

Anxiety, Worry, and Fear

Anxiety

Few things can do more harm to both the body and the spirit than intense, prolonged anxiety.

As we have seen, not all distress is sinful. Jesus was extremely upset at times, and yet was without sin. Anxiety becomes problematic when it becomes obsessive, or when it turns to worry, sinful fear, or fretting.

When a person develops health problems related to stress, such as ulcers or chronic headaches from tense back and neck muscles, those problems may indicate a wrong response to stress.

God designed us to become tense at times and to be relaxed at other times. When a person is often tense and unable to relax, it is evidence of an inability to think of the stresses of life in proper perspective and with an attitude of trust in God.

If I receive a bill I cannot pay, my child brings home a bad report card, my transmission is going out, I know I will not make the deadline for a project at work, the laundry is piling up—all those things should cause a degree of tension so that I will be motivated to address the problem. If the purpose of the tension is to drive me to action, then once I have taken action there is no value in remaining tense.

So how do you help a person who cannot seem to relax and let go of that tension? By teaching him to obey 1 Peter 5 and cast all his anxiety on the Lord.

1 Peter 5:6,7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

We learn two very important principles from this passage. Since they have been discussed repeatedly in preceding chapters, they are only briefly mentioned here. "Humble yourself under God's mighty hand"

Suffering with humility

The phrase *God's mighty hand*, a concept that comes from the Old Testament, refers to the sovereign, mighty work of God. Sometimes it is a work of punishment or chastening, sometimes it is a work of amazing deliverance, sometimes a work of provision, sometimes a work of testing.

When the mighty hand of God is upon a person and he is feeling the pressure, help him learn to accept it. Teach him not to resist what God is doing. People tend to become tense when they think things are spinning out of control. But in the ultimate sense, things are never spinning out of control.

To accept and even appreciate the mighty hand of God requires humility. In his pride a person often resists, like a baby who does not want to be held—arching his back and struggling in his parent's arms. If your child does that, and for some reason you cannot set

him down at that moment, your only recourse is to overpower him and grip him more tightly, which is uncomfortable and distressing to the child.

But when the child accepts the idea of being held and snuggles up in his mother's arms, there is not a more beautiful picture of peaceful rest in all the world.

When God sends the stresses of life by the dozen, don't resist what He is doing. Don't arch your back and struggle. Humble yourself and accept what He is doing. Only then will you be able to cast your cares on Him.

“Cast all your anxiety on him”

The big picture

When we cast all our anxiety on Him, it reminds us of the big picture —the perspective from heaven. In my little world it doesn't take much to be overwhelmed: a couple of phone calls with bad news; a crisis with my kids at school; some days, simply watching the news.

But when I make an effort to turn those concerns over to God (after I have done all I can do), I am reminded of how small they really are. Is God sliding off His throne in helpless dismay because my daughter brought home an F? Are the armies of angels paralyzed as the kingdom of God grinds to a halt because my health insurance dropped me?

Casting my cares on Him gives me the “big picture” perspective I need to avoid being overcome by the stresses of life.

“He cares for you”

God's love

In the arms of a kidnapper it is wise for a child to kick and scream. But there is no reason for a baby to resist the tender embrace of a loving parent. The greater our understanding of God's love, the more ability we will have to accept what He is doing.

When you counsel someone who struggles with anxiety, remind her of how wide and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ, and teach her to know the love that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:18).¹ This principle will be discussed further in the section on worry.

David understood these principles and described them all in Psalm 131. When a person humbles himself and accepts the mighty hand of God on his life, that person can counsel himself:

Psalm 131:13 My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore.

Worry

Two specific kinds of anxiety are specifically forbidden in Scripture: worry and fretting. Fretting is discussed in the next chapter. Worry is expecting that God will do something

wrong. It is assuming that, all things being equal, God will generally do that which causes you the most pain.

