let's just watch the broadcast."

"Why don't you like large churches, Grandma?" he would ask.

"I just don't," she would reply firmly, in a tone that warned him further discussion would not be appreciated.

As you can imagine, this confused the young man quite a bit. He couldn't understand why his grandmother would dismiss a church without ever going to see it—especially since they were blessed by the messages on the program each week. He felt a deep conviction that it was important for both of them to fellowship with other believers. So he continued asking her to accompany him to church until she finally agreed to go.

I'm happy to tell you that she loved it. In fact, she joined the First Baptist Atlanta family the very next week.

But I was intrigued by what had hindered her from visiting in the first place. Did she really dislike big churches? Had she been hurt by a congregation somewhere? No. She later told me she just always *thought* she would be averse to such a setting, but she never understood why. I asked her several questions to see if I could get to the heart of why a large church had been so off-putting to her.

Finally, she replied, "I guess somewhere inside of me I just thought, *It's too big. No one will even notice me. No one will be kind to me or care about me.* I figured there was no use in visiting." In other words, she was afraid people would be unfriendly and reject her. But when she stepped through the doors of First Baptist Atlanta, the reality was far different from what she had imagined. Many people greeted her, welcomed her with a warm handshake or hug, and showed a genuine interest in her. She instantly felt loved and accepted.

Her subconscious, undefined fears almost prevented her from experiencing the great blessing of having a devoted church family. The same thing can happen to us in different areas of our lives if we never confront why we think and react as we do in certain situations. As I explained previously, we may have underlying currents of anxiety influencing our decisions and perceptions without even knowing it. This is why it is so important that we identify what we're actually telling ourselves.

VALID FEAR

But perhaps you are still reticent to admit that you have any anxiety in your life. Or maybe you are not fully convinced that your worries are all that bad. After all, isn't it natural and reasonable to have some concerns—especially in this volatile and ever-changing world?

Fear of God Is Good and Essential

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is not just good, but absolutely essential that we fear the Lord. So, it is true that not all fear is negative. It is right for us to show reverence to God for who He is—our sovereign King, wise Counselor, and loving Leader. In Psalm 34:9–15, David affirms:

O fear the LORD, you His saints; for to those who fear Him there is no want. The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing. Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. Who is the man who desires life and loves length of days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry. (Ps. 34:9–15)

Our obedience to the Lord and respect for His ways always bring us blessings. Why? Because God assumes full responsibility for our needs and covers us with His umbrella of protection when we submit to Him. Our circumstances may not always be pleasant or easy—in fact, at times they may be very difficult. But we are assured, “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them” (Ps. 34:7). Therefore, honor and revere the Father above everything else.

Uneasiness Can Be a Valuable Alert

There are also times when our uneasiness in a situation serves as an important red flag, alerting us to a possibility that harm could befall us. As I said before, it is good to have a healthy caution when approaching dangerous predators or potentially explosive situations—such as an active volcano.

I recall when the long-dormant Mount St. Helens in Washington began to rumble, causing thousands of earthquakes throughout March and April of 1980. By April 29, officials had closed off the area to the public due to the increasingly imminent threat caused by the massive pressure building in its core.

Sadly, many refused to heed their warnings. When it finally erupted on May 18, 1980, fifty-seven people lost their lives, though they had plenty of time to evacuate. In that instance, a sense of uneasiness and concern over the looming danger would have served them well.

Knowledge That Sin Has Perilous Consequences

It takes wisdom to realize the dangerous consequences of sin and to avoid it. What is sin? It is when we willfully choose our way rather than God's. We attempt to meet our needs or accomplish our goals in our own way, despite what He tells us in His Word. Yet Galatians 6:7–8 solemnly cautions us, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

Of course, if you are a believer, you are no longer in danger of eternal separation from God. However, you still bear the devastating consequences of your sinful behaviors, including all of the emotional, relational, and/or financial problems that accompany them. If you steal or kill, you will still be responsible for breaking the laws of the land. If you are deceptive in your dealings with others, your character will be marked and people won't trust you. Sinful actions produce painful results. Therefore, you are wise to flee whenever you are tempted to sin.

Shock Relating to Disturbing Facts

A fourth way we experience valid fear is directly after we receive a disturbing report or face a shocking situation. When we are blindsided by unexpected news—perhaps we receive word that a loved one has been in an accident or has a precarious medical condition—anxiety is a natural reaction. The immediate concern we

feel often compels us to take appropriate action. We seek more information, wise counsel, and the best way to respond to whatever challenges are ahead of us.

