

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Coping with Life: How to deal with worry

Recently, I was staying away from home, on business. I woke up in the morning and wondered if my wife would cope that morning with our son, who had gone to bed in a bad mood the night before. I read the paper over breakfast, and caught up with various worrying developments in the UK and abroad. On my way to the office, the radio news added a few more concerns. Once behind a desk, my calendar reminded me I had the auditors arriving in a few minutes, and my e-mail showed that I had several other urgent issues that I needed to attend to. Then my phone beeped as a text message came in. It was my wife, letting me know that I should have sent in a radio talk a week ago. The subject was 'How to deal with worry'!

Worry is a problem that every one of us faces. Some of us have very serious issues to worry over. Others have so many **little** worries that they seem to swell up into an overwhelming tidal wave. Modern life seems to have been deliberately designed to maximise our worries. If health, spouse, children, job and finances are not enough to wear us down, the media present us all the time with new things to fret over. The financial crisis, immigration, rising crime and constant rain, are enough to make you want to emigrate! But then you might face war, tropical disease or persecution as an immigrant! Wherever you go, you will still have to worry about global warming, diminishing oil supplies and the ever expanding world population. Sometimes, our newspapers and TV programmes seem determined to insist that we worry about twenty things every day, and, if we aren't worrying, we are made to feel guilty about our lack of concern! It is tempting to think that, when Jesus said to His disciples, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things" (Matthew 6:34), He just didn't understand what the 21st century was going to be like.

How then can we deal with worry?

What is Worry?

First, let's define what we are talking about. When I talk about 'worry' this morning I am not referring to a proper concern about a difficulty. When the Bible commands us not to worry, it is not insisting that we do not care. On one level, it is absolutely right that we be concerned about crime and the problems caused by the financial crisis. What the Bible condemns, is the kind of anxious fretting over a situation that produces no fruitful action, and dishonours God.

Why is worry wrong?

Worry is wrong on a purely practical level. It doesn't achieve anything positive. The colourful illustration of Jesus that nobody can make themselves taller by worrying (Matthew 6:27), underlines the fact that worry does not contribute anything practical. Worse than that, it tends to paralyse us and actively prevent useful action. Worse still, it can have damaging effects on our mental and physical health.

At the spiritual level, worrying can lead to other sins. We find ourselves getting angry at other people without reasonable cause, because our worry is 'eating away' at us. We resort to scheming or lying, because we are worried that things will turn out badly if we don't.

But I don't think any of these is the chief reason that the Bible tells us so firmly that worry is wrong. The worst thing about worry is that it dishonours God. Worrying implies that God cannot be trusted. He is either not strong enough, or not caring enough, for us to confidently leave things in His hands. We don't usually think of it in those terms, but that is the inescapable logic of our worrying.

Why do we worry?

If worry is so unproductive, unhealthy and unspiritual, why do we all do it so regularly? In my experience, many worries stem from situations that are outside my control. Perhaps I have some particular psychological issues, but I like to feel I am in command of things! When I have worked through all the options, decided my strategy and thought about my contingencies or workarounds for any anticipated problems, I can relax! Then problems arise that I had not anticipated, or there are potential problems that I can't see any possible solutions for, and the worries come creeping in. This is especially the case when an issue involves other people. Perhaps one of my children faces a serious

choice, or a challenge, that I have no power over. I quickly move from the reasonable concern that I talked about earlier, to full scale worry.

Sometimes we worry about things that we think we **should** be controlling, or managing. If it seems perfectly reasonable that we should be able to cope, but things seem to be spiralling out of control, we have another reason to worry.

At the root of both these, and perhaps all other causes of worry, is our inability to see the future, or at least to see it clearly. We usually worry more about what **might** happen more than what we know **will** happen. This leads us back to the issue of how much we trust God.

What are the alternatives to worrying?

You might think I am suggesting that all Christians should cultivate an attitude of sunny optimism. If we can only manage to act in a 'happy, go lucky' kind of way, we will be living out a true Christian character.

If that were the case, then those people with the naturally sunny disposition of the born optimist would have a built in advantage in the spiritual life. But I don't believe that is the case.

For reasons I shall explain in a minute, I don't think optimism is, itself, what God requires. I don't think the Biblical opposite of 'worried' is 'relaxed'.

