

Coping with Anxiety

By David Morsey

The age we are living in has had many epithets attached to it—space age,” “new age,” “age of aquarius,” for example—but one of the most appropriate phrases would be “the age of anxiety.” In the history of mankind, including the episodes of war and catastrophe, probably no epithet is more appropriate than “the age of anxiety.” Not only are there the common and overt or obvious causes of stress, but a host of covert or hidden causes—things that are a constant part of our daily activities, which are not recognized as anxiety-producing. A good example of this would be television. Through the medium of television all of the events—conflicts, catastrophes, as well as malevolent episodes—from the remotest parts of the earth, are brought instantly into our living rooms. In addition to that, the burden of the stream of suffering humanity is laid at our feet, with at least a tacit sense of guilt, that somehow we should be able to alleviate it. In addition to this there is the age of technology, which while enhancing productivity immeasurably, brings with it many side effects in terms of pressures, frustrations, and demands that contribute considerably to our daily anxieties.

In addition to the covert anxiety-producing elements that are not obvious, there are the overt elements which are based upon the increasing problems of survival in an increasingly perilous and decadent world. The once rather simple matter of raising a family with an ingrained appreciation of moral values has become extremely difficult in the face of the constant cultural changes that militate against these values.

Beyond the general psychological problems, there are the host of physiological problems that are directly responsible for emotional disorders—biochemical imbalances, inadequacy of neurotransmitters, and general brain dysfunctions, for example. These anxieties are often medically treatable, but many people are not aware of or open to such help.

In short, society is plagued with a myriad of anxiety-producing elements, with little substantial relief. Tragically, the Christian population is a victim of the same elements. The relief offered by the Church is often saddled with conditions and expectations that are unrealistic and unreliable at best, and are beyond the reach of the average believer. For example, when lack of faith is advanced as the reason for the anxiety, the ensuing struggle and guilt in trying to attain it tend more to contribute to it than to alleviate it. In addition to the fact that such an attitude is totally unsubstantiated, the capacity of the human mind to control its feelings of trust often presents an insurmountable hurdle.

So then, what recourse does the Christian have? Where does faith come in?

Faith is indeed basic to the solution, but it must be something that is not dependent on human emotion, since the effort to generate faith or trust, in the human mind, only complicates the problem.

The following paragraphs are intended to examine some of the common problems faced by Christians in trying to cope with anxiety. Coping with anxiety cannot be reduced to a simple act of prayer or a human effort to generate “faith.”

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

In order to cope with anxiety, we must first understand what it is. The word is one of those, like love and faith, that is thrown about so carelessly as to have very little real meaning. We can make some distinctions here that will help. In technical terms, anxiety is “unbearable stress.” It is considered unbearable because in time it will do damage. Like anxiety, worry is a feeling of uneasiness, but is far milder. The so-called “worry-wart” probably goes through an entire lifetime with low key concern about many things. Anxiety is much more intensified than worry and often has physical side effects. Stress, on the other hand, is the producer of tension and anxiety. Worry is a universal human condition. Everyone worries at one time or another. One who never worries may be in a state of euphoria which could be either irrational or irresponsible. Anxiety carries worry to an unhealthy degree. The anxiety may be rational, based upon circumstances, or it may be irrational based upon some physiological problem. So anxiety then is worry raised to an unhealthy degree. Technically it is classified as “unbearable stress” because if left unresolved it could cause damage. The body will not tolerate it for long.

HOW DO WE COPE WITH ANXIETY?

Recognizing the difference between the flesh and the spirit

The flesh is merely the cocoon or “house” of the spirit. As such, it is subject to all of the weaknesses and failures and afflictions of humans caught in the prison house of time and space with its earthly distresses. These afflictions are orchestrated by Satan, “the prince of the power of the air,” and are only interfered with by God when He chooses to do so for a special reason. Otherwise, humans are simply victims of a world gone mad at the hand of Satan. Given the seemingly inequitable way in which believers are not always spared from destructive forces, God apparently interferes only when He has a special purpose for doing so. Otherwise, when believers suffer the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” along with the unbelievers, it affords an opportunity to demonstrate to Satan and to themselves that whatever the afflictions of earth, God's people remain faithful to Him in spite of them. These so-called “trials of faith” are not in the nature of determining whether or not a believer will stand, but proving to believers that they will stand, in spite of all. The flesh then is the temporary abode of the spirit and is subject to the battering and affliction of the earthly scene.