Likewise, if we are attacked in some way or we run into something unexpected—like a rattlesnake or grizzly bear on a hike—our adrenaline level can spike quickly, initiating our fight-or-flight response and preparing us for the encounter almost instantaneously.

WHEN ANXIETY CONTINUES

We can see there are some perfectly acceptable grounds for feeling fear, and there are likely more than I have listed here. In fact, I sometimes experience a sense of unease and restlessness when God is about to move me in a new direction. This is the way He gets my attention so I do not miss what He is telling me. Some feelings of apprehension are legitimate and even useful.

However, I find that these aren't the anxieties people usually complain about. Rather, their reasons are generally much more long-term and profound. People are intensely worried about their jobs, families, finances, health, world politics, unmet desires, and even how they measure up to other's expectations.

For example, not long ago a friend and I were chatting and he said, "I just went to see my financial advisor—we sat down and made some projections about my retirement. Since I'm over seventy now, I wanted to make sure everything is okay and that I have enough in my portfolio to live out the rest of my life. But I have to tell you, Charles, I came away more unsure about my future than

ever. The more I think about what the days ahead may hold, the more jittery I become.”

Another person confided, “My doctor told me the condition I have is getting worse—it’s developing into something that may not be curable. He doesn’t know of any way to treat this particular disease or to impede it from progressing. I feel like jelly inside. This is it—my health is deteriorating and I can’t do anything about it.”

Countless people, like the two above, have very serious problems to deal with. Sadly, instead of turning their attention to God’s

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provision, many of the people I meet choose to fret continually about their troubles—they remain uneasy about the future and are unable to think about anything other than the difficult challenges before them. Their fears are overpowering, affect other areas of their lives, and often feel absolutely insur-

mountable. Consequently, their incessant focus on their problems makes them feel as if their lives will never improve.

Maybe this sounds familiar to you. Perhaps you are experiencing something very similar. Let me assure you: the continual nervousness you feel is not from the Father. The Lord never intended for you to endure a relentless onslaught of anxiety, which is what far too many of us do. That’s not how God wants you or anyone to live.

This is why Jesus instructed the following:

Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will

put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?

And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin; yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!

Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matt. 6:25-34)

Jesus did not deny that anxiety exists. There are many things in the world that can cause us to become frightened. But He pointed out two significant truths that are important for us to note:

1. Our fears do not achieve us anything of value.
2. Our focus should be on our Father, who faithfully provides.

In other words, we need to look past our problems and center our attention on our all-powerful, wise, and loving Lord, who is ready, willing, and able to handle anything we face. Nothing is impossible for Him (Luke 1:37).

Understanding this is central to overcoming our ingrained apprehensions, which is why these two principles will shape the remainder of our study of anxiety.

1. Fear Achieves Nothing of Value

For the remainder of this chapter, we will look at what being afraid does produce for us—the negative consequences that ongoing worry can have on our lives. This will help us determine once and for all whether the concerns we harbor or the negative emotions we face are due to deep, fearful wounds within us.

You see, there are times when we don't realize we are operating out of deep-seated worry and may even think we don't have a problem with fear. But those who've studied anxiety have concluded that it is universal—experienced by people of every culture and age group, during every era of history. No one is immune from it, no matter how hard we fight against it or how many defenses we attempt to construct.

Of course, there are people who adamantly deny ever feeling frightened, but in my experience they are some of the most fearful people of all. They build up their possessions, physique, influence, impressive qualifications, or what have you—all to prove they have nothing that could scare them. But in reality, they are

terrified of losing the things that form the basis of their security. If their defenses collapse, they are absolutely devastated.

This brings us to the next principle—the foundation that never fails.

2. *Trust in God Diminishes Fear*

Our focus should be on our Father, who faithfully provides. As I often say, trusting God means looking beyond what we can see to what He sees. When our attention is trained on the challenges before us, they appear much more ominous and terrifying than they really are. But when we consider the immeasurable grandeur, strength, and brilliance of our awesome Creator—who formed the entire universe out of nothing just by speaking—our concerns really don't look so bad.

Sadly, there are issues that cloud our vision and understanding of the Father's love, power, and wisdom that keep us from fully trusting Him. They are wounds we may not even realize still have an effect on us but that create a continual breach in our relationship with Him. These subconscious fears become active roadblocks to our faith. We want to trust and obey God, but we cannot pinpoint why we're having so much trouble or how to overcome it.

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For example, I experienced a time when I faced a terrible impediment to my faith. I couldn't understand why I was strug-

gling so badly or why I was so agitated—everything else in my life seemed to be going very well. I recall repeatedly praying that the Lord would enable me to trust Him more. But for whatever reason, I just could not break through the impassable wall that kept me from relying on Him fully.