Pushed even further, perhaps the opposite of worrying is carelessness, or fatalism. Maybe we sometimes try and convince ourselves that, while we may worry a bit, at least it shows we aren't heartless, or too lazy to care. But carelessness isn't really the opposite of worry either.

For the Christian, the opposite of 'worry' is 'trust' - trust in God. That is why I don't think natural optimists are any more spiritual than natural pessimists. What God values, is how much we trust **Him**. Just trusting that, 'things will probably turn out OK', is not a spiritual virtue.

How can we learn not to worry?

If worrying is as bad as the Bible seems to suggest, how shall we learn not to worry? We might, take a deep breath, grit our teeth and make a solemn, determined effort not to worry. "Today I **will not** worry!", we might repeat under our breath. Within an hour, the true worriers among us would have already started to worry about whether we were getting worried! When Paul wrote to the Philippians he said, "Be anxious for 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", Philippians 4:6. In this way he both warned against worrying, and gave the antidote - praying with confidence about everything. Learning not to worry is as simple (and as complicated!) as learning to know, and therefore trust, our Heavenly Father.

This last spring and summer, my wife and I, and our two children, have been improving our dinghy sailing skills. If that sounds a little grand, perhaps a more accurate summary is that we have been up at the local reservoir with our neighbourhood scout group, learning to capsize less often! On a really windy day a small, light 'tippy' boat, that contains a sail and boom that can move from side to side faster than you can duck, is an exciting place to be! Such a boat with two novices in it provides ample cause for worry; I can vouch for that personally! But the same boat, on the same day, with one novice and one calm, unflappable instructor, is a totally different experience. Sitting with somebody who seems to anticipate what will happen next, and is ready to meet it with the correct response, can be a calming influence, that leads to quick and happy learning. Having somebody in the boat that you trust just makes a world of difference. At least it does, if you really relax and trust them. Some people just can't see past their worries and fear, and just want to get back on shore as quickly as possible. Jesus' disciples had a similar experience on the Sea of Galilee in another small boat! (See Matthew 8:23-27 and Matthew 14:22-23). All too often we too are people "of little faith" (Matthew 8:26, 14:31), who fail to gain any comfort from the presence of Jesus in our worries and difficulties, and carrying on fretting.

Some practical points

This is one of those topics where it is reasonably easy to point out Bible verses that apply to the situation, but most of us find that bitter experience has taught us that knowing a few key Bible verses doesn't seem to help us when the problem hits. How can we make practical progress in learning not to worry?

1) Accept that we all have different starting points

I have already stated that some people are born to be pessimists. In the same way, some of us are naturally short tempered, others are naturally loud mouthed and still others are naturally insensitive. In other words, we *all* have elements of our character that we have to struggle against if we are to grow as Christians. This means that some of us will struggle with worry more than others do. Our Father understands that. He knows the character of a Martha, who seemed to be naturally worried about practical things (see Luke 10:38-42). After all, He made her that way! That doesn't mean He accepts that we stay that way, but He does know, and takes account of, our individual strengths and weaknesses.

2) 'Practice makes progress'

How I hated that expression as a boy! Practice sounded like boring, hard slog. What I wanted was a good shortcut! In a world of 'instant everything', my wish for a shortcut seems to have become almost universal. The Bible resolutely insists that spiritual character is built through regular exercise and practice. We think of Abraham, and mentally skip to the end of his story, and wish we had that kind of faith in God. Who would need to worry, if we had could have that level of 'superhero' faith? We casually forget that Abraham's faith took a long lifetime of hard experience to build. Perhaps some of the hardest lessons for Abraham were when nothing seemed to happen for a long time. God promised him a son (see Genesis 12:1-3), but then nothing happened for years. They must have seemed like very long years, as both Abraham and Sarah got older and older. Sarah's scheme to provide a son went badly wrong (see Genesis 12:10-20), and the waiting continued. We know the story ended happily (Genesis 21:1-7), but Abraham had to live through all those hard years of waiting, and his worries spill out in his desperate pleas to God. "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? ... O that Ishmael might live before You!" Genesis 17:17-18. Those hard years helped to shape and strengthen Abraham's faith, but that didn't make them easy at the time.

