

# Introduction

**A**re the waves of anxiety crashing around you? Can you feel them rising, threatening your breath? Are you just trying to keep your head above them? If you've picked up this book, you have likely experienced—or are in the middle of experiencing—the daily struggle anxiety brings as it pulls you into its depths. For you, it may be an ominous surge, a torrent, threatening to inundate you. Or maybe it's more subtle, like standing at a shore, understanding that there are unknowns out there in the depths, wondering if you might be overtaken any moment. Or perhaps your experience is more like a mix of erratic waves, or like a sneaker wave, catching you unaware, lifting you off your feet at unpredictable times.

Regardless of exactly how you have been swept into anxiety's undertow, there is often no warning. No cautionary “danger: strong currents” sign to prepare you. As someone who was initially swept off my feet and overwhelmed, I stand in solidarity, dripping wet with you. I offer this book as a life ring.

As I consider all God has taught me, I can say something now that, when the waters engulfed me and I was at the bottom of the sea, I never thought possible, and that is this: I went from believing that anxiety was the worst thing that could happen to me to now knowing that anxiety became one of the best things that has ever happened to my faith.

You may wonder how I can say that. The reasons for this statement are manifold and what I will attempt to communicate in this book. Overall, I can make this statement because I have come to see that being a conqueror is not measured by never feeling anxious again. I realize this is not the prevailing litmus test for victory we are so often taught. We are told to measure our success or failure with any given struggle based on how well we keep it at bay. If we sense the struggle

on a certain day, we have failed the test. If we don't sense it much at all, we have succeeded. This is not how the Bible handles our struggles, ailments, or weaknesses. To sense struggle is not victory or defeat in and of itself. To feel our weakness in the face of suffering is not failure. In fact, to feel the acuteness of our fragility and acknowledge the acuteness of God's divinity opens a portal to true success, which is a deep dependence on a never-anxious God.

I was surprised by this discovery because a lot of teaching on anxiety will tell you that to overcome it, the person you need to understand and depend on most is *you*. If you take these ten courageous steps and find strength within yourself by mustering up enough mental power, you will conquer the waves of anxiety like a pro-Olympic surfer and become the champion of your own story. But you will not find much of that in these pages since the first-place award is not up for grabs. It is awarded to the One who is over the winds and waves. Understanding yourself and developing insight is a good thing (we'll do some of that), and there are certain mental exercises that are helpful when it comes to combatting anxious thoughts (we'll do some of that too), but *depending* on yourself to fix something as big as anxiety? That is another thing entirely. That is why you'll find that my intent in this book is not to rile you up into a motivational moment. Instead, I ultimately desire to lift your eyes from all that swirls in your own head and up to the Prince of Peace, because He is the true hero of our story. One of the most courageous things you can do is ask Him for help.

Victory in anxiety, for me, has been found by experiencing this deep dependence on God. And that is something I can do on a particularly anxious day when I feel as though I'm drowning, or on the days when I'm at the edge of the shoreline. As it turns out, anxiety was not an obstacle that I needed to avoid; it was a portal to a person I needed to behold: Jesus Christ. And so, I learned that every trembling trial we face is another push toward Him. I now no longer ask myself, "Did I avoid the wave of anxiety today?" Instead, I ask myself, "When I feel the wave, big or little, who will I depend on?"

I can say that through the lessons learned in this book, my difficulties with anxiety have indeed lessened. But I cannot know if that will

remain the case. The Bible promises that in this world, we will have trouble,<sup>1</sup> so I can be assured that there will always be an opportunity for anxiety. I may re-enter a stronger anxiety storm than I've faced thus far. Or, in spite of the world and by God's grace, I may continue to recover from anxiety, even experiencing a miraculous and total release from its grip. But here's something I know to be true either way. Even if I never again tremble in the ways I have, I never want God to take away what I have learned in my most anxious season thus far—the weakness that led me to dependence and reliance upon the Lord. The ability to rejoice in what God is doing despite how I feel. The opportunity to see the heavenly realities that go beyond earthly boundaries and burdens. The endurance to find hope when circumstances seem bleak and hopeless. God has graciously lifted my eyes upward to see that victory is in Jesus, even when my steps falter because my body feels broken. In the seasons when anxiety's waves have crashed onto my frame and I've trembled to my core, I have learned what it is to lay hold of the only anchor that can sustain us in the trying waters, and that is Christ. We all *know* we should lay hold of Him, of course. But I have actually done it, I've been forced to do it. Charles Spurgeon said, "They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls."<sup>2</sup> In this sea, I've laid hold of him in the past few years in ways that I never knew were possible. And I can confidently say now that no matter the bait thrown out by the enemy, I wouldn't give up the pearls I received underwater, deep in my lament. Those lessons and pearls include spiritual things, of course. But they include other things too, for anxiety is not *only* a spiritual thing. It involves the whole person. And so, expect to see words from me that range as far and wide as the human experience does. Which brings us to what to expect in this book.