Finally, I asked my four closest friends for help. They were all wise men who loved God, so I knew they would give me excellent counsel. They committed themselves to staying with me—praying, asking questions, and discussing the events of my life—until the Father showed us what was really going on.

We met together and talked for about eight hours the first day and several more hours the following day. I recounted everything about my personal history I could recall. Finally I said, “That’s everything I know to tell you. I don’t think I held anything back.”

One of the men nodded and suggested, “Charles, put your head on the table and close your eyes.” I did so. He then asked me a question I will never forget.

“Imagine that your father just picked you up in his arms and held you. What do you feel?” He went straight to the core of my problem and I burst into tears. I could not stop weeping for quite a while.

You see, my father passed away when I was only nine months old. Losing him at that young age created profound areas of emptiness and uncertainty within me I didn’t even realize were there.

When I settled down, my friend again asked, “What do you feel, Charles?”

“I feel warm, secure, and accepted. I feel loved,” I replied. For

the first time I truly understood that God loved me—that I could have a real, personal relationship with Him beyond salvation. Please realize, I had been preaching about the Lord's unconditional love all of my life. I believed it with my mind, but had never experienced it deep within my spirit until that day.

Had I ever told myself that the Lord didn't really love me? No. Did I ever doubt God's love? No. So what was it within me that created that inability to experience the Father's love in a meaningful way?

It was the need a little boy had for his earthly father that was never met. My mind learned to block out the pain, do without his physical presence, and survive. No one was at fault. My mother loved me very much and did the best she could. She was a wonderful mother. But I needed my father, and that affected how my mind processed information about the Lord. The most amazing thing of all was that I had absolutely no idea those self-protective thought patterns even existed until they were exposed.

Imagining God holding me as an earthly dad holds his little boy was just what I needed in order to overcome that roadblock. I affectionately carried my son Andy that way many times, but had never even considered how much I needed to be held by my own father—and especially my heavenly Father.

Suddenly, my struggle with God made sense, and I finally felt close to Him. Recognizing His presence in such an intensely tangible way opened the floodgates of profound relief and joy. It was groundbreaking. Coming to that understanding—having that hidden wound revealed and healed—changed my entire life and ministry.

Friend, you don't know what you don't know about yourself.

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None of us do. Uncovering the hidden wounds requires the work of the Holy Spirit, who is able to examine and minister to us in extraordinary ways (Rom. 8:26–27). He may use Scripture, godly counsel, circumstances, sermons, or other resources—but without the Spirit

of the living God revealing those secret places of pain in you, they will remain concealed (1 Cor. 2:11–14).

So when we move on to the next chapter and we look at what issues may be getting in the way of you fully trusting the Father, I hope you will consider each prayerfully and be open to what He has to say to you.

THE TELLTALE SIGNS

For now, however, I ask you to focus on the symptoms of deeply ingrained anxiety. This is just as important as thinking through the causes because this is the first step in determining if you have some blind spots in your emotional life. So please consider each of these consequences carefully. And as you discover the signs of anxiety in your life, write them down so you can bring each to the Father in prayer.

1. A Persistent Lack of Peace

The first and most obvious result of deep-seated fear, of course, is a lack of peace. We feel as if something is off, amiss, or out of control. The New Testament word for *anxiety* sheds some light on this. It is used in 1 Peter 5:6–7, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God . . . casting all your *anxiety* on Him, because He cares for you” (emphasis added). The Greek term used there is *merimna*, which comes from a root that means “pulled apart,” “split into pieces,” or “disjointed.” In other words, there is something within that is always tugging us in a different direction, diverting our attention, and preventing us from focusing on the task before us. It gnaws at us continually, making us feel uneasy, dissatisfied, and distracted.

This dividing force within us stands in direct opposition to the concept of *peace*, which is *eirene* in the Greek. Jesus used it when He said, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have *peace*” (John 16:33, emphasis added). It is a word that means “joined or bound together.” For example, through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross we can have *peace*—or *be united*—with Him and be fully reconciled to the Father (Col. 1:20).

However, it also means an internal sense of harmony and tranquillity. Everything within us is calm—confident “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). It is the Savior’s goal that we would possess the inward composure that comes from having a personal relationship with Him and enjoying His provision. How do I know this? Because of what He

said in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."

He doesn't want you to be torn apart from the inside. Rather, His desire is that you have the quiet stillness of trusting Him as your Lord.

So ask yourself if there is anything that is tearing you apart. Do you have tranquillity in your innermost soul or do you feel a constant agitation? If you are unsure, pray for God to reveal anything that is persistently stealing your serenity. Then thank Him for rooting out those concerns that are pulling you apart and teaching you His peace.

