



No Need to Fear

Dealing with Spiritual Anxiety

by Donald L. Deffner

A terrified young woman sits fidgeting on the edge of a chair as she faces her doctor. She has all the characteristics of a frightened bird about to take flight. Her body is tense. She turns her head quickly from side to side, blinking her eyes as she glances nervously around the room.

“What are you afraid of?” the doctor asks.

“I don’t know,” the woman answers. Then, barely audible, “Yes, I do ... I’m afraid I’m going to die.”

“What makes you feel that way?” the doctor asks.

The woman hesitates and then says, “I have these ... spells, I call them. I can be shopping, driving a car, washing the dishes, anything, then suddenly, without any warning, I get scared. Terrified! I just want to run, but I can’t move. I start to shake. I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. I can’t get my breath, and I go numb all over, like I’m fainting. And all the while I get more and more frightened.”

She pauses for a moment, but the doctor does not reply. “You think I’m going crazy, don’t you?” she asks finally.

“No,” the doctor says, “I don’t think you’re going crazy, but I do think you are sick.”

The woman blinks her eyes nervously and bites her lip. Then, softly, “Will I die? What do I have?”

Now the doctor leans forward. “Please understand what I’m saying, and let me finish before you respond,” he says. “Yes, you will die—someday—but not from this. Right now you’re suffering from anxiety over death, something that probably won’t happen to you for a long time.”

For the first time during the interview the young woman’s head is still, her eyes steady and unblinking.

“Anxiety? Is that all?”

“It’s enough,” the doctor says. “In your case, more than enough.”

Some define anxiety as being afraid when we do not know the danger. Fear is being afraid of a definite and specific danger. For the nervous woman in the doctor’s office, the threat of her own death, whether it be labeled anxiety or fear, was real. And because it was real, she had to deal with it.

As she and the doctor continued talking, he began to help her understand where her anxiety was coming from. She had begun to notice signs that she was getting older ... aging! She was realizing that death would come to her, too. This reality conflicted with the dream of endless youth and beauty she wanted to preserve. And that’s what led to the conditions she had described to her doctor.

Now, calmer and more in control, she asks, “Will I get over it?”

“No,” the doctor replies, “None of us is ever free of anxiety, not completely. But we can learn to live with it. We can learn to survive.”

Body, Mind, and Spirit, Too

Sometimes we are anxious over things that don't exist. We may even fear fear itself and imprison ourselves when we ought to be free.

To feel anxious and in need of professional help does not mean we are crazy, as the young woman suspected she was. In today's fast-paced world, it is normal for us to feel anxiety and fear from time to time. When we feel threatened or confused by what is happening to us, it doesn't help for a friend to simply say, "Don't worry, everything's going to be okay." Nor does it help to just deny that anything is wrong in the first place. What we need is help from someone who can explain the mystery of what's going on inside us and who can help us deal with our anxiety in a constructive way. Psychologists, psychiatrists, pastors, and counselors are trained to provide that kind of help. We should not feel any more embarrassed to seek them out than we are to visit a supermarket where we can buy food to keep our bodies healthy.

But sometimes our anxieties are essentially *spiritual* in origin and in nature. For example, you may not feel like you are doing anything wrong now, but you may need to really accept God's forgiveness for the sins in the past, which keep bugging you. You may not need therapy, but you may need to learn how to deal with daily temptations through the power God makes available to you in faith.

In summary, to deal with your spiritual anxiety, what you may really need is a far more vigorous and meaningful relationship with the God who created you, sustains you, and loves you as you are. Then, assured of His presence in your life, you'll be able to stop brooding over your own problems and get down to the exciting task of living more for the people God has placed all around you.

"The World Is Too Much with Us"

It's one thing to say our anxieties are rooted in a spiritual problem, but it's quite another to revive a spiritual life that has been sleeping for years or begin one from scratch. Perhaps those would be rather drastic changes in your life, and they won't occur just because somebody writing a booklet told you they should happen.

One thing that often holds us back from a spiritual solution is that "the world is too much with us." The information explosion over the past two decades has increased the pressure of the outside world on our inner lives. We know too much to handle it all easily and confidently. Too many things are going on at once for us to place them into some overall scheme of things. The mass media frequently offers misleading answers to the great questions of life: Who am I? Where are we going? What's the purpose of life?

You and I live in an unreal world in the sense that the standards of wealth, popularity, and success to which we are told we should aspire are false standards. They represent ideals that are often impractical or even impossible for ordinary people like ourselves to achieve.

