



A
NON-ANXIOUS

Life

EXPERIENCING THE PEACE
OF GOD'S PRESENCE

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BECOMING A MASTER OF ANXIETY

For most of my adult life, I've been a master of anxiety. I'm working to become a master of peace.

Without realizing it, I became a student of anxiety as a child. I grew up in a home with a mom who learned anxiety in a post-World War II midwestern orphanage. From ages four to fourteen, she, together with her older brother and sister, learned the ways of worry. And growing up, I sat at her feet. Am I blaming my mother for my worries? No; I'm no victim. I'm simply telling my story.

We all have our reasons for wrestling with worry or anxiety. But our reasons are not insurmountable. As followers of the Prince of Peace, we can place ourselves at his feet to learn to live in his way of peace. We can learn peace for our hearts and minds, peace in our relationships (as far as it depends on us), peace in our vocational life, and peace in our perspective about the future. This peace is not dependent on things going the way we like. It does not require that everything happen the way we prefer. The way of peace that Jesus leads us into is a way that begins from within us in relationship with him. It does not require peaceful circumstances to survive.

So this book is not a theoretical research project. It isn't a message I'm preparing for others. Writing this book has been a necessary personal quest. Anxiety has, at times, diminished me, hindered me, even paralyzed me—it really has. I'm writing as a fellow student and not a master. I have been on a journey to discover the way of peace.

THE RISE OF ANXIETY

Anxiety has been on the rise for a while. A study by the National Institutes of Health indicates that anxiety steadily increased in the adult population from 2008 to 2018. In that same time frame, anxiety doubled among eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old young adults.¹ But in the first year of the pandemic, the World Health Organization measured a 25 percent increase in anxiety and depression worldwide.²

We all had different experiences of anxiety during the global pandemic. My first was sitting on a plane in Delhi, India, in the early morning hours of a mid-February Saturday in 2020. Covid-19 was just beginning to hit our news feeds, but it felt mostly an “out there” issue for me at the time.

As our scheduled departure time came and went, I noticed flight attendants conferencing in the first-class galley. After more than an hour delay, the flight purser announced that there was a passenger with flu-like symptoms whom they were assessing, who needed to be deplaned before we could depart. Anxiety!

We were told that if we brought that passenger with us back to the States, the whole plane load of us would be quarantined for two weeks; the first cruise ship had recently been quarantined in Japan with infected passengers. It took about ninety minutes before they convinced the passenger to deplane, and we finally

left the gate. As we taxied toward take-off, an announcement was made, requesting that if there was a doctor on board to make themselves known. We had already left the sick passenger behind. Now what? More anxiety.

Just before we pulled onto the runway to leave, an announcement told us that yet *another* passenger was found to have flu-like symptoms and that we would be returning to the gate. There was an audible gasp from the rest of us. Even more anxiety.

Once we got back to the gate, it didn't take long for this second passenger to do the walk of shame from the back of the plane to the exit. I had needed the restroom for some time, but we'd been told to remain seated. Once the passenger went by and departed, I jumped up and ran into first class for the restroom that I could see was not in use.

While in there, a text notification went off on my smartphone. When I got out of the restroom, I read the text. It essentially said that because of our departure delay, the crew had timed out and would not be able to depart on the flight any longer due to FAA regulations on shift lengths and such. I showed the text to one of the attendants standing there and he looked as concerned as I felt. I went back to my seat and wrestled with what I was going to do in Delhi for twenty-four more hours. I had no local contacts or plans. Still more anxiety.

After about fifteen minutes, an attendant came on to say that if we would be seated immediately, they had been given special permission by the FAA to work a longer than allowed shift and take us home. Finally, after a total delay of three hours, we departed. Nearly twenty-four hours later I arrived home, gave my wife, Gem, a kiss hello, and we both soon found ourselves in bed for the next month with Covid-19.

I began to feel this pandemic crisis emotionally, therefore, a month before what would become a worldwide shutdown. And it began a season in which my anxieties would assail me in new and surprising ways.