2. *A Divided Mind*

As you can imagine, if your inner person is disjointed, it is likely that your mind will be pulled in different directions as well. Therefore, if you have ingrained fear, you may find it difficult to concentrate on the tasks or duties at hand.

There are several ways this can reveal itself in your life and how you deal with the choices you face. So as you go forward through each indication that fear is ruling the mind, please ask yourself, *Is this evident in me?*

First, because anxiety is a constant and wearying distraction, it often prevents us from focusing on our assignments—from completing them as quickly, effectively, and as skillfully as we are

capable of. Our productivity, energy levels, and performance are impacted.

For example, many experience this to a heightened degree when loved ones are in the hospital or receiving intensive care. They are so consumed with worry, they find themselves emotionally spent, unable to fully concentrate on the task before them, and merely going through the motions of completing their duties. When a loved one is in a critical condition, this is understandable.

However, what I am referring to is a much more subtle but persistent inability to focus. When we are distracted on an ongoing basis, we will not be able to give our best, improve in our abilities, and learn important new skill sets or accomplish the objectives that are dear to our hearts. Ultimately, this lack of concentration will have implications for our income, success at work, and achievement of goals.

Second, we may struggle with indecision. When we struggle with deep woundedness, it is sometimes difficult for us to step forward in confidence because we are so afraid of taking a wrong turn or missing something better. Seeing too many options often increases our unease and makes our decisions much more challenging.

For instance, many young people who come from broken homes experience intense uncertainty when choosing a mate. They don't want to repeat the mistakes their parents made, so they either refuse to seek a mate at all or they continue their dating relationships for years without ever making a commitment. Rather than seeking God's will and trusting Him to lead them in

the right way at the right time, they abstain from the decision and end up missing a great blessing the Father has for them.

Although this is a relational example, the problem of indecision can permeate every area of our lives—paralyzing us from letting go of the things that hinder us and taking hold of all that the Lord has planned for us. If you are having difficulty stepping out in faith, this underlying trepidation may have something to do with it.

Third, our apprehensions can drive us to make unwise decisions. Although fear immobilizes some people, it can have the opposite effect on us as well—compelling us to jump at opportunities because we are afraid of missing out.

A good example of the rash actions we take when we are motivated by fear can be seen clearly in the biblical account of 1 Samuel 13. Saul's impertinent rush to secure God's favor resulted in terrible consequences that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Verse 5 tells us, "The Philistines assembled to fight with Israel, 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, and people like the sand which is on the seashore in abundance." The Israelites were so terrified by the threat of this great foreign army that they "hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits. Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead" (vv. 6–7).

King Saul understood that for Israel to be victorious in the battle against the Philistines, God would have to help them supernaturally. After all, he had only "about six hundred men" (v. 15) to stand with him against the enormous Philistine army. There

was no way the Israelites could hold off such a powerful enemy without the Lord's intervention.

The problem was that as king, Saul had no right to make the sacrifices that God had commanded. That privilege and responsibility went to the prophet Samuel, who had instructed, "Behold, I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings. You shall wait seven days until I come to you and show you what you should do" (1 Sam. 10:8). However, as the seventh day drew to a close, Saul grew increasingly anxious and impatient because Samuel was nowhere to be found. The Philistines were posed for war, and the people were beginning to desert him.

Driven by fear, Saul jumped. He ran ahead of God's plan and made the sacrifices himself. Sadly, Scripture reveals that "As soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came" (13:10). If he had only waited just a little longer, the Lord would have blessed him greatly. But the anxiety within him drove him to ruin.

As a result, Samuel proclaimed, "You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, for now *the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure*" (13:13–14, emphasis added).

Ultimately, Saul lost the kingdom because his panic drove him to make an unwise decision. We do likewise when we allow our fears to influence our choices such as taking a job, selecting a spouse, making a large purchase, or what have you.

Therefore, if you ever find yourself driven by the thought, *If I don't act now, I'll miss the opportunity and may never have another*

chance—rather than whether or not that choice is God’s will for

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you—then it is likely that you’re acting out of anxiety and you will not come to a wise conclusion. My advice to you is, “Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the LORD” (Ps. 27:14). Allow Him to tell you “yes,” “no,” or “wait” in the matter. Then

when He shows you what to do, you can step out confidently in faith. Certainly, the Father will never steer you wrong and will bless your obedience.

3. Diminished Self-Confidence

For this next symptom of deep-seated anxiety, let me ask you: Do you measure up? Do you have what it takes to be successful or to be loved and respected by others? Do you feel good about yourself?

