

anXIOUS
for
NOTHING

FINDING CALM *in a* CHAOTIC WORLD

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



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It is with great joy that Denalyn and I dedicate this book to Kahu Billy and Jenny Mitchell and the wonderful congregation of Mana Christian Ohana. For fifteen years you have made your home our home away from home. We hold you dearly in our hearts.

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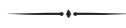
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Chapter 1

LESS FRET,
MORE FAITH

It's a low-grade fear. An edginess, a dread. A cold wind that won't stop howling.

It's not so much a storm as the certainty that one is coming. Always . . . coming. Sunny days are just an interlude. You can't relax. Can't let your guard down. All peace is temporary, short-term.

It's not the sight of a grizzly but the suspicion of one or two or ten. Behind every tree. Beyond every turn. Inevitable. It's just a matter of time until the grizzly leaps out of the shadows, bares its fangs, and gobbles you up, along with your family, your friends, your bank account, your pets, and your country.

There's trouble out there! So you don't sleep well.

You don't laugh often.

You don't enjoy the sun.

You don't whistle as you walk.

And when others do, you give them a look. *That* look. That "are you naive" look. You may even give them a word. "Haven't you read the news and heard the reports and seen the studies?"

Airplanes fall out of the sky. Bull markets go bear. Terrorists terrorize. Good people turn bad. The other shoe will drop. Fine print will be found. Misfortune lurks out there; it's just a matter of time.

Anxiety is a meteor shower of what-ifs. What if I don't close the

sale? What if we don't get the bonus? What if we can't afford braces for the kids? What if my kids have crooked teeth? What if crooked teeth keep them from having friends, a career, or a spouse? What if they end up homeless and hungry, holding a cardboard sign that reads "My parents couldn't afford braces for me"?

Anxiety is a meteor shower of what-ifs.

Anxiety is trepidation.

It's a suspicion, an apprehension. Life in a minor key with major concerns. Perpetually on the pirate ship's plank.

You're part Chicken Little and part Eeyore. The sky is falling, and it's falling disproportionately on you.

As a result you are anxious. A free-floating sense of dread hovers over you, a caul across the heart, a nebulous hunch about things . . . that might happen . . . sometime in the future.

Anxiety and fear are cousins but not twins. Fear sees a threat. Anxiety imagines one.

Fear screams, *Get out!*

Anxiety ponders, *What if?*

Fear results in fight or flight. Anxiety creates doom and gloom. Fear is the pulse that pounds when you see a coiled rattlesnake in your front yard. Anxiety is the voice that tells you, *Never, ever, for the rest of your life, walk barefooted through the grass. There might be a snake . . . somewhere.*

The word *anxious* defines itself. It is a hybrid of *angst* and *xious*. *Angst* is a sense of unease. *Xious* is the sound I make on the tenth step of a flight of stairs when my heart beats fast and I run low on oxygen. I can be heard inhaling and exhaling, sounding like the second syllable of *anxious*, which makes me wonder if anxious people

aren't just that: people who are out of breath because of the angst of life.

A native Hawaiian once told me the origin of the name that islanders use for us non-Hawaiians—*haole*. *Haole* is a Hawaiian word for “no breath.” The name became associated with the European immigrants of the 1820s.¹ While there are varying explanations for this term, I like the one he gave me: “Our forefathers thought the settlers were always in a hurry to build plantations, harbors, and ranches. To the native Hawaiians they seemed short of breath.”

Anxiety takes our breath, for sure. If only that were all it took. It also takes our sleep. Our energy. Our well-being. “Do not fret,” wrote the psalmist, “it only causes harm” (Ps. 37:8). Harm to our necks, jaws, backs, and bowels. Anxiety can twist us into emotional pretzels. It can make our eyes twitch, blood pressure rise, heads ache, and armpits sweat. To see the consequences of anxiety, just read about half the ailments in a medical textbook.

*Anxiety and fear
are cousins but not
twins. Fear sees
a threat. Anxiety
imagines one.*

Anxiety ain't fun.

Chances are that you or someone you know seriously struggles with anxiety. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders are reaching epidemic proportions. In a given year nearly fifty million Americans will feel the effects of a panic attack, phobias, or other anxiety disorders. Our chests will tighten. We'll feel dizzy and light-headed. We'll fear crowds and avoid people. Anxiety disorders in the United States are the “number one mental health problem among . . . women and are second only to alcohol and drug abuse among men.”²

“The United States is now the most anxious nation in the world.”³ (Congratulations to us!) The land of the Stars and Stripes has become the country of stress and strife. This is a costly achievement. “Stress-related ailments cost the nation \$300 billion every year in medical bills and lost productivity, while our usage of sedative drugs keeps skyrocketing; just between 1997 and 2004, Americans more than doubled their spending on anti-anxiety medications like Xanax and Valium, from \$900 million to \$2.1 billion.”⁴ The *Journal of the American Medical Association* cited a study that indicates an exponential increase in depression. People of each generation in the twentieth century “were three times more likely to experience depression” than people of the preceding generation.⁵

How can this be? Our cars are safer than ever. We regulate food and water and electricity. Though gangs still prowl our streets, most Americans do not live under the danger of imminent attack. Yet if worry were an Olympic event, we’d win the gold medal!

Citizens in other countries ironically enjoy more tranquility. They experience one-fifth the anxiety levels of Americans, despite having fewer of the basic life necessities. “What’s more, when these less-anxious developing-world citizens immigrate to the United States, they tend to get just as anxious as Americans. Something about our particular way of life, then, is making us less calm and composed.”⁶

Our college kids are feeling it as well. In a study that involved more than two hundred thousand incoming freshmen, “students reported all-time lows in overall mental health and emotional stability.”⁷ As psychologist Robert Leahy points out, “The average *child* today exhibits the same level of anxiety as the average *psychiatric patient* in the 1950s.”⁸ Kids have more toys, clothes, and opportunities than ever, but by the time they leave home, they are wrapped tighter than Egyptian mummies.

We are tense.

Why? What is the cause of our anxiety?

Change, for one thing. Researchers speculate that the Western world's "environment and social order have changed more in the last thirty years than they have in the previous three hundred!"¹⁹ Think what has changed. Technology. The existence of the Internet. Increased warnings about global warming, nuclear war, and terrorist attacks. Changes and new threats are imported into our lives every few seconds thanks to smartphones, TVs, and computer screens. In our grandparents' generation news of an earthquake in Nepal would reach around the world some days later. In our parents' day the nightly news communicated the catastrophe. Now it is a matter of minutes. We've barely processed one crisis, and then we hear of another.

In addition we move faster than ever before. Our ancestors traveled as far as a horse or camel could take them during daylight. But us? We jet through time zones as if they were neighborhood streets. Our great-grandparents had to turn down the brain sensors when the sun set. But us? We turn on the cable news, open the laptop, or tune in to the latest survival show. For years I kept a nightly appointment with the ten o'clock news. Nothing like falling to sleep with the accounts of murders and catastrophes fresh on the brain.

And what about the onslaught of personal challenges? You or someone you know is facing foreclosure, fighting cancer, slugging through a divorce, or battling addiction. You or someone you know is bankrupt, broke, or going out of business.

Without exception we are getting older. And with age comes a covey of changes. My wife found an app that guesses a person's age by evaluating a picture of the person's face. It missed Denalyn's age by fifteen years to the young side. She liked that. It missed mine by five

years to the old side. So I retook it. It added seven more. Then ten. I quit before it pronounced me dead.

One would think Christians would be exempt from worry. But we are not. We have been taught that the Christian life is a life of peace, and when we don't have peace, we assume the problem lies within us. Not only do we feel anxious, but we also feel guilty about our anxiety! The result is a downward spiral of worry, guilt, worry, guilt.