I am not an expert in the field of mental health. Know that I am speaking, not as a trained counselor, but as someone who has experienced anxiety and trembling. While I have had experts read this book to verify its helpfulness, I'm not going to give you an anxiety manual. My goal as a sister in Christ is to put before you the lessons I learned

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1. John 16:33

2. Charles H. Spurgeon, sermon "The Golden Key of Prayer" (March 12, 1865), *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 11*.

and passages that have been most instructive to me as I persisted through the worst and best parts of learning to manage my anxiety and develop a different relationship to it.

As you read through these pages, you'll see that I start off by sharing my story of how I met anxiety. The truth is, my story is the story of the human race since we are all afraid in some way. I invite you to explore with me the origin story of humanity and the *why* behind this universal experience; we'll explore different kinds of fear. What is beautiful is how God engages us amid our anxiety; and it might be different than what you might typically think. Then, I write about the surprising fact that while we weren't made to be shaken, there are ways in which we *were* made to tremble. We'll explore what it looks like to let God rule over your life instead of anxiety. I write about how we are more than a soul (since God has created us as whole beings—body, soul, and spirit), and how that should all weigh in on how we think about our experience and the tools available to help us. I share tips I have learned along the way through counselors and friends who have also experienced anxiety. You'll also see a chapter about how we can be helpful when it's time to care for those we love who are anxious. I write about how God helps us in our experience with deep anxiety when we cling to Him. We can cast our cares upon Him and even “do it scared,” with His help. I primarily share scriptural encouragements along with some physical helps to ease symptoms and manage stress.

Oh, and one thing to know about me: Since I'm a poet and spoken word artist, I write in poetry and prose. You will see a mix of poetic writings and poetry throughout the book. A final word that feels fitting for a book like this: If you are in urgent need of help in your anxiety journey, there are some numbers and websites, breathing techniques, promises, prayers, psalms, and a poem in the appendix section, along with a word to church leaders looking to help those in their care who struggle with anxiety.

Now that you know what to expect in this book, I'd love to close this introduction by praying over you and with you.

*Oh Prince of Peace,*

*We tremble before You because You are the true and living God.*

*I come on behalf of my friend who is afraid, anxious, trembling, because they are surrounded by cares.*

*We are unsure of so much in our lives: our health, our home, our families, our churches, our country, our world.*

*Meet us in our individual storms.*

*Calm our anxious bodies, hearts and racing thoughts.*

*Help us to cast our cares onto You because You care for us.<sup>3</sup>*

*As our health, home, families, churches, country, and world feels out of control, remind us that You have full control.*

*Every moment of our lives is known by You.*

*Each fearful moment You are right here with us in the midst of it.*

*Thank You that You have not left us alone in our anxiety.*

*You are the God who sees us . . . and comforts us in our sorrows.<sup>4</sup>*

*Jesus, you are the God who incarnated to be familiar with our sorrows.*

*In Your holy humanity, You modeled for us: “When [we are] filled with cares, your comfort brings [us] joy.”<sup>5</sup>*

*Help us to find You amid this suffering, that we might find Your joy.*

*In the name of our Savior, Jesus, who suffered and trembled for us.*

*Amen.*

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3. 1 Peter 5:7

4. 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

5. Psalm 94:19



## CHAPTER 1

# Anxiety Knows My Name

**M**y body shakes like hundred-year-old floorboards in a Southern revival. My clamoring heart takes center stage and preaches to me as the loudest voice in the room. *Lub-dub*. This pounding is given a mic, and everything and everyone else fades into a muffled blur. My wooden frame pulsates to the preaching. Heart stomping on the 1 and 3 and clapping on the 2 and 4 exposes me to nature's elements. Breath shallow. Mind foggy. Body frail. *Lub-Dub*. My thundering heart tarries at the altar like a sinner waitin' on the Holy Ghost. Pearls of sweat gather on my skin like jewelry I never asked for. Anxiety wrestles me into submission. Waterlogs me until I release my deepest secrets. Awakens me with its thunderbolts. *Lub-Dub*. This pouring rain never seems to close its faucet. It leaves me sopping, a crescendo of rage inside of me. *Lub-Dub*.

My thoughts swish, swirl, and crush like an ocean threatening to hold me under its rogue waves. Once the undertow takes hold of me, as though she wants to make me a tombstone out of her tears, I am left with questions ruminating like roaring rapids. *What are these erratic rivers that hold my body and mind captive? Why does my body tremble? Will things always be this way?* My head hurts. My heart is beating fast and hard like the strong hands of a church mother's distressed tambourine. She taps on-beat with the rain between stomps, reinforcing the grooved clothes that fit loose on sanctuary planks. *Lub-dub* grows louder and louder. I'm forced to surrender to its beating. Anxiety is my white noise. I wave my white flag. Float in this lake with hands outstretched.