

Part 2: When I Feel Anxious

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September 11, 2022

We live in a remarkable era. Despite the turmoil America has gone through in the past three years, a global data firm has recorded that America's "quality of life index" has increased 20% since 2012.

We have more technology, more abilities, more awareness, more resources and more opportunity than any generation before us. But what is it producing?

It seems that in lock-step with every technological breakthrough, every new level of global connectivity, every new discovery, we encounter more and more questions. We are faced with more things we didn't know about, and we know more problems than we know what to do with.

In the past three years the national rate of individuals who categorize themselves as struggling with anxiety has increased from 32% to 62%. A monumental study in the UK, tracking 2.5 million people over the course of 10 years, showed not only the rise of anxiety but that prescriptions meds for anxiety have increased by over 200% in that same time period with specific growth among those between the ages of 18-25.

Another medical journal notes that pediatric anxiety has risen by nearly 25% each year for the past couple years. As of 2020, nearly one out of every ten kids between the ages of 3-17 has been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

Your experience and exposure to anxiety might be as near as darkness, or so distant you wonder if it's merely an over diagnosed softening of the human experience. Debate surrounds it on every side. But one thing we know for sure is that the God of the Bible cares for the anxious person.

In many ways, anxiety is a normal part of a fallen human experience—common to us all. In other ways there are those who wrestle with crippling anxiety on a medical or habitual level. Yet for all of us together God holds out hope and clarity to those who are simultaneously sinners and sufferers. In our "Talking to Yourself" series, today we are going to tackle the issue of anxiety and here is what we are going to see: **Anxious hearts find relief by resting in Jesus' righteousness.**

We are going to see this in three ways with Isaiah 8:11-22 as our home base. First we are going to see **The Reality of Anxiety** (Isaiah 8:11-15), then we are going to learn to **Reset Our Anxiety** (vs. 16-22), and lastly we are going to learn to **Rest in Our Anxiety**.

Imagine a world where there was a superpower nation who for centuries enjoyed prosperity, security and economic growth. But despite this, an era was seemingly coming to an end as global powers grew in influence and expanded their borders, division, dissention and conspiracy ripped through the nation dominating the dinner table and the public square. While this might sound familiar to you today, it was the real context of our passage today in Isaiah 8.

It was the mid-8th century B.C., and the nation of Israel was falling apart. Split by a recent civil war into two pieces, the northern Kingdom of Israel feared the dubious alliance the southern Kingdom of Judah

just made with Syria. Judah's king, Ahaz, and his people are growingly anxious. Despite the fact that God had just reassure the nation in of his care in chapter 7, rumors, gossip and turmoil consumed the nation.

In the midst of this the Prophet Isaiah addresses his King and his people: **Isaiah 8:11-15**.

Here we see our first point this morning: **The Reality of Anxiety**.

Whether it's America in 2022, Britain in the 1700s, Rome in fifth century or Judah in the eighth century B.C.—fear, dread and anxiety seem to be inescapable at a human level.

Why is that? Because there's always something to be anxious about. How many of you have every had the reoccurring dream that is the picture of anxiety: You get up for school, or for a job interview, and you make your way there only to find out what? You're wearing no clothes.

This universal sense of fear was actually the first experience of Adam and Even when they rebelled against God. They were created in a perfect Garden where God provided everything for them, and they lived in an undisturbed intimacy. They were naked, but they were not vulnerable. Adam wasn't worried about rashes, Eve was worried about what Adam thought of her body. Neither of them felt anything they had to hide from God, but notice what happened when they distrusted God and listened to the serpent: **Genesis 3:6-8**.

You see God made us for intimacy which thrives on comfort and safety. Sin disrupted all of that and now we live in a world of anxiety. Because intimacy of being with God was removed by sin we are anxious about ourselves—we see things in us which we know ought to be covered and hidden from others. We are anxious about the condition of our world—we need coverings from the elements which bear against us. And we are anxious about encountering the holy God who we have sinned against.

We are anxious because of what sin separated us from, and what sin still separates us from today.

Now, I want to make a distinction here. Experientially, those who wrestle with anxiety often struggle with depression and vice versa. The two often feed into each other. But we are going to talk about depression in a couple weeks so I think it's best for me to define what I mean when I talk about anxiety today.

Generally speaking, depression compresses. It weighs us down with what is presently burdensome at the moment. Anxiety on the other hand bubbles up. It's like a boiling pot. Walt Whitman, the famous poet wrote on his anxiety and called it, "his electric soul."

Biblically speaking this is what we find behind the myriad of words used. Even here in Isaiah 8 the word dread is a specific word for "excitement." Beyond the simple word for "anxiety" there are in Hebrew and Greek, words which stress anxious awe, anxious concern, anxious stirring up, and anxious haste. Generally the depressed person is downcast because of what is, the anxious person is stirred up, excited and concerned with what may be—the potential of what's coming. The discomfort of their soul electrifies them with a desire to do something but they are often overwhelmed with what that something may be.