It's enough to cause a person to get anxious.

It's enough to make us wonder if the apostle Paul was out of touch with reality when he wrote, "Be anxious for nothing" (Phil. 4:6).

"Be anxious for less" would have been a sufficient challenge. Or "Be anxious only on Thursdays." Or "Be anxious only in seasons of severe affliction."

But Paul doesn't seem to offer any leeway here. Be anxious for nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Is this what he meant? Not exactly. He

*The presence
of anxiety
is unavoidable, but
the prison of anxiety
is optional.*

wrote the phrase in the present active tense, which implies an ongoing state. It's the life of *perpetual anxiety* that Paul wanted to address. The *Lucado Revised Translation* reads, "Don't let anything in life leave you perpetually breathless and in angst." The presence of anxiety is unavoidable, but the prison of anxiety is optional.

Anxiety is not a sin; it is an emotion. (So don't be anxious about feeling anxious.) Anxiety can, however, lead to sinful behavior. When we numb our fears with six-packs or food binges, when we spew anger like Krakatau, when we peddle our fears to anyone who will buy them, we are sinning. If toxic anxiety

leads you to abandon your spouse, neglect your kids, break covenants, or break hearts, take heed. Jesus gave this word: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with . . . the anxieties of life” (Luke 21:34 NIV). Is your heart weighed down with worry?

Look for these signals:

- Are you laughing less than you once did?
- Do you see problems in every promise?
- Would those who know you best describe you as increasingly negative and critical?
- Do you assume that something bad is going to happen?
- Do you dilute and downplay good news with doses of your version of reality?
- Many days would you rather stay in bed than get up?
- Do you magnify the negative and dismiss the positive?
- Given the chance, would you avoid any interaction with humanity for the rest of your life?

If you answered yes to most of these questions, I have a friend for you to meet. Actually, I have a scripture for you to read. I’ve read the words so often that we have become friends. I’d like to nominate this passage for the Scripture Hall of Fame. The museum wall that contains the framed words of the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and John 3:16 should also display Philippians 4:4–8:

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. 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

ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Five verses with four admonitions that lead to one wonderful promise: “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds” (v. 7).

Celebrate God’s goodness. “Rejoice in the Lord always” (v. 4).

Ask God for help. “Let your requests be made known to God”
(v. 6).

Leave your concerns with him. “With thanksgiving . . .” (v. 6).

Meditate on good things. “Think about the things that are good and worthy of praise” (v. 8 NCV).

Celebrate. Ask. Leave. Meditate. C.A.L.M.

Could you use some calm? If so, you aren’t alone. The Bible is Kindle’s most highlighted book. And Philippians 4:6–7 is the most highlighted passage.¹⁰ Apparently we all could use a word of comfort.

God is ready to give it.

With God as your helper, you will sleep better tonight and smile more tomorrow. You’ll reframe the way you face your fears. You’ll learn how to talk yourself off the ledge, view bad news through the lens of sovereignty, discern the lies of Satan, and tell yourself the truth. You will discover a life that is characterized by calm and will develop tools for facing the onslaughts of anxiety.

It will require some work on your part. I certainly don't mean to leave the impression that anxiety can be waved away with a simple pep talk. In fact, for some of you God's healing will include the help of therapy and/or medication. If that is the case, do not for a moment think that you are a second-class citizen of heaven. Ask God to lead you to a qualified counselor or physician who will provide the treatment you need.

This much is sure: It is not God's will that you lead a life of perpetual anxiety. It is not his will that you face every day with dread and trepidation. He made you for more than a life of breath-stealing angst and mind-splitting worry. He has a new chapter for your life. And he is ready to write it.

I have a childhood memory that I cherish. My father loved corn bread and buttermilk. (Can you guess that I was raised in a small West Texas town?) About ten o'clock each night he would meander into the kitchen and crumble a piece of corn bread into a glass of buttermilk. He would stand at the counter in his T-shirt and boxer shorts and drink it.

He then made the rounds to the front and back doors, checking the locks. Once everything was secure, he would step into the bedroom I shared with my brother and say something like, "Everything is secure, boys. You can go to sleep now."

I have no inclination to believe that God loves corn bread and buttermilk, but I do believe he loves his children. He oversees your world. He monitors your life. He doesn't need to check the doors; indeed, he is the door. Nothing will come your way apart from his permission.

*Anxiety is not a sin;
it is an emotion.*

*(So don't be anxious
about feeling
anxious.)*



It is not God's will that you lead a life of perpetual anxiety. It is not his will that you face every day with dread and trepidation. He made you for more than a life of breath-stealing angst and mind-splitting worry. He has a new chapter for your life. And he is ready to write it.



Less Fret, More Faith

Listen carefully and you will hear him say, “Everything is secure. You can rest now.” By his power you will “be anxious for nothing” and discover the “peace . . . which passes all understanding” (RSV).

Dear Lord,

You spoke to storms. Would you speak to ours? You calmed the hearts of the apostles. Would you calm the chaos within us? You told them to fear not. Say the same to us. We are weary from our worry, battered and belittled by the gales of life. Oh Prince of Peace, bequeath to us a spirit of calm.

As we turn the page in this book, will you turn a new leaf in our lives? Quench anxiety. Stir courage. Let us know less fret and more faith.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Section 1



CELEBRATE GOD'S
GOODNESS

Rejoice in the Lord always.

Chapter 2

REJOICE IN THE LORD'S
SOVEREIGNTY

*You can't run the world, but you
can entrust it to God.*

I grew up in a camping family. My dad's idea of a great vacation involved mountains, creeks, tents, and sleeping bags. Let others tour the big cities or enjoy the theme parks. The Lucado family passed on Mickey and headed for the Rockies.

I attempted to continue this tradition with my own family. No luck. Our idea of roughing it is staying at the in-laws. We like campfires . . . as long as someone else builds them and room service is available. I'm not as hardy as my dad.

He loved camping gear as much as he loved camping trips. One day when I was about nine years old, he returned from a trip to the army surplus store with a tent that became a part of Lucado family lore.

It was huge. It could hold a dozen cots. We could erect the tent around a picnic table and still have room for sleeping bags. A big tent, of course, requires stable tent poles. This one came with two. Don't confuse these poles with the slender, retractable, aluminum versions that come with the average-size camping tent. No sirree, Bob. These poles were made of cast iron and were as thick as a forearm. The shelter wasn't fancy. No zippered doors. No mosquito netting. No camouflage design. But it was sturdy. Let the winds howl. Let the summer rains fall. Let the hail pound. Let the weather change. We weren't going anywhere.

On one occasion we were camped at Estes Park, Colorado, along with Dad's eight siblings. The sky suddenly grew dark and stormy.

Rain popped the ground, and wind bent the pine trees. Everyone made a dash for their tents. Within moments everyone left their tents and scampered to ours. It was, after all, the one with two cast-iron poles.

I'm thinking you and I could use a set of those poles. The world has a way of brewing some fierce winds. Who among us hasn't sought protection from the elements of life?

If only our storms were limited to wind and rain. Our tempests consist of the big *Ds* of life: difficulties, divorce, disease, and death. Does anybody know where to find a shelter that is suitable for these gales?

The apostle Paul did. If anyone had reason to be anxious, it was he. Let your imagination transport you two thousand years back in time. Envision an old man as he gazes out the window of a Roman prison.

Paul is about sixty years old, thirty years a Christian, and there is scarcely a seaport on the Mediterranean he doesn't know.

