



Getting Through Anxious Times

"Casting all your care upon him; for he cares for you." ~ 1 Peter 5:7

Does God care? That is the question? But, what is the answer? If you have just lost a close family member, you might answer no. If your business has just gone bankrupt, you might wonder. If you have just gone through a divorce, you might question. If you have been laid off from work, the sewage system is backing up, and the late notices are piling up, you may have your doubts.

Religious philosophers do their best sailing in a bathtub, when the accounts are solid, the car starts, and nobody dies. In counseling with people who have suffered great losses, there is always a common concern --a common thread of fear. More than their losses, they fear they will lose their faith. They don't plan to --it just happens.

Part of the blame must lay at the church door. For too long, the church has equated success, prosperity, and the accumulation of wealth with faith in God. Yet, Jesus could fill none of these measures when he lived on earth as a man who was to be the example for all men. When we have taught the book of Job, we have often ended our sermons with the fact that Job got everything back and some to boot. According to some, that is what makes faith in God rewarding. We love the story told in that way, because we love *things*. We even say, "Look, God gave him a new family too." As if, you can get a new family, like getting a new dog at the animal shelter, and everything will be fixed.

However, profit is not the message of the book of Job. The real story is about a man who was able to forgive God for allowing him to live in an imperfect world --a world where people are allowed to make real choices, even if they are evil choices, or bad choices, or foolish choices, or careless choices. You make your own decisions in this imperfect world; that is what makes it imperfect. You can eat all the fat you want, not fasten your seat belt, drive too fast, take advantage of others, and spend more than you make. You can even declare war if you can get enough people to go along with you. You can do as you well please and pay the consequences or have someone else pay them --and they, in turn, may do the same to you.

Job's real struggle was with his faith in a good and caring God. Job said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15). The commentators tell us that there is a lot of accusation and anger in that statement. Job is saying, "Look, he's slaying me; yet here I am trusting him." Job is not all that happy with God.

The authentic story of Job is about a man who was able to forgive God for allowing him to live in an imperfect world. However, there are some good things about living in such a world. Living in such a world allows people to be real free moral agents, make real choices, rather than being robots or

puppets. Robots and puppets can be counted upon to make the moves desired by their maker, but they are not real people. On the other hand, living in an imperfect world allows for a demonstration of care and faith. Love and care is meaningful only when it is a choice. While the bad actions of a robot mean nothing in terms of hate, neither do the good actions of a robot mean anything in terms of love.

What makes living in a world such as ours manageable is that God cares. "Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). The word care appears twice in the verse; however, the first time it has a different meaning than the second time. The first has the meaning of "anxiety", while the second means "to be interested in" or "concerned about." It could be translated, "casting all your anxiety upon him, because he is concerned about you." Peter is actually quoting from the Old Testament, "Cast your burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain you" (Psalm 55:22).

The point is, the Lord will carry our worries as well as our sins. People have literally "worried themselves sick." Some people "worry themselves to death," others to insanity, still others to suicide. Worry can ruin your life.

Still, every normal person worries; worry becomes a problem when it gets out of hand. No one can be happy when the mind is overcome with worry. And there is always something to worry about. People worry about money --will they be able to make the payments? They worry about the kids --will they be safe, happy, and good? They worry about business, layoffs, investments. They worry about offending other people. They worry about being accepted by other people. I think people worry about war. Early Christians had to worry about persecutions. It is to these early Christians that Peter wrote, "cast all your worry upon him, for he cares about you."

That we will have cares seems to be the assumption of the text. Finding a way to successfully live with them is the difficulty.

One way is to share our cares with another. We call this friendship. Two can carry a heavy load much better than one. In other things, we work together and we accomplish what an individual can never accomplish; why not help one another with fears and concerns? God's children ought to do this for one another and they ought to share the load with God in prayer. Listening with empathy is a great power.

Contrary to what some have taught about this text, it is not a once and for all thing to take our troubles to the Lord. The language of the text is actually, "keep on casting your cares on the Lord." Don't stop. Don't stop. Since our troubles never truly stop, we should never stop sharing them with Christ. It should become a way of life.