What we need is a hard look at what real beauty is—not just the end result of our using the right soap or shampoo, but the "inner man" and the "inner woman" of which the Bible speaks so profoundly. That's not to put down physical beauty; if you are attractive, consider that a gift from God for which you can be thankful. However, someone else's beauty does not mean I have to feel inferior. I am not worthless if the latest fashions never look as good on me as they do on the models, if I haven't mastered the art of applying makeup, or if my nose is a little too big.

Nor should I feel deprived if my car is three, six, or ten years old, if my lawn is never as green as my neighbor's, or if my house needs a coat of paint that I can't afford. What I possess does not define me any more than the way I look. I am a complete, special, and valuable person before God, even though I may lack money and property or look rather ordinary, even homely, by the world's standards.

Those standards often represent our tendency to confuse what we want with what we need. Ask yourself—of all the items presented to you for purchase in newspapers, on TV, and on radio, which ones do you really need to live? At what point do we cross the line between "that's enough" and "not enough"? Why should our lack of some items other people tell us are essential to our well-being make us feel anxious and inferior?

If we are not being harassed by messages that tell us we ought to be rich or beautiful, we are told we should at least be successful in this world's terms. And too often we accept the achievement of that goal as vital to our sense of identity and our sense of well-being. For example, we don't simply play a game, we play to win. We teach our children to be competitive because they will need that skill to survive as adults. Descriptive terms like taller, shorter, lighter, or darker can become standards by which we compare and judge each other's importance and worth.

But why not simply accept ourselves as God made us and be glad to be who we are? If we are dissatisfied with that identity and anxious about some defect in ourselves, perhaps it's because we have adopted the world's standards and values. Perhaps it's because we are confused by goals which change constantly, which drive us to pursue things we don't really need, and which sometimes inhibit us from living life joyfully, fully, and contentedly: the way God intended it to be lived when He first gave it to us.

The Past, the Present, or the Future?

Often people are spiritually anxious because they are not living in the present tense. Listen to them and see how often they use phrases such as "I used to ..." or "I'm going to ..." It's not just that they're caught up in a nostalgia kick or that they're futurists. Rather, it's simply a matter of being dissatisfied with the way things are going now.

All of us have a tendency to let failures and guilt from the past dominate our personality. For some of us, dwelling on the past represents our feeling that we deserve to be punished for some offense committed a long time ago. And in our preoccupation with the past, we sometimes create the very problems of spiritual anxiety we complain about. What we need to do is accept God's forgiveness for the past and live each day as freed, loved children of a heavenly Father. We are not prisoners condemned to pay for our crimes by a vengeful judge.

Other people face the future in the same way they look at the present—with spiritual anxiety. They are convinced that nothing is going to change and all the future holds is more of the same bad luck and frustration. Their only question is "How bad will it get?"

The problem with that expectation is that the help we need will have to come from outside, in some miraculous manner, or we will have to discover in ourselves some ability we don't seem to have at the moment. Neither eventuality is the kind of thing we can count on.

Excessive worry can mean we believe God doesn't care. The record of His actions on behalf of people like ourselves, however, says otherwise. So does the witness of His followers throughout the world today. It's very clear from the Bible and from the lives of Christians that God *does* care. And He will be present in the future to bless our efforts—and sometimes even provide an unexpected gift. But we have to trust His promise, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b).

How We Feel About Ourselves

If you asked them, most people would deny they've ever really hated anyone. But if you asked them, "Do you sometimes dislike yourself?" The answer would most likely be, "Yes, I do." A lot of people don't like the way they look, the way their voice sounds, or the way they walk. Others are embarrassed because they're too fat or too skinny. Some people dislike themselves for having a quick temper, for being unable to make friends easily, or for never getting the joke everyone else is laughing at. Still others think of themselves as generally dull, uninteresting people, a little below average—maybe even inferior.

Part of our problem with self-dislike goes back to the values of beauty, wealth, and success we are constantly exposed to. No one can measure up to the level of perfection portrayed in magazines and on TV. But sometimes our self-dislike has its source in our habit of comparing ourselves to other people, in order to find out what we're worth. We want to be the same as the people around us, if not just a little bit better. And if we are not better or even the same, then we feel there's something wrong with us.

But God is not concerned with how we compare to others. He has given all of us different personalities and abilities. He calls us to be ourselves, to use those special gifts which He has given to us alone. The Bible talks about this in terms of “stewardship.” A “steward” is a person who has been given something to take care of, and make use of, for someone else.