See how stooped he is? All angles and curves. Blame his bent back on the miles traveled and the beatings endured. He received thirty-nine lashes on five different occasions. He was beaten with rods on three. Scars spiderweb across his skin like bulging veins. He was once left for dead. He has been imprisoned, deserted by friends and coworkers, and has endured shipwrecks, storms, and starvation.

He's probably half-blind, squinting just to read (Gal. 4:15). What's more, he is awaiting trial before the Roman emperor. Nero has learned to curry the favor of the Roman citizens by killing believers, of which Paul is the best known.

As if the oppression from the empire weren't enough, Paul also bears the weight of newborn churches. The members are bickering. False preachers are preaching out of pride and envy (Phil. 1:15–17).

So much for the easy life of an apostle.

His future is as gloomy as his jail cell.

Yet to read his words, you'd think he'd just arrived at a Jamaican beach hotel. His letter to the Philippians bears not one word of fear or complaint. Not one! He never shakes a fist at God; instead, he lifts his thanks to God and calls on his readers to do the same.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). Paul's prescription for anxiety begins with a call to rejoice.

Paul used every tool in the box on this verse, hoping to get our attention. First, he employed a present imperative tense so his readers would hear him say, continually, habitually rejoice!¹ And if the verb tense wasn't enough, he removed the

*Paul's prescription
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expiration date. "Rejoice in the Lord *always*" (emphasis mine). And if perchance the verb tense and *always* were inadequate, he repeated the command: "Again I will say, rejoice!" (emphasis mine).

But how can a person obey this command? Rejoice always? Is it possible for any person to maintain an uninterrupted spirit of gladness? No. This is not Paul's challenge. We are urged to "Rejoice *in the Lord*." This verse is a call, not to a feeling, but to a decision and a deeply rooted confidence that God exists, that he is in control, and that he is good.

The apostle held firm to this belief. He had erected cast-iron stabilizers in the center of his soul. Let Nero rage. Let preachers self-promote. Let storms blow. Paul's tent of faith would never collapse. He had stabilized it with a sturdy belief system.

How sturdy is yours?

Flip back the flaps of your soul, and you'll see a series of beliefs

that serve like poles to stabilize your life. Your belief system is your answer to the fundamental questions about life: Is anyone in control of the universe? Does life have a purpose? Do I have value? Is this life all there is?

Your belief system has nothing to do with your skin color, appearance, talents, or age. Your belief system is not concerned with the exterior of the tent but the interior. It is the set of convictions (poles)—

*Belief always
precedes behavior.*

all of them unseen—upon which your faith depends. If your belief system is strong, you will stand. If it is weak, the storm will prevail.

Belief always precedes behavior. For this reason the apostle Paul in each of his epistles addressed convictions before he addressed actions. To change the way a person responds to life, change what a person believes about life. The most important thing about you is your belief system.

Paul's was Gibraltar strong.

Take a close look at the poles in the tent of the apostle, and you will see one with this inscription: the sovereignty of God. *Sovereignty* is the term the Bible uses to describe God's perfect control and management of the universe. He preserves and governs every element. He is continually involved with all created things, directing them to act in a way that fulfills his divine purpose.

In the treatment of anxiety, a proper understanding of sovereignty is huge. Anxiety is often the consequence of perceived chaos. If we sense we are victims of unseen, turbulent, random forces, we are troubled.

Psychologists verified this fact when they studied the impact of combat on soldiers in World War II. They determined that after sixty days of continuous combat the ground troops became "emotionally

dead.” This reaction is understandable. Soldiers endured a constant threat of bomb blitzes, machine guns, and enemy snipers. The anxiety of ground troops was no surprise.

The comparative calm of fighter pilots, however, was. Their mortality rate was among the highest in combat. Fifty percent of them were killed in action, yet dogfighters loved their work. An astounding 93 percent of them claimed to be happy in their assignments even though the odds of survival were the same as the toss of a coin.²

What made the difference? Those pilots had their hands on the throttle. They sat in the cockpit. They felt that their fate was theirs to determine.³ Infantrymen, by contrast, could just as easily be killed standing still or running away. They felt forlorn and helpless. The formula is simple: Perceived control creates calm. Lack of control gives birth to fear.

You don't need a war to prove this formula. Road congestion will do just fine. A team of German researchers found that a traffic jam increases your chances of a heart attack threefold.⁴ Makes sense. Gridlock is the ultimate loss of control. We may know how to drive, but that fellow in the next lane doesn't! We can be the best drivers in history, but the texting teenager might be the end of us. There is no predictability, just stress. Anxiety increases as perceived control diminishes.

So what do we do?

Control everything? Never board a plane without a parachute. Never enter a restaurant without bringing your own clean silverware. Never leave the house without a gas mask. Never give away your heart for fear of a broken one. Never step on a crack lest you break your mother's back. Face anxiety by taking control.

*Anxiety increases
as perceived
control
diminishes.*

If only we could.

Yet certainty is a cruel impostor. A person can accumulate millions of dollars and still lose it in a recession. A health fanatic can eat only nuts and veggies and still battle cancer. A hermit can avoid all human contact and still struggle with insomnia. We want certainty, but the only certainty is the lack thereof.

That's why the most stressed-out people are control freaks. They fail at the quest they most pursue. The more they try to control the world, the more they realize they cannot. Life becomes a cycle of anxiety, failure; anxiety, failure; anxiety, failure. We can't take control, because control is not ours to take.

The Bible has a better idea. Rather than seeking total control, relinquish it. You can't run the world, but you can entrust it to God. This is the message behind Paul's admonition to "rejoice *in the Lord*." Peace is within reach, not for lack of problems, but because of the presence of a

*Rather than rehearse
the chaos of the
world, rejoice in the
Lord's sovereignty,
as Paul did.*

sovereign Lord. Rather than rehearse the chaos of the world, rejoice in the Lord's sovereignty, as Paul did. "The things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ" (Phil. 1:12-13).

And those troublemakers in the church? Those who preached out of "envy and strife" (Phil. 1:15)? Their selfish motives were no match for the sovereignty of Jesus. "Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice" (Phil. 1:18 NLT).

Rejoice in the Lord's Sovereignty

Paul believed that “God highly exalted [Jesus] and gave Him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9 HCSB).

Conditions might have been miserable in the prison, but high above it all was a “God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

To read Paul is to read the words of a man who, in the innermost part of his being, believed in the steady hand of a good God. He was protected by God’s strength, preserved by God’s love. He lived beneath the shadow of God’s wings.

Do you?

Stabilize your soul with the sovereignty of God. He reigns supreme over every detail of the universe. “There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD” (Prov. 21:30 NIV). “[God] does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’” (Dan. 4:35 NIV). He “sustains all things” (Heb. 1:3 NRSV). He can “whistle for the fly that is in the farthest part of the rivers of Egypt” (Isa. 7:18). He names the stars and knows the sparrows. Great and small, from the People’s Liberation Army of China to the army ants in my backyard, everything is under his control. “Who can act against you without the Lord’s permission? It is the Lord who helps one and harms another” (Lam. 3:37–38 TLB).

God’s answer for troubled times has always been the same: heaven has an occupied throne. This was certainly the message God gave to the prophet Isaiah. During the eighth century BC, ancient Judah enjoyed a time of relative peace, thanks to the steady leadership of Uzziah, the king. Uzziah was far from perfect, yet he kept the enemies at bay. Though antagonists threatened from all sides, the presence of Uzziah kept the fragile society safe from attack for fifty-two years.

Then Uzziah died. Isaiah, who lived during the reign of the king, was left with ample reason for worry. What would happen to the people of Judah now that Uzziah was gone?

