

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a person walking a tightrope. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt, light-colored jeans, and large sneakers with thick soles. They are balancing on a thin red rope that stretches diagonally across the frame. The background is a clear blue sky with the silhouettes of bare tree branches. The overall mood is one of balance and focus.

RHETT SMITH

the
Anxious
Christian

Can God Use Your
Anxiety for Good?

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RHETT SMITH

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*To my mother Melodee who courageously
faced her anxiety in the face of her breast cancer.*

*To my father, Tim, and brother, Wyatt, who have
been the best traveling companions on this journey.*

*To my beautiful children, Hayden and Hudson, who have
taught me more about facing my fears than anyone.*

*Last, to my extraordinary wife Heather—no words can
ever convey just how much you have transformed my life.
I would not be who I am today, if not for you. I love you.*

*“Those who believe that they believe in God,
but without passion in their hearts, without anguish
in their mind, without uncertainty, without doubt,
without an element of despair even in their consolation,
believe only in the God idea, not God Himself.”*

Spanish philosopher and writer, MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO¹

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chapter one

Embracing Anxiety

“if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or just silly.”¹

C. S. LEWIS, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

If you were to come to my home and walk into my study you would find two sets of *The Chronicles of Narnia* proudly sitting on the top of my bookshelves. One set I bought for Christmas of 2006, a gift for my wife in hopes that we would one day read this wonderful book series to the child we were expecting the following summer. And next to the newer version is an older, well-worn set that belonged to my mother. It’s a set that I cherish because she used to read it to me as a child. In fact, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is one of my last memories of her reading a book with me. It was in those early readings that my mom, through the words of C. S. Lewis, introduced me to the terrifying but loving lion, Aslan.

Meeting Aslan as a child left an indelible mark on my imagination and it was one of the earliest images that I most identified God with. There was this sense growing up that God, like the lion Aslan, could be quite scary. But it was not a scariness

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that drove me to run away from Him. Rather, the scared feelings I felt seemed only to have propelled me toward Him.

Looking back now, I can see that as a child I had this sense of anxiety about God. It's still very much present in my relationship with Him today. So I can identify with Susan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* who in her anxiety is questioning Mr. Beaver on whether or not Aslan is safe. What she finds out is that He isn't safe, but instead that He is good. "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king I tell you."²

And so I began to see my anxiety as something that didn't always feel safe. It brought up feelings and emotions that I didn't like to deal with and it made me question all kinds of things going on in my life. I would do anything to stuff those feelings deep down inside of me in hopes that they would never reappear. But in its lack of safety I slowly began to see that my anxiety was good and led me to pursue God more than I ever had. I was beginning to see that God didn't want me to stuff those emotions and feelings and so He used anxiety as a tool in my life to help me more radically pursue Him and who He wanted me to become.

I know that your anxiety is scary and that it does not feel safe.

But what if your anxiety can be used for good?

What if God has allowed anxiety in your life in hopes that you wouldn't continue to stuff and bury every feeling and emotion that you experience?

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How would perceiving anxiety in this way begin to change how you live?

Fear of Anxiety

It is more than likely that if you have ever taken the risk to share your anxiety within the Christian community, you have heard some counsel in the form of the apostle Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:6. Paul says to the "holy people" at Phillipi, "Do not be anxious about anything." It's a very powerful verse, a favorite of mine, and one that Christians have turned to time and time again when they experience anxiousness. Perhaps you have used it when trying to encourage others during their times of anxiety.

I believe that when we cite this as the cure-all to one's anxiety we mean very well. In fact, many find comfort with the recitation of these six simple words. But in our attempts to help others and perhaps deflect our own anxiety and feelings of helplessness, we can inadvertently communicate the wrong message.

Often a Christian will come to counseling and tell me that they have tried to follow the "biblical counsel" of others to not be anxious, but their anxiety doesn't quite seem to dissipate.

"Is something wrong with me? Am I a bad Christian?" they desperately ask me.

"No, nothing is wrong with you," I tell them. "What if God is using your anxiety to speak to you? What might God be saying to you?" I ask.