I believe one of the most comforting passages in the Bible is the one that expresses what God requires in His stewards—that they be found faithful. Not “perfect.” Not “successful.” Not even “effective,” just “faithful.” (Read Matthew 25:14-30, “The Parable of the Talents.”) This means we don’t have to ask, “How do I compare to others?” Instead, we are free to accept our limitations, our so-called weaknesses and inadequacies, and still joyfully do whatever work God has set before us.

And there are things you can do, perhaps even some things only you can do. I’m not talking about spectacular, superhuman abilities. Think of very ordinary tasks, things done in everyday situations that are so normal you do them without thinking. Perhaps you’re the only person in your building willing to spend more than two minutes with the lady down the hall who does nothing but complain.

You may have a habit of always smiling (something you feel makes you look silly), but it’s your smile that more than once has made someone else feel better when things weren’t going very well. Maybe you’re good at keeping secrets, so people feel they can confide in you and come to you for advice or just to “get something off their chest.” If you’re quiet and not very good at making conversation, you may be exactly the person a busy, harassed mother likes to have a cup of coffee with. Or maybe you’re the one who always finds time to help somebody else, no matter how busy you are yourself. You might be surprised how many people admire you—or even envy you—for that ability.

No matter what you’re able to do, your talents are gifts from God. He expects you to use them on behalf of others. And when you do that, the focus of your attention is going to move away from yourself and what you lack. Instead, you’ll find yourself looking at other people’s needs. In that shift of focus, your feelings of anxiety might get lost. That’s the beauty of helping others; we take the spotlight off our problems, and we feel better because of it.

Not Alone

Another clue to overcoming spiritual anxiety is to know we are not alone in our fear. Sometimes we feel we are the most miserably alone person in the world. Because our anxiety causes us to look so deeply into ourselves, we feel alone and frightened, even when we are with other people. In fact, we may feel more anxious around others, so we isolate ourselves away at home or in a quiet room—and we feel even more lonely and more anxious. Spiritual anxiety thrives on isolation.

But we do not have to be alone. In fact, God says we are not: “The family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:9). We’re involved in a fellowship of suffering. Other people, including Christian people, are just as anxious as we are.

Just knowing that another person is going through exactly what we are going through, however, doesn’t automatically diminish our anxiety. But that knowledge can give us a new perspective on the experience. We discover that we are not set apart from everybody else. We are not strange, not inferior, not even that much different from others. In fact, the spiritual anxiety we feel may almost be something normal if everybody goes through it.

Sometimes, if we find other people who have already gone through the experience of spiritual anxiety like the one we’re going through, they may be able to teach us how to deal with it. Then again, perhaps we can teach them.

God Keeps His Promises

The beautiful conclusion of that passage about the “brotherhood of suffering” is this comforting reminder: “God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13b).

In other words, God never permits a test to come to us that is beyond our power—a power He gives—to bear. Bearing the test, putting up with it, and living with it is a type of victory. We can be on top of our spiritual anxiety, rather than having it on top of us.

Once again, this is not to say that spiritual anxieties will leave and never return. But they need not control and dominate your life. And the reason they don't have that kind of power is that you know you have a heavenly Father who promised to help you out. He says, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7), and "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8b). Now, we either believe that promise or we don't. But the promise is there, just as surely as God is there. What we do with it won't change the fact of it. Carrying the burden of your spiritual anxiety to your heavenly Father can be the act which restores peace of mind and confidence when you're paralyzed by it. You can get on with your life in hope, in spite of the way things look.

So take a good look at your anxious concerns again. Accept the fact that God has forgiven your past and your present. Anxiety, guilt, and self-dislike need not loom up and fill you with feelings of inferiority. You are a unique creation of a very loving God. He doesn't make inferior products. He has placed at your disposal all the resources you need and all the needy people you can handle.

And one more thing, don't be anxious about tomorrow, God knows about tomorrow. He knows your needs completely. Go to Him in prayer and turn your anxiety over to Him (see Philippians 4:6).

Am I Going to Die?

Ultimately, God is the only one who can handle that one enemy we all fear most—death. Our fear of death should not be taken lightly, especially, if it is accompanied by some physical pain or an intense mental and emotional turmoil. Like the young woman in the story at the beginning of this booklet, we need to confront our pain and fears in the presence of someone who can help: a doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, clergyman, friend, or counselor.

I know an energetic older woman who suddenly developed breast cancer and faced surgery on her 85th birthday. We sat together in the sunroom of the hospital the day before her operation.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

"No. Well, maybe a little," she said. "But I've been alive a long time, and I don't know why I should expect my life to never end."

She sat a moment thinking and then went on.