Or, in your case, what will happen now that your job is gone? Or your health has diminished? Or the economy has taken a nosedive? Does God have a message for his people when calamity strikes?

He certainly had a word for Isaiah. The prophet wrote:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!” (Isa. 6:1–3)

Uzziah’s throne was empty, but God’s was occupied. Uzziah’s reign had ended, but God’s had not. Uzziah’s voice was silent, but God’s was strong (Isa. 6:8–10). He was, and is, alive, on the throne, and worthy of endless worship.

God calmed the fears of Isaiah, not by removing the problem, but by revealing his divine power and presence.

Think of it this way. Suppose your dad is the world’s foremost orthopedic surgeon. People travel from distant countries for him to treat them. Regularly he exchanges damaged joints for healthy ones. With the same confidence that a mechanic changes spark plugs, your dad removes and replaces hips, knees, and shoulders.

At ten years of age you are a bit young to comprehend the accomplishments of a renowned surgeon. But you’re not too young



Stabilize your soul with
the sovereignty of God. He
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detail of the universe.



to stumble down the stairs and twist your ankle. You roll and writhe on the floor and scream for help. You are weeks away from your first school dance. This is no time for crutches. No time for limping. You need a healthy ankle! Yours is anything but.

Into the room walks your dad, still wearing his surgical scrubs. He removes your shoe, peels back your sock, and examines the injury. You groan at the sight of the tennis ball-sized bump. Adolescent anxiety kicks in.

“Dad, I’ll never walk again!”

“Yes, you will.”

“No one can help me!”

“I can.”

“No one knows what to do!”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t!”

Your dad lifts his head and asks you a question. “Do you know what I do for a living?”

Actually you don’t. You know he goes to the hospital every day. You know that people call him “doctor.” Your mom thinks he is smart. But you don’t really know what your father does.

“So,” he says as he places a bag of ice on your ankle, “it’s time for you to learn.” The next day he is waiting for you in the school parking lot after classes. “Hop in. I want you to see what I do,” he says. He drives you to his hospital office and shows you the constellation of diplomas on his wall. Adjacent to them is a collection of awards that include words like *distinguished* and *honorable*. He hands you a manual of orthopedic surgery that bears his name.

“You wrote this?”

“I did.”

Rejoice in the Lord's Sovereignty

His cell phone rings. After the call he announces, "We're off to surgery." You scrub up and follow him into the operating room on your crutches. During the next few minutes you have a ringside seat for a procedure in which he reconstructs an ankle. He is the commandant of the operating room. He never hesitates or seeks advice. He just does it.

One of the nurses whispers, "Your dad is the best."

As the two of you ride home that evening, you look at your father. You see him in a different light. If he can conduct orthopedic surgery, he can likely treat a swollen ankle. So you ask, "You think I'll be okay for the dance?"

"Yes, you'll be fine."

This time you believe him. Your anxiety decreases as your understanding of your father increases.

Here is what I think: our biggest fears are sprained ankles to God.

Here is what else I think: a lot of people live with unnecessary anxiety over temporary limps.

The next time you fear the future, rejoice in the Lord's sovereignty. Rejoice in what he has accomplished. Rejoice that he is able to do what you cannot do. Fill your mind with thoughts of God.

"[He is] the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1:25).

"[He] is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

"[His] years will never end" (Ps. 102:27 NIV).

*Your anxiety
decreases as your
understanding
of your father
increases.*

He is king, supreme ruler, absolute monarch, and overlord of all history.

An arch of his eyebrow and a million angels will pivot and salute. Every throne is a footstool to his. Every crown is papier-mâché next to his. He consults no advisers. He needs no congress. He reports to no one. He is in charge.

Sovereignty gives the saint the inside track to peace. Others see the problems of the world and wring their hands. We see the problems of the world and bend our knees.

Jeremiah did.

My soul has been rejected from peace;
I have forgotten happiness.
So I say, "My strength has perished,
And so has my hope from the LORD."
Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood
and bitterness.
Surely my soul remembers
And is bowed down within me. (Lam. 3:17-20 NASB)

Jeremiah was the prophet to Judah during one of her darkest periods of rebellion. They called him the weeping prophet because he was one. He wept at the condition of the people and the depravity of their faith. He was anxious enough to write a book called Lamentations. But then he considered the work of God. He purposefully lifted his mind to thoughts about his king. Note the intentionality in his words:

This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope.



Others see the problems of the
world and wring their hands.

We see the problems of the
world and bend our knees.



ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,

For His compassions never fail.

They are new every morning;

Great is Your faithfulness.

"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,

"Therefore I have hope in Him."

The LORD is good to those who wait for Him,

To the person who seeks Him.

It is good that he waits silently

For the salvation of the LORD. (Lam. 3:21–26 NASB)

Lift up your eyes. Don't get lost in your troubles. Dare to believe that good things will happen. Dare to believe that God was speaking to you when he said, "In everything God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28 NCV). The mind cannot at the same time be full of God and full of fear. "He will keep in perfect peace all those

*The mind cannot
at the same time
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who trust in him, whose thoughts turn often to the Lord!" (Isa. 26:3 TLB). Are you troubled, restless, sleepless? Then rejoice in the Lord's sovereignty. I dare you—I double-dog dare you—to expose your worries to an hour of worship. Your concerns will melt like ice on a July sidewalk.

Anxiety passes as trust increases. In another Scripture, Jeremiah draws a direct connection between faith and peace.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,

And whose hope is the LORD.

Rejoice in the Lord's Sovereignty

For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,
Which spreads out its roots by the river,
And will not fear when heat comes;
But its leaf will be green,
And *will not be anxious* in the year of drought. (Jer. 17:7–8,
emphasis mine)

Many years ago I spent a week visiting the interior of Brazil with a longtime missionary pilot. He flew a circuit of remote towns in a four-seat plane that threatened to come undone at the slightest gust of wind. Wilbur and Orville had a sturdier aircraft.

I could not get comfortable. I kept thinking the plane was going to crash in some Brazilian jungle and I'd be gobbled up by piranhas or swallowed by an anaconda. I kept shifting around, looking down, and gripping my seat. (As if that would help.) Finally the pilot had enough of my squirming. He looked over at me and shouted over the airplane noise, "We won't face anything that I can't handle. You might as well trust me to fly the plane."

Is God saying the same to you?

Examine the poles that sustain your belief. Make sure one of them is etched with the words "My God is sovereign."

Chapter 3

REJOICE IN THE
LORD'S MERCY

Guilt frenzies the soul. Grace calms it.

My hangover was terrible, but I could survive the headache.
The nausea was palpable, but I knew it would pass.

The discipline was severe, but I deserved it.

What I couldn't bear was the guilt.

I was taught from a young age that drunkenness is wrong. Our family tree is marked by a blight of alcoholism. My dad made it clear: alcohol abuse leads to trouble, and that trouble leads to misery. He regularly took me to rehab centers to visit his siblings for their benefit and ours. The battle of the bottle cost them their marriages, jobs, and health. He urged me to learn from their mistakes. More than once I promised I would never get drunk.

Then why did I? Why did my friend and I, at the age of sixteen, get so ragingly inebriated that neither of us could drive safely? Why did I drive anyway? Why did I drink so much that I went to bed with head a-spinning and stomach a-turning? Why did I get so commode-hugging drunk that I could not stand?

Did I honestly think my dad wouldn't hear me throw up? (He did.) Did I think he would believe my excuse about Mexican food? (He didn't.) When I awoke the next morning, I had a pounding head, an angry father, and this: a guilty conscience.