WHAT ANXIETY LOOKS LIKE

What I've been learning is that anxiety is a deep-rooted habit that has formed in me over time. It's easy enough to worry about things that feel or look bad to me, but I can also worry when things are going well (*When is all of this finally going to turn bad?* I wonder). Acknowledging the reality of anxiety as a habit has been good news for me. With work, habits can be changed.

The ways in which I have let anxiety malform me can be reformed.

I am not trapped.

I am not hopeless.

I am not helpless.

I have been learning to cultivate perspectives and habits of peace.

I'm learning how to upgrade my internal operating system from anxiety to peace. An operating system is the software that provides a foundation for the basic functions of a computer. Though we are far more complex than a computer, our souls have a sort of operating system as well. Few of us think much about the operating system for our computers. And too few of us think about the ones that run our lives.

Anxiety has too often been my basic way of approaching situations and people. It wasn't as though there was a moment when I sat down and decided that it was the system for me. It was the system I'd received growing up. I've built programs on this foundation that

“work,” but not very well. Anxiety has proven to be a bad habit of soul hurry that I can unlearn and have been unlearning.

What does this operating system upgrade look like for me?

- ♦ It has replaced a tunnel-vision perspective with a more spacious and options-rich one.
- ♦ It has replaced an energy-demanding and energy-draining dynamic with one that has proven energy-renewing.
- ♦ It has replaced knee-jerk assumptions about my past, present, and future with a freeing vision of many very good options that surround me.

When I call peace an operating system, I’m saying that it is possible to learn to allow peace to be the underlying framework of our lives. Instead of accepting insecurity as my default, I’ve learned to assume confidence and resourcefulness as my foundation. I’ve replaced a lot of internalized stress with more inner peace and calm. Peace might even become something unconsciously trusted rather than frantically sought. I’ve found that while peace is a fruit of the Spirit, anxiety is not. Peace is creative. Anxiety isn’t. Peaceful is resourceful, but worry isn’t.

I’ve been discovering that peace isn’t hiding from me and playing hard to get. Peace is in me because my very body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit bears the fruit of peace from within me. It makes a great deal of difference to remember that I’m living in the Prince of Peace and he is living in me. The peace of God can bubble up from within at any moment and in any place. The sort of peace the world offers is profoundly dependent on optimal conditions and situations.

A lot of my worries are triggered by circumstances. Something happens (or threatens to happen) and anxiety is triggered. I imagine

disastrous trajectories inevitably growing out of present dynamics. Anxiety has sometimes felt like my only reasonable option in the face of certain perceived hazards or threats. But I've never regretted upgrading my operating system from anxiety to peace.

I wish that it were a permanent upgrade, but I often have to reboot into this more peaceful way of living. One way I do this is by recalling that the Lord is shepherding me well (Psalm 23:1). What more could I want?

It may not seem realistic to be at peace every moment. I'm not claiming to have arrived in a place where I never feel anxious or worried anymore. We all live real lives with challenges, obstacles, and threats. And anxiety still erupts in me in reaction to unpleasant surprises. When I talk about a non-anxious life, I'm talking about something that can begin *within* us. I've often said that busy is a matter of calendar, and hurry is a matter of soul. In that spirit, anxiety is a result of focusing on our circumstances, and peace is a fruit of focusing on the Prince of Peace, the Shepherd of our souls.

It's been good to remind myself that anxious living isn't a faithful reflection of my present reality in God's good kingdom. Rather than being on the verge of presumed danger, I am in the presence of powerful love. The faithfulness of God-with-me is measureless. My anxiety doesn't take that into account.

And anxiety is not a tone of voice used by the Spirit of God. The voice of anxiety in the back of my head is not the voice of the Spirit's counsel. But sometimes the weight I give that voice might lead someone to think that I'm taking it as a divine word. The way of God is a way of peace. Shalom. Well-being. A life rich with reliable goodness. I can live in peace because I'm in the presence of Peace.

Anxiety is not an especially wonderful counselor. The advice anxiety has given me over the years has not borne good fruit. It has

driven me to mindless activity. It has gotten me stuck in narrow, untrue visions of my life. It's been more like a false prophet than a wonderful counselor. It helps when I've downsized anxiety's mentoring role in my life and done what I can to disregard its warnings more often.

