

Chapter 1

LESS FRET,
MORE FAITH

It's a low-grade fear. An edginess, a dread. A cold wind that won't stop howling.

It's not so much a storm as the certainty that one is coming. Always . . . coming. Sunny days are just an interlude. You can't relax. Can't let your guard down. All peace is temporary, short-term.

It's not the sight of a grizzly but the suspicion of one or two or ten. Behind every tree. Beyond every turn. Inevitable. It's just a matter of time until the grizzly leaps out of the shadows, bares its fangs, and gobbles you up, along with your family, your friends, your bank account, your pets, and your country.

There's trouble out there! So you don't sleep well.

You don't laugh often.

You don't enjoy the sun.

You don't whistle as you walk.

And when others do, you give them a look. *That* look. That "are you naive" look. You may even give them a word. "Haven't you read the news and heard the reports and seen the studies?"

Airplanes fall out of the sky. Bull markets go bear. Terrorists terrorize. Good people turn bad. The other shoe will drop. Fine print will be found. Misfortune lurks out there; it's just a matter of time.

Anxiety is a meteor shower of what-ifs. What if I don't close the

sale? What if we don't get the bonus? What if we can't afford braces for the kids? What if my kids have crooked teeth? What if crooked teeth keep them from having friends, a career, or a spouse? What if they end up homeless and hungry, holding a cardboard sign that reads "My parents couldn't afford braces for me"?
Anxiety is a meteor shower of what-ifs.

Anxiety is trepidation.

It's a suspicion, an apprehension. Life in a minor key with major concerns. Perpetually on the pirate ship's plank.

You're part Chicken Little and part Eeyore. The sky is falling, and it's falling disproportionately on you.

As a result you are anxious. A free-floating sense of dread hovers over you, a caul across the heart, a nebulous hunch about things . . . that might happen . . . sometime in the future.

Anxiety and fear are cousins but not twins. Fear sees a threat. Anxiety imagines one.

Fear screams, *Get out!*

Anxiety ponders, *What if?*

Fear results in fight or flight. Anxiety creates doom and gloom. Fear is the pulse that pounds when you see a coiled rattlesnake in your front yard. Anxiety is the voice that tells you, *Never, ever, for the rest of your life, walk barefooted through the grass. There might be a snake . . . somewhere.*

The word *anxious* defines itself. It is a hybrid of *angst* and *xious*. *Angst* is a sense of unease. *Xious* is the sound I make on the tenth step of a flight of stairs when my heart beats fast and I run low on oxygen. I can be heard inhaling and exhaling, sounding like the second syllable

of *anxious*, which makes me wonder if anxious people aren't just that: people who are out of breath because of the angst of life.

A native Hawaiian once told me the origin of the name that Islanders use for us non-Hawaiians—*haole*. *Haole* is a Hawaiian word for “no breath.” The name became associated with the European immigrants of the 1820s.¹ While there are varying explanations for this term, I like the one he gave me: “Our forefathers thought the settlers were always in a hurry to build plantations, harbors, and ranches. To the native Hawaiians they seemed short of breath.”

Anxiety takes our breath, for sure. If only that were all it took. It also takes our sleep. Our energy. Our well-being. “Do not fret,” wrote the psalmist, “it only causes harm” (Ps. 37:8). Harm to our necks, jaws, backs, and bowels. Anxiety can twist us into emotional pretzels. It can make our eyes twitch, blood pressure rise, heads ache, and armpits sweat. To see the consequences of anxiety, just read about half the ailments in a medical textbook.

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Anxiety ain't fun.