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When we discourage others from safely expressing their anxiety, then we are essentially saying to them that anxiety is a bad emotion, and that it is something to be done away with. It communicates to them that perhaps something is wrong with their Christian faith and they begin to internalize the message, “I’m a Christian. I’m not supposed to be anxious.”

Kierkegaard referred to anxiety as our “best teacher”³ because of its ability to keep us in a struggle that strives for a solution, rather than opting to forfeit the struggle and slide into a possible depression. It would be nice if our lives and our Christian faith did not involve any struggle. But to believe that, and to perpetuate the belief to others that somehow the struggle with anxiety is unChristian, is a mistake.

We are not the first people to struggle with anxiety and the emotions that surround it. In fact, as Christians we come from a long line of people who have struggled with anxiety and have gone into hiding, putting on masks, and in the process have become less of who God created them to be. In the opening pages of Scripture we see that when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit from the tree of knowledge both of their eyes were opened. In that moment their instinct was to fight or flee, which is what most of us do when we are faced with anxiety. In their anxiousness, Adam and Eve chose to blame each other, flee from the scene, hide, and cover themselves up. I can only imagine the anxiety that the two of them must have felt as they hid from the Lord, waiting to be found out. Every sound coming from the Lord as He made his way toward them must have filled them with a growing sense of dread. As Scripture records,

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Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (Genesis 3:7–10)

When faced with anxiety we feel exposed, naked, and vulnerable. Hiding and covering up is typically how we respond when we feel those things.

God has not only created us, but He has created us as free beings, and in our freedom we are given possibility and choice. I would like for you for a moment to imagine God freely calling you toward His good purposes. And as you journey in that direction you may find yourself caught between the present and the future. That in-between place of present and future can create all kinds of anxiety because of the freedom of choices God has given us in our life. Perhaps we are anxious because the experiences of our past have shaped us in such a way that we are in dread of making a free and deliberate choice. Or perhaps just the mere possibility of making a wrong choice has left you feeling anxious.

Anxiety is, therefore, both the cost and gift of our identity as free creatures in relationship to God. We have choices. Without freedom, and the anxiety it entails, we are just slaves—yearning for safety and security and grumbling at

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God rather than living the anxious journey through the wilderness toward freedom.

Maybe during your life journey you feel as if the plans and purposes that God has for your life are not congruent with the life you are leading. And no matter how many times someone quotes to you Jeremiah 29:11 (“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”), you just don’t feel at peace in your heart. What many people forget to tell you is that in verse 29:10 the Lord says that Israel will go through seventy years of exile and slavery in Babylon. Talk about anxiety! But God would use this time of trouble to draw Israel closer to Him. It was during this time of exile that God continually reminded His people that He was their God and that when they sought Him with all their heart He would listen and deliver them out of captivity.

Anxiety beckons us to not allow our lives to get stuck in a rut. If God gives us freedom and allows possibility, then just maybe God has hardwired anxiety into us as part of those choices. Perhaps anxiety is a paradoxical feeling offered up to us as a gift that propels us to seek after Him and to continually grow in the process.

Perhaps anxiety is an act of grace because it encourages us to face our fears, so that we can then choose to freely follow God where He is calling us to.

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Discovering Anxiety in Our Selves

I remember a particular session one day with a young adult woman who was in her mid-twenties and really struggling with anxiety. She was worried and overwhelmed with life's choices and she felt stuck, unable to make a decision or move forward. I could see the look of desperation in her eyes as she sat frozen across from me on the couch. On the outside she looked calm and her college degree and successful career communicated that she was in control of her life. But under the surface her anxiety was screaming, "I don't know what to do! Help me!"

She, like many of us, struggle with a myriad of questions that we are constantly asking, and that leave us feeling anxious and unsure. In our anxiety we wrestle with questions like:

What if I fail?

Will my parents get divorced?

Can I find a career that I'm passionate about?

Should I marry this person?

What if I can't have kids?

Should we move or stay here?

Should I tell someone about my abuse?

How can a loving God allow me to have so much hurt in my life?

And others like them.