Your husband is ten minutes late picking you up? He is probably dead. You just got a very large, unexpected bill—God most likely will not provide for you. Hoping for sunshine? No doubt God will send rain.

People with this problem generally realize they are being irrational. If you sit down with the woman whose husband is ten minutes late, for example, and explain, “Here are the statistics on life expectancy in this type of circumstance—only one in two million husbands who are ten minutes late are late because of injury or death”—that will not help. She probably already knows her fears are irrational. That is why the world passes this off as a brain disorder—there is no other apparent cause.

But there is a cause. Jesus pinpointed it in Matthew 6. That kind of worry comes from a distorted view of the character of God.

Matthew 6:25-34 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

The problem of worry has everything to do with how a person views his heavenly Father. When we worry, it is because of a sense that God is generally unfavorable toward us and He would rather inflict pain than grant joy. He is the type who will hurt you even when it is not absolutely necessary. Deep down the worrier thinks of God as an unpleasant master who has it in for him.

My dad refers to worry as practical atheism—being an atheist in practice. I think we can take that even a step further. For the Christian, worry is worse than atheism. The atheist thinks the events of life are random. So if he is afraid of tomorrow because all he has going for him is the luck of the draw, he actually has a valid point. That would be scary.

But for the Christian, who knows that God is in control of what happens, the only way he can be a worrier is to assume that God is generally unkind. The Christian worrier insults the character of God far more than the atheist.

Here’s why: If someone does not know you and ignores you, that is a mild insult. But if your own precious child always assumes you will be unkind and do him unnecessary harm, that is a major insult. This is why we should not be pessimists. God is our Father and we are His children.

When we say, “We planned our picnic for Saturday, so I’m sure it will rain” or “With my luck, I will probably hit every red light,” what are we saying? Just because I want something to happen it probably won’t? Because I have a particular desire, God will probably do the opposite ... and for no other reason than to foul me up? What a distorted view of God!

I recently received an email from someone about a major decision I was making, and he said, "I'm sure you will do the wrong thing. You will do whatever is expedient and will not show integrity."

That really hurt. But to some degree, that kind of attitude toward me may be justified. There have been plenty of times in my life I have failed to do what is right, and so it is not inconceivable that someone could assume something like that about me. But to assume that of God? What blasphemy!

The worrier may wonder, *Why am I this way?* The answer to that question is that worry often stems from an unwillingness to accept suffering from God. People experience extremely painful, excruciating sorrow but refuse to accept the truth of Scripture that God never allows suffering without good reason.

They might give lip service to trusting God, but deep down they do not really believe that God's reason, whatever it may be, is adequate to justify the degree of suffering He has allowed. As time goes on, whenever they think about their suffering, they think of it as not really being necessary but as something God is making them endure for no good reason.

The result is that they begin to resent God for the suffering He brings. That resentment finds expression in their attitude about the future. They perceive God as having been unkind to them in the past, and expect that He will be unkind to them in the future.

Someone may ask, "The truth is, my past has been filled with sorrow after sorrow. What's wrong with assuming things will probably continue as they have been?"

In response, I would point out two things.

Failure to appreciate blessing

First, no matter how much pain a person has experienced, most of the things that have happened in his life have been positive blessings. Just ask him: "How many nights' sleep have you had? How many meals have you eaten? How many breaths have you taken? How many acts of love have been done for you? How many opportunities to love have you been given? How many spiritual resources? How many promises? How many riches in Christ? How high a calling have you received? How faithful has God been?"

Even the person who has experienced sorrow after sorrow after sorrow—if he piled them all up in one stack, that stack would hardly be visible if it were next to the mountain of blessings God has given each one of us.