Or are you constantly second-guessing yourself—perpetually concerned that you’ll be rejected, deemed unworthy, or found to be inadequate? Are there parts of you—your personality, looks, abilities, or attributes—that you just cannot stand? Do you ever feel helpless to change those aspects of your life? Do you wonder if you’ll ever be good enough to deserve the desires of your heart?

If any of those questions strike a chord within you, it may be an indication that you are struggling with insecurity and that fear has prevented you from understanding who God created you to be.

These anxieties can be so embedded in the way we think that they seem to be an immovable part of our personhood—we truly

believe this is who we are and who we'll always be. We worry that we will never do anything right, that we will not belong, and that we will be found unworthy of love and respect.

Consequently, we may isolate ourselves from others, work hard to make people like us, and fail to step out in faith when the Lord calls. We may even verbalize doubts about our abilities or put ourselves down when we talk so that others won't expect too much of us. However, all of these symptoms prove that fear has damaged our self-confidence and is dominating our lives.

These are some of the most difficult misgivings for people to overcome because they are part of our identity, which is powerfully affixed within us. In order to heal, we must confront and accept the very flaws and failures we try so hard to hide from everyone else (2 Cor. 12:7–10). We must also change what we define as valuable about ourselves. Instead of dwelling on whether or not we will fail, if people will dislike us, or if we'll get what we want, we must intentionally focus on the fact that God loves us and is always faithful to us (Phil. 3:4–14).

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Of course, overcoming this mind-set is far easier said than done. As I said, those anxieties are particularly difficult to root out. I've even heard people try to spiritualize their entrenched doubts about themselves by saying they are just being humble. However, true biblical humility does not require that you disparage yourself, and it would never call into question how God created you (Ps. 139:14). This does not honor Him in the least.

Nineteenth-century pastor Dr. J. R. Miller tells us, “What is humility? It is not thinking meanly of one’s self. It is not a voluntary humbling of one’s self for any particular purpose. It is the spirit which is ready always to use its best powers and its richest gifts in the lowliest service of love. Love is at the heart of it. . . . Humility is in the spirit, not in the station.”

In other words, if we have humble hearts, we will be willing to do whatever God calls us to do out of love for our Savior. It does not mean we despise ourselves. On the contrary, it often takes a person whose self-confidence is firmly rooted in Christ to do the difficult tasks He assigns (Acts 5:40–42). But if you continually dread failure, doubt that you will be accepted, or question whether or not you measure up, then there may be a festering wound of fear within you.

4. Damaged Relationships

You and I were created to be in relationship with God and others. But when we are plagued with doubt—when we lack peace, have low self-confidence, or struggle with a divided mind—our woundedness affects our interactions with those around us. As you read through these consequences, however, please understand, there are many ways that our anxieties can affect our relationships. I am simply highlighting four of the most extreme so you can have an idea of what to look for in your own life.

First, due to fears, we may unconsciously protect ourselves because we are suspicious of others’ intentions or feel we don’t measure up.

When we mistrust people as a general rule, we tend to make sure that no one gets too close to us by hiding our real thoughts and sentiments. We isolate ourselves, doing whatever we can to make sure no one hurts us.

Unfortunately, this usually results in feelings of alienation and loneliness because we do not get our deepest emotional needs met.

So if you feel isolated or estranged from those you want to be close to, ask yourself, *Do I push people away when I sense they are getting too attached or personal? Am I inordinately guarded with others?* If so, it may be because you subconsciously prevent yourself from being vulnerable to others due to ingrained fear. Thankfully, God can show you who to trust and how to exercise wisdom and discretion in your relationships.

Second, we may wish to connect with others but become so inwardly focused that we have trouble reaching out to them. In order to have relationships with other people, it is necessary for us to show interest in them—listening to their feelings, dreams, hopes, and desires. We must engage with them, find areas of commonality, and be willing to support them when they experience times of difficulty.

Unfortunately, we can become so accustomed to focusing on our own issues that we find it challenging to care for others. We may feel awkward when reaching out or may dread being rejected if we do so.

However, if we refuse to take the risk, we will never have the meaningful relationships that Christ intended us to have. We will turn people off with our self-focus and uneasiness because they

will interpret our standoffishness as arrogance, rather than a cry for friendship.

Third, we may wish to bond with others to fulfill our own needs but be so inwardly focused that we have no interest in giving back to them. This is very similar to the previous issue, but it applies to the person who has developed the social skills to keep others providing for them despite their lack of engagement.

