

Goliath

Must

Fall

Putting the X in Anxiety



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It's likely something is keeping you up at night. A 2009 CDC study showed more than 35 percent of people surveyed slept less than the recommended minimum of seven hours of sleep per night. You probably don't have to think very far back to remember the last time you couldn't sleep because anxious thoughts and worries kept your mind racing. Our culture is crippled by anxiety, and it's keeping us up at night.

On a slightly less serious note, I remember a time when it was snakes keeping me awake in the dark. When Shelley and I made our first trip to Africa, we went to the beautiful country of Botswana to lead a youth conference along with Chris Tomlin and his band. The school where the conference was held was in a remote village. The sessions took place in the cafeteria building and it was a special time I will never forget. Our set up was pretty basic (I have a vision of a microphone taped to a volley ball net stand) but we learned so much about the spirit of worship from our new friends.

Our living quarters were also at the school. Tomlin and crew were bunked in a screened-in dorm style room while Shelley and I were given one of the newer teacher's apartments a hundred yards away. At night, we'd finish with the evening session late, say our goodnights, and have a long walk down an unlit path to our apartment. The arrangement was great, mainly because we didn't have to figure out a bunk bed situation or deal with the noises of students trying to prank their neighbors. But, there were some downsides. For one, the teacher who lived in our apartment during the school year hadn't paid the electric bill so the power was turned off. We had to use candles to get any light, which was fine. But every step of the hundred-yard walk to the apartment was dreadful.

You see, as soon as we stepped onto Botswanian soil, our host wasted no time teaching us about the country's snake population. He had tons of snake stories he couldn't wait to share with us. "First you've got the black mamba", he started with the precision of a seasoned nature guide. "The locals call it the three-step snake. Its bite is so deadly, you'll only be able to take three steps before you're dead. Oh, and if you see one, don't try and run away; black mambas are known to be able to run at speeds of forty miles per hour in short bursts."

Knowing full well we were being bamboozled, I challenged him: "How in the world does a snake run, let alone at a speed faster than I average in my car on my commute?" Our host sent me a knowing look and touted, "Oh these guys reach ten, twelve, sometimes fifteen feet in length, so they'll arch most of their body upright and propel themselves with the rest of their body on the ground to chase you down." I reached for my notebook to begin writing my will, but our host continued, "Then you've got the Boomslang. It hides out on the branches of trees along paths and waits for its prey to cross underneath it. The Boomslang will then drop on its prey and kill it." *Great*, I thought. He continued, "But the one you really need to look out for is the Puff Adder. It lays on paths at night in the dark and sleeps until someone steps on it, at which point it strikes and kills them." These stories continued all the way from the airport to the school. It was apparent, while we came to Africa to introduce students to Jesus, we were really there just trying to survive imminent death by snake bite.

So you can imagine then, when the evening gatherings ended, and our long journey began, we were on edge. With my flashlight I triple-checked the ground before every step I took. But that was only the beginning. Once we'd made it safely to our cottage apartment, I told Shelley to wait in the doorway while I stabbed every dark corner and cabinet of the place with the flashlight beam. Once we both felt safe enough, we would check the sheets of the bed, tuck them all tightly from sides and bottom, then slip ourselves under them like sardines packaging themselves. We'd sleep for a few hours, but mostly lay awake imagining we heard a snake slithering across the floor or dropping from the ceiling.

That whole week our fears owned us and robbed us of peaceful sleep. You might be living your life similarly, cowering in fear under the covers, paranoid you might see a snake's shadow in your room. When you lie down at night, you do your very best to protect yourself from any harm and danger, but you can't find peace on your own.

First Peter 5:6-7 tells us to "Cast our anxiety on Jesus." Peter used a very specific Greek work for anxiety: *merimna*, which means to divide or to separate. He's telling us that anxiety literally pulls us apart on the inside. If

we're hoping to manage our anxiety on our own, we'll fail. Relying on sleeping pills, taking a drink, or sleeping with the TV on to try and "take the edge off" won't work in the long run. We need peace, and that's a gift from Jesus. So how do we put the X in anxiety and live full and free in the peace he's given?

1. Name what is keeping you up at night.

Here's a revelation: anxiety isn't your giant; it's the shadow cast by your true giant—a symptom of an issue with deeper roots. Maybe you're like me and you struggle with control. Maybe you just want to be liked by others. Maybe there's a big decision, a project deadline, or a diagnosis looming over you. Maybe you think someone has it in for you (or they actually do). Humbly ask God to help you uncover what's underneath your anxiety. Then, be honest with him and say out loud, "_____ is keeping me up at night." When you bring God into the conversation, anxiety has to exit.

Philippians 4:4–7 lays out the ultimate battle plan to combat anxiety: make your requests known to God. And there's a promise attached to making our requests known to him: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Whatever is stressing you out, you can leave it in the hands of your Shepherd, the God of the universe. He loves you, and he has the power to manage whatever is making you anxious.

2. Believe God will take you *through* whatever is making you anxious.

No matter how terrifying your circumstance, your Shepherd won't abandon or leave you in the valley to die. He promises to lead you *THROUGH* the valley, not just to the valley. And he promises to walk with you no matter what you face. The enemy is telling you you're not going to make it. But Jesus says something different. Cling to his promise and recognize his presence.

3. Trust your Shepherd's defensive capability.

Psalm 23 tells us our Shepherd carries a rod and a staff. And there's good reason. He uses them to defend us against anyone and anything that threatens attack and to guide us through life.

You've probably tried "counting sheep" to help you sleep at some point in your life. That adage comes from the shepherds of old who would literally circle the perimeter of their flock throughout the night, counting their sleeping sheep to make sure none went missing. The sheep might have been vulnerable and defenseless in the middle of the night, but they had a shepherd who watched out for every single one, all night long.

Jesus does the same thing. Each night while you're sleeping, he's watching and counting you. So you can let go, lie down, and let him guard the perimeter while you sleep. Whatever is causing you to worry may not be gone in the morning, but you will wake up to another day to walk with your faithful Shepherd.

4. Praise God.

Worship and worry cannot exist in the same space. One will displace the other. When you are afraid don't bail on God, lift up his name instead. Put on a soundtrack of praise and reset the atmosphere with worship. The circumstance may not change right away, but your point of view and mindset will. You'll see Jesus as bigger than whatever is trying to strangle you with fear.

Anxiety is real and is tormenting millions of us. But Jesus is bigger than anxiety and whatever (or whoever) is making you anxious. Put your cares (worries) in his hands. Let go of trying to control the outcome. And trust that he's got your back through the day and through the night.