

A listener of my podcast sent this question, and I haven't been able to get it out of my mind all week. *The Bible tells me to be anxious for nothing, but I still worry. What is wrong with me, and how can I ever fix it?* The reason I keep mulling it over is not because it's unusual but because it's so normal. The irony is that the question isn't really about anxiety: It's about anxiety about anxiety. It's not really about worry, but about worry about worrying. Why do we feel this way?

Part of the problem with a question like this is confusion with words. Anxiety is the term we use for a treatable, medical, physiological condition, in which case doctors and other experts can help. Anxiety can mean the medical condition or — as it seemed to mean for this listener and for most people who ask me — just general worry about what might happen next or unease about the future. This definition is more in line with what the Bible addresses and what many of us mean when we use the word for ourselves. The reason anxiety about this kind of anxiety matters is because it shows us a misreading of the Bible that many of us have unwittingly absorbed. The irony is that these passages are not warnings but reassurances.

It took me a long time to understand what people meant by “pillow talk” because I've never experienced it. I've never lain in bed talking with my wife about anything, because within 30 seconds of stillness and quiet, she is asleep. And I don't understand that, because I've grappled with insomnia all my life. She doesn't understand that. Early in my marriage, she realized that she actually wasn't helping me when she would wake up to find me staring at the ceiling and say, “You need to go to sleep! Look, it's 3 a.m. You only have three hours before you have to get up, and you have a big day tomorrow!” Over time, she realized going to sleep is not a matter of motivation and willpower but just the opposite. The only way a person can sleep is to stop thinking about sleep. What actually worked for me is when she would say, “Well, it's okay if you don't get any sleep tonight. You normally get a burst of adrenaline that helps you through the day just fine, and then you can sleep tomorrow.” Hearing that would be almost like anesthesia; I would drift off within 15 minutes.

That's why mishearing Jesus or his apostles as screaming *Stop worrying!* when you're facing anxiety isn't working. But let's pay attention to what the New Testament actually says. In talking about anxiety “about tomorrow”, Jesus did not give us a new law to keep but freed us from an old one we had made up for ourselves. You need not be anxious about your life or about how you are going to make a living or about what your future will be, Jesus says — but not because those things are wrong or because worrying about them is morally offensive. In fact, Jesus says all these concerns are reasonable and “your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.”

Jesus turns our attention to all the ways God cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, teaching us that we can trust he knows our needs. That is not a one-time upload of information; we are to look continually to all those realities. That's reassurance, not rebuke.

This teaching is similar to Jesus' instruction about prayer. He warns about a genuine moral problem — prayer as theatrical performance — but he also takes on a problem that isn't a deficiency of integrity as much as an ignorance of just how kind God is.

Jesus says we do not need to ramble off long prayers like those who “think that they will be heard for their many words”. What is the answer to freeing ourselves from thinking we must summon God and hold his attention? Jesus says it is to remind ourselves that he is our Father.

Similarly, when Paul writes to the church at Philippi, telling them not to “be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6), he is not castigating them. He is telling them they do not need to bear the burden of anxiety about the future. And the solution he gives them is to redirect those concerns — again, continually — and articulate their needs to God.

Paul is saying what Jesus said: Worry feels like doing something, but it really doesn’t accomplish anything. Prayer actually does something. Worry requires more and more worry, but prayer can give you freedom — you can cast your concerns on him, and he will carry them.

That, too, though, we can turn into a new law. One person who was worried about worry pointed to Paul’s words—“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7)—as a sign of having displeased God, because the person didn’t feel tranquility. But this isn’t about feeling peace. This peace, Paul writes, “surpasses all understanding.” This isn’t a transaction: Stop worrying and God will give you peace. It’s a reassurance of an existing reality. The peace of God “will guard your hearts and your minds” even when you don’t understand it. The peace of God guards you; you do not need to guard yourself.

Here’s the problem many of us have: We want to think of God as an employer giving a performance review. That’s not what’s happening. The Prodigal Son, even after he “came to himself” and headed home, planned to say, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants” (Luke 15:17, 19). But this is not what happened. Instead, “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (v. 20).

That’s why we worry about our worry. We don’t realize that the Father loves and cares for us. Then he reminds us of that, and we worry that because he has to remind us means he’s mad at us, so the cycle starts again.

Our worry about our worry is because we still aren’t accustomed to grace. We think God is like a camp counselor yelling into our tents, “Go to sleep, or I’m going to take your merit badge away from you!” But that’s not what’s happening. It’s more like your dad saying, “I know you’re on edge about whether there are bears out there in the dark. But I’m going to stay up and watch for them, and I can deal with it. You can go to sleep.”

You don’t fall asleep because you’ve secured the perimeter. You fall asleep because someone who loves you is there. You can stay awake all night, but he’s still there. Once you know that, you have the freedom to rest. That’s true whether or not you feel it. In fact, that’s why you’re free to feel it. Anxiety tells you that you have to secure your future. Anxiety about anxiety tells you that you have to secure even your inner life. Anxiety about anxiety wants you to hear the voice of Jesus as irritated and angry: Stop it! But the voice of Jesus is really saying, *You can rest. I’m here.*