Some of the same questions persist, and new ones may arise over time. But under the surface we are wrestling with

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the basic questions that we face at each transitional stage in life: “Who am I?” “What am I to do?” “How am I to be loved?” and “How can I become all that God intended me to be?”⁴ They are what the renowned psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom refers to as our “ultimate concerns”⁵—freedom, isolation, belonging, and meaning. These questions are of the utmost importance and are often the driving force behind much of our anxiety. They strike at the heart of our identity and who we believe God created us to be. These questions are concerns shared by God as well. After all, He is the one who has stirred up these deep and pressing questions within us.

Anxiety manifests itself to each of us in its own unique way. It has the potential to be both helpful (butterflies before a talk, excitement before a first date, nervousness before you recite the wedding vows) and harmful (stress about making decisions, worry of being abandoned, fear of being intimate).⁶ More commonly we may think of or experience anxiety in the forms of worry, fear, stress, guilt, shame, or dread. I like the way that anxiety researcher and psychologist Edmund Bourne describes four specific types of anxiety⁷ in his *Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. He talks about anxiety in the form of the Worrier⁸, Critic⁹, Victim,¹⁰ and Perfectionist¹¹, all categories that I believe resonate with different people’s experiences of anxiety.

If you identify with those negative feelings of anxiety, then maybe it is time for you to open yourself up to see anxiety in a new and positive light. Anxiety can often indicate to us that there is something constructive happening within us, beckoning us to follow it in order that our lives may be trans-

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formed. I remember my churning stomach the very first time I lined up in the starting blocks to run the 300-meter hurdles in high school. I hoped that anxiety would eventually go away, but it didn't, and I came to realize that it was a feeling that helped me feel capable and ready to sprint from the blocks as fast as I could. Anxiety reminds us that we are alive, a feeling that is important in keeping us from going numb and withdrawing from the life God desires for us.

But how do you know if the anxiety you are experiencing is a healthy or unhealthy anxiety? That can be difficult to discern. Normal, healthy anxiety occurs when you confront the unknown, doubts arise, and the transitions ahead of you seem unclear. But healthy anxiety gives you the ability to say, "I can do it." But unhealthy anxiety is characterized by worry and an inability to make decisions in life, leading to mental and emotional paralysis. Healthy anxiety spurs us toward action, while unhealthy anxiety keeps us mired in inaction. We no longer feel we can do it, so we say and believe "I can't, and I won't."

Anxiety is a part of our lives, but we don't have to let it keep us living in a prison of fear or retreating in shame. We have the opportunity to look it square in the face and allow God to use it to transform our lives.

Hiding in Shame

My daughter is intrigued with any person who puts on a mask, costume, or cape, and is intent on being one of the "good guys." She is obsessed with superheroes. When she was

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about three years old, she showed an affinity for Batman, so my wife and I decided to buy her a Batman mask and T-shirt. Everyday she would faithfully put on that mask, grab her cape, and run around the house “fighting the bad guys.” The more she immersed herself in the role, the more our families sent her all kinds of dress-up superhero costumes until we had quite an extensive array strewn about our house. She loved to wear her costume to the local playground, where my wife and I would always get a kick out of the kids following her all around declaring to their parents, “Mommy, that’s Batman!” The parents seemed to wonder about our decision to allow our daughter out of the house and in public with a cape and costume, but the kids on the playground were quick to join her in her quest to rid the playground of all “bad guys.” Eventually she discovered Superman, Captain America, Spiderman, and Robin, and in that process her varying masks and capes helped her constantly rotate between superhero identities.

This is normal play for kids, but many adults continue this well into adulthood. They forgo the process of pushing through the anxieties that confront them, and choose instead to settle for an endless rotation of masks that they easily slip on and off so they can retreat into hiding when their fears arise within them.

The word for *mask* comes from the Ancient Greek word *prosopon*, meaning “about the eyes,” or literally, “face.” The mask was a tool the actor used to play a part. By putting on the mask, the actor became another person by vanishing into the face of an acting role. We hide because we live in a cul-

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ture, especially a Christian culture, that tells us something is wrong with us for experiencing anxiety. Therefore, in our shame, we retreat and hide behind masks and costumes that say, “Hey, look at me, I’m successful. I have everything under control. Life is good.” We project this image while underneath we are wrestling fears, worries, and inadequacies.