But the person who resents the pain in his life cannot see the blessings. God will give him a thousand wonderful acts of kindness—big and small—that go completely unnoticed, while he fixes all his attention on one painful thing. He will carry a grocery bag to his car in the wind and rain a hundred times, and the bag never breaks. But does he get in his car and think about how kind God was? Does he think, *Boy, that paper bag could have easily broken and my groceries would have fallen all over the parking lot, and it would have been such a hassle picking them up while getting soaked. Thank you, Lord, for making the bag hold?*

No; he takes blessings like that for granted every day. And the one time God has some purpose for the bag to break, he has a fit: "This *always* happens to me! Now I'm going to be late, and I'm cold, and the eggs are broken...."

People who resent their pain do not appreciate God's kindness, no matter how much of it He showers on them. People like that will enjoy ten thousand positive blessings on any

given day, but if they have one disappointment, they will go to bed dwelling on that one thing. Over time, they develop a wrong image of God, and they become chronic worriers.

The importance of a person's attitude toward pain

Second, suppose a woman has a history of pain. Her spouse has hurt her every day for the last ten years. Isn't it rational to assume the same thing is likely to happen again today? The answer is yes, it is likely, but it will happen only if God decides it is ultimately what is best. It is important to recognize that her attitude toward pain makes all the difference as to whether she becomes a worrier. It is not that worriers simply assume there will be pain; they assume there will be *unnecessary* pain. Anticipating unnecessary pain creates anxiety and fear. Anticipating only pain that is absolutely what is best for you creates joy and faith.

The worries of this life are a great test of the quality of a person's faith. Faith that will persevere to the end is the kind of faith that remains unshaken by the worries of this life.

Matthew 13:21²² [The man who hears the word but has no root] lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

If your life can be derailed by worries, something is inherently lacking in your faith.

The solution to worry

Study what Scripture teaches about God's character

Urge the worrier to study the doctrine of God (Matt. 6:25³⁴) and to learn everything he can about the nature of God. A person who has an accurate understanding of God will not suffer from chronic worry.

Study what Scripture teaches about suffering

Understanding what Scripture says about suffering will cause a person to embrace it as a precious gift rather than unwittingly to resent God for allowing it. When suffering is anticipated, it helps to understand that a good thing, rather than a bad thing, is being anticipated.

Pray with thanksgiving

Philippians 4:5⁷ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Take a careful look at these verses. They do not say, "If you struggle with worry, then pray." Many people who have a problem with worry pray all the time. The key is to pray with thanksgiving—genuine gratitude for what God is going to do in response to prayer.

"God, please heal my loved one. I realize that Your answer to this request may be "yes" and it may be "no." Whichever it is, I want to thank You right now for your answer."

But how can I have genuine gratitude if the answer might be “no”? You can't, unless you are completely convinced that when God says “no” to a prayer, He does so only if that is what is best for you.

Praying with thanksgiving causes a person to think this through each time she prays, and that trains her to appreciate the fact that God never does anything bad.

If she has gained confidence in the goodness of God, then when painful things come into her life, they will be things she has already thanked God for, before they ever happened, and she will not resent them.

Think from an eternal perspective

COLOSSIANS 3:12 Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.

When you think about life from an eternal perspective, your priorities will change and the less important things no longer will worry you so much.

Luke 10:41-42 “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Is preparing an important dinner significant? Yes. Should someone put a lot of effort into it? Of course. But in comparison with what Mary was doing, it was insignificant. If Jesus is at your house, teaching in person, then sitting at His feet should be the highest priority.

As a person adjusts his priorities and revises the list of things that are important to him from an eternal perspective, he will see most of his worries fade into insignificance. And the more he looks at his situation in light of spiritual realities, the more he will tend to be encouraged, because his spiritual situation is amazing beyond all comprehension! (If he doubts that, direct him to Ephesians 1.)

When spiritual things are a person's highest priority and he reads in Scripture all the wonderful promises of God, he will be filled with hope, not worry.

Focus on God's love

1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

When we know that God is allpowerful and that He cares for us, we can truly trust Him with our concerns. We need to remind ourselves and others that the things outside of *our* control are not outside of *God's* control, so we can let God worry about them.