My anxiety reminds me of a common experience I have with squirrels when I cycle on local bike trails. I like squirrels, but not along the bike trail. I was cycling the other day when a squirrel darted out in front of me, just missing becoming a squirrel pancake by about twelve inches. In the process, he provoked a jolt of adrenaline in me that felt like anxiety at full volume.

Do these little guys have a death wish? Are they daring one another to jump in front of those big rolling things that race by? I think I know what's happening: they hear me coming and it sounds like danger. In reaction, their little squirrel brain urges them to find safety. Go home! Except that it seems like their home is always on the other side of the bike trail.

So the instinct to race home puts them in more danger than if they took a moment to see what they were hearing and decide on the best course of action. That would be to stay put, but they don't seem to understand that.

My anxiety is a lot like this squirrel instinct. Something shocks me or threatens me, and I go into self-protection mode. "Get safe!" is what my safety-seeking brain cries out. But if I don't take a moment to look around, I may put myself in the way of greater harm by operating in the tunnel of anxiety. I hope I'm smarter than a squirrel.

ANXIETY ZOMBIE

I've had a strange, zombie-like relationship with anxiety. I've been semi-aware of its presence with me, but I've sought to avoid it at

the same time. This doesn't make it go away. Anxiety is active, but it isn't alive; it's a kind of living death. It's frantically busy, but not vitally alive.

Too often, my go-to strategy in dealing with anxiety could be summed up in three words: numbing, escaping, and avoiding. Instead of finding true rest amid my anxious feelings, I've escaped through food, drink, or mind-numbing media engagement. I've escaped into my imagination, into endless online journeys, and into familiar video games. I've avoided my life sometimes by over-checking my email and social media, and at the cost of avoiding important work.

If I can resist the temptation to numb, escape, or avoid, it helps because these are counterfeits of peace. Numbing prevents me from feeling the anxiety that is in me. Escaping is an attempt to run away from anxiety. Avoiding is my effort to do an end-run around anxiety. But I can learn to be present to my anxieties in the presence of God. I can feel anxious and learn to not let that drive me to worry.

So when I numb, escape, or avoid, I don't feel my anxiety for a while. But not *feeling* anxious doesn't mean that the roots of anxiety have been addressed. I'm simply numb to them for a while. Numbness and peace don't really feel the same. One is a lack of feeling. The other is a sense of well-being, or being relaxed, or becoming confident.

I choose numbing in my lack of vision for how anxiety might actually be resolved. I prefer to feel numb than to feel anxious. But learning to receive peace is better than not feeling anxiety temporarily. It's hard to be healed of that which I cannot feel.

For example, I often find myself feeling a dull anxiety as I begin a typical workday. I have a nebulous dread that I'm not going to

be up to the work that lies ahead. I've too often attended more to the anxiety that whispers its dark insinuations than to the peace of God that is always with me. This is draining. I sometimes feel worn out in seasons with a monotonous schedule, unbroken by outside speaking or travel. Anxiety suggests I'm just about out of gas for the work to which I feel called. And for some reason, I find myself listening to and believing its counsel.

How do I navigate what feels like paralyzing anxiety when I have work that needs to be done? How do I overcome these strong negative feelings? What does the fruitful path forward look like? Is it true that this experience is a necessary weakness so I might grow strong in grace? Is this sort of thing like Paul's thorn in the flesh, or is it something that simply should be resolved through counsel, coaching, or medications?

I've worried a lot. I sometimes worry about how much I worry. Then I worry that I'm worrying about my worries. There are layers of present worry that reinforce layers of ancient worry laid down in my very body. Anxiety is obviously a problem for me.

A VISION OF ANXIETY

For years, the cars Gem and I drove were older models donated to us through the nonprofits in which we served. One day, the red check engine light came on as one of our sons was driving. We took the old car to our mechanic to figure out what was wrong. A few days later, he called to say that he'd run every diagnostic he could think of, but nothing resolved the engine light. His opinion was that the computer itself was malfunctioning, and that replacing it on such an old vehicle was not worth the cost. He recommended that we simply continue driving the car for as long as we'd own it with that light stuck on.