Because we live in a broken world we will have anxiety. Part of that is God's gift to us. When you're in the woods and hear a sound it does you well to be anxious. That's God's alarm system that something is

wrong. When you're about to engage in something sinful and your heart rate is elevated that's God's gift trying to cause you to second guess your decision.

Jesus himself experienced distress and concern when looking forward to the cross in **Luke 12:50**. That word Jesus used here, distress, is the same word Luke uses in Acts 18 to say Paul was wholly occupied with the task of preaching. Whatever Jesus was concerned with, he was fully occupied with that distress.

Paul says this in **2 Corinthians 11:28**. Paul was anxious for the churches.

Now if you're familiar with your Bible you will notice a couple things. First both Jesus and Paul warn people of anxiety and worry. Yet both experienced the same sort of troubled and anxious spirit regarding what was to come. But Jesus was sinless, even with his experience of anxiety.

In Joshua 22:24 some of the tribes of Israel built an altar out of an anxiety that without that reminder their kids would forget the goodness of God. Phinehas the priest and the rest of Israel heard the anxious motivation and verse 30 says, "It was good in their eyes."

So is anxiety good or bad? Is it sinful or is it not? It depends. It depends upon what you do with it. And isn't this the exact point Isaiah made to his anxious people? Look back at **Isaiah 8:11-13**.

We live in a world where anxiety is sometimes safe, sometimes sinful, but always present. But as Isaiah describes the fear and dread of the anxious heart the command to God's people is: Don't be anxious like everyone else is anxious, don't be anxious over the same things everyone else is anxious about.

If you'll notice, Isaiah doesn't give the advice we often give to people who wrestle with anxiety. He doesn't simply say: "Don't be anxious." That is in part what Isaiah says here: don't fear, don't worry. It's in part what Paul says in the first part of **Philippians 4:6a**.

But that's not where either person ends. Isaiah says, "But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear and him be your dread." Paul continues in **Philippians 4:6**.

What's the point? In a world where anxiety is common, the Christian is to be distinct by knowing who to bring their anxiety to, and what to be anxious about. We bring the fullness of our experience and we submit it to God himself and there we find our care and our peace. When our experience with God becomes the centerpiece of our experience with anxiety we encounter something profound. Did you see what Isaiah said? He said "fear God, be in dread, be anxious of him." And what? He will become a sanctuary to you.

This is what leads us to our second point this morning: **Resetting our Anxiety**. We need to think about anxiety differently, and God's word helps us do that. The anxious person is agitated when anxious because we have a desire to resolve something. We are driven to do something even if that something is distraction. The Lord who made us knows our tendency to look for help and notice the recalibration he provides the anxious heart: **Isaiah 8:16-22**.

In the face of a world where voices are endless, where mediums chirp and advice tweets, where are God's disciples to go? To the teachings and to the testimonies.

This doesn't mean that we don't listen to advice from other believers or even medical doctors. But it does mean that we realize the living God knows us and cares for us at a unique level. It means that we get to assess all the common grace God gives us in medicine, counseling and therapy through the primary lens given in vs. 20: according to God's teaching, his testimony and his word.

To fail to assess God's word and his understanding of our own experiences when our hearts are troubled is to listen to those who "have no dawn." Verses 21-22 describe this all too common reality of God's people who wrestle with anxious dread, but who instead of turning to God, turn to the world and then shake their fist at God when all the world provides them is more darkness and gloom and anguish.

This hierarchy of turning to the world or turning to God is the crux of your experience of anxiety. Look back at Isaiah 8:14-15 you'll notice that it is the realization of who God is, his holiness, and your relationship to him which determines if you find a sanctuary or if you find a stumbling block. We'll talk more about this later, but what we see right now is that we must reconcile our anxiety first and foremost with God because all anxiety is a direct result of our separation from God.

So what does it look like to reset our anxiety? It first means we need to understand the causes of our anxiety at a biblical level.

Just as we talked about last week we need to understand the creational limits God gave us when he made us, but we also need to understand how sin has added new situational realities to our experience. Not only are we not God, but our hearts are morally broken in sin, and our world is broken by the effects of sin.

The situational brokenness of our world can cause anxiety. We can be anxious about a medical test coming back, and that's a normal anxiety. We can be anxious because of foolish decisions. I heard one counselor say he was working with a guy who was struggling with anxiety only to find out he fell asleep every night to a horror movie. If you are sleeping with the news on every night, or pounding coffee all day, you might find yourself wrestling more with anxiety. It's not necessarily sinful for that to be the case—but we need to be careful because we can begin to sin even in anxiety which itself isn't sinful.