“Will I get the job I want? I'm not worried, because Someone who cares for me is in charge of that.”

“Will I or my loved one be healed? Someone who cares for me is in charge of that.”

“Is it going to rain tomorrow? Fortunately for me, Someone who cares for me is in charge of that.”

How can we develop this type of mentality? The grammar of 1 Peter 5:7 gives us a clue.

The word *cast* is actually a participle, “*casting* all your anxiety on him.” The meaning is dictated by the finite verb it is attached to, at the beginning of verse 6:

1 Peter 5:6-7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time, casting (literal trans.) all your anxiety on him....

Peter is saying, “Humble yourselves ... casting all your anxiety on him....” Casting your cares on Him is an outgrowth of humility. The pride in our hearts is what makes us cling to our worries.

“I can handle this myself. I don’t want to just “turn it over to God” because I don’t know if I can trust Him to handle it the way I want.”

“I’m in a painful marriage, and I can’t just “turn it over to God,” because for all I know it is His will for me to remain in this untenable situation for the rest of my life.”

“I’m worried about my job, and I can’t just “turn it over to God” because His solution might be for me to be fired and then have a very difficult year or two of not being able to find work.”

Sometimes we are willing to “trust” God only if we are fairly certain that He will solve the problem the way we want.

It takes humility and a real dying to self to say, “Lord, here are all my struggles. I trust You totally with them. Your way is the best way, period.”

This is not easy. The word *cast* is a strong word—it means to throw, heave, or thrust something away from you. Peter does not say “lay your cares at His feet” or “lay them down at the foot of the cross.” He says, “*throw* them.” It takes some effort. It’s like trying to throw away Styrofoam packaging material—your cares cling to you. Your pride wants to hold on to them.

The word translated *anxiety* comes from a root that means “to be drawn in different directions” (Thayer, *GreekEnglish Lexicon of the New Testament*). Much of our worry comes at the point of making big decisions.

“God has promised to take care of me, but He is not going to be able to pull that off unless I make the right decision about this house or job.”

When someone has to make a big decision, tell him to do everything he can to employ wisdom. But once he has done that, *trust God!* Some people cannot trust God to take care of them in the event that they make the wrong decision. The theme of their whole life is “what if?” What if I decide the wrong way? What if the economy tanks? What if I become disabled? What if I get cancer? What if I have made the wrong move? What if this effort fails?

Should you take those various possibilities into consideration in the decisionmaking process? Yes. To the best of your ability you should calculate the probabilities. If, for example, you are trying to decide whether to marry a particular man who has a long track record of being humble and Christlike and godly, is it possible that he could turn bad in the years to come? Yes, but it is unlikely, and it is a risk worth taking. If, on the other hand, he has led a reprobate life for the last twenty years and has just changed since meeting you two weeks ago, you should face the likelihood that he will revert to his old ways. A marriage to him is not worth the risk.

You should take into consideration possible contingencies. But once you have applied wisdom to the best of your ability, leave the rest in God’s hands.

Yes, there may be unknown factors you cannot possibly foresee. Perhaps you try to start a business, and you have no way of knowing now, but in the future your office will burn down, and it will happen while you are switching insurance companies, on the day you are not covered, and you will lose everything. Of course you would have had no way of knowing this would happen. If you have applied wisdom, you need to trust God that this suffering was all part of His plan for you.

Here is an example from my own life: I made a decision to pastor a church in Oklahoma after examining our compatibility as thoroughly as I could. Two years later a doctrinal difference came up and I was fired. Does that mean it was a bad decision to go there? No. God did not allow me to see that contingency, because it was His plan for me to go there for two years, during which time I made the connections that made possible a church plant (Creekside Church in Louisville, Colorado). Working with this church has been the greatest thrill of my life.

