Combating Worry and Anxiety

Why do we worry and become anxious? I’m sure we all know the feeling. We begin to struggle with the “What ifs?” of life. What if I lose my job? What will happen to me? What if I get cancer and someone else will raise my children? What if the terrorists bring down our country?

Sometimes our worries and cares stem from having taken on more than we can handle. We agree to do a project for our work or church and find that we are now overwhelmed with more to do than we are sure we are capable of figuring out, and so we worry about how it will all turn out. We worry whether others will be happy with the job we have done.

Most of us Christians know that God has told us not to worry or be anxious. If we have shared our anxieties with someone else we sometimes hear, “You just need to trust God more.” That might be a true admonition, but it sounds too simplistic and somewhat condescending because we are sure that our friend probably hasn’t successfully overcome his worries either.

So let us take a look at what the Bible says about worry to find out why it is an offense to God and what He provides as a means for overcoming this debilitating feeling. As we do this, I don’t mean to sound flippant or trite. I haven’t been able to successfully put all of this into practice either, but if there is a solution to be found, it will be found in the truth of what God has to say. Otherwise there is no answer and we are left to human techniques which may help us relax some, but don’t really solve the problem.

The first thing I believe we need to recognize is that we need to focus on what is true. Our feelings have a way of throwing us around like a rag doll. We need to be firmly connected to the ground of truth which is God Himself and His Word. So let’s look first at what Jesus has to say.

Turn in your Bible to Matthew 6:25. Jesus says, “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life….” He begins His sentence with “therefore.” That means He is connecting it to what preceded. In verse 24 He had told us that we cannot serve two masters. We as human beings have trouble with idolatry. We try to serve things that are not God and we put other things in the place that only God should occupy. So Jesus has said that it’s not possible to serve two masters. Therefore, do not worry. I take this to mean that when we worry we are actually trying to serve something other than God. I believe this is one reason Jesus commands us not to worry. We are trusting something other than Him to satisfy our deepest needs. So one thing we can do is to look at what we worry about to see if there is some focus there that is too strong and is usurping God’s rightful place.

In this passage in Matthew Jesus is focusing primarily on food and clothing. As we read through the passage we see that God is faithful to provide for the needs of His creation and we are of more value to Him than anything else in creation and therefore He will supply our needs as well. We can trust Him. We can’t increase our stature or add one day to our life by worrying about it and so we should trust Him to meet our needs. So anxiety is a sign that we are not really trusting God for what He has promised to provide. As we think about our propensity to worry, we should examine the kinds of things we worry about and ask ourselves if we are really trusting God in these areas.

Many other examples of the down side of worry are mentioned in Scripture. Martha was worried about her serving whereas Jesus told her she should have been focusing on something more important (Luke 10:41). The worries of this world can actually choke out the gospel and prevent eternal life from taking hold (Mark 4:19). Worries can weigh us down just like many other “worse” sins and keep us from being alert to the coming of the Lord (Luke 21:34).

So without being too simplistic, how can we gain victory over this menacing sin? First, we need to train ourselves to think about things that are true, lovely, noble, etc. (Philippians 4:8). We are prone to thinking negatively. We are prone to thinking about past circumstances and possible future difficulties. Neither of these is true. What’s past is done and can’t be changed. All the going back and rehearsing how it would be different if I had only..., don’t work. So focus on what you know to be true about God, His promises and the circumstances. If you still have your health and job today, then that is what’s true. So focus on the truth.

Next, consider the truth that God is sovereign. He is working all things together for His glory and for your good if you are one of His children. He doesn’t simply *know* what you are going through, He has *designed* it to further His purposes in the world. What you are going through is not a surprise to Him. Consider for example Acts 4:27, 28; John 9:1-3; Isaiah 45:5-7.

Remember the fact that God is always good, loving, kind, wise and gracious. He is working all things together for your good (Romans 8:28). Remember, our definition of good and His are frequently different. His view of our good is that we be conformed to the image of Christ and that takes a life-time of experiences.

Another truth that we need to keep in mind is that God will not allow us to be tested above what we are able (1 Corinthians 10:13). So when we are in the midst of something difficult we should not tell ourselves, *“This is too much; I can’t handle it.”*  That would be a lie and an insult to God’s faithfulness in keeping promises.

We need to remind ourselves of the truth that even though worry is a sin, all sins for believers have been forgiven in Christ. His perfect obedience and perfect trust and zero anxiety have all been credited to us. Whereas all of our worry and fretting have been credited to Him and He died because of those and all other sins.

Another necessary focus is the truth that worry never solves anything (Matthew 6:27,34). If we are facing a problem and some decision we make can put us on the path to solving it, then we should take those steps if they are wise and prayerfully considered. But if there is nothing that can be done, then worrying does not help.

God’s goal is our growth in Christ-likeness for His glory. This is almost always achieved through trials of various kinds. Paul wrote, “*And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;*” (Romans 5:3, NKJV). He goes on to show how perseverance leads to character and a whole list of other traits that God is working to build into our lives. James 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 say almost the same thing.

In addition, God uses others in the body of Christ to help encourage one another. In order to be of help to someone else going through some trial, God may permit a similar trial in your life so that you can be of help to others (2 Corinthians 1:3; 8:14). While this might not be a pleasant thought, we need to remember what God is doing in the world for His glory. God is gradually changing us so that we think like He does. And that kind of thinking may involve gladly and peacefully accepting a trial knowing that we can then encourage a brother or sister in their distress.

Finally, in all of this we need to practice thankfulness and contentment. Paul writes to the Philippians, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;” (Philippians 4:6, NKJV). Developing a thankful heart is an important key in defeating worry. No matter what we have to worry about, we should thank God for all of the other blessings we have in life. Focusing on those will make the problems seem smaller.

In Philippians 4, Paul also writes about the fact that he had learned to be content in all circumstances. If we are content, we are not worrying about our circumstances. It was because he had learned to be content that Paul would write, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). Contentment and thankfulness are closely intertwined with each other. If we are truly thankful for all that God has provided for us in our current circumstances, we will be content with those circumstances. When we are content, we are not anxious or worried about changes that may occur in our circumstances. Hebrews 13:5 tells us to be content with the things we have for He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” The truth of God’s constant presence and care is the assurance that we are being cared for and thus contentment can be ours.

So even though worry and anxiety are not an easy foe to defeat, it is possible if we focus on the Truth – the truth about God’s character, the truth about God’s motives and design, God’s faithfulness to His promises and the truth of what we are becoming as He does His work in us for His glory.