There is a guilt that sits in the soul like a concrete block and causes a person to feel bad for being alive. There is a guilt that says, *I did bad*. And then there is a guilt that concludes, *I am bad*. It was this deep,

dark guilt that I felt. I found myself face-to-face with a version of me I had never known.

Maybe there is someone on the planet who has not known this quagmire of remorse, but I've never met that person. What sucked you under? A one-night stand? Back-street brawls? Did you pocket what wasn't yours? Or maybe your guilt is the result not of a moment in life but of a season of life. You failed as a parent. You blew it in your career. You squandered your youth or your money.

The result? Guilt.

A harsh consequence of the guilt? Anxiety.

*Behind the frantic
expressions on the
faces of humanity is
unresolved regret.*

Surprised? Lists of anxiety triggers typically include busy schedules, unrealistic demands, or heavy traffic. But we must go deeper. Behind the frantic expressions on the faces of humanity is unresolved regret.

Indeed, humanity's first occasion of anxiety can be attributed to guilt. "That evening [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden; and they hid themselves among the trees" (Gen. 3:8 TLB).

What had happened to the first family? Until this point there was no indication they felt any fear or trepidation. They had never hidden from God. Indeed, they had nothing to hide. "The man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:25 NLT).

But then came the serpent and the forbidden fruit. The first couple said yes to the serpent's temptation and no to God. And when they did, their world collapsed like an accordion. They scurried into the bushes and went into hiding, feeling a mélange of shame and dread. Bearing

Rejoice in the Lord's Mercy

crumbs from the cookie jar they were told to avoid, they engaged in a flurry of cover-ups.

Note the sequence. Guilt came first. Anxiety came in tow. Guilt drove the truck, but anxiety bounced in the flatbed. Adam and Eve didn't know how to process their failure. Neither do we. But still we try. We don't duck into the bushes. We have more sophisticated ways to deal with our guilt. We . . .

Numb it. With a bottle of Grey Goose. With an hour of Internet pornography. With a joint of marijuana, a rendezvous at the motel. Guilt disappears during happy hour, right? Funny how it reappears when we get home.

Deny it. Pretend we never stumbled. Concoct a plan to cover up the bad choice. One lie leads to another, then another. We adjust the second story to align with the first. Before long our knee-jerk reaction to any question is, how can I prolong the charade?

Minimize it. We didn't sin; we just lost our way. We didn't sin; we got caught up in the moment. We didn't sin; we just took the wrong path. We experienced a lapse in judgment.

Bury it. Suppress the guilt beneath a mound of work and a calendar of appointments. The busier we stay, the less time we spend with the people we have come to dislike most: ourselves.

Punish it. Cut ourselves. Hurt ourselves. Beat up ourselves. Flog ourselves. If not with whips, then with rules. More rules. Long lists of things to do and observances to keep. Painful penance. Pray more! Study more! Give more! Show up earlier; stay up later.

Avoid the mention of it. Just don't bring it up. Don't tell the family, the preacher, the buddies. Keep everything on the surface, and hope the Loch Ness monster of guilt lingers in the deep.

Redirect it. Lash out at the kids. Take it out on the spouse. Yell at the employees or the driver in the next lane.

Offset it. Determine never to make another mistake. Build the perfect family. Create the perfect career. Score perfect grades. Be the perfect Christian. Everything must be perfect: hair, car, tone of voice. Stay in control. Be absolutely intolerant of slipups or foul-ups by self or others.

Embody it. We didn't get drunk; we are drunks. We didn't screw up; we are screwups. We didn't just do bad; we are bad. Bad to the bone. We might even take pride in our badness. It's only a matter of time until we do something bad again.

Adam and Eve hid behind fig leaves, bushes, and lies. Not much has changed.

Let's go back to the story of sixteen-year-old Max and envision the teenager who woke up in a prodigal's pigpen. Suppose he decides to treat his shame with one of the above options or a combination thereof. Perhaps he downplays or dismisses the event. Maybe he opts for the road of pitiless self-punishment. Then again, he could anesthetize the regret with more liquor.

What will happen to Max if he never discovers a healthy treatment for failure? What kind of person does unresolved guilt create? An anxious one, forever hiding, running, denying, pretending. As one man admitted, "I was always living a lie for fear someone might see me for who I really was and think less of me, disapprove of me, reject or judge me. So I hid behind my fig leaf of competence or knowledge or superspirituality or a whole list of other options. Living this lie was exhausting and anxiety producing."¹

Unresolved guilt will turn you into a miserable, weary, angry, stressed-out, fretful mess. In a psalm David probably wrote after his affair with Bathsheba, the king said:

Rejoice in the Lord's Mercy

When I refused to confess my sin,
my body wasted away,
and I groaned all day long.
Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me.
My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.
(Ps. 32:3–4 NLT)

Guilt sucks the life out of our souls.
Grace restores it.

The apostle Paul clung to this grace. To the same degree that he believed in God's sovereignty, he relied on God's mercy.

No one had more reason to feel the burden of guilt than Paul did. He had orchestrated the deaths of Christians. He was an ancient version of a terrorist, taking believers into custody and then spilling their blood. "Paul was like a wild man, going everywhere to devastate the believers, even entering private homes and dragging out men and women alike and jailing them" (Acts 8:3 TLB).

*Guilt sucks the life
out of our souls.
Grace restores it.*

In addition, he was a legalist to the core. Before he knew Christ, Paul had spent a lifetime trying to save himself. His salvation depended on his perfection, on his performance.

If anyone ever had reason to hope that he could save himself, it would be I. If others could be saved by what they are, certainly I could! For I went through the Jewish initiation ceremony when I was eight days old, having been born into a pure-blooded Jewish home that was a branch of the old original Benjamin family. So I was a real Jew if

there ever was one! What's more, I was a member of the Pharisees who demand the strictest obedience to every Jewish law and custom. And sincere? Yes, so much so that I greatly persecuted the Church; and I tried to obey every Jewish rule and regulation right down to the very last point. (Phil. 3:4–6 TLB)

Paul had blood on his hands and religious diplomas on his wall.

But then came the Damascus road moment. Jesus appeared. Once Paul saw Jesus, he couldn't see anymore. He couldn't see value in his résumé anymore. He couldn't see merit in his merits or worth in his good works anymore. He couldn't see reasons to boast about anything he had done anymore. And he couldn't see any option except to spend the rest of his life talking less about himself and more about Jesus.

He became the great poet of grace. “But all these things that I once thought very worthwhile—now I've thrown them all away so that I can put my trust and hope in Christ alone” (Phil. 3:7 TLB).

In exchange for self-salvation, God gave Paul righteousness. “Now I am right with God, not because I followed the law, but because I believed in Christ” (Phil. 3:9 NCV).

Paul gave his guilt to Jesus. Period. He didn't numb it, hide it, deny it, offset it, or punish it. He simply surrendered it to Jesus. As a result, he would write, “I am still not all I should be, but I am bringing all my energies to bear on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God is calling us up to heaven because of what Christ Jesus did for us” (Phil. 3:13–14 TLB).

What would the apostle say to a guilt-laden teenager? Simply this: “Rejoice in the Lord's mercy. Trust in his ability to forgive. Abandon

any attempt at self-salvation or justification. No more hiding behind fig leaves. Cast yourself upon the grace of Christ and Christ alone.”

A happy saint is one who is at the same time aware of the severity of sin and the immensity of grace. Sin is not diminished, nor is God's ability to forgive it. The saint dwells in grace, not guilt. This is the tranquil soul.

God's grace is the fertile soil out of which courage sprouts. As Paul told Titus, “God's readiness to give and forgive is now public. Salvation's available for everyone! . . . Tell them all this. Build up their courage” (Titus 2:11, 15 *THE MESSAGE*).

