

Catastrophizing

Anxious for Nothing Series, April 6 & 7, 2024 | 1 Corinthians 13:4-7
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What are we going to do with our anxious thoughts?

Anxious thoughts are rampant.

We're anxious about the conflicts raging in the world right now.

We're anxious about the climate, the election, the country, the border, and the budget.

We're anxious about how people perceive us online and in real life.

We're anxious about having enough money for the future.

It seems like we are more anxious than ever.

Anxiousness is not anxiety exactly.

Anxiousness is an emotion or a response to events.

Anxious thoughts become anxiety when thoughts get out of control and persist, when those thoughts aren't attached to specific problems, and when they interfere with daily living.

Anxiety can become a disorder that is a form of mental illness.

Anxiety disorders are common. In fact, they are the most common mental illnesses in the United States, affecting 40 million adults (more than 19% of the population) every year.¹

If you have an anxiety disorder, you probably need more help than I am offering here.

I am speaking to all of us who experience anxiousness and anxious thoughts.

Anxiousness clouds our minds and makes healthy thinking difficult.

We've all been anxious before. We may have been anxious getting ready for a test, for a first day on a new job, before a date, or before a presentation.

Anxiousness is a natural response to normal stress.

Anxiousness causes a series of responses in our bodies.

We get focused in some ways—more alert and ready for action.

At the same time, anxiousness can make it tougher to think clearly. We get worried and tense.

We're ready to act, but are we ready to think? Probably not. At least not clearly.

Anxious thoughts happen when we lose sight of God.

God is so many things. God is powerful. He is good. He is in control. He is Truth itself!

When we remember who God is, it helps us to face and deal with life—including its problems.

When we forget who God is, it makes life with its problems feel much bigger and much more intimidating. When we forget who God is, our anxious thoughts begin to spin out of control.

¹ <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/facts-statistics>

Our anxious thoughts become like a knot tied around our brains, choking them and making it difficult to think clearly.

However, the Gospel unties the knot of anxious thoughts in our minds.

The Gospel reminds us of who God is and how he works in our lives.

When we remember who God is and how he works in our lives, it starts to untie the knot of anxious thoughts choking our brains, so that we can think clearly again.

There are lots of thought traps that lead to anxious thoughts; today we begin with catastrophizing.

Even Moses catastrophized!

Moses confronted Pharaoh.

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, ends with the Israelites going to Egypt to escape a famine.

Then Exodus, opens with the Israelites settling down in Egypt for generations, growing as a people, and prospering.

However, as years passed, the Egyptians began to fear the Israelites, so they tried to limit their population and made them slaves. Eventually, the Israelites cried out to God for deliverance.

God sent Moses to deliver them. God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and command Pharaoh to set his people free. God enabled Moses to do deeds of power that would demonstrate that the Lord was serious, and God gave Moses his brother Aaron to do the public speaking.

Exodus 5:1 opens:

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.' "

Pharaoh catastrophized!

He said that he wouldn't let the Israelites go and ordered them to get back to work.

Pharaoh saw danger. In **Exodus 5:5** we read:

And Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!"

Pharaoh was catastrophizing! The Israelites had to be either for him or against him. Clearly, they were against him. They must be a danger! He concluded that Egypt was at risk; he had to stop the Israelite threat!

So, he added to the Israelites' burden. Before, they had been making bricks for Pharaoh's construction projects. Now they would also gather the straw they needed to make the bricks. And they would make as many bricks as they did before.

Then the Hebrew foremen catastrophized.

When the Israelites were unable to gather straw, make bricks, and make as many bricks as they had before they were responsible for gathering straw, the Egyptians beat the Hebrew foremen as a punishment.

The Hebrew foremen asked Pharaoh to lighten their burden, but Pharaoh told them that Moses' request proved that they did not have enough work. So, Pharaoh wouldn't budge.

The Hebrew foremen went to Moses and Aaron, accused them of ruining their lives and ensuring that they would all die. In **Exodus 5:21** the Hebrew foremen said,

... “The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

Even Moses catastrophized!

In **Exodus 5:22-23** we read:

Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all.”

Clearly, Moses thought, God had ruined his life and the lives of all the Israelites.

Even Moses catastrophized.

We catastrophize when we forget God’s power.

What do I mean when I say “catastrophize”?

To catastrophize means to jump to the worst possible conclusion—usually on the basis of little or no evidence.

When catastrophizing, we break events down into all good and all bad.

If we find one bad thing or one thing wrong, then we focus on that one bad thing.

We then ignore anything good.

That one bad thing becomes our focus. We see everything as bad and getting worse.²

We catastrophize when we forget God’s power.

Pharaoh, like all pagans, didn’t know God’s power.

Exodus 5:2 reads:

But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”

Pharaoh didn’t know God’s power. He trusted his own gods and his own power.

That’s why he refused Moses’ request.

However, trusting yourself and false gods doesn’t get you very far, and Pharaoh was quickly worried that the Israelites were growing in strength and would eventually overpower the Egyptians unless he did something quickly.

Pharaoh just didn’t know God’s power, so he catastrophized.

The Israelites forgot God’s power.

The Israelites’ ancestors knew God and saw God’s power at work, but in Egypt, they forgot God’s power.

When God sent Moses, God had to remind them of his power.

Look at **Exodus 4:30-31**:

² <https://hbr.org/2023/03/how-high-achievers-overcome-their-anxiety>

Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

In Exodus 4, the Israelites remembered God's power. Then in Exodus 5, they forgot again. And they started catastrophizing quickly.

