

The Troubled Waters of Worry

They reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distresses. He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed.

PSALM 107:27-29

I can remember a scene from my youth: My mother is the center of attention, sitting at our kitchen table with her head slightly bowed. I am standing at the head of the table, listening to her. I cannot recall the circumstances or the problem, but I still remember my mother's words: "I am worried." The tone of her voice, the deep lines in her face, and the slump in her shoulders all testified to the depth of her anxiety.

Something was bothering her. And I didn't like it! It didn't seem fair to me that she should have to encounter the troubled waters of worry. After all, she held my childhood universe together. She was radiant with compassion, kindness, and consideration for others. Against the background of her caring nature, emotional stability, and winsome personality, these symptoms of excess worry stood out in bold relief.

Through the years, I have had a number of lightbulb moments when I moved from ignorance to insight about some aspect of the human condition. Here is one: During my teenage years, between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, when my grandmother didn't think I would live to be twenty-five, I was responsible for many of the worrisome circumstances and anxious days in my mother's life. I cringe in shame as I reflect on some of the stupid and destructive decisions I made.

If I remember correctly, it started on the day I graduated from the eighth grade. Proud of me, my mother gave me permission to get on the bus with a group of friends from the neighborhood and go across the city to Go Kart Land, an amusement park. She also gave me strict instructions to be home by ten o'clock that night.

I bolted out of the house, ran down the stairs, and caught up with my friends. When we arrived at Go Kart Land, we descended from the bus, breathing anticipation and excitement. That day we quenched our thirst for adolescent freedom on the go-karts. But for some reason, I decided to ignore the perfectly reasonable curfew given to me by my mother. I *deliberately* lost track of the time.

In the meantime, on the other side of the city, my mother did not know why I was late or where I was. As she said later, “I didn’t know if you were sick, dead, or dying.” We did not have smartphones in 1968, but if we had, I doubt I would have called home or answered her call. It would not even have occurred to me to send her a text message explaining my tardiness. Nor did it occur to my adolescent mind to step into a nearby phone booth, place a coin in the slot, call home, and ease my mother’s concern.

It was way past ten o’clock when I got home that night. Mother was worried about what had happened to me; I was worried about what she was going to do to me when she saw me! I tiptoed up our back stairs, opened the door quietly, and tried to sneak into the house, to no avail. My father was asleep, but my mother was still up!

I can still see her, stepping around the corner, her eyes filled with a mingling of love and maternal fury. She confronted me in the kitchen with the words, “Boy, why are you so late?” She was relieved when she saw me, but gave me a piece of her mind.

Some years later, she remarked to me that on that night, she had offered a prayer of intercession: “Lord, just bring Winfred home, and then I will kill him!” She had no intention of taking my life, of course, but her prayer expressed the depth of her anxiety.

THE DEEPS OF WORRY

I did not understand then, but I understood later. When the ship of my life sailed out of the river of singlehood into the ocean of adulthood, marriage, and fatherhood, I felt for the first time the powerful, deep, and overwhelming currents of anxiety over my children. I had never felt such currents before. The experience was new and troubling, but it would have been irresponsible to retreat to the safety of the river. I remembered these words:

Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business on great waters;
They have seen the works of the LORD,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the
depths;
Their soul melted away in their misery,
They reeled and staggered like a drunken man,
And were at their wits' end. (Ps. 107:23–27)

The ocean is where God wanted me to be, but the stormy winds have often “lifted up the waves,” causing my wife and me to be at wits’ end with anxiety over one of our precious children.

Our son Sterling was born in Senegal, West Africa, the country where Stephne and I served as missionaries for nearly a decade. During those years, we evangelized the lost, nurtured and equipped believers, worked in prison ministry, and started a training institution for pastors, evangelists, and laypeople. We developed deep relationships that we enjoy to this day.

The theological wrestling match deepened our anxiety as we struggled with questions about the sovereign care of God.

As much as we love Senegal and its people, I must admit that the environment and climate are not always conducive to health. During the rainy season, the temperature can soar to 120 degrees, with al-

most suffocating humidity. Malaria in Senegal is as frequent as the common cold in North America. At different times, every member of our family had malaria.

On one occasion, we thought that Sterling had contracted malaria again. My wife noticed it first. Sterling was lethargic. He had diarrhea and a fever. At that point in our missionary career, we were no longer troubled about malaria and knew how to treat it. Thinking that Sterling had malaria, we gave him the needed meds. But he did not improve, and our anxiety increased.

We decided to take Sterling to a competent and well-respected pediatrician in Dakar. We were shocked when the doctor proceeded to treat Sterling for typhoid fever. He was just a little boy. Stephne and I were living out

God's call on our lives. Couldn't our great and infinite Father protect our little guy from a sickness like typhoid fever? The theological wrestling match deepened our anxiety as we strug-

gled with questions about the sovereign

care of God. My personal worries deep-

ened as I entertained other questions: Lord,

did I do something to displease You? Are

You trying to get my attention by allowing

Sterling to get sick? Is this a test?

Sometimes His ways are shrouded in mystery, and we struggle to make sense of pain, tragedy, and the unexpected.

Our observations of God's ways with other godly missionaries did not help. We knew one missionary couple with three wonderful children. One day the husband was out jogging in a park in Dakar with his son, when suddenly the father collapsed in front of his son and died of a massive heart attack. He was just thirty-nine years old. After burying her husband, the widow returned to Senegal with her children to serve Christ. About a year

after her husband's death, one of her sons was hit by a car and killed. A family of five was now reduced to a family of three. I feel a strange numbness as I recount this event. Stephne and I knew another missionary couple who had one little boy, and their baby boy died at the tender age of eight months.