If Abraham's faith took lots of time and hard experience to grow, then I can expect the same to be true for me. God is a patient and diligent teacher - it is just as well given our impatience and lack of diligence!

3) Focus on the really important things

Jesus taught this lesson in Matthew 6. "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat? Or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear? For after all these things the gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows you need all these things." Matthew 6:31-32. What could possibly be more important than food, drink and clothing? Remember that these were not 21st century people, worrying about fashionable clothes and supermarket fresh food. Jesus' hearers were 1st century people, worrying about sufficient clothing to keep warm, and enough food and drink to avoid starvation. They seem like the most basic of needs. Jesus' point is that some things are even *more* fundamental than physical necessities. He instructed His followers to put these spiritual priorities first, and trust God for their practical needs. Let me say again, that Jesus wasn't teaching idleness, nor was he saying that His followers would have no more problems. A little later He says that each day will have enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:34). There will be struggle and trouble, but we are not to focus on them and worry over them.

There is a rather American business cliché that says, "Don't sweat over the small stuff. It's all small stuff!" What seem like really important things to us are, from a heavenly perspective, just 'small stuff'. Matthew 6:25-34 is all about the relative importance of things on earth and things in heaven, with the persistent message that the things in heaven are vastly more important. I wonder how many times we worry about the eternal things in heaven. Worry often springs from this failure to focus on the truly important things.

4) Don't worry about what other people think

Many of our worries arise from concerns about what other people think of us. While living in a way that sets a good example to others and avoids both sin and the appearance of sin are commendable, worrying too much about the opinion of others can be an insupportable burden - and one we are not meant to bear. Trying to guess what a variety of other people might think about us and our motives, and then act in ways that will impress them is not only impossible, it is guaranteed to make us worry constantly. Pleasing one master is hard enough. Let us focus on what pleases our Lord and Saviour.

5) The Comfort of a Helper

If Jesus was physically standing next to you in your present problem, would you still worry? Perhaps we should think back to the story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat before we rush to answer that one! (See Matthew 8:23-27 and Matthew 14:22-23) We instinctively feel that seeing somebody physically present would make trust easier. The times in the Bible when Jesus, or an Old Testament appearance of God, was present don't really seem to support that.

Besides, God appears to regard it as essential that we build the kind of relationship with Him that is strong enough to trust without constant, physical reassurances. The statements of the New Testament are quite emphatic that, in ways that are just as real as a physical presence, Jesus *is* with us, all the time. I'm a weak swimmer, and I struggle to trust the water to hold me up. I panic as soon as water splashes in my face and up my nose, convinced that I am drowning. It can take a very determined effort to fight back that panic, and force myself to recognise I am OK.

Even when I have been wearing my buoyancy aid while sailing, I have felt that sense of panic, in spite of it being almost impossible to sink while wearing one. I regularly have to give myself the same little 'emergency lectures' when worry takes hold. My Father is in control. He can be trusted. He is not about to let me go.

Prayer

The solutions to our tendency to worry are connected to two things at the heart of the Christian life: faith and prayer. We have looked several times at our trust in God, which is an expression of our faith. Let's briefly consider the connections to prayer.

"Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you", 1 Peter 5:7. The way that we hand over our worries to God is prayer. Jesus says that our Father is aware of our needs. That doesn't imply that we don't need to talk to Him about them, but we don't tell our Father about our needs in order to give Him new information. We tell Him in order to hand them over to Him. We tell Him about our needs, and our worries about our needs, and then we leave them with Him. Sometimes we might need to take practical steps as well, but often we worry precisely because there are no practical steps we can take. Clearly, prayer and faith are interlinked. If we have little real trust in God, we will have little incentive to pray, and we will have limited confidence in His readiness to answer any prayers we do make. If, on the other hand, our experience of living with God has taught us that He does hear and answer our prayers, then our confidence in leaving things with Him will grow.

Conclusion

Worrying has nothing to commend it, but it is something that we all struggle with at times, and some of us struggle with it every day. It incapacitates us and wears us down, and it dishonours the God we love. Let's listen to the commands of scripture and start taking positive steps to rid ourselves of this unnecessary burden.

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