These individuals take as much as they can but give back as little as possible. Their sense of self-protection is so overdeveloped that they never realize the joy of sharing generously with others or that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Sadly, we see more of this every day. Yet we should not be surprised that this type of behavior has its roots in fear as well.

I’ve read about several children who were so neglected in their early infancy—abandoned for hours and days at a time—that they became emotionally shut off and unable to care about others without serious intervention. I can only imagine the profound terror those babies felt as they cried out and no one paid attention to them. It is no wonder their hearts hardened in self-protection. But I am convinced even this kind of overwhelming, isolating fear can be healed through God’s loving power.

Fourth, we can become so needy because of our anxieties that we exhaust those we love. When we require our friends and family members to give us constant assurance of their agreement, care, or acceptance, it can become quite burdensome to them.

Perhaps there is someone you dread seeing because of the way

he or she drains your energy. It may be that the individual grumbles nonstop about the same burdens, worries, and grievances year after year. Or it could be that he is constantly looking to you for validation and you just don't know what else to say to him.

Ultimately, these individuals refuse to heed any advice, make progress, or relinquish their complaints because voicing their concerns is the way they get attention. The result is that those who have the misfortune of encountering them are left feeling depleted, anxious, and frustrated.

We know how trying this type of personality can be, so it is a good idea to ask our loved ones if we demand too much of them or if our own need for approval has become overwhelming.

5. *Poor Health*

Of course, one of the most intriguing ways that fear is demonstrated in our lives is in the way it shows up in our bodies. I've known many people who appeared content on the outside, but whose internalized apprehensions resulted in high blood pressure, heart and respiratory problems, and digestive distress. In fact, numerous medical and scientific studies have concluded that anxiety is related to these and many other health-related conditions, such as asthma, colitis, ulcers, muscle weakness, autoimmune diseases, vertigo, psoriasis, eczema, headaches, and even cancer. Why is this?

It all has to do with the way our mind and emotions affect our bodies. God built us with everything we need in order to react to sudden emergencies through what is called the *fight-or-flight*

response. As we saw earlier in this chapter, if we receive news that requires us to leap to attention, are attacked in some way, or encounter danger—such as coming across a mountain lion or rattlesnake on a hike—our bodies instantly trigger their defenses. Our heartbeat and respiratory rate quicken; our cortisol and adrenaline levels increase; the blood and nutrient flow to our muscle groups and limbs are augmented; our nervous system is mobilized; and our pupils dilate. Everything we need to preserve ourselves is primed for action. The processes that are not immediately needed for survival—such as our digestive and immune systems—are inhibited, allowing more energy to go to essential areas. A great deal happens to make our bodies as effective as possible in fighting or fleeing.

We can see the awesome wisdom the Lord had in giving us this capability. However, the Father meant for this to be a short-term provision for emergencies. He did not design us to live in a perpetual state of extreme stress, which is what we often do. Imagine the harm we do ourselves when these biological systems stay in this heightened condition. It is no wonder that when we consciously or subconsciously harbor anxiety, there is a notable effect on our health.

6. An Impediment to Spiritual Growth

The final and potentially most devastating effect of persistent anxiety in our lives is that it hinders us from becoming all that the Father created us to be. How does fear keep us floundering in our relationship with the Lord?

First, our anxiety deters us from trusting the Father and being conformed to His character. We know that one of the main ways the Lord instructs us, frees us from bondage, and forms His likeness in us is through difficulties. I often say, because it is true, adversity is a bridge to a deeper relationship with God because it is true. If our hearts are inclined toward Him, the tests we experience can fortify our faith (1 Pet. 1:6–7), strengthen our endurance (James 1:2–4), prove our character (Rom. 5:3–5), and give us a platform for ministry (2 Cor. 1:3–7).

However, fear generally causes us to be pessimistic, self-focused, and unwilling to take risks. We ask, *Why me?* instead of, *Father, what is it You are teaching me?* If we are suspicious of His intentions or believe that He is constantly sending us trials without purpose or meaning, it will be impossible for us to trust Him fully or draw nearer to Him, which is ultimately what He calls us to do (Prov. 3:5–6). Because of this, we will fail to learn what He is teaching us.

So ask yourself, *What do I really believe when I face difficulties? Do I question God's character? Do I wonder if He despises me? Do I feel like He is punishing me without cause? Or do I give Him thanks because I know He has promised to work all things together for my good (Rom. 8:28)?*

In other words, do you express your confidence in Him? Or do you allow your apprehensions to taint your view of what He is accomplishing?

The apostle John explains, “We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one

who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. . . .

