

# Anxiety and the Bible

## *Occupied or preoccupied?*

«Do not be anxious about anything...» (Phil. 4:6 ESV).

«And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches» (2 Cor. 11:28 ESV).

Anxiety is one of the most frequent emotional problems of our days in the developed countries. It is estimated that up to 20% of people suffer from some form of pathological anxiety that requires treatment: phobias, panic disorders, generalized anxiety in the form of constant insecurity and apprehension, physical symptoms such as dizziness, shortness of breath, headaches, etc.

How is this remarkable increase explained in a society that has reached high levels of technical progress and wealth? Isn't it a paradox that the increase in material well-being has anxiety as a surprising “fellow traveller”?

### **The causes of anxiety**

We certainly live in a world of contradictions: the so-called “welfare state” covers many basic social needs such as health care, retirement pensions, unemployment benefits, etc. This is clearly a breakthrough and we must applaud the efforts of governments to improve the quality of life of people, especially those who are vulnerable. However the reality is eloquent: the better we live, the more anxious we become. It seems that anxiety is greater when we have a lot to lose.

Social factors certainly play a role in anxiety and we do not give up having a better world to live. However, in our opinion, the key does not lie primarily in having a *better society* but *better people*. The root of anxiety *is not around us, but inside us*. Therefore a full understanding of anxiety requires going beyond the social to **the personal level**.

Everyday life confirms our assertion. Many anxiety disorders are caused by **broken relationships**. Walls of separation are built where there used to be love and commitment. Divorce and the weakness of family life are just the tip of the iceberg. *The fragility of personal relationships* is a hallmark of our post-modern society. The enormous crisis of fidelity and commitment acts as a powerful source of anxiety. Why? They demolish basic pillars of our life: a sense of mutual belonging, community roots, and meaning in life. This eventually leads to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. This is the embryo of anxiety which sooner or later will grow into some form of anxiety disorder.

The biblical teaching, however, takes us one step further. Besides the *social and personal* factors, there is an *existential* reason behind anxiety. Our identity and sense of personal security come, ultimately, from our **relationship with God**. When this link is broken, the human being experiences fear.

The Genesis account describes this fact very eloquently. When did fear first appear in history? Just after Adam and Eve decided to become independent from God: «...I heard Your voice in the garden, and **I was afraid**... and I hid myself» (Gen. 3:10 NKJV). Before the Fall, when Man lived in a close and harmonious relationship with his Creator, there was no notion of anxiety. This appears as soon as sin separates us from God. For this reason, an adequate response to the problem of anxiety involves restoring the personal relationship with our Creator, our supreme source of security because «in Yah, the Lord, is everlasting strength» (Isa. 26:4 NKJV).

## Understanding the meaning of anxiety

Anxiety is not always negative. In fact, there is a type of anxiety that acts as a valuable stimulus in life because it motivates us. It is the force that drives us to **take proper care** of people or situations that require it. An example of this positive concern is found in Paul's attitude toward the churches in the verse quoted above. The word used in the text -*merimnao*- is the same that Jesus uses in Matthew 6:25 to rebuke a certain type of anxiety. This shows us that the problem is not in anxiety itself, but in its *content* -what causes us to be worried- and in the *attitudes* that surround it.

In its positive sense, anxiety is a force that leads us to make decisions and take the necessary steps to better face any problem. So far we can talk about the adaptive value of anxiety, the “good anxiety” that is a necessary tool for life itself.

However, it is one thing to take care and another to **worry**. Anxiety in its most popular sense carries the idea of excessive worry about the future, close to fear: “*What is going to happen to me? What will be of my life? How will this disease evolve? Will I be able to work? Will I earn enough to support my family?*” Endless uncertainties rain down on our minds. Insecurity and fear dominate thoughts in a vicious circle from which we do not know how to get out. It is as if the world came down on us and crushed us. It is no accident that the word *anxiety* -or its synonymous *anguish*- comes from an etymological root that conveys the idea of a narrow pass, a gorge, something that constricts or suffocates. We have to combat this type of anxiety because it usually acts as a burden in life.

## Good and bad anxiety: Being anxious versus toiling

We need to understand well the biblical teaching on anxiety. Misconceptions

are often the source of unfair guilt feelings and frustrations. We must draw a distinction between **being anxious** and **toiling**. Not only are they different words, but also they reflect different realities. Let's see it:

### ***The anxious personality: psychological anxiety***

It is a **way of being**, a personality trait which has a clear genetic base. It is usually transmitted from parents to offspring both by inheritance and by learning (emotional “contagiousness” when children observe the anxious behaviour of their parents). Such people worry excessively about everything. They anticipate events in a pessimistic and exaggerated way. Their minds are full of bad omens; they are specialists in “terribilizing”, always imagine the very worst in any situation. They can never fully relax because by the time they have sorted out one worry they are already thinking about the next one. They live without truce, in such a way that they rarely live in peace.

The anxious personality is a psychological problem that can be improved with certain techniques. Cognitive therapy, for example, which involves teaching you to think more positively, is often helpful. This type of anxiety, in itself, is not a sin because it is **not incompatible with trust in God**. Jacob, David, Jeremiah, and other men of great faith went through times of great anxiety, but in the midst of their anguish they continued to trust God admirably. As David said, «Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You» (Ps. 56:3 NKJV).

### ***«Do not be anxious about tomorrow»: existential anxiety***

Unlike the previous anxiety, this is a **reaction** of mistrust towards the future, especially with regard to life's essentials: food, health and clothing as Jesus points out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25-31). The verb *merimnao* appears up to four times in the text and gives the idea of being very worried, overwhelmed, to the point of disquietude and being troubled. It is the same word that Jesus uses to reproach Martha's attitude: «...you are **anxious** and troubled» (Luke 10:41 ESV).

This type of anxiety is clearly rebuked in the Bible because at its root there is a lack of trust in God's provision. It implies, in practice, denying two basic attributes of the divine character: his faithfulness and his providence. It makes God a small God. No longer is He the Almighty, but rather a “pocket god”. If the previous form of anxiety was rather a psychological problem that requires treatment, existential anxiety is a sin that requires repentance. Its best treatment lies in exclaiming our full assurance with the psalmist: «But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord; my times are in Your hand» (Ps. 31:14-15 NKJV).

We cannot conclude without mentioning the paramount antidote to this existential anxiety: **prayer**. The apostle Paul has left us one of the most illuminating passages on the subject:

*«Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God» (Phil. 4:6 ESV).*

The various steps in the text are a sort of *spiritual exercise* that leads us to the core of the problem. Indeed, prayer relieves the ultimate cause of anxiety, *separation from God*. The more we learn to develop a constant sense of God's awareness in our lives -«pray without ceasing» (1 Thess. 5:17 ESV)- the more we will experience the therapeutic balm of God's peace. Paul's forceful conclusion saves any comment:

*«And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus» (Phil. 4:7 ESV).*

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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