As children of God we do not have to worry about ultimate disaster coming because of something unforeseeable. When you counsel someone who is facing a difficult decision, remind him not to allow himself to be pulled apart by the various options he is facing. He must apply wisdom as best he can, make a decision, and then trust God to carry him to wherever He wants him to be in life by means of that decision, despite whatever aspects may ultimately prove to be favorable or unfavorable from a human perspective.

This principle is true especially when those who are in authority over you make a decision on your behalf.

Fear

All worry is sin (Matt. 6:34), but not all fear is sin. The emotion of fear is a gift of God designed to protect us. It keeps us from getting too close to a cliff or needlessly exposing ourselves to danger. Frequently, however, it becomes an avenue for sin. When counseling people who struggle with fear, the counselor must first understand exactly when fear is sinful.

When is fear sinful?

Fear crosses over into sin when (1) we fear something we are forbidden to fear, or (2) our fear turns into cowardice (that is, it overrides our courage).

Forbidden fears

There are some contexts in which the very existence of the emotion of fear indicates sin. Scripture gives at least three examples of forbidden fears:

Mistakes of God.

No Christian in his right mind would say he believes that God could make a mistake. But as we found in the last section, when a person worries, that person is, in effect, assuming God might do something wrong. This is clearly a sinful misconception of the character of God. To think this way, a person must believe either that God lacks power or that He lacks love.

This type of thinking is more common than you might expect. Christians often disobey God out of fear that if they obey, God may allow some circumstance that will be too much to bear. In your own life, think of how many times you have chosen not to tell the truth, failed to share your faith, or refused to commit to something you knew you should do because of your fear of the consequences. Christians who do that are like the wicked, lazy servant who said to the master, "I knew that you are a hard man.... So I was afraid ..." (Matt. 25:24,26).

Irrational assumptions.

When some type of suffering is likely to occur, it is not wrong to anticipate it and prepare for it. But if it is not likely, then concerning yourself with it is a waste of time and energy. When a woman continually worries that her husband might leave her, even though there are no signs of unfaithfulness, or a man is in continual fear of being fired even though there are no signs of trouble at work, those fears are irrational.

The solution to irrational fear is wisdom.

Proverbs 3:21-26 My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; ... [then] when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.

The wise woman or man understands how God tends to operate throughout His world and understands which things are more likely or less likely to happen. Showing discernment and sound judgment will help protect a person from making foolish decisions that lead to unnecessary suffering.

Loss of a cherished idol.

We naturally fear the loss of things that are precious to us. Some things, however, should not be so precious to us. When we realize that we fear the loss of these things, we gain insight into what may be an idol in our hearts.

In John 12 we read of a group of fearful believers.

John 12:42-43 Many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

There is nothing wrong with enjoying praise from men. But if that praise means more than praise from God, it is idolatry. The idolatry in these men's hearts became evident when they had to choose between confessing Christ or clinging to their idol.

The real sin in this case is not the fear, but the reason for the fear. It's possible to spot your covetousness by what you have an inordinate fear of. Jesus said:

Matthew 10:28 "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Fearing the wrong thing is evidence that a person does not understand or believe the truth about what is really dangerous.

Cowardice

Besides being idolaters, the Pharisees Jesus denounced in John 12 were cowards. In them you see the kind of fear that displeases the Lord. Note that no matter what people may fear, if their fear overrides their courage, it is cowardice. Cowardice is a serious sin. God's word is clear—cowards go to hell.

Revelation 21:8 But the cowardly² ... their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

If the government threatens you with torture for preaching the Gospel, it is not sinful to feel uneasy about enduring the torture—as long as you act courageously and go ahead and preach. But if your fear prevents you from doing what is right or pushes you into sins such as lying or worrying, it has become sinful.

Suppose a man has committed adultery three times over the course of his marriage, and each time it has caused his wife unbearable pain. Now she sees him beginning to do

the things he did the last three times, such as showing up late from work, etc. Should you tell her that her husband is probably not committing adultery? No. That would be to ignore sound reasoning. God never wants us to do that. Should you tell her it is wrong to assume that she is likely in for a lot of pain? No. The truth is, sometimes when God decides you will have to suffer you can see it coming. To pretend you don't is to lie to yourself.