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There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love” (1 John 4:16, 18). The Father cares for you deeply and unconditionally. He allows certain challenges in your life so He can teach you to walk more closely with Him. You can be confident that “He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness” (Heb. 12:10).

But if you doubt that God really loves you and you’re continually terrified about where and how He will send the next trial, then there is something terribly wrong with how you view Him. Your understanding of Him is not only distorted but it is also dangerous because it is keeping you from relating intimately with the One who cares for you most. This brings us to our next point.

Second, our anxieties hinder us from hearing the Father and responding to Him in obedience. Hebrews 11:6 instructs, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” In other words, complete trust should characterize the life of His children.

We know that the great men and women of God were commended for their absolute reliance upon the Lord and confidence in His unfailing character. Against unbelievable odds and

staggering adversaries they “conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Heb. 11:33–34) all because they trusted the Father and wanted to honor Him. They did not focus on the things that could go wrong or the magnitude of the challenges; rather, they “endured, as seeing Him who is unseen” (Heb. 11:27). And the Lord rewarded their devotion by giving them awesome victories.

But if we are full of anxiety, we may cringe at the prospect of joining their ranks. We can be terrified that God would make us experience such hardship and sacrifice. As a result, we shy away from the opportunities that would grow our faith or strengthen our relationship with Him. We don’t pray because of what He might say. We don’t even claim His promises because we doubt they could be meant for us.

In doing so, we may believe we are keeping ourselves safe. But don’t be fooled—we are hurting ourselves immeasurably because we are missing out on God’s best for our lives. As we saw in the account of Adam and Eve in the previous chapter, the enemy’s favorite tools for hindering us are fear and uncertainty. He puts devastating, faithless doubts in our minds: *Am I sure I heard God right? Who really receives direction from Him anyway? Am I certain He will really help me? After all, He doesn’t really have time to help someone as insignificant as me. I’m worthless. Look at my misery—He’s probably upset with me. He can’t use me; I’m too weak. I certainly don’t deserve His favor. And look around—everything is*

against me. There is no evidence He is helping me, so forget Him. Better to quit while I'm ahead than be humiliated.

Do these thoughts enter your mind when you try to obey the Father? Do they keep you from stepping out in faith? The enemy knows just how to chip away at your convictions of the Lord's love and provision and keep you from becoming an effective believer. For Adam and Eve, that meant the fall of the human race, a lifetime of hardship, and the loss of their intimate communion with God. For you and me, it means we will forfeit the abundant life—the one that is worth living and that would truly satisfy our souls.

This is why we must make a conscious effort to choose God

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over our apprehensions and to replace the enemy's disheartening messages with the Word of God.

Think about it. Courage is not the lack of fear, but the determination that there is One who is greater than anything that could come against us. You can be brave and courageous. God can use you in mighty ways you've never even imagined—filling you with a love, joy, and peace you never dreamed possible. But you must accept that what He says is absolutely true: "The LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (Deut. 31:8). And whenever the devastating lies of the enemy come into your mind, you must counteract them with God's truth.

THE ENEMY'S LIE	GOD'S TRUTH— OUR DEFENSE
<p><i>Am I sure I heard God right?</i></p>	<p>Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. —PROVERBS 3:5-6</p>
<p><i>Who really receives direction from Him anyway?</i></p>	<p>I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. —PSALM 32:8</p>
<p><i>Am I certain He will really help me?</i></p>	<p>Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. —MATTHEW 7:7-8</p>

THE ENEMY'S LIE	GOD'S TRUTH— OUR DEFENSE
<p><i>He doesn't really have time to help someone as insignificant as me.</i></p>	<p>Thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." —ISAIAH 43:1-2</p>
<p><i>I'm worthless.</i></p>	<p>See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God. —1 JOHN 3:1</p>
<p><i>Look at my misery— He's probably upset with me.</i></p>	<p>The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. —PSALM 34:18</p>

THE ENEMY'S LIE	GOD'S TRUTH— OUR DEFENSE
<i>He can't use me— I'm too weak.</i>	My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness. —2 CORINTHIANS 12:9
<i>I certainly don't deserve His favor.</i>	The LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him. —ISAIAH 30:18
<i>Look around— everything is against me.</i>	“No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their vindication is from Me,” declares the LORD. —ISAIAH 54:17

THE ENEMY'S LIE	GOD'S TRUTH— OUR DEFENSE
<p><i>There is no evidence He is helping me, so forget Him.</i></p>	<p>For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.</p> <p>—2 CORINTHIANS 4:17–18</p>
<p><i>Better to quit while I'm ahead than be humiliated.</i></p>	<p>The Lord GOD helps Me, therefore, I am not disgraced; therefore, I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed.</p> <p>—ISAIAH 50:7</p>

FREEDOM THROUGH CHANGE

Do you experience any of the symptoms of anxiety? Does a persistent lack of peace plague you? Are you tormented by a divided mind—your life characterized by a lack of focus, progress, and wisdom in making decisions? Do you constantly second-guess yourself because of the fear that you'll be rejected, deemed unworthy, or found to be inadequate? Are your relationships strained, unfulfilling, and, at times, even alienating? Is your body deteriorating as a result of undue stress? Have you found yourself unable to grow spiritually as you hoped you would?

