

Thinking Biblically About Worry

by Paul David Tripp

Sally worries about the kids all day long as they are at school. Jed never seems to put the burden of his finances down. Linda fears that she will never get married. Sarah dreads the pains of getting old. Fred constantly worries about what the people around him are thinking about him. Benji worries he won't make the team. Mary is never free from worry about her weight. Cindy has spent many sleepless nights worrying about her relationship with Brad. As a senior, Jared is in a bit of a panic about what will happen after college. Jaqueline admits that she is a bit of a germophobe. Ben avoids big crowds, but he doesn't want anyone to know. Sharon is afraid that God doesn't love her, but she doesn't talk about it much. Ron knows he spends too much time worrying about losing his job, but he can't seem to keep his mind from going there. Dina worries so much about her adult children that she is afraid her frequent calls will drive them away. Pete did very well in seminary, but his preaching is always accompanied by anxiety. Greta worries more about what her classmates think of her than she does about her grades. Josh worries every time he is told that the boss wants to see him.

Worry — it really is everywhere. Perhaps it is the one experience that all of us have in common. Consider the people above. They have two things in common. They are all professing believers and they all struggle with worry. What about you? How much is worry of some kind a regular part of your daily thought life? How much does worry shape what you do and what you don't do? How does worry interact with the faith that you hold dear? Could it be that worry is a greater influence in your life than you have typically considered it to be?

Maybe worry is one of the dirty secrets of the church. Perhaps it renders us timid, passive, and doubtful when our theology tells us we have every reason to be courageous, active, and confident. Could it be that many of us live with a huge gap between the theological confidence that we celebrate on Sunday and the street-level fear, worry, and anxiety that accompanies us the rest of the week? Why do so many of us worry so much? Why do we not experience the rest that the gospel is meant to give us? Why do we have sleepless nights, nervous stomachs, and fretful days? Why does worry so often enter our door?

Worry and the fallen world

Perhaps your answer to the questions I have asked is, "Paul, I worry because I live in a fallen world!" It is true that the world we live in simply does not operate in the way that the Creator intended. Because of this we do live in a world where deceit, danger, and disappointment are realities. The Bible is quite honest in its depiction of how broken this world actually is. There are things in this world that you should fear. There are things that should get your attention and cause you concern. There are things that you should work to avoid and protect your loved ones from. You should live carefully and aware. Living with the realistic expectations that a biblical understanding of the fallenness of our world provides is a responsibly godly thing to do. You should not be naïve. This side of heaven, you must always remember that the *shalom* (peace and wholeness) that the Creator made has been shattered. Everyday, somehow, someway, the brokenness of your world will press in on you. It will be this way until you cross over to the other side.

But, an important distinction needs to be made between looking at life through the honest lens of Scripture and living a life of subtle and not-so-subtle worry. In the Bible we are confronted with the

reality that in situations where God's people were experiencing some of the harshest realities of life in a fallen world, they experienced, in those moments, some of the most remarkable rest of soul that the Bible records. Let me provide for you one powerful example.

Psalms 3 and 4 are morning and evening psalms, written when David was fleeing for his life and from those who would take his throne. You know the back story. It was David's son Absalom who was out after his throne. He had already won the hearts of the people of Israel, and now he was after his father's kingdom. David knew what this was about. This was a monarchy: for a son to permanently take his father's throne, the father would have to die. So, David flees for his life with a small band of loyal men and is hiding in a cave. Perhaps there is no more heart-wrenching story in Scripture: sin ripping a family apart, sin resulting in sedition and possibly death. In this story, you're seeing the fallen world at it worst. But in the middle of it all, David isn't paralyzed by panic. He isn't driven by worry. He isn't captivated by the "what ifs." No, David is remarkably restful. Look at what he writes from the cave: "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:8). David is experiencing the full weight of the disappointment and danger of life in this fallen world, but he is not riddled with anxiety. His heart is at rest and his body is able to sleep, even in the middle of what would break the heart of any father.

David's story and David's psalm confront us with something important. It is what we will be unpacking for the rest of this article. Here it is: *The difficulties of life in this fallen world are the occasion of our worry, but not the cause.* To understand the cause, you have to look deeper. David was in a circumstance that could be the occasion for much worry, yet he was not fearful or anxious. His rest points us to where help for our worry can be found. Worry is not caused by what exists outside of us. No, worry is caused by what is going on inside of us.

Shrunken worlds and worry

To understand why we Christians tend to worry more than anyone should with our theology of everyday life, I am going to have to take you on a bit of a biblical tour. I want to begin with two verses that provide a stunning insight into what sin does to all of us. These verses begin to point us to why worry is such a universal struggle. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all...*that those who live might no longer live for themselves* but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:14-15; emphasis mine).

In the ten words that I have highlighted, Paul makes a thunderous observation about how sin fundamentally alters every person's approach to life. I was meant to live for something vastly bigger than myself. I was created to live for God — His kingdom and His glory. I was designed to get my identity, meaning and purpose, and my inner sense of well-being vertically. I was made to get my reason for doing what I am doing and my rest in the middle of doing it from God. But sin causes every one of us to live for ourselves, that is, to shrink our lives to the size of our lives. Sin causes us to reduce the field of our dreams and concerns down to our wants, our needs, and our feelings. Sin makes us scarily self-focused, self-absorbed, and self-motivated.