In light of these stories, was my little boy, now being treated for typhoid fever, going to be next?

I am not questioning God's wisdom and goodness in these circumstances, but what I am saying is that sometimes His ways are shrouded in mystery, and we struggle to make sense of pain, tragedy, and the unexpected. God generally does not explain Himself to us in those times. Rather, He tells us who He is! He reminds us that He is good, He is wise, He is faithful, He is in control. Stephne and I had to step out and entrust our little boy to God. Our concern was sharp, but this attitude eased our anxiety. We cried to the Lord in our worry, and "He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed" (Ps. 107:29).

The Lord brought Sterling through his illness, and we were thankful. Still, I must admit that even in our capac-

ity as full-time Christian workers, missionaries, and parents, we were worried.

OUR ANXIOUS NEW WORLD

After forty years of marriage, thirty-one years of full-time Christian ministry, and six decades of living, one of my big takeaways is that we live in a worry-filled and anxiety-driven world. Every day it seems new anxiety-creating circumstances intrude on our lives.

In the twenty-first century, these threats seem larger, more frequent, and more menacing. Terrorism, economic uncertainty, the recent resurgence of racial unrest, the murder of respected police officers in the line of duty, the murder of unarmed civilians by rogue cops, the breakdown of trust between law enforcement and the citizenry, senseless gun violence, the danger some children face as they walk to and from school, mass shootings of innocent people, the moral and spiritual crisis of the Western world, and the erosion and blatant rejection of traditional values—all of these realities generate worry in many of us. Gary Collins puts it this way:

Chaotic overscheduling, worry over tests, the disappearance of family routines or stability, endless exposure to disturbing information, lack of close connections, constant change, insecurity, information overload, pressures from peers, and the fading of clear moral guidelines all combine to raise anxiety levels in young people. . . . Constant reminders about the ongoing activity of terrorists around the world have heightened our insecurities and led to what has been called “the new anxiety.”¹

In 2012, a man dressed in tactical clothing opened fire inside a movie theater in Colorado. Since then, a number of shootings have occurred inside theaters, producing a dark cloud of anxiety on what was once considered a worry-free pastime.

My wife and I are avid moviegoers, and we recently went to see a newly released blockbuster. As the lights dimmed, and I prepared to listen to the instruction from the big screen about how cellphone usage during the film spoils the experience for others, I heard this new, troubling warning: “Let’s talk safety. If you see any strange

people or strange activity, let someone from our staff know.” I settled into my seat in the theater, but I paid close attention to people when they left or came in.

Since September 11, 2001, bold signs hang on the walls of trains that read: “If you see something, say something.” The exhortation itself heightens our sense that danger may be lurking in the shadows. In a world where terrorist attacks are a reality, the signage on train walls can generate a new low-grade anxiety.

We live in a world of global communications with a never-ending, 24/7 news cycle. We watched in real time as the terrorist attacks in Paris unfolded. We have repeatedly watched the news in horror as ISIS fanatics behead their captives. It is not an overstatement to say that our entire planet is worried.

Even church sanctuaries are not necessarily safe havens. The church bombing in Birmingham in 1963 showed that not even churches are off limits. And more recent events like the shooting that occurred in a Charleston church’s prayer meeting and threats against pastors who preach the gospel have raised new concerns about security during church services.

Mass shootings in schools, universities, theaters, and

churches have demolished our naïve assumptions about the safety and security of these places. Respect and honor resulting in sensible behavior is no longer a given in these traditional havens of rest. The twenty-first century is a new, high-tech world full of anxiety and worry, yet our old anxieties have not left us.

You may be a part of the sandwich generation, with children at home on the one hand and aging parents for whom you are responsible on the other. You never dreamed life would be this hard and demanding. You are worried about your capacity to continue at this pace.

Anxiety can reside in virtually every nook and cranny of human experience. Its causes are myriad, and it is no respecter of persons or circumstances.

You may be a mother with a tendency to worry. Perhaps you have a son or a daughter who is struggling, or maybe your new baby is ill. You may even feel guilty because you are so utterly helpless in the face of your child's overwhelming need. You are worried, preoccupied with the pressures of life, feeling like you are all alone.

You may be a grandparent, enjoying your golden years, when out of the blue, and for reasons beyond your control, you find yourself caring for your grandchildren. You love these kids, but you are tired all the time. You worry that you have to bear these burdens alone.

Your spouse may be a police officer. You have a good marriage, and although the safety of police officers has always been a concern, it is a major concern today. And, if you are honest, you are no longer just a concerned husband or wife; you are downright worried.

You may be single, and while there isn't anything wrong with singleness, you want to get married one day, have a life partner, someone you can grow old with. You have laid out your biblical criteria for a spouse in the presence of God, but weeks, months, and years have gone by, and you are still single. And the desire to be married is no longer simply a concern but a preoccupation.

THE THEOLOGICAL, EXISTENTIAL,
AND PRACTICAL QUESTION

Even though worry has taken on new forms and descended with a vengeance on former havens of tranquility, it is a

problem as old as the ancient text of Scripture. Our struggle with worry is a part of the human condition. Anxiety can reside in virtually every nook and cranny of human experience. Its causes are myriad, and it is no respecter of persons or circumstances. And Christians are not exempt!

In light of such a reality, the theological, existential, and practical questions that we as Christians must address are: How do we overcome anxiety in a worry-filled world? How do we obtain victory over worry in situations that are charged with anxiety? When a raging sea of anxiety rises up in our souls, how do we keep ourselves from drowning?

The purpose of this book is to answer this question biblically. May we all embrace heaven's answer.