If you answered yes to any or all of these, then there is evidence that some form of anxiety is driving you. Friend, I say this with all sincerity, you need to deal with your fears in God's strength and wisdom in order to enjoy the freedom He created you to experience.

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I realize this may be intimidating for you. It is for most of us. I recall teaching about liberty from fear one Sunday morning some years ago. After the service, a woman came up to speak with me about the message because she wasn't convinced she could truly let go of her anxieties. After a few minutes, the real source of her disbelief was revealed.

"But how will I feel? I mean, what will I think about if I let my worries go?" she asked with tears in her eyes.

I was taken off guard, but only for a moment. Sometimes we

grow so accustomed to our anxieties that they become part of our identity and a refuge for us. We realize that if we let them go, we may encounter situations that will challenge us—making us feel awkward and uncomfortable. For example, the person with a fear of flying may use his trepidation as an excuse to avoid traveling altogether. He may say, “I would love to go overseas on a mission trip, but I am so afraid of airplanes, I couldn’t possibly go.” He uses his phobia of flying as a justification to avoid what God may be genuinely calling him to do—a task that will test him, push him outside his comfort zone, and require him to exhibit faith.

Likewise, you may be holding on to some of your fears because they’ve become a crutch—an excuse for other failings in your life. But as long as you cling to them, you’re missing out on God’s best for your life.

So before you move on to the next chapter and learn about the issues that may be getting in the way of you fully trusting the Father, commit yourself to letting go of your fears. I want to assure you, there is awesome freedom and joy in releasing them to Him. Yes, it may be intimidating and unnerving at first, but it is absolutely worth it.

Therefore, be open to what the Lord has to say to you, confront your fears with faith, and obey the Father with confidence of His awesome plans for your life. His wonderful blessings await you. Don’t miss out on them any longer.

Father, how grateful I am that You have begun to reveal all the ways that fear is ingrained in my life. Thank You for releasing me from the bondage it causes. I agree with You that my anxieties do not achieve anything of value and that my focus should be on You—my faithful, loving Savior, who always provides perfectly.

Therefore, Father, I ask You to root out these places of woundedness and pain. You alone know where I lack peace and confidence—where the concerns of life tear me apart—so I commit them to Your tender care. Wherever I am tormented by a divided mind or hide myself for fear of being rejected, deemed unworthy, or found to be inadequate, please heal me. Unearth the coping mechanisms that cause me to be isolated from my loved ones and destructive in my relationships. Mend my body from all the ways it has been broken by stress and worry. Teach me how to enjoy the quiet stillness of trusting You as my unfailing and loving Lord. Destroy the doubts that have become roadblocks to my faith. And empower me to reject the enemy's lies and replace them with truth from Your Word.

Father, I confess that some of my fears have become a crutch—I've grown comfortable with them and use them as an excuse to avoid stepping out in faith. But Lord, I don't want to live this way anymore. I recognize that my anxieties are keeping me in bondage and preventing me from experiencing Your very best for my life.

Therefore, Lord God, I commit myself to You, with full confidence that You lead me on the path of freedom and joy. Thank You for giving me the peace that passes understanding. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP STUDY

1. Think about the issues you usually worry about. Are most of your concerns valid or are they merely perceived problems?
2. Is there any problem you tend to think about incessantly? Why do you think this particular trial is such an issue for you?
3. Can you think of a situation in which you struggled with indecision to the point of missing a blessing from God? What kept you from making a commitment?
4. Have you ever rushed ahead of God out of anxiety? What was the result?
5. In reading through this chapter, did you discover any of the telltale signs of anxiety in your own life? What were they?
6. If you recognized the consequences of deep-seated

fear in yourself, consider how you have protected yourself in those areas. What steps could you take to turn them over to God?

7. Name a source of anxiety on your mind today. Take time to research what the Bible teaches about that issue (if that particular problem is not addressed in Scripture, think about general biblical principles that would apply to your situation). Are you willing to commit that situation to the Lord, with faith that He will take care of it?