There is an attitude and outlook that makes it easier for people to receive help. That is precisely why the text is preceded by these words: "In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:5,6).

Humble people have less to be anxious about in the first place. Humble people have little to lose, while proud people have a lot to lose. Most of what we have to lose is tied up with our pride. Pride is the barrier that keeps us from the help and support we can get from God and others. Friends can help; so, share your cares.

Faith is also a good medicine for worry. One time Jesus was asleep in the back of a boat. The wind came up, and with it the waves. Things got worse and worse; the boat started to fill with water. The disciples were worried. They woke Jesus from his sleep and said, "Master, don't you care if we perish?" Jesus then said, "Peace be still" and the wind stopped, the sea calmed, and they were all safe. Yet, that is not all he said; he also said, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). It is faith that can get us through dangerous and difficult times.

Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you --you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:25-34).

Jesus goes on to remind them "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). There is a lot less reason to worry if God cares; have faith in God. Why should the Christian be the most paranoid of all the creatures? Don't we have something better to preach than fear?

Identify the real threat; don't blame God for everything. All people are afraid; paranoid people, by contrast, have unrealistic fears. They come to fear even their best friends. They fear the government. Angry, paranoid people are dangerous people. Timothy McVeigh was a dangerous person because he was paranoid. Identify the real threat: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith (once again, there is faith), for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering." You're not the only one who has it hard.

Who did it to Job? The devil. Who got the blame? God. Think straight about this; there is an opposition, but it is not God. Pride makes us vulnerable to the opposition, while faith brings us to the safety of Christ.

There is a balance here between faith and works: "Be vigilant, be watchful, discipline yourselves, keep

alert." Careful people are going to have a lot less to worry about in the first place.

As our adversary goes about as a roaring lion --strong, violent, alert to catch his prey, he will scare the liver out of us. Sure, he will scare us, but he doesn't scare Christ --the "lion of the tribe of Judah." "That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime held in slavery by the fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Our opponent comes in many forms: an "angel of light" (yes, a preacher), a "snake in the grass", a "lion," a "devil." In every case, we are called upon to resist him and he will flee. Don't be held hostage by fear.

Here then, are the three methods God gives us to keep our anxiety and fears in check: *Friendship, Faith, and Fight*. There is not much Christianity to be had for those who refuse to engage in the struggle of the soul.

Closing remarks: 1 Peter 5:12-14. "Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it." Silvanus was the messenger who delivered the letter (perhaps even helped to write it). He is mentioned as a faithful brother, no doubt in contrast to Demas "who has forsaken us." Not that Demas necessarily gave up his faith, but he did give up his work for Christ --Silvanus, on the other hand, kept on.

Peter's purpose in writing the letter is "exhorting," or the better word is in the NRS Bible, "encourage" -- not to teach doctrine, but to encourage. "I write this short letter to encourage you." Not to "jack them up," but to "lift them up." You see, most Christians do not need more truth, they just need the courage to use the truth they already have; **they need to be encouraged.**

It finishes with a blessing of peace from Christ that can, in its own right, sufficiently displace a great lot of anxiety. In addition, there is an encouragement to practice some affectionate demonstrations of support among the members of the congregation, "Greet one another with a kiss of love." You might not want to do that --it spreads germs. However, people do need demonstrations of our support --you might try a hug now and then.

"Hugs are not only nice; they are needed. Hugs can relieve pain and depression, make the healthy healthier, the happy happier and the most secure among us even more so.

Hugging feels good, overcomes fear, eases tension, provides a stretching exercise if you're short and a stooping exercise if you're tall. Hugging does not upset the environment, saves heat and requires no special equipment. It makes happy days happier and impossible days possible."

~ Kathy Tobin, Tomahawk, Wisconsin.

What can we do about worry? Trust Christ, share it with friends, and don't give up the fight (have faith; be faithful) -we're not alone unless we choose to be.