The spirit, on the other hand, is the abode of Christ and is a “safe haven” for the faith which comes with the coming of Christ. Thus, no matter what happens in the flesh, the faith of God within is secure and is the basis for God's continual interaction with our spirits. We are forever joined to Him as citizens of His Kingdom, and as such are invulnerable to Satan at the spirit level. Many believers are confused by the fact that their human minds are often fraught with doubts and fears and anxieties because of the nature of the human psyche and yet remain identified with Christ within their spirits. This is a first step in alleviating anxiety. The fact that these anxieties do not indicate a lack of faith or of identity with Christ removes the insecurity and leaves one free to relate to Christ in spite of feelings in the flesh, and therefore to have His continued help.

Alleviating the guilt factor

Given the intricate and often involuntary patterns on the cortex of the brain, it is often impossible for humans to really control the emotions that overtake them. The cortex is the layer of the brain which contains all the data that it has accumulated from genetics and acquired knowledge and experience, and which determine the way in which the mind thinks and feels. It is like a “grid pattern.” Thus, in the matter of faith, the human side of faith is trust, which is an emotion that is greatly affected by the “grid pattern.” Faith is the Divine side which is a gift of God; trust is the human side. Divine faith is not affected by human feelings. If one has had experiences in life that have affected the capacity to trust anyone or anything on earth, it would also affect the capacity of one to trust matters of heaven. For one to assume that God will only help if one has strong feelings of trust, would be totally contrary to the reality of human emotion. In the case of the notable characters throughout the Bible, God functioned through them in spite of their own doubts and fears (e.g., Gideon).

Worry is another emotion which is often the result of genetics. The common “worry-wart” usually has a long line of forebears who were also worriers. While one may have to bear the consequences of unsound actions, God is not unmindful of the human condition—*“He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14)*. This does not excuse us from making careless decisions, but it does help to alleviate the feelings of guilt. Of course guilt may be a reasonable reaction to an unsound decision, but it is certainly forgivable and need not deter one from seeking the help of Christ in one's situations. But this has to do with the circumstances that have brought about the anxiety and not anxiety itself. One need not feel guilty about feeling anxious. Contrary to common religious fallacy, it is not “a sin to worry.” If, for example, one is facing a budget crisis, it is certainly natural for one to worry. Perhaps the budget crisis is one's own doing, but that does not alleviate the worry. The alleviating of guilt will not necessarily eliminate anxiety, but will certainly relieve some of the burden of it.

Holding on to one's faith

Faith is a gift of God to our spirits. It is not possible for the mind to generate faith for salvation. If it is not possible for the mind to generate faith for salvation, why should we assume that the mind can generate faith after salvation? It is common for believers to confuse faith and trust. Remember, faith is the Divine side—an energy process affecting our spirits. Trust is the human side—an emotion of the mind expressing a human kind of confidence. The faith which God gives to our spirits is constant and not affected by the human process of emotions. It is thus possible for the faith of God to be operative in our spirits, and at the same time for the mind to be affected by doubts and fears.

Paul himself expressed this emotion in II Corinthians 7:5—*“Without were fightings, within were fears.”* As was expressed earlier, the brain is deeply affected by a myriad of factors—genes, as well as the accumulated data of knowledge and experience. The emotion of trust is easier for some than for others, based on these factors. Meanwhile, the spirit is a “safe haven” for faith. It is kept for us by Christ Himself. *“Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again unto a lively [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved [treasured up] in heaven for*

you, who are kept [guarded] by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed at the last time" (I Peter 1:3-5).

Whereas the human emotions are vacillating and unreliable, the faith of Christ within us is as constant and reliable as God. The truth of the matter is that the faith of God within us is functional and operative in spite of how we feel about it. The faith of Christ within us carries us when our human emotions are inadequate. Reliance on the faith of Christ instead of our own emotions of trust will do much to alleviate our anxieties. We do not have to be anxious about whether or not our "faith" is adequate. Christ is with you in spite of our feelings of anxiety. He will be present with you in the midst of your anxieties and help you to handle them.

Determining the nature of the anxiety

Not all anxieties are of the same nature. Broadly speaking (non technically), anxieties can be classified as rational or irrational. Rational anxieties are those that have a discernable cause, as for example budget problems, or employment loss. Irrational anxieties are those that have no apparent reason. They usually come involuntarily and unexpectedly. Irrational anxieties suggest a physical problem. There has been a great deal of research and development in the field of the brain and nervous system in the last decade. Biochemical imbalances, deficiencies of neurotransmitters, and a host of other physiologically induced disorders have been treated with great success by the use of medication. Without going into technical detail, it is important to understand that there is an area of anxiety for which one is no more responsible than for other genetic or physical deficiencies.