"God has been very good to me. This cancer thing is quite a surprise, even for an old lady who's gotten used to seeing her body fall apart before her very eyes."

She laughed a little at herself.

"But it hasn't gotten me down. The doctors are very good. And all my friends are praying for me. I'm praying too, you know. God knows what's best for me so, either way, I can accept it."

Granted, this lady was a Christian and she had lived many years. But in her response she acknowledged two great truths applicable to anyone who is spiritually anxious about facing death. First of all, she accepted the reality of her own death. It was something to be expected at some point. At the same time, she was not ashamed to admit her fear of death. It was an unwelcome intrusion.

The second truth she shared with me that day was her confidence that God loved her and wanted only the best for her. She was sure He would treat her as a child whom He loved. Whether she lived or died, God's love for her would be the same.

But what about those who die at a much earlier age? Is there such a thing as an "untimely death"? While death in old age is often explained as due to "natural causes" or simply what happens when people get old, death before old age is often considered a mistake, a deviation from the normal course of events. How do we set things right again in our minds when that has happened?

First of all, we ought not feel there's something wrong with being frustrated or even angry in the presence of death at an early age. Death is a terrible mystery no matter when it occurs. Our issue, though, may arise from an unrealistic expectation of the number of years we feel human beings deserve to live.

Sometimes we imagine ourselves to be so important, so wise, so strong that we reject any indication of weakness in ourselves. We refuse to believe we are limited in any way. Put simply, we are struggling to be God. We are not God, however, and acknowledging the great difference between God and ourselves by admitting we can die is to begin loosening the grip of anxiety on our hearts and minds. Although God does not die, His creatures do.

Spiritual anxiety over death often contains one of the elements that is part of the actual grieving process: fixing blame. People like to be able to say, "Charlie died because he smoked too much." "Emily got killed because she wasn't careful." "He wouldn't be dead today if he listened to his doctors." The problem arises when we cannot find any rational thing to fix our blame on.

Sometimes death is simply a tragedy with no explanation. That is when we usually try to fix the blame on God. This is wrong. For while it is true that God knows when someone will die and does allow it to happen, God is not the cause of death. He does not make it happen, and He takes no pleasure in seeing people die.

It is not wrong, however, to lay our anger and frustration at God's feet. In purely rational terms we cannot blame God for death, but we can involve Him in our grief and spiritual anxiety over death. In His love He accepts our anger with compassion and does not blame us for our bewilderment in the presence of so great a mystery as death. But finally, even as we grieve, He points us toward the way out of the maze of anxiety we've stumbled into and places the blame for death squarely where it belongs.

The real cause of death is summed up in St. Paul's words: "Death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12b). When Adam and Eve, our first parents, turned God's perfect creation in a different direction by their disobedience, they also changed the outcome of human life. Instead of an uninterrupted time of fellowship with God, things now have a conclusion. We die. We die because sin has entered the world.

The link between sin and death, consequently, extends also to the remedy for our spiritual anxiety over the end of life. Jesus' ministry on earth included the working of many miracles. He healed the sick, fed huge crowds of people with only a small amount of food, walked on water, and raised the dead. Each of these miracles upset the "natural order of things," and for a moment, at least, the lives of some people were governed by a new set of laws.

The miracles recorded in the Bible must have been spectacular events. But behind each of them was an even greater, more spectacular event: the forgiving of human sin. Whenever Jesus acted in a miraculous way, He also tried to make clear that His main reason for being here on earth was not to be the world's doctor but to be its *Savior*. As long as the cause of all evil, including death, had not been dealt with, human beings could not expect the course of their lives to be any different than what it always had been. But once the cause of evil had been overcome, the effects of evil also were diminished. There could be a new perspective on physical death.

Once while passing through Nevada, I overheard a woman describe a rather sad philosophy of life. She was in her 60s, standing in front of a slot machine with a paper cup full of nickels. As she put one more coin in the machine, she said, to no one in particular, "Might as well try it again. You only live once."

Just a week before, I had heard my friend—the lady facing surgery on her birthday—tell me, "Isn't it wonderful that this isn't the only life we have!"

What a difference in attitude—both toward life and toward death. The lady in Nevada, if she really meant what she said, was reflecting on human limitations. She knew that all life had to end sometime. My friend in the hospital knew that, too.

Aware of the fact that there is a conclusion to life, the lady in Nevada was trying very hard to fill every moment she had left with as much pleasure and adventure as she could. My friend facing surgery had done the same during her lifetime.