I think the red-light indicator of my own habitual anxiety is like that check engine light. It comes on, often stays on, and warns me of some major problem that may not even exist. It claims to be warning me of a problem, but it may *itself* be the problem.

It's important to notice my anxiety, to discern whether its warnings are helpful, and to respond accordingly. Too often, I assumed my anxiety indicator was an infallible source of truth about my past, present, or future; it often hasn't been.

My anxiety is also like trying to time-travel into my past or my future. Anxiety recalls unpleasant or painful experiences for me to replay, rehearse, and ruminate on. Anxiety paints a dystopian image of what lies ahead of me. Letting anxiety tempt me to time-travel like this isn't productive. The grace of God is available to me now, but anxiety overlooks the present moment. And it can't actually see the future about which it makes such confident proclamations of doom. The future it predicts has rarely been as disastrous as threatened.

Anxiety is never satisfied. If I listen to its frantic warnings, it does not stop there—it finds something else to warn me about. Anxieties followed tend to multiply into more anxiety. Anxiety has not led me to a path of safety and therefore peace. It leads me to fretting and more anxiety. It is not a path of life. It does not bear good fruit in my soul, my relationships, my work, or my leadership.

My anxiety is like buying into a conspiracy theory. Anything that supports the conspiracy is embraced as trustworthy authority; anything that contradicts the conspiracy is rejected as part of the conspiracy. Anxiety flourishes in that kind of insecurity and doubt about the goodness of my path with God.

Non-anxious living is more than dealing with anxious feelings. It's an orientation to life. It's learning to live a life of shalom, of well-being, of healthy rhythms, of cooperation with the kingdom ways of God. I'm seeking to describe a non-anxious life in far broader and more global terms. I've been learning that it is a kind of pace at which I live, and relate, and work.

Now, let me be clear: a non-anxious life is not a life without concerns. It is not a life without difficulties or hardships. It is not a life in which I never feel nervous. A life completely free of cares would be a life in which nothing matters to me. The great commandment is, at its heart, a command to care. It isn't baptized stoicism. It is peaceful caring that is with us in our actual troubles.

I'm grateful for many resources that have helped me with my anxiety. I have benefited from years of psychological therapy. I have done important work with issues that arise in my adult life, rooted in childhood and youth experiences. I've found fruitful freedom from forms of anxiety that used to often overwhelm and even paralyze me. I have recently taken advantage of medication for depression and anxiety. All of this has helped. What I'm exploring in this book is how we might embrace the resources available to us in the peaceful kingdom of God and in the presence of the Prince of Peace.

CONTINUING AS WE BEGAN

In contrast to anxiety is trust or faith. Paul offers this counsel to his friends in Colossae: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Colossians 2:6-7). While the language

of peace isn't explicitly present, these have been words of wisdom to deepen my experience of peace in the presence of God.

How did I receive Christ Jesus as Lord in my youth? I received Christ like I would receive any gift. I trusted in the generosity of the Father's gift of his Son. There was nothing I could do to make myself deserving of such a gift. I could only welcome divine generosity with open hands.

What has enabled me to find peace in this kingdom counsel has been Paul's little phrase "just as." My continuing journey can be lived in the very same spirit in which I embarked on this journey. I live my life in Christ Jesus as Lord *just as* I received him—still receiving his generous initiative and kind provision.

This has been a grounding and stabilizing reality for me. I'm living my life in response to the kind and lavish work of God in Christ. I've learned to find growing confidence in the life already available to me from God the Father through Christ the Son empowered by the Holy Spirit. Confident trust in this triune communion has deepened my peace. This way of living has caused gratitude to well up in me more often. I am finding this a peaceful way to live even when circumstances tempt me to worry and to be anxious.