I can bear witness to the power of this grace. I could take you to the city, to the church within the city, to the section of seats within the church auditorium. I might be able to find the very seat in which I was sitting when this grace found me. I was a twenty-year-old college sophomore. For four years I had lived with the concrete block of guilt, not just from that first night of drunkenness but also a hundred more like it. The guilt had made a mess of my life, and I was headed toward a lifetime of misery. But then I heard a preacher do for me what I'm attempting to do for you: describe the divine grace that is greater than sin. When at the end of the message he asked if anyone would like to come forward and receive this grace, iron chains could not have held me back. Truth be told, chains had held me back. But mercy snapped the guilt chains and set me free. I know this truth firsthand: guilt frenzies the soul; grace calms it.

That was forty years ago. In the intervening years various breeds of anxiety have stalked me. But guilt-based anxiety? No sir. The benefit of being a great sinner is dependence upon a great grace. I found a forgiveness that is too deep to be plumbed, too high to be summited. I have never been more or less saved than the moment I was first saved.



A happy saint is one who is at the same time aware of the severity of sin and the immensity of grace.

Sin is not diminished, nor is God's ability to forgive it.



Not one bad deed has deducted from my salvation. No good deed, if there are any, has enhanced it. My salvation has nothing to do with my work and everything to do with the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Do you know this grace? If not, we have stumbled upon a source of your anxiety. You thought the problem was your calendar, your marriage, your job. In reality it is this unresolved guilt.

Don't indulge it. Don't drown in the bilge of your own condemnation. There is a reason the windshield is bigger than the rearview mirror. Your future matters more than your past. God's grace is greater than your sin. What you did was not good. But your God *is* good. And he will forgive you. He is ready to write a new chapter in your life. Say with Paul, "Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God is calling us" (Phil. 3:13–14 TLB).

Denalyn and I enjoyed a nice dinner at a local restaurant the other night. About the same time we received our bill, we received a visit from a church member. He spotted us and came over to say hello. After we chatted for a moment, he reached down and took our bill and said, "I'll take this." (What a godly man.)

When he took it, guess what I did. I let him! I even ordered extra dessert. (Not really.) I just let him do what he wanted to do: I let him take it away.

Someday we will all stand before God. All of us will be present. All

My salvation has nothing to do with my work and everything to do with the finished work of Christ on the cross.

of us will have to give an account for our lives. Every thought, every deed, every action. Were it not for the grace of Christ, I would find this to be a terrifying thought.

Yet, according to Scripture, Jesus came to “take away the sins of the world” (John 1:29 PHILLIPS). On the day when I appear before the judgment seat of God, I will point to Christ. When my list of sins is

produced, I will gesture toward him and say, “He took it.”

Let him take yours.

In the great trapeze act of salvation, God is the catcher, and we are the flyers. We trust. Period.

In one of Henri Nouwen’s books, he tells about the lesson of trust he learned from a family of trapeze artists known as the Flying Rodleighs. He visited with them for a time after

watching them fly through the air with elegant poise. When he asked one of the flyers the secret of trapeze artists, the acrobat gave this reply:

The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe [my catcher], I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron. . . .

The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.²



There is a reason the windshield
is bigger than the rearview
mirror. Your future matters
more than your past.



ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

In the great trapeze act of salvation, God is the catcher, and we are the flyers. We trust. Period. We rely solely upon God's ability to catch us. As we do, a wonderful thing happens: we fly.

Your Father has never dropped anyone. He will not drop you. His grip is sturdy and his hands are open. As the apostle proclaimed, "And *I know* the Lord will continue to rescue me from every *trip, trap, snare, and pitfall* of evil and carry me safely to His heavenly kingdom. May He be glorified throughout eternity. Amen" (2 Tim. 4:18 THE VOICE).

Place yourself entirely in his care. As you do, you will find it is possible—yes, possible!—to be anxious for nothing.

Chapter 4

REJOICE IN THE
LORD *ALWAYS*

God uses everything to accomplish his will.

Place a finger on each of your temples. Now offer this prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for my amygdalae. Thank you, Lord, for the two almond-shaped neural clusters that reside inside my brain. I wouldn't be alive without them.*

The truth is, you wouldn't. Thanks to your amygdalae, you ran for cover when the grizzly growled, you stepped back on the curb when the car honked, and you ducked your head when the baseball screamed in your direction.

Your amygdalae operate like an alarm system. If an intruder breaks a window or pries open a lock to your house, your home security system warns you. Bells, alarms, horns, lights! Get up, get out, and get safe! The system alerts you before you have time to think about it.

Amygdalae do the same. We don't consciously think, *A car is coming. I'm in its way. The car is big; I am small. The car is fast; I am slow. I better move.* Amygdalae prompt a reaction before we know one is needed. And when the amygdalae command, the rest of the body reacts. Our pupils dilate, improving our vision. We breathe faster, pumping more oxygen into the lungs. Our pulse rate increases, infusing more blood into the system. Adrenaline turns us into Hercules. We are faster, stronger, better able to escape danger or fight through it. Surface-level blood vessels constrict, reducing trauma-related blood loss in the moments after injury. Even the bowel system reacts, sometimes embarrassingly, by jettisoning the unnecessary weight of what

we had for lunch. We are ready for fight or flight, suddenly faster, stronger, and more alert.¹

We like our amygdalae.

We don't like supersensitive ones, however. We don't want a home system that goes off at the gust of a breeze or the bark of a dog. We don't want that in our homes. Nor do we want that in our heads.

Perpetual anxiety is amygdalae with an itchy trigger finger. They see a mole on the skin and think cancer. They see a dip in the econ-

Perpetual anxiety is amygdalae with an itchy trigger finger.

omy and think recession. They hear the teenagers complain and conclude, *They'll be on drugs before they leave the house.* Perpetual anxiety is the mental alarm system that never quite turns off.

Limited anxiety is helpful. We need to be alerted to danger. What we don't need is to live in a state of high alert.

Here is why. God created our brains to replenish themselves with natural mood elevators and tranquilizers like dopamine and serotonin. These restore joy and peace. But if the amygdalae never stop, the natural tranquilizers never have an opportunity to do their work. The brain never resets. We become edgy, unsettled, and restless. That is the bad news. The good news is this: God can calm our amygdalae! And he may very well use the words of the apostle Paul to do so.

Paul urges us to "rejoice in the Lord *always*" (Phil. 4:4, emphasis mine). Not just on paydays, Fridays, good days, or birthdays. But rejoice in the Lord always. You aren't the first to read the word *always* and arch an eyebrow. *Rejoice in the Lord always?*

"Yeah, right," mumbles the reader from the hospital bed.

"How?" sighs the unemployed dad.

“Always?” questions the mother of the baby born with a disability.

It is one thing to rejoice in the Lord when life is good, but when the odds are against you?

Joseph knew this challenge. This Old Testament hero predated the apostle Paul by about twenty centuries. But both knew the challenge of imprisonment. Joseph’s jail was dank and dark, a dungeon of underground, windowless rooms, stale food, and bitter water. He had no way out.

And he had no friend to help him. He thought he did. He had befriended two men from Pharaoh’s court. One was a butler, the other a baker, and both were troubled by their dreams. Joseph had a knack for dream interpretation and offered to help. He had bad news for the baker (“Get your affairs in order; you’re going to die.”) and good news for the butler (“Get your bags packed; you’re going back to Pharaoh.”). Joseph asked the butler to put in a good word for him. The butler agreed. Joseph’s heart raced; his hopes soared. He kept an eye on the jail door, expecting to be released any minute.

“The chief cupbearer [butler], however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him” (Gen. 40:23 NIV). So had everyone else, it seemed. Joseph’s story is one of abandonment.