Too often as Christians when we experience anxiety we tend to go into hiding, believing that anxiety is not something that Christians should experience. And it is in hiding where shame envelops us. When we feel shame we do everything to mask and cover up the feeling. I believe one of the reasons that so many Christians are afraid to acknowledge their own anxiety, and mask it over by going into hiding, is because they have somehow internalized their feelings of anxiety as being something inherently wrong. They have come to believe the message, “Because I am a Christian and have feelings of anxiety, there must be something wrong with me. As a Christian, I should trust God. And if I really trusted God, I wouldn’t be anxious. Therefore, I must not trust God.”

Perhaps a pastor may have said something from the pulpit like “there is no place for anxiety in the Christian life because the Bible says don’t be anxious.” But what happens after the pastor says that and you still have feelings of anxiety? Is something wrong with you?

Or you might have a well-meaning friend who is continually encouraging you to “just let go of your anxiety,” but you somehow aren’t able to. Are you not a faithful Christian then? Do you just need to spend more time in prayer and daily quiet times, as some may insist?

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We send messages all the time to one another as Christians that we intend to be helpful, but if we are not careful, what we end up doing instead is shaming people and driving them into believing that something is wrong with them.

Most of the time these messages are unintended, but there are Christian communities that thrive on shaming one another, hoping that the shame is the catalyst that will produce the change. But it doesn't. It drives people into hiding and isolation, though on the outside they may appear to have it all together. There are Christian communities that fear anxiety because of the freedom of possibility that anxiety opens up before them. They are not comfortable with choice, options, and mystery, and would prefer that someone such as a pastor dictate their life to them from the pulpit.

The anxiety that propels you to freedom is the same anxiety that many in the Christian community prefer that you ignore, and if you don't, then they will convince you that something is wrong with your faith. When we ignore our anxiety it festers and goes to work on how we feel about ourselves—and even worse, on how we perceive God feels about us.

If anxiety can lead us to believe lies about ourselves and about God, then it gains a strong foothold in us and we need to begin the process of defeating those lies and living in the truth.

Coming Out of Hiding

We are not meant to hide, living our lives behind masks. And thankfully we worship a God who does not want us to stay in that place of anxiety and fear. Soon after Adam and

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Eve fled in fear from the Lord, we find a most beautiful scene in Genesis 3:21 where He calls them out of hiding and into the light: “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” This is a grand demonstration of grace amidst the anxiety of being banished from the Garden of Eden and driven into the unknown.

Anxiety has been a part of our human condition from the earliest beginnings. When we experience anxiety we are in that space where a world of freedom and possibility is opened up before us by God. And in that space we have the choice to run and hide, covering up in shame, or we can choose to embrace that anxiety, clothed in grace by God, and allow Him to lead us into freedom and possibility. It is in this place that our lives are transformed.

The choice is yours.

What I am saying about anxiety, and what God is asking of you in your anxiety, is not an easy decision. If it were, then Paul’s words in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything,” would cure all of our worries. But Paul reminds us in that same letter in Philippians 2:12 that we are to “continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling.” There is to be a sense of anxiety as we acknowledge and wrestle with the things that God is wanting for our lives.

Without this anxiety we are creatures who are tempted to play life safe. When we play life safe we are tempted to become content and comfortable, and eventually stagnant. God does not want that of us. To follow after God is to be in a state of heightened alertness and sometimes “knocking knees,” as C. S. Lewis put it.

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Without our anxiety, we do not become who God desires us to be.

Begin to embrace it on your journey with God.

Discussion Questions

1. How have you most experienced anxiety in your life? (i.e., fear, stress, worry, etc.)
2. When you feel anxious, do you ever find yourself experiencing shame or hiding from others?
3. What are some of the messages that have been communicated to you by the Christian community about anxiety?

Exercises

1. Write down any anxieties that you are currently experiencing.
2. If you feel safe in your group or with someone, share some of these anxieties with another person.

Prayer

God, please take the anxiety that I feel and use it for your good. Help me to not hide in shame, but instead to be covered by your grace.