

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

What to do when you can't stop worrying

Presented by David Reay

What do we do when we can't stop worrying? We can sing that song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy". But it won't make a lot of difference. And if someone tells us not to worry because everything will work out OK, that won't make a lot of difference either. Christians are good both at worrying, and telling other Christians not to worry. So is there a better way of controlling worry? There is, and it comes from the mind and heart of God, not from pop psychology or feel-good sentiments.

First, let's be clear that worry or anxiety is a significant matter. It reflects a belief that things are out of control, that no one is looking after us, that we are the helpless victims of circumstances. The root meaning of the biblical word for anxiety is "distraction". We are not focussed on the proper thing, we have not got things in perspective. We are not thinking or feeling straight. And because of this, life can take a very dark shape.

"Worry is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained." Worry is like a whirlpool, sucking all things into its destructive forces. And even little whirlpools have their effect. So today let's see what the Bible says about it.

God doesn't seem to quarantine Christians from circumstances that may bring about anxiety. He invites us to react differently to them. One way we react differently is to get our perspective right. To think straight. Jesus gives us some help in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, *Matthew 6:26: Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

Jesus' argument is simple: if God takes an interest in the lesser creatures, won't he also take an interest in human beings who are the pinnacle of his creation? Later he says something similar *Matthew 6:28-30: And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?*

When we are anxious, we are saying God can't cope, that things are out of control. We are distracted from the truth, which is that a loving God is very much in control. He knows our plight, he is not at a distance, wringing his hands. Agreed, we don't understand why he doesn't simply step in and change our circumstances. But then again, we realise he is more interested in changing us than in changing our circumstances.

Other bible texts say similar things. *1 Peter 5:7: Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. We are not to hide our anxieties but bring them to God and fling them onto him. Why? Because he cares, and because he alone can bear the burdens.*

Isaiah 43:1-2: But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Another promise that God is with us, that he is able to care for us. We do pass through deep waters and painful fires, but God is with us to see that they are not destructive but constructive. He knows us by name because he made us: we are his possessions. He has our interests at heart, and never takes his eye off us.

Back in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that worry doesn't work – *Matthew 6:27: And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?*

Many who pride themselves on efficient use of their time and being focussed and wise people spend too much time worrying, which is really a waste of time. Worrying can't do a thing to help us handle our circumstances. Worry actually chews us up, uses so much emotional and physical energy that it means we can't cope adequately. It is distraction from the truth and preoccupation with the lie: that life is ours to control and it is out of our control.

Jesus reminds us of the distraction of worry *Matthew 6:25: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Matthew 6:31-32: Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*

Worry reflects wrong values. Those without God spend lots of time worrying about material things. That is their preoccupation. But the children of God are to be different. So if we worry about material things, it may mean we are too focused on them. Our lives are out of balance. Because we haven't got the main issue right, which is devotion to God, nothing else is right. If the central issue in life is blurry, then all else will be as well.

Jesus tells us the remedy *Matthew 6:33: But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

All other concerns will find their proper level and perspective once we get our priorities right. Seek God's purposes for life first. Get the centre right and the periphery will follow. Put material or other things first and they can be carriers of anxiety. And this applies no matter how good or right these things might be. If we make our families our church or our friends or our work our God then they are out of their true place and become anxiety-laden. They only become blessings and not burdens when they are part of our overall devotion to God.

And then Jesus tells us to live one day at a time *Matthew 6:34: So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*

One feature of worry is that it is often focused on possibilities in the future. We worry not simply about what is happening now but what may happen in the future. What will that medical test show? How will I do in that interview? What will I say in that meeting? The power of worry is that it teases us with possibilities and worst-case scenarios. We hope for the best but fear the worst.

Again, this doesn't work. Worrying about the future doesn't change one thing about it. All we do is spoil the certainties of today by worrying about the possibilities of tomorrow. We may have a holiday but spend the holiday worrying about what will happen on our return. This again is distraction. God gives us the present moment for our blessing. We are to be thankful for that moment, what has been called the sacrament of the present moment. God is there for us in the present moment, in the present circumstance. By worrying about the future we fail to see God in the present and thus fail to trust him for the future.

It is so hard for some of us to celebrate the present moment without bringing in all sorts of concerns about future moments. It takes discipline to seize the present moment and be thankful for it, immersing oneself in it and so tasting of the goodness of God that will surely see us through any future times.

We have been saying that worrying about tomorrow won't change anything. What we most fear usually doesn't happen. "Today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday." And if we are realistic, we know that sometimes our tomorrows turn out to be not so good. Even so, God is with us and cares for us. We don't tell ourselves or others not to worry about tomorrow because our fears may not come true. They may come true, though usually they don't. Rather we remind ourselves and others that God is with us, that no circumstance is beyond him. We remind ourselves and others that worrying won't change a thing.

Of course, we do give thought for the future. Jesus isn't saying we don't plan ahead or don't think through issues in advance. If I know I have a difficult speech to make tomorrow, part of overcoming anxiety about it is to plan thoroughly for it. Planning and thinking are not the same as worrying. It all depends on the attitude. Good planning occurs in a prayerful context where all is committed to God. Anxiety is distraction, where God is left out of the picture. So plan for the future, but celebrate the present, realising that God is in control of both and can be trusted in both.

Paul the apostle has other words to say about worry. *Philippians 4:6: Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* We have touched on this matter of celebration and thankfulness. Here Paul reminds us that thanksgiving is part of our overcoming anxiety. Why? Because when we are grateful we are conscious of the goodness of God in past and present. If he was good in the past, and is good in the present, he can be trusted to be good in the future.

Keep a gratitude list and look at it regularly. Write down his small and large blessings as a record. It will serve to keep the fears at bay. God is so very good but so often we are distracted and don't recognise it. Or we admit his past goodness but believe tomorrow it will be different. A spirit of gratitude helps us here.

And note that Paul is saying we commit all things to him. "A care too small to be turned into a prayer is a care too small to be turned into a burden." God is interested in the little things, and it is the little things that trip us up. Some years ago, the crew of a wide-bodied jet flying into Miami Florida noted the landing gear lights were not all green and so were not sure the wheels were down. They spent much time trying to figure out the problem, especially trying to get the tiny bulb out to confirm that it was the problem. All the time they did this, the aircraft's flight pattern was not properly set and it flew into the Florida Everglades with heavy loss of life. The crew let a little thing distract them from the major thing.

Paul also talks of the value of other people. *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.* One way of beating worry is to talk things out, not only with God but with others. God uses the insights and compassion of others to minister to us. Another person can provide objectivity and insight

that we may not have at a time of anxiety. They can remind us of what has been said today, remind us of biblical truth that is true no matter how we may feel about it. A good and wise Christian friend can bring us back to reality away from the fantasy world of worry. And that reality will always be the love of God for his children and his mastery of all circumstances.

If worry is distraction, our remedy is not to be found in happy jingles, but in getting back to the heart of life: a personal Father who has been trustworthy in the past, is trustworthy in the present and will be trustworthy in the future. Life has its seasons, some of them uncomfortable. But God can be trusted to be with us no matter what the season may be. He is the God of all seasons. The words of the old hymn express it well.

O God our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.

Beneath the shadow of your throne
your people lived secure;
sufficient is your arm alone,
and our defence is sure.

O God our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come;
be our defence while life shall last,
and our eternal home.