Chances are that you or someone you know seriously struggles with anxiety. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders are reaching epidemic proportions. In a given year nearly fifty million Americans will feel the effects of a panic attack, phobias, or other anxiety disorders. Our chests will tighten. We'll feel dizzy and light-headed. We'll fear crowds and avoid people. Anxiety disorders in the United States are the “number one mental health problem among . . . women and are second only to alcohol and drug abuse among men.”²

“The United States is now the most anxious nation in the world.”³ (Congratulations to us!) The land of the Stars and Stripes has become the country of stress and strife. This is a costly achievement. “Stress-related ailments cost the nation \$300 billion every year in medical bills and lost productivity, while our usage of sedative drugs keeps skyrocketing; just between 1997 and 2004, Americans more than doubled their spending on anti-anxiety medications like Xanax and Valium, from \$900 million to \$2.1 billion.”⁴ The *Journal of the American Medical Association* cited a study that indicates an exponential increase in depression. People of each generation in the twentieth century “were three times more likely to experience depression” than people of the preceding generation.⁵

How can this be? Our cars are safer than ever. We regulate food and water and electricity. Though gangs still prowl our streets, most Americans do not live under the danger of imminent attack. Yet if worry were an Olympic event, we’d win the gold medal!

Citizens in other countries ironically enjoy more tranquility. They experience one-fifth the anxiety levels of Americans, despite having fewer of the basic life necessities. “What’s more, when these less-anxious developing-world citizens immigrate to the United States, they tend to get just as anxious as Americans. Something about our particular way of life, then, is making us less calm and composed.”⁶

Our college kids are feeling it as well. In a study that involved more than two hundred thousand incoming freshmen, “students reported all-time lows in overall mental health and emotional stability.”⁷ As psychologist Robert Leahy points out, “The average *child* today exhibits the same level of anxiety as the average *psychiatric patient* in the 1950s.”⁸ Kids have more toys, clothes, and opportunities than ever, but

by the time they leave home, they are wrapped tighter than Egyptian mummies.

We are tense.

Why? What is the cause of our anxiety?

Change, for one thing. Researchers speculate that the Western world's "environment and social order have changed more in the last thirty years than they have in the previous three hundred!"⁹ Think what has changed. Technology. The existence of the Internet. Increased warnings about global warming, nuclear war, and terrorist attacks. Changes and new threats are imported into our lives every few seconds thanks to smartphones, TVs, and computer screens. In our grandparents' generation news of an earthquake in Nepal would reach around the world some days later. In our parents' day the nightly news communicated the catastrophe. Now it is a matter of minutes. We've barely processed one crisis, and then we hear of another.

In addition we move faster than ever before. Our ancestors traveled as far as a horse or camel could take them during daylight. But us? We jet through time zones as if they were neighborhood streets. Our great-grandparents had to turn down the brain sensors when the sun set. But us? We turn on the cable news, open the laptop, or tune in to the latest survival show. For years I kept a nightly appointment with the ten o'clock news. Nothing like falling to sleep with the accounts of murders and catastrophes fresh on the brain.

And what about the onslaught of personal challenges? You or someone you know is facing foreclosure, fighting cancer, slugging through a divorce, or battling addiction. You or someone you know is bankrupt, broke, or going out of business.

Without exception we are getting older. And with age comes a covey of changes. My wife found an app that guesses a person's age

by evaluating a picture of the person's face. It missed Denalyn's age by fifteen years to the young side. She liked that. It missed mine by five years to the old side. So I retook it. It added seven more. Then ten. I quit before it pronounced me dead.

One would think Christians would be exempt from worry. But we are not. We have been taught that the Christian life is a life of peace, and when we don't have peace, we assume the problem lies within us. Not only do we feel anxious, but we also feel guilty about our anxiety! The result is a downward spiral of worry, guilt, worry, guilt.

It's enough to cause a person to get anxious.

It's enough to make us wonder if the apostle Paul was out of touch with reality when he wrote, "Be anxious for nothing" (Phil. 4:6).

"Be anxious for less" would have been a sufficient challenge. Or "Be anxious only on Thursdays." Or "Be anxious only in seasons of severe affliction."

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But Paul doesn't seem to offer any leeway here. Be anxious for nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Is this what he meant? Not exactly. He wrote the phrase in the present active tense, which implies an ongoing state. It's the life of *perpetual anxiety* that Paul wanted to address. The *Lucado Revised Translation* reads, "Don't let anything in life leave you perpetually breathless and in angst." The presence of anxiety is unavoidable, but the prison of anxiety is optional.