On the other hand, there are rational anxieties that are based on circumstances and human relationships. They are usually based on discernable stress of one kind or another. It is not always easy to determine the difference since they involve a complex of factors. Where there are unmanageable or undiscernable anxieties, it would be important to seek help in sorting things out. Unfortunately there are always a host of amateurs, ready to give advice, solicited or unsolicited. Such ones are well-meaning, but dangerous. For the irrational anxieties, known technically as obsessive/compulsive disorders, it is essential to seek professional help. Above all, one must eliminate the guilt feelings that come from questioning one's faith or "spirituality," when the problem is actually physiological.

Seeking appropriate help

It is never wise to get opinions from friends and neighbors. One problem is that the amateur does not see the wide variety of differences and variables. Amateurs may be dealing out of the resource of their own personal experience or the experience of a handful of others, but they are not equipped to see the large number of cases that involve a variety of individual differences. The usual advice begins with "I know that when I . . ." or "I knew a person who . . ." or "I haven't been in exactly the same situation, but I know that . . ." Especially to be avoided are those who have a special message for you "from God;" or who know a lot of Scripture texts (out of context). Physiological problems definitely require professional help. Psychological problems also may require special help from experienced counselors.

Dealing with the changeable

Anxiety is worry raised to unhealthy levels. That is, anxieties can, over a period of time, produce health-endangering consequences. It is therefore necessary to assess one's

situation and consider necessary changes. For example, if one has undue job stress, it would be quite wise to seek other types of employment or jobs within the same field that are less stress-producing. A person who is insecure should never go into teaching, for example. A person who is not at ease with people should seek a job that does not involve significant social contact. If a person is facing a budget crisis, there should be a serious review of the financial situation and an effort to make such changes as are necessary. These are merely examples in a vast array of problems. If one's health is at stake and one's well-being, it is better to make the changes, however inconvenient, than to face the physiological and psychological consequences of not making changes.

Committing the unchangeable to Christ

We sometimes make decisions where there is no going back to “square one.” Making unsound decisions is certainly a common experience of human beings everywhere. In fact, some decisions that might be quite sound when we make them, turn out to be unsound as a result of changing situations. No one really knows for sure whether or not one is making the right decision, in spite of the effort to follow sound principles of guidance and to seek the help of Christ. Ultimately we must ask the Lord to see to it that we do the right thing. The human brain is easily misled. No matter how “spiritual” one thinks oneself to be, there is a question as to whether or not humans ever really know absolutely how to figure out the mind of God. But, in spite of all, supposing one has made an unsound decision and now has consequences that are difficult to handle. What then? While God cannot always reverse decisions that we have made, He can give us the grace to cope with the situation; He can help us find the best available option; and He can give us the “peace that passes understanding.” *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace that passes understanding shall keep [guard] your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7).*

CONCLUSION

The approach to coping with anxiety lies in the following principles:

1. Recognizing that the problems with the fleshly cocoon do not affect the presence of Christ within one.
2. Alleviating feelings of guilt by recognizing the commonality and inevitability of problems in the flesh and remembering that God knows our human weaknesses.
3. Holding on to one's faith as a gift from God in one's spirit, even while one is struggling with problems in the flesh.
4. Determining the nature of the anxieties—rational anxieties, based upon determined causes; or irrational anxieties based upon physiological factors.
5. Seeking appropriate help as indicated by the nature of the anxieties.
6. Dealing with changeable factors (with the help of Christ, of course).
7. Committing the unchangeable factors to Christ for His grace and His assistance in making the best of it.

Remember, in conclusion, that there is no guilt attached to human feelings of worry or anxiety. Remember also that faith is the gift and province of God and is not dependent on human feelings of trust for its vitality. The discussion of the physical factors of anxiety was brief and intended only to indicate that there is that side to anxiety which is beyond the

capacity of the human will to control. The fact that God can heal such physical problems is not denied, but is not guaranteed any more than healings in other physical problems. Sometimes God heals and sometimes He does not (remember Job). It is therefore as important to seek appropriate help in these matters, as it is in other forms of physical distress. The bottom line is that we are in God's hands, as His children, and He will work with us in our needs in whatever way He chooses. Meanwhile we can be at peace in our spirits in the midst of the turbulence of our flesh.