His brothers had disliked his dreams and swagger and decided to kill him and throw him into a pit. Had their greed not been a feather heavier than their thirst for blood, he would have died. When they had a chance to sell him to traveling merchants, they did.

His father was uninvolved. You’d hope to read of the sudden appearance of Jacob, who searched for his son, rescued him, and took him home. We don’t, because Jacob didn’t. He was MIA.

Joseph was carted off to Egypt and raffled off like a farm animal. The great-grandson of Abraham was sold to the highest bidder.

Even so, he landed on his feet. He worked his way to the top of Potiphar's household. But then the mistress of the house put the hanky-panky on him. The lady went shady, and Joseph got out, leaving her holding his coat. When she accused him of attempted rape, her husband took her side and tossed Joseph in prison. Joseph landed in jail for a crime he didn't commit.

Still, he didn't give up. He became a model prisoner. He made his bed, made friends, and made a good impression on the warden, who recognized him as inmate of the month and promoted Joseph to convict-in-charge. Joseph met the butler and requested help. The butler agreed but quickly forgot, and cruelty tipped the scales. Joseph languished in prison for two years with no word and no solution.

Two years! Plenty of time to give up. Plenty of time for the world to turn gray, for gargoyles of dread to appear. Plenty of time to wonder, *Is this how God treats his children? Is this God's reward for good behavior? Do your best, and this is what you get? A jail cell and a hard bed.*

If Joseph asked such questions, we don't know. But if you ask those questions, you aren't alone.

Denalyn and I spent the better part of last evening listening as a wife told us of her husband's latest affair. This is dalliance number three. She thought they had worked through the infidelity. The bridge of trust was enjoying some fresh mortar and reinforcement. They were talking more. Fighting seldom. Life seemed to be on a good path.

Then she saw the charge on the credit card. She confronted him. He became defensive. She came undone. He walked out. It's a mess.

She asked between sobs, "Where is God in all this?"

And you? You weren't thrown in jail, like Joseph, but then again, maybe you were. Or you ended up in AA or a women's shelter or an

unemployment line. And you wonder, *I believe in God. Is he aware? Does he care?*

Deism says no. God created the universe and then abandoned it.

Pantheism says no. Creation has no story or purpose unto itself; it is only a part of God.

Atheism says no. Not surprisingly, the philosophy that dismisses the existence of a god will, in turn, dismiss the possibility of a divine plan.

Christianity, on the other hand, says, “Yes, there is a God. Yes, this God is personally and powerfully involved in his creation.”

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3 NIV). The Greek word that is translated *sustaining* is a term commonly used in the New Testament for “carrying” or “bringing.”² The friends *carried* the paralyzed man to Jesus, and the servants *brought* wine to the master of the wedding. They “sustained” the man and the wine (Luke 5:18; John 2:8). They guaranteed the safe delivery.

To say Jesus is “sustaining all things by his powerful word” is to say he is directing creation toward a desired aim. The use of the present participle implies that Jesus is continually active in his creation. He exercises supremacy over all things.

Distant? Removed? Not God. “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17 NIV). Were he to step back, the creation would collapse. His resignation would spell our evaporation. “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28 NIV).

Because of him, the water stays wet and the rocks remain firm. The laws of gravity and thermodynamics don’t change from generation to generation. With his hand at the helm of creation, spring still follows winter, and winter follows autumn. There is an order to the universe. He sustains everything.

And this is crucial: he uses everything to accomplish his will. He “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11 NIV). The phrase “works out” comes from the Greek word *energeō*.³ God is the energy and energizing force behind everything. No moment, event, or detail falls outside of his supervision. He stands before the universe like a symphony conductor before the orchestra, calling forth the elements to play their part in the divine reprise.

He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts. (Ps. 104:14–15 NIV)

God is the one who “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45 NIV). God is the one who feeds the birds and watches the sparrows (Matt. 6:26; 10:29). God is the one in charge of everything, even the details of our lives.

He isn’t making up this plan as he goes along. And he didn’t wind up the clock and walk away. “The Most High God rules the kingdom of men, and sets over it whom he will” (Dan. 5:21 RSV). He “executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another” (Ps. 75:7 NRSV). “The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind” (Jer. 30:24 NRSV).

Such starchy verbs: God “rules,” “sets,” “executes,” “accomplished.” These terms attest to the existence of a heavenly Architect and blueprint, and his blueprint includes you. “In him we were also chosen, . . .

according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11 NIV).

So if God is in charge, why was Joseph in prison? Why is our friend’s marriage in disarray? Why does God permit challenges to come our way? Wouldn’t an almighty God prevent them?

Not if they serve his higher purpose. Remember the rest of Joseph’s story? When Pharaoh was troubled by his dreams, the butler recalled Joseph’s request. He mentioned Joseph to Pharaoh, and as fast as you can say *providence*, Joseph went from prison to palace. Joseph interpreted the dream, which was a forecast of a famine. Pharaoh promoted him to prime minister, and Joseph successfully navigated the crisis and saved not just the Egyptians but also the family of Jacob.

Years later Joseph would tell his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children” (Gen. 50:20–21 NIV). Two words at the heart of this passage reveal the heart of providential hope: *but God*. “You intended to harm me, but God . . .” What was intended as harm became good. Why? Because Joseph kept God in the middle of his circumstance.

Joseph viewed the sufferings of his life through the lens of divine providence. Can I urge you to do the same? If you don’t, anxiety will stalk you every day of your life. Quite honestly, I have no words to counter the stress of the atheist or agnostic. What alleviates their anxiety? Yoga? Deep-breathing exercises? Stress-relief candles? Seems like going to a joust with a toothpick.

God’s sovereignty, on the other hand, bids us to fight the onslaught of fret with the sword that is etched with the words *but God*.

The company is downsizing, *but God* is still sovereign.

The cancer is back, *but God* still occupies the throne.

I was a jerk during the first years of my marriage, *but God* showed me how to lead a family.

I was an anxious, troubled soul, *but God* has been giving me courage.

The brothers had every intention to harm Joseph. But God, in his providence, used their intended evil for ultimate good. He never robbed

*God's sovereignty
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words but God.*

the brothers of their free will. He never imposed his nature upon them. But neither did he allow their sin and their sin nature to rule the day. He rerouted evil into good. God uses all things to bring about his purpose. He will not be deterred in his plan to sustain and carry creation to its intended glory.

The ultimate proof of providence is the death of Christ on the cross. No deed was more evil. No other day was so dark. Yet God not only knew of the crucifixion; he ordained it. As Peter told the murderers, "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. *But God* raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Acts 2:23–24 NIV, emphasis mine).

Everyone thought the life of Jesus was over—*but God*. His Son was dead and buried, but God raised him from the dead. God took the crucifixion of Friday and turned it into the celebration of Sunday.

Can he not do a reversal for you?

I'm sorry for the pain that life has given you. I'm sorry if your

parents neglected you. I'm sorry if your teacher ignored you. I'm sorry if a heartbreaker said "I do" on your wedding day but "I don't" every day afterward. I'm sorry if you were inappropriately touched, intentionally mocked, or unfairly dismissed. I'm sorry if you ended up in Egypt.

But if the story of Joseph teaches us anything, it is this: we have a choice. We can wear our hurt or wear our hope. We can outfit ourselves in our misfortune, or we can clothe ourselves in God's providence. We can cave in to the pandemonium of life, or we can lean into the perfect plan of God. And we can believe this promise: "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28 NIV).