Our moral brokenness, our sin, can cause us anxiety. If a child disobeyed and ate a chocolate chip cookie, he's going to anxiously brush his teeth and worry about his parents noticing that he did that. His anxiety itself isn't sinful. But it is caused by sin, and in his anxiety he can choose to solve it by adding more and more sinful deceit to cover his tracks.

And sometimes our anxiety isn't because of our sin, sometimes it isn't because of the brokenness in the world. Sometimes our anxiety is because of the brokenness of our bodies. Both of the kinds of anxiety we just talked about are good warning signs that something is wrong. But sometimes our body warns and gets excited about things which are not necessarily sinful and situations which are not necessarily dangerous.

This is the category of those who wrestle with anxiety on an acute, continual and even medical level. As a human, I am very familiar with these first two categories, but I also know the unwanted friend of walking with persistent, unreasonable, and undiscernible anxiety.

I don't say this to boast that I've figured anything out. In fact, I say this to prove the opposite. I stand here today as one who has had crushing anxiety, shortness of breath, night sweats, nausea and panic attacks to say: "To the teaching and to the testimony!"

In my own walk with anxiety I have tasted the darkness of trying to placate my anxiety in the ways of the world—I've found darkness and I've found myself increasingly frustrated with God. But there came a very distinct moment in my anxiety where I realized all of my anxiety produced an electricity that had me moving towards anything and everything except the pause and consideration of God's word.

There are all sorts of circumstantial, medical, and situational issues which might cause us anxiety and those need to be dealt with accordingly. But as a matter of first importance the anxious person needs to take their energy, and begin by turning to God's advice first before we run to the world.

First, **Repent**. This is for those who find that we have been anxious because of our sin, and those who have begun to sin in their anxiety. In college I was anxious about my performance in school, which is not on its own sinful, but that anxiety drove me to lust and pornography because it was there I found the comfort and control I didn't have in school. It's not always a sin to be anxious, but it's often very easy to sin in our anxiety—that is we begin to think obedience to God will actually make us more anxious and sin brings us peace. If we taste the darkness of this foolish decision we have the wonderful privilege of turning back to God. Here we see the hope of **1 John 1:9**.

Second, **Respond**. Sometimes we find that our anxiety isn't sinful, and it's not immediately causing us to sin, but it opens up other areas of potential sin. If you've been needing to pay a bill, or have a conversation with an employee, but you've been too anxious to pay it or have that conversation that passivity may compound your anxiety. Anxious people often focus on step 100 and wrestle to take step one. I love the story we saw a few weeks ago where Jesus asked his disciples to feed the 5,000 only to have them say: "There's no way we can do that." But then what did Jesus say, "Split them up into groups of 50." They couldn't feed 5,000 but they could do that. And when they did that they realized Jesus provided for them what was next too. Often times our anxiety keeps us from obeying because we don't think obedience will actually help—but obeying Jesus in the smallest first step is the best step we can take.

Third, **Remind**. This is where our creational limitations matter. Anxious people are often anxious because we are not omniscient and we don't know what's next, or because we aren't omnipotent and we can't control what's next. But we will never be omniscient nor omnipotent. Only God is. If we are anxious every time we realize we aren't God we set ourselves up for misery. The anxious person should be familiar with the confession of **Psalms 127:1-2**. We are not God, therefore we have the privilege of resting in God.

Fourth, **Reorient**. For the acute sufferer of anxiety, the source of our anxiety is often irrational. That is to say what makes me anxious might not make any other reasonable person anxious. When that happens I know the foolishness of it, but the experience is the same and I feel anxious and silly about feeling anxious and silly. But look at what Paul says in **Romans 8:26-27**. When I don't know what's going on in my own heart, the Holy Spirit does and he desires to take what I can't put my finger on and bring it before God the father. So I actually sync up my breathing to help on a physiological level. On my inhale I pray, "Holy Spirit come down" asking him to know the mysteries of my heart. And on my exhale I pray, "Holy Spirit go up" bring it to God, bring it to my Father who will not mock my fears and wants to help me in the midst of it all.

And lastly, **Recreate**. In the midst of your anxiety, do something. Go for a walk, read a book, go to the gym, play with your kids. Now I want to be careful here because our world loves distraction but biblical distraction looks different than worldly distraction. Biblical distraction comes back to the issue with a clearer mind, worldly distraction turns into a delusion which never comes back. It distracts with the goal of never returning to what is actually wrong. When Jesus preaches to anxious people he says, "Look at the flowers of the field and the birds of the air." What is he doing? He's getting your attention off yourself, he's drawing it to something else, but then he comes back and says, "If your heavenly Father cares for them, will he not also provide for you." Take a break and realize that God is faithfully guiding the whole world in his providence, here is the rest you need to return and know he will care for you as well.