My worry is often rooted in trying to manage something that feels unmanageable to me. It helps when I recognize that the One I've come to follow is not overwhelmed by what overwhelms me. I'm ultimately safe in the presence of a very good shepherd. Do I always feel safe? No. Am I never threatened by people or circumstances? That would be nice, but not real. I am safe, though, from ultimate harm. As Julian of Norwich heard in a divine vision during a dark time in human history (disease and war were rampant), "All shall be well"—I'm coming to trust that simple

statement as a description of my own present and my own future. And in this I am finding peace.

I think of Jesus' words to Martha, and to us, in Luke 10. He speaks with great compassion to our many worries. He doesn't accuse us, shame us, or condemn us. He seeks to lift our eyes to see his good presence with us to protect our hearts and minds. I think some people imagine that Jesus' repeated "Martha, Martha" is spoken with arms crossed, head shaking, and brows furrowed in disappointment. But I imagine the face of Jesus full of compassion. He is, after all, the Prince of Peace who takes no pleasure in the anxiety of his beloved children.

A FELLOW TRAVELER

I set out to write a book about living a life free of anxiety. Somewhere, in the back of mind, I hoped I'd find a life where I'd never even *feel* anxious. I didn't discover that place. I also imagined I could write this book from the position of an expert. I've had to settle back into writing it as a student. I've been a student of anxiety most of my life. I'm seeking to be a student of peace now—inner peace, relational peace, and peace in the world about me.

But I write this book with a great sense of hope. My lifelong journey with anxiety has not been fruitless. I am learning how to live in the peaceful kingdom of Jesus. I'm learning that Paul just might be right when he suggests that I needn't worry (Philippians 4:6-7). Instead, I can learn how to regularly entrust my worries into the care of One who cares. I can live in a way where peace really does stand guard over my heart and mind. I'm learning that Peter just might be right that I can hand my worries over to Jesus because Jesus is interested in them and is Lord over them (1 Peter 5:7).

Whatever I have to say of value about anxiety in this book will be most helpful if it is spoken from actual weakness rather than presumed strength. We need to hear messages of lived mercy and grace. Talking about un-lived theories doesn't help much.

So, a non-anxious life is about a certain pace of soul, pace of interaction, pace of engagement. Living a non-anxious life is about learning the pace of the kingdom, and God's kingdom has a particular pace. It's slower in all the best ways. It is an unhurried pace. It's admittedly a definition in the negative—God's kingdom is not in a hurry. But I've tried to offer *unhurried* as a virtuous, positive word for our purposes. Perhaps *non-anxious* can do the same work.

Peace is rooted in the robust and full-orbed meaning of the Hebrew *shalom*. It is more than an absence of tension, stress, conflict, or trouble. It is the presence of the Prince of Peace, the God of peace, the Spirit of peace. Peace is the atmosphere of heaven. And heaven surrounds and permeates us with peace we can breathe.

In the pages ahead, we'll see how Jesus can be our wise guide into the way of peace. We'll learn about good friends of peace like grace, hope, joy, and humility. We'll learn how to practice the presence of the Prince of Peace together.

Jesus embodies peace and gives to us as the world can never do. It is the peace of presence, not the peace of absence. Therefore, it is a peace that can guard our hearts and minds amid anxious feelings, anxious circumstances, anxious relationships. It is a peace we bring to our lived reality rather than a peace that we do not yet have and must seek elsewhere. Let's explore this non-anxious way of life together.

NON-ANXIOUS REFLECTION

You will find questions at the end of each chapter to use in reflection and journaling. You may want to discuss them with a spiritual friend or small group as well.

- ♦ How have you experienced God's peace in challenging situations that didn't resolve? What did that feel like? How did it compare to the peace of welcome circumstances or lack of trouble?
- ♦ Was there one of the anxiety metaphors that felt especially descriptive of your own experience (an operating system, a not-so-wonderful counselor, an anxious squirrel, a broken warning light, attempting time-travel, or a conspiracy theory)?
- ♦ What is currently tempting you to worry? What would it look like to translate that worrying into praying? How might you let anxious thoughts and feelings prompt you to pray rather than move you to worry? Ask for the help of God's Spirit in this.

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