In the famous lace shops of Brussels, Belgium, certain rooms are dedicated to the spinning of the finest lace with the most delicate of patterns. These rooms are completely dark, save for a shaft of natural light from a solitary window. Only one spinner sits in the room. The light falls upon the pattern while the worker remains in the dark.⁴

Has God permitted a time of darkness in your world? You look but cannot see him. You see only the fabric of circumstances woven and interlaced. You might question the purpose behind this thread or that. But be assured, God has a pattern. He has a plan. He is not finished, but when he is, the lace will be beautiful.

Some time ago I made a special visit to the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem. I was in Israel with a long list of places to visit and sites

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to see. But at the top of the list was a visit to the lobby of the American Colony Hotel. I placed it on my itinerary not because I, too, am an American. Not because the food in the restaurant is tasty or the facility is particularly nice. The food is tasty and the establishment is terrific, but I went for another reason. I wanted to see the handwritten lyrics that hang on the wall, framed and visible for all to see.

Horatio Spafford wrote the lyrics, never imagining they would become the words to one of the world's best-loved hymns. Spafford was a prosperous lawyer and Presbyterian Church elder. In 1871 he and his wife, Anna, suffered tragic losses in the Chicago fire. In November of 1873, Anna and their children set sail for Europe with a group of friends. Horatio stayed home to take care of some business. On December 2 he received a telegram from his wife that began "Saved alone. What shall I do?"⁵ He soon learned that the ship had collided with a British vessel and had sunk. Their four daughters drowned and Anna survived. He left for England to bring Anna back home. En route, while sailing on the ship, he wrote the lyrics to a song that would become an anthem to the providence of God.

He and Anna eventually moved to Jerusalem to form a Christian society designed to minister to the needs of all people. In time the group expanded and moved into a large house outside the city walls. The house became a hostel, then a hotel. It still stands, and it still serves as the display location for these words written by a grief-stricken man on a storm-tossed sea.

"It Is Well with My Soul"

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;

ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

It is well, with my soul,
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.⁶

May we so trust in the providence of God that we can say the same.
Always.

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3:16: The Numbers of Hope

... the 26 words that can change your life.

core scripture: John 3:16

And the Angels Were Silent

... what Jesus Christ's final days can teach you about what matters most.

core scripture: Matthew 20–27

The Applause of Heaven

... the secret to a truly satisfying life.

core scripture: The Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1–10

Before Amen

... the power of a simple prayer.

core scripture: Psalm 145:19

Come Thirsty

... how to rehydrate your heart and sink into the wellspring of God's love.

core scripture: John 7:37–38

Cure for the Common Life

... the unique things God designed you to do with your life.

core scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:7

Facing Your Giants

... when God is for you, no challenge is too great.

core scripture: 1 and 2 Samuel

Fearless

... how faith is the antidote to the fear in your life.

core scripture: John 14:1, 3

A Gentle Thunder

... the God who will do whatever it takes to lead his children back to him.

core scripture: Psalm 81:7

Glory Days

... how you fight from victory, not for it.

core scripture: Joshua 21:43–45

God Came Near

... a love so great that it left heaven to become part of your world.

core scripture: John 1:14

Grace

... the incredible gift that saves and sustains you.

core scripture: Hebrews 12:15

Great Day, Every Day

... how living in a purposeful way will help you trust more, stress less.

core scripture: Psalm 118:24

The Great House of God

... a blueprint for peace, joy, and love found in the Lord's Prayer.

core scripture: The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:9–13

He Chose the Nails

... a love so deep that it chose death on a cross—just to win your heart.

core scripture: 1 Peter 1:18–20

He Still Moves Stones

... the God who still does the impossible—in your life.

core scripture: Matthew 12:20

In the Eye of the Storm

... peace in the storms of your life.

core scripture: John 6

In the Grip of Grace

... the greatest gift of all—the grace of God.

core scripture: Romans

It's Not About Me

... why focusing on God will make sense of your life.

core scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:18

Just Like Jesus

... a life free from guilt, fear, and anxiety.

core scripture: Ephesians 4:23–24

A Love Worth Giving

... how living loved frees you to love others.

core scripture: 1 Corinthians 13

Next Door Savior

... a God who walked life's hardest trials—and still walks with you through yours.

core scripture: Matthew 16:13–16

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior

... hope in the unlikely place—upon the cross.

core scripture: Romans 5:15

Outlive Your Life

... that a great God created you to do great things.

core scripture: Acts 1

Six Hours One Friday

... forgiveness and healing in the middle of loss and failure.

core scripture: John 19–20

Traveling Light

... the power to release the burdens you were never meant to carry.

core scripture: Psalm 23

When God Whispers Your Name

... the path to hope in knowing that God knows you, never forgets you, and cares about the details of your life.

core scripture: John 10:3

When Christ Comes

... why the best is yet to come.

core scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:23

You'll Get Through This

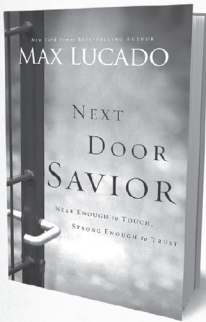
... hope in the midst of your hard times and a God who uses the mess of life for good.

core scripture: Genesis 50:20

Recommended reading if you're struggling with . . .

FEAR AND WORRY

Before Amen
Come Thirsty
Fearless
For the Tough Times
Next Door Savior
Traveling Light



DISCOURAGEMENT

He Still Moves Stones
Next Door Savior

Recommended reading if you want to know more about . . .

THE CROSS

And the Angels Were Silent
He Chose the Nails
No Wonder They Call Him the Savior
Six Hours One Friday

GRACE

Before Amen
Grace
He Chose the Nails
In the Grip of Grace

HEAVEN

The Applause of Heaven
When Christ Comes

GRIEF/DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

Next Door Savior
Traveling Light
When Christ Comes
When God Whispers Your Name
You'll Get Through This

GUILT

In the Grip of Grace
Just Like Jesus

LONELINESS

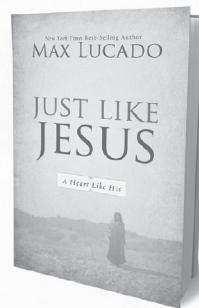
God Came Near

SIN

Before Amen
Facing Your Giants
He Chose the Nails
Six Hours One Friday

WEARINESS

Before Amen
When God Whispers Your Name
You'll Get Through This



SHARING THE GOSPEL

God Came Near
Grace
No Wonder They Call Him the Savior

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COMFORT

For the Tough Times
He Chose the Nails
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COMPASSION

Outlive Your Life

COURAGE

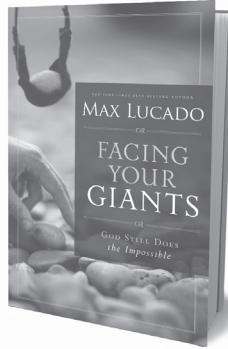
Facing Your Giants
Fearless

HOPE

3:16: The Numbers of Hope
Before Amen
Facing Your Giants
A Gentle Thunder
God Came Near
Grace

JOY

The Applause of Heaven
Cure for the Common Life
When God Whispers Your Name



LOVE

Come Thirsty
A Love Worth Giving
No Wonder They Call Him the Savior

PEACE

And the Angels Were Silent
Before Amen
The Great House of God
In the Eye of the Storm
Traveling Light
You'll Get Through This

SATISFACTION

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Come Thirsty
Cure for the Common Life
Great Day Every Day

TRUST

A Gentle Thunder
It's Not About Me
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You Can Be Everything God Wants You to Be
You Were Made to Make a Difference

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The Oak Inside the Acorn
You Are Special

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You Changed My Life

AT CHRISTMAS:

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God Came Near

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