What does this have to do with worry? Everything! As a result of sin, no longer do we attach our inner peace to a God who is the definition of wisdom, power, and love and who will never, ever change. No, without realizing what we have done, we begin to look for identity, meaning and purpose, and our inner sense of well-being horizontally. We look to the broken and ever-changing situations and relationships of this fallen world for our purpose and our inner rest. Things that were not designed to give us peace and over which we have no control become our replacement messiahs. We ask them to do for us what only God is able to do. You see, here is what happens: important things (like family, work, housing, money, etc.) become all too important to us because they become the places we look to

for rest. When they do, they not only do not give us rest, they become the reason for the endless cycles of worry, anxiety, and fear that, frankly, are in the daily lives of too many believers. Your job is important, but it must not be the source of your identity, and when it is, it becomes the cause of endless anxiety. Your marriage or friendships are important, but they must not be the place you look for inner peace. Here's what Scripture moves us to say. Worry that drives or paralyzes us reveals more about what is inside of us than what is outside of us. This is where I think our next passage, [Matthew 6:19–34](#), is so helpful.

Kingdoms, treasures, and worry

[Matthew 6:19–34](#) is one of the Bible's most familiar passages about anxiety and worry. (Why not pause to read the passage right now?) Who is not familiar with the words “and which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his life span?” (v. 27) or “therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” (v. 31). When you step back from this passage you immediately see that it is much more than an examination of worry. It is really a detailed unpacking of the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of self. This is precisely why it says what it says about worry. It teaches us that behind every moment of worry is a war for the heart. This battle is about whether our hearts will be effectively and functionally ruled by the kingdom of God or the kingdom of self.

Because of sin, our struggles with the kingdom of self are so pervasive and seductive that Christ spends most of His time unpacking the dynamics of this kingdom (vv. 19–32). It is not until the first word of verse 33, “But,” that we come to the turn of the passage and the call to live for the kingdom of God. Essentially, what Christ says is that the kingdom of self is driven by a pursuit of earth-bound treasures and anxiety-bound needs. The kingdom of self shrinks life down to a catalog of physical, experiential treasures and a list of personal needs. In this kingdom I live to make sure I acquire what I want and I fulfill my needs. Now before you say, “Well, Paul, I don't live that way!” let me ask you, how much of your worry in the last month had anything whatsoever to do with the kingdom of God?

I would encourage you to humbly permit this passage to be a mirror into which you look to see things about yourself that you would see no other way. Christ uses a very helpful word here for the things that capture our hearts: *treasure*. Think about this word. There are very few treasures in life that have intrinsic value. Most treasures are of assigned value. That's why the old proverb says, “One man's trash is another man's treasure.” For example, why is a twenty-dollar bill worth twenty dollars? It's not because it contains twenty dollars worth of ink or paper. No, its value is assigned. In the same way you are assigning value to things in your life. It is impossible to be a human being and not do this. Jesus warns us to be careful of what we assign value to because what we name as our treasure will control our hearts, and what controls our hearts will control our behavior.

How does this connect to worry? The connection is obvious and powerful. *Worry and rest always reveal the true treasures of your heart*. You will rest the most when what you treasure the most is secure, and you will worry the most when what you treasure the most is at risk. What does your world of worry reveal about the true treasures of your heart?

But, in this passage, Jesus uses another provocative category — need. Your life is always shaped by what you tell yourself you need. If need means “essential for life,” to call something a need is a significant heart commitment. If you are convinced that something is a need, then it seems right to expect that you will have it and it seems natural to worry that you may not get it. Perhaps one of the sloppiest words used by human beings is the word *need*. The vast majority of the things we call needs are not needs. And Jesus would argue that the things that are true needs our heavenly Father will graciously provide.

So the assigning of needs connects to worry in two ways. First, you will tend to worry when you've attached the vitality of your life to things you don't actually need and can't ever control. And second, you will tend to worry in the face of legitimate need when you forget your heavenly Father and His ever-faithful covenant love. Your Father is sovereign, wise, gracious, and powerful. He rules over all things for the sake of His church ([Eph. 1:15–23](#)). If He did not spare His Son, will He not freely supply us with everything that we truly need ([Rom. 8:31–32](#))?

Rest and war

I am deeply persuaded that real, lasting personal rest of heart is never to be found in ease of circumstances. Even in the best of situations in this fallen world your heart will be able to find reasons for worry. Inner rest of soul and lasting peace of heart are only ever found when Jesus and His kingdom are your highest and deepest treasures. When you place your identity in His never-changing hands, when you find your meaning and purpose in the unstoppable work of His kingdom, and when you place your inner sense of well-being on the sure foundation of His promise to meet your every need, you will be able to rest even when the situations and relationships around you are broken.

Defeating worry is not about hoping that tomorrow will be better. No, defeating worry is about being a good soldier in this deeper war for the heart. It is about fighting the temptation to attach the peace of your heart to things that, by their very nature are temporary and, therefore, are not organically designed to give you lasting peace (see [Matt. 6:19](#)). It is about daily feeding your soul on the promises and provisions of your heavenly Father. It is about taking special care before you name something a need. And it is about living for something bigger than you. It is about giving the love and concern of your heart to the King and His kingdom and fighting the instinct to construct a Lilliputian kingdom of your own. The kingdom of self will never give you rest because it does not have the capacity to satisfy the cravings of your heart.

In the cave, David had it right when he said, “For you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety” ([Ps. 4:8](#)). It's as if David is saying, “My peace isn't found in locations, relationships, or circumstances; it is found in the Lord. Because it is, I am as free of worry here in this cave as I was in the palace!” Yes, David was grieved as any father would be, and no, he did not know how things were going to turn out; but in the middle of his questions and in the throes of his grief he was a man with a heart at rest, so much so that he was able to sleep.

Worry and rest always reveal the true treasures of our hearts, and in this battle we are not alone because the King we are called to serve is also Emmanuel. He is ever with us and battles for us by His grace.