We catastrophize when we forget God's power.

We come up against tough circumstances in life. We make mistakes, run into disappointments, and encounter opposition.

When we forget that God is powerful, we focus on the bad and on how the bad can get worse.

That's when catastrophizing becomes a trap. Those anxious thoughts swirl around, they wrap themselves around our minds and make our minds clouded. If we let those thoughts swirl for long enough and allow them to become strong enough, then we are caught.

Catastrophizing comes naturally to me!

Catastrophizing comes easily to me because I am always thinking about the future. I think I can see the consequences tomorrow of things that happen today.

This really tripped me up when my two sons were younger.

If they missed a homework assignment in elementary school, I could see it becoming a habit and a character flaw. They would get bad grades, fall behind in middle school, miss out on the top classes in high school, not get into college, fail at work, become homeless, turn to drugs, end up joining a gang, and spend the rest of their lives in jail. I could see it all!

So, they OBVIOUSLY couldn't miss a homework assignment.

Catastrophizing comes naturally to me.

God's power unties the knot of anxious thoughts in our minds.

Creation: God created everything that exists by his great power.

God created EVERYTHING in heaven and on earth.

God did it all by simply speaking.

Creation demonstrates God's great power in multiple ways.

Brokenness: In our own sin, we chose to live in our own power.

Sin is claiming the power to make the rules and run our lives.

Idolatry, which is our essential sin, is putting creation and ourselves in the seat of power.

But we don't have the power to get to heaven or fix what we've broken.

Jesus: God's power alone breaks the power of sin and death.

We don't have the power to make our sin or guilt go away.

We don't have the power to defeat death.

Jesus alone had the power to pay the price for our sin so that we could be forgiven.

Jesus alone had the power to defeat death and rise from the dead.

Church: God's power is always at work.

Because we sinned, hardship is going to be part of life now. Sometimes it looks like sin, death, evil, and suffering triumph.

But God's power is at work in the world through his Holy Spirit, calling people to himself.

God's power is at work through his Holy Spirit in us, pushing back the darkness and the brokenness and building his Kingdom.

God's power is at work through his Holy Spirit making God present WITH US.

God's power is always at work. Remember that.

Return: God's power will triumph in the end.

In the end, God's power will finally and forever defeat sin, death, evil, and suffering.

God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

He will destroy evil itself, Satan, and everything that serves evil.

He will resurrect us to live with him forever.

God's power will triumph in the end.

Trusting God's power got me through March 31, 2013—the day that will live in infamy in our family.

It was an Easter Sunday, and my wife, Tammi, was in Florida on spring break with our sons.

Our sons were in middle school at the time, and they were spending time with family.

Easter Sunday morning, I got a text that my wife was not feeling well.

Then I got another message that it was a heart problem and that she was heading to the emergency room.

Then we started worship, and I proclaimed the power of God and the resurrection.

Later that afternoon, it became clear that my wife actually had experienced a heart attack.

It was a total shock because she was in her early 40s at the time. We weren't expecting that.

I quickly made plans to fly from Minnesota, where I lived, to Florida to be with her.

"Heart attack" is a shocking thought. I started catastrophizing.

What if Tammi died? I would be alone. What would happen to our boys?

But a strange peace came over me.

It was Easter Sunday. I had just proclaimed the power and the resurrection of Jesus.

I had to trust God with her, with me, and with our boys. I had to trust God's power.

I learned something important about God that day.

Trust in God's power and untie the knot of anxious thoughts in your mind.

Anxious thoughts become like a knot in your mind.

They tie a knot around your reason and around your faith.

With a knot around your reason and faith, you can only see ahead the worst that's possible. You start to panic. You aren't going to do your best thinking when you panic. But trusting in God's power starts to untie the knot of those anxious thoughts in your mind. 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 God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6)
Trust in God's power and untie the knot of anxious thoughts in your mind.

Godly love unravels the threads of anxious thoughts in our minds.

When we trust in God's power, we show godly love.

That's God's commandment. If we receive him, then we love one another and love him.

His power at work in us and through us yields his character coming out in us.

God's character is godly love. God tells us about his character clearly in **Exodus 34:6** where he proclaims his name: ... "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ..." Look at his character. Steadfast love (godly love) is the cornerstone of God's character, and that godly love should come out in us.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 is probably the most famous description of godly love in the Bible:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Godly love refuses to catastrophize.

Godly love does not envy or boast. It's not zealous for getting what is someone else's, nor does it make a lot of noise about its own accomplishments and glory.

Godly love isn't arrogant or rude. It's not proud and puffed up, nor does it behave inappropriately and hurt others in the process.

Godly love doesn't insist on or demand its own way.

Godly love isn't irritable or resentful. That means that it isn't easily stirred up to anger, nor does it quickly or easily count things as bad or evil.

Godly love isn't glad in an odd way when things go wrong.

Instead, Godly love remains constant.

Godly love is patient. It is longsuffering.

Godly love is kind. It is actively good.

Godly love rejoices with the truth. It looks at reality, accepts reality, and rejoices in reality (not fantasy.)

Godly love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Godly love keeps on keeping on, keeps having believing faith that God's power is working toward the future, keeps hoping in a hope that is concrete and real, and is faithful to the end.

Sometimes our minds get all tied up in anxious thoughts.

Those anxious thoughts can feel like they are strangling our minds and suffocating our hope.

But trusting in God's power unties the knot of anxious thoughts.

Then godly love unravels the threads of the anxious thoughts themselves.

And godly love actually creates a pathway toward being truly anxious for nothing.