Anxiety is not a sin; it is an emotion. (So don't be anxious about feeling anxious.) Anxiety can, however, lead to sinful behavior. When we numb our fears with six-packs or food binges, when we spew anger

like Krakatau, when we peddle our fears to anyone who will buy them, we are sinning. If toxic anxiety leads you to abandon your spouse, neglect your kids, break covenants, or break hearts, take heed. Jesus gave this word: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with . . . the anxieties of life” (Luke 21:34 NIV). Is your heart weighed down with worry?

Look for these signals:

- Are you laughing less than you once did?
- Do you see problems in every promise?
- Would those who know you best describe you as increasingly negative and critical?
- Do you assume that something bad is going to happen?
- Do you dilute and downplay good news with doses of your version of reality?
- Many days would you rather stay in bed than get up?
- Do you magnify the negative and dismiss the positive?
- Given the chance, would you avoid any interaction with humanity for the rest of your life?

If you answered yes to most of these questions, I have a friend for you to meet. Actually, I have a scripture for you to read. I’ve read the words so often that we have become friends. I’d like to nominate this passage for the Scripture Hall of Fame. The museum wall that contains the framed words of the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and John 3:16 should also display Philippians 4:4–8:

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for

ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Five verses with four admonitions that lead to one wonderful promise: “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds” (v. 7).

Celebrate God’s goodness. “Rejoice in the Lord always” (v. 4).

Ask God for help. “Let your requests be made known to God” (v. 6).

Leave your concerns with him. “With thanksgiving . . .” (v. 6).

Meditate on good things. “Think about the things that are good and worthy of praise” (v. 8 NCV).

Celebrate. Ask. Leave. Meditate. C.A.L.M.

Could you use some calm? If so, you aren’t alone. The Bible is Kindle’s most highlighted book. And Philippians 4:6–7 is the most highlighted passage.¹⁰ Apparently we all could use a word of comfort.

God is ready to give it.

With God as your helper, you will sleep better tonight and smile more tomorrow. You’ll reframe the way you face your fears. You’ll learn how to talk yourself off the ledge, view bad news through the lens of sovereignty, discern the lies of Satan, and tell yourself the truth.

You will discover a life that is characterized by calm and will develop tools for facing the onslaughts of anxiety.

It will require some work on your part. I certainly don't mean to leave the impression that anxiety can be waved away with a simple pep talk. In fact, for some of you God's healing will include the help of therapy and/or medication. If that is the case, do not for a moment think that you are a second-class citizen of heaven. Ask God to lead you to a qualified counselor or physician who will provide the treatment you need.


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This much is sure: It is not God's will that you lead a life of perpetual anxiety. It is not his will that you face every day with dread and trepidation. He made you for more than a life of breath-stealing angst and mind-splitting worry. He has a new chapter for your life. And he is ready to write it.


I have a childhood memory that I cherish. My father loved corn bread and buttermilk. (Can you guess that I was raised in a small West Texas town?) About ten o'clock each night he would meander into the kitchen and crumble a piece of corn bread into a glass of buttermilk. He would stand at the counter in his T-shirt and boxer shorts and drink it.

He then made the rounds to the front and back doors, checking the locks. Once everything was secure, he would step into the bedroom I shared with my brother and say something like, "Everything is secure, boys. You can go to sleep now."

I have no inclination to believe that God loves corn bread and buttermilk, but I do believe he loves his children. He oversees your world.



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Less Fret, More Faith

He monitors your life. He doesn't need to check the doors; indeed, he is the door. Nothing will come your way apart from his permission.

Listen carefully and you will hear him say, "Everything is secure. You can rest now." By his power you will "be anxious for nothing" and discover the "peace . . . which passes all understanding" (RSV).

Dear Lord,

You spoke to storms. Would you speak to ours? You calmed the hearts of the apostles. Would you calm the chaos within us? You told them to fear not. Say the same to us. We are weary from our worry, battered and belittled by the gales of life. Oh Prince of Peace, bequeath to us a spirit of calm.

As we turn the page in this book, will you turn a new leaf in our lives? Quench anxiety. Stir courage. Let us know less fret and more faith.

In Jesus' name, amen.