The difference between them lay in the way they looked at death. The lady at the slot machine saw it as a final event after which there would be nothing. The lady in the hospital saw death as a transition. She knew Jesus Christ died to give us forgiveness while we are still living. And she knew He would also give us new and glorious lives after we die. She believed in Jesus' resurrection. What happened to Him would happen to her.

How then should we face death? Remember the words of my friend: "Isn't it wonderful that this isn't the only life we have!" Just think of it, we will live again! And our second life is going to be better than the first because it will be exactly

the way God originally intended life to be—free of all decay, all sense of loss, all shame or inferiority, all disintegration, and all spiritual anxiety. Physical death will still come and sadden us in this life. But the fear we have of it no longer has to immobilize us or distract us from getting on with life.

Overcoming

Sometimes people, especially some Christians, have the idea that life is supposed to be free of all anxiety, worry, and depression. They feel people should always be “up,” “positive,” “confident,” and a host of other things, all of them good. If negative thoughts or feelings somehow worm their way into our minds and hearts, such people tell us we should ask God to forgive us for having such a weak faith.

Personally, I feel uncomfortable with those who give the impression that Christians should not have a care in the world. The Scriptures constantly remind us that human life on this side of heaven is imperfect. Problems and frustration are hallmarks of a sinful world. We can expect to confront them and be affected by them in every aspect of our lives.

At the same time, God has given us a vision of what life can be, what He intended it to be. Perhaps it is the tension between the reality we are experiencing and the reality we know God wants us to experience that gives rise to our deep-seated fears and spiritual anxieties.

As long as we are in this world, we will be subject to all kinds of anxiety. We simply have to accept that as a great, annoying fact of life. But we also need to accept an even greater fact of life; namely, that we are children of a compassionate heavenly Father. Out of His tremendous love for us, a love that is totally undeserved, He sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to endure the same frustrations and be subject to the same limitations we endure and are subject to. He felt physical pain. He became angry at the way things were going. He felt overwhelmed by all the demands people made on Him. He was tired and hungry. He was reluctant to die.

Because Christ endured human life, we, too, can endure. We can survive. That is the victory, trusting God to bring us through. Finally, we will be freed of all worry and every anxiety, although it seems for most of us, that will come a little later.

No Need to Fear

Since we are creatures of flesh and blood, God has provided some very practical, tangible ways for us to be assured of the victory over fear that is available to us.

First of all, there are Christian people all around us who are willing to listen and advise, if that’s what we want. Many of them, like pastors and counselors, are specially trained to help people deal with spiritual anxieties.

Secondly, God speaks His words of comfort to us directly in the Bible. So find a translation you like and read some of it. Look at the book of Psalms for expressions of hope and trust in the midst of trouble. Those words came from people who felt very much like you do. Also read some of the historical accounts in the Old Testament, not just because they’re interesting (they are certainly that), but because they show how God has always been deeply involved in the life of His people, saving them or helping them get through whatever was happening. And then read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John to see God in action in Jesus. Look for Jesus’ compassion in those stories and look for times when He assured people of the forgiveness of their sins and promised them that they would be raised from the dead.

A third thing you can do is talk to God. It’s okay if you haven’t done it before or you’ve forgotten how. Prayer doesn’t have to be fancy. There are no rules. Simply tell God what you’re going through, and let Him know you’re turning the whole problem over to Him. Then get on with living your life in a positive way.

If you need to hear God’s forgiveness spoken to you face-to-face, talk to a minister in a Christian church. Don’t be ashamed or embarrassed to admit the wrongs that weigh heavily on your heart and mind. He will understand and wants only to assure you that God loves and forgives you in Jesus Christ.

Finally, get the focus of attention off yourself and onto somebody else. Accept the needs that other people have as opportunities for service that God has placed in front of you. Give people whatever it is you have to offer—and accept from them the help they may be able to give you.

Above all, be confident that God lives and acts in this world on your behalf, He keeps His promise: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10b).

Psalm 4

Answer me when I call to You,
my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

How long will you people turn My glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?
Know that the LORD has set apart His faithful servant for Himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.

Tremble and do not sin;
when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.
Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the LORD.

Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?"
Let the light of Your face shine on us.
Fill my heart with joy
when their grain and new wine abound.

In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for You alone, LORD,
make me dwell in safety.

Rev. Dr. Donald L. Deffner served The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod for 50 years as a parish pastor, a university professor, and as an academic department chairman. He was the first campus pastor in the Missouri Synod. Concordia University Irvine in California awarded Deffner its honorary Doctor of Divinity degree for his many literary and academic accomplishments.



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