By walking through these resetting exercises I'm able to help place my anxiety in one of two categories: Is it sinful or is it safe?

Am I turning fearing what the world fears as the world fears? Or am I fearful of the world but responding with a proper fear of God? Sometimes we can walk through all those things, sometimes we can deal with the physiological situations—getting better sleep, talking with our doctor—and the anxiety remains. But if we've asked first if it's sinful, then we have the difficult privilege of realizing that this anxiety, though unwelcome, is a safe anxiety.

In the brokenness of our bodies, in the weight of life, sometimes anxiety clings to us as closely as our humanity. But when we assess it in light of God's word we continue to walk in the midst of it.

This is our last point today **Resting in our Anxiety**. For some of us we can rest from it, but for others we need to learn to rest in it. That's what Isaiah is actually fighting for in Isaiah 8, and it's actually what is perfectly captured for us in Psalm 23.

Would you read that with me? **Psalm 23:1-6**.

We love this Psalm. Everyone wants the beginning and the end of this Psalm, but we like to act like the middle doesn't exist. We want all the dwelling and none of the doom. We want the emerald green of the pasture and not the enemies lined up at our table. But there we often walk.

And there we learn to remind ourselves of the one who walks with us. We remind ourselves of his staff which guards us, and his rod which disciplines us. Anxiety in the world is only resolved through intimacy with the shepherd.

Look back at two portions of Isaiah 8: **Isaiah 8:14-15 and 20-22**. Do you see the line of division in this text? Here we see the anatomical spine of anxiety.

For those who refuse to fear God, for those who in their sin stand apart from him, for those whose hope is in the ways of the world your anxiety is fitting. You stand apart from God, you stand apart from the promise of daybreak, you stand in ever and only darkness. At the core of our anxiety is ultimately our relationship with God. He is the one who brings safety and comfort, he is the solution to all our anxiety in an anxious world and for those who stand apart from him there is no relief, there is only empty distraction and consuming anxiety.

We are anxious because things aren't right. Which means what we desire more than anything else is righteousness—we want things to be as they should be. We want light out of darkness.

Right after Isaiah warns of endless darkness look at what he says: **Isaiah 9:1-2**. This prophecy is fulfilled in Matthew 4 in Jesus' ministry and specifically his message of repentance.

God brings light on those who walk in darkness by bringing the gospel of repentance through Jesus his son.

His son would know anxiety. Because Jesus came, anyone who hopes in him has the relief of knowing our greatest fear will never happen—God will not forsake us. But Jesus lived his whole life knowing that he would not be spared that fear—he would die, forsaken by God, as a substitute for what we deserved.

Jesus prayed in that Garden that if there were another way to resolve his anxious despair, it would be opened to him. But Jesus obeyed. He knowingly walked into the unknown pain of the cross to show us that even here—obedience gives us hope in our anxiety.

Because of what Jesus did, because Jesus subjected himself to the wrongness of the world—we receive his righteousness. Look at **Romans 3:21-22a**. We have through Jesus a righteousness which gives us peace—even when it seems we don't feel it at the time. We have intimacy restored to God through the son!

Anxiety has been one of the hardest thorns I've had to deal with in my own obedience to Jesus. And this past year it has been compounded all the more as my son has grown to have disruptive anxiety in his own life. But as I've tried to help him, I've realized more of my Father's heart for me.

There are two questions Owen and I ask each other when we are wrestling to make decisions in the midst of our anxiety. The first is, "Is it safe?" This is where we try and vet out any of those circumstantial issues of our anxiety, where we try and see if this anxiety is actually helpful or unhelpful.

But sometimes even if the act is itself safe, we feel in the brokenness of our bodies that it is not safe. But this is where we ask the second question: "Is it obedient." And if it's obedient we ask ourselves a third question: "Where is safety?" And the answer is, "Safety is walking with Jesus."

Safety is knowing that what I fear in separation from God is greater than the fears of this world so I cling with all my heart to the one who holds me to the Father in desperate intimacy. We cling to the cross because the cross gives hope even through the veil of fearful anxiety—that the other side of obedience is always God's loving kindness.

The righteousness of Jesus allows us to remind ourselves, even when our anxious hearts are screaming within us, even when our breath fails us, and when the world mocks us, that there is nothing safer than walking with Jesus.

Walt Whitman writing a poem on his own anxiety concludes saying: "I throw myself upon your breast my father, I cling to you so close that you cannot unloose me...Kiss me my father...breathe to me while I hold you close, the secret of the murmuring I envy."

What is the murmuring we need to hear in the face of a world that chips and mutters? Consider this in **1 Peter 5:6-7**.

Jesus wants your anxiety. One day, in resurrected life, he will remove it all together, but today he wants what is present. He asks you to give it to him and to walk with him even when the valley is dark.

Here, is safety. Here is comfort. Let him be your fear and him be your dread.