The appropriate response is for her to acknowledge likely pain, which will cause natural feelings of fear, and then to override those feelings with courage (by doing what she knows is right in spite of her feelings).

Overcoming fear

As with any emotion, it is one thing to decide you should not have fear but it is another thing entirely to rid yourself of it. If you can remember the last time you were afraid, you know that you cannot eliminate fear by simply deciding not to be afraid or by telling yourself your fear doesn't make sense.

So when you counsel people who struggle with fear, how can you help them deal with it? By building both their faith and their courage.

Building faith

The more confidence you have in your caretaker, the less fearful you will be. I remember a time when I was sitting in the living room reading as my young children were playing on the floor. Suddenly there was a clap of thunder so loud it shook the house. All three kids were startled and momentarily stopped what they were doing and looked toward me with great concern. I smiled and said, "Wow, that was a good one!" That put all three at ease and they went right back to playing. They just wanted to know if things were under control, so they looked to see their father's reaction.

We do not have the joy of being able to physically see the face of our Father when we experience frightening trials, but we can look to Him in faith. We can fill our minds with thoughts of His total control and loving care. We can remind ourselves of His faithfulness in the past and His promises for the future. We can intensify our level of concentration on the imperturbable joy of God and the smile on His face as He watches His perfect plan being carried out right down to the tiniest details of our lives. It is true that His plan for us often involves suffering, but even in the midst of suffering we can recall His words of comfort:

ISAIAH 41:1014 "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you," declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

The greatest way to strengthen someone's faith is through the Word of God.

ROMANS 10:17 ... faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

When you are counseling people who are fearful, give them a list of passages such as Isaiah 41 to read when they are afraid. Tell them to read these aloud and have them memorize particular passages. Reading, hearing, or being reminded of God's word can be tremendously calming and reassuring.

Psalm 56:34 When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

Building courage

Some strong fears simply cannot be eliminated; they must be overcome by courage. For example, a mother might be afraid of heights, but if her baby crawls out onto the roof, suddenly her courage overrides her fear. She will go rescue her baby.

Courage is when a person is driven by a desire that is stronger than the desire for safety. Normally you might be afraid to get close to someone with a contagious illness. But if it is your little child and you want to comfort her, your desire to hold her close might override your desire to avoid contact with the virus. Think of a man who is terrified at the prospect of advancing into a hail of gunfire. But if he is consumed with the desire to defend his country or to do his job, he will be able to summon the courage. The courageous Christian, acutely aware of what is at stake in our spiritual warfare, has the courage to obey God no matter what the danger.

Seeking courage instead of escape from fear was the apostles' approach when they faced the incredibly frightening prospect of imprisonment, flogging, and death. In Acts 4, the vicious, dangerous, powerful men responsible for the murder of Jesus Christ summoned the apostles and repeatedly commanded them not to teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus. They made serious threats should the apostles disobey. Think of how terrifying such threats would have been to them—especially after having just witnessed the crucifixion. Few of us have ever faced threats that terrifying.

The apostles took these threats seriously. They immediately reported them to the church, and the whole church rushed to prayer. First, they built up their faith by reminding themselves of God's power and sovereignty. They began their petition this way:

Acts 4:24-29 "Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

Notice that instead of praying for protection, they prayed for boldness! Instead of seeking the elimination of what they feared, they sought the courage to be obedient in the face of what they feared. And God granted their request:

Acts 4:31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

The result

Acts 5:40 [The Sanhedrin] called the apostles in and had them flogged.

They feared being flogged, so they prayed for the courage to obey. God granted their request, and then they were flogged. But look at their response:

Acts 5:41-42 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

You and I can thank the Lord that the Gospel was proclaimed around the world and passed down to us because those men were more interested in courage than in their own deliverance, comfort, or safety.