

Freaking Out

Worry, Fear, Anxiety, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

By Reid S. Monaghan



Introduction

In every epoch of history, human beings have struggled to find peace of mind amidst the chaos of life under the sun. Ever aware of the fragility of life and circumstances we can be gripped with worry, fear and crippling anxiety. American culture has done everything we can to plaster over these realities with wealth, entertainment, and an illusion of scientific mastery of all things. As the coronavirus pandemic has shown us, reality disrupts even the best laid plans to make life easy, comfortable, and safe. When facing these realities, the soul can become caged in its own dark meditations and fears, and a strange bondage can overwhelm us. Our modern age is certainly rife with concerns: rapid change, global terrorism, technological totalitarianism, artificial intelligence, the rancor of political divisions, and mass economic uncertainty. These along with the ancient, lingering realities, of disease, injustice, death and broken relationships all press in on the modern psyche. The believer has a great privilege not to be taken out of this world where the curse reigns, but to trust God in it. God's word speaks to the deepest needs and fears of our lives. He wants to walk with us from fear to faith, kindly teaching us what it means to trust Jesus our sovereign King. He is our Lord and will walk with us through the varied labyrinths of this world.

In this brief piece we will endeavor to do a few simple things. First, we will discuss the human experiences of fear, worry and anxiety and define some basic terms. Second, we will discuss the scope and suppositions which are underneath our study together. Third, we will speak of several issues which relate to our fear and anxiety and how these issues are connected to our relationship with God.

We are Freaked Out

To say that concern, worry, fear and anxiousness are "universal" would be self-evident to some and perhaps insulting to others. Though the degree to which we are gripped by such realities varies by individual and personality, these emotions are indeed universal in scope. Not one of us can expect to sing *hakuna matata* for the rest of our days¹. This world has many problems and troubles, and these intersect with our story more often than some would like to admit. Studies will be done related to the levels of fear and anxiety during this pandemic and how it affected our mental health, but recent studies show that just over 18% of the adult population in our country already met criteria for suffering from various anxiety disorders.² These are beyond the everyday stress, worry, and fear experienced which is considered "normal."

Furthermore, when one looks at a list of modern psychopathologies the most prevalent category has to do with our fears.³ General anxiety also appears to be twice as common among women than among men, likely because they have to deal with men.⁴ Just kidding, but the research is clear that though both freak out a bit, women experience anxiety a bit more. Finally, the northeastern US, currently deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, already ranked high in "neuroticism" in the "stress belt" of the United States.⁵ I can't help but recall of all that our friends in the church we helped plant are facing today in terms of health and the economy.

In our culture we might assume that money and financial security might alleviate one's anxieties. However, a study conducted by researchers at Boston College is showing precisely the opposite. In a survey of 500 people who had an average net worth of 78 million dollars, the research is showing that the super-rich are in no way

¹ This of course is a reference to the Swahili phrase made popular by Disney's 1994 animated hit *The Lion King*. The phrase means "no worries." *The Lion King*, (Walt Disney Company, 1994).

² Ronald C. Kessler et al., "Prevalence, Severity, and Comorbidity of 12-Month Dsm-Iv Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 62, no. June 2005 (2005).

³ Edward T. Welch, *Running Scared - Fear, Worry and the Rest of God* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2007), 22.

⁴ Peter Tyrer, and David Baldwin, "Generalised Anxiety Disorder," *The Lancet* 268 (2006), www.thelancet.com.

⁵ Stephanie Simon, "The United States of Mind " *Wall Street Journal* (2008), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122211987961064719.html>.

immune to the specters of loneliness and anxiety. Many shared deep insecurities about, above all things, money.⁶

In every culture and place human beings “freak out” and are gripped with fear and anxiety. There are reasons for this that we will examine shortly. For now, we must declare ourselves part of the world in which fear and anxiety will arrive at our doors. No one is immune. What we do with these thoughts and feelings we will examine here together? Before moving to look at the biblical backdrop for our world being an anxiety producing place, I want to say a few things about the scope of our discussion and some assumptions we will have in looking at these issues.

Assumptions and Definitions

I want to say clearly up front that this discussion of fear, anxiety, worry and the various relationships to God are not meant to be clinical in nature. We will be discussing these issues in a theological and pastoral context. There are cases of severe anxiety which call for clinical attention and I am thankful for godly clinicians and therapists. However, with that said, it is my strongest conviction that our struggles in this area are indeed holistic and theological in nature. As such, the counsel and understanding of Scripture should not be neglected even in more severe situations. The worldview and teaching of the Scriptures should remain in the forefront of our minds as we wrestle with fear, anxiety, and worry in varying degrees.

Basic Assumptions about Human Persons

Any discussion of things which affect both mind and body must proceed from a robust anthropology. Before we can address human persons, we must have an understanding of what a human person is. This is by no means taken for granted today in our culture. Some would say humans are only animals ruled by DNA working out its mechanistic replications due to environmental constraints.⁷ Furthermore, there is a view of humans which tends to boil down all behaviors into desires for sex and survival as if these are the only aspects of life which “really” matter. Others would see the mind as merely a product of the electrochemical machinations of our brains.⁸ Of course I use the terms *only* and *merely* above as I find no disagreement with humans being partially animal in nature and certainly there is a correlation between the function of the mind and the human brain.⁹ Yet we resist a pure reduction of human beings into mere matter which would eliminate a functioning *person* residing in unity with his or her physical body.

The view we are assuming here is a biblical anthropology whereby we consist of a *psychosomatic unity*. In this view, humans are not seen in either of two extremes. We are not reduced to being bodies alone, nor are we seen as disembodied spirits trapped in a body. Soul and body unified as a human person is the view we will follow in our discussions. There is much more to be discussed here so for the interested reader I refer you to several sources on biblical anthropology.¹⁰ In light of this view we not only see a reciprocal nature between body and soul; we expect it. The state of the body affects the soul and the condition of the soul affects the body. As such what we believe, trust, assume and place our hope in has a holistic effect on us as human beings.

⁶ Graeme Wood, "The Fortunate Ones," *The Atlantic* 2011.

⁷ The modern reductionist view is well represented by the works of Richard Dawkins who wrote “DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.” Richard Dawkins, "God's Utility Function," *Scientific American* 273, no. 5 (1995).

⁸ See John Smart, "The Identity Theory of Mind," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mind-identity/>. For a version of this by a Christian author see Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, *Current Issues in Theology*, ed. Iain Torrance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ For a simple and popular level discussion of this see Greg Koukl, "All Brian, No Mind," (<http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5474>).

¹⁰ See Reid S. Monaghan, "The Implications of Nancey Murphy's Non Reductive Physicalism on Confessional Christian Theology" (2009),

http://www.powerofchange.org/storage/docs/non_reductive_physicalism.pdf, John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting : Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), Mario Beauregard, and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain : A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2007). <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0717/2007018398.html>.

Basic Definitions

As we begin a discussion of “freakin out” I did want to provide some very cautious definitions. I am using the label “freakin out” to encompass several conditions of the soul, namely, worry, fear and anxiety. I do not intend philosophical precision in using these terms only to broadly describe our human experience. Dr. Ed Welch gives the following helpful example:

To deeply understand fear we must also look at ourselves and the way we interpret our situations. Those scary objects can reveal what we cherish. They point out our insatiable quest for control, our sense of aloneness. Even the vocabulary of fear indicates that the problem can be deeper than a real, objective danger. While “fear” refers to the experience when a car races toward us and we just barely escape, “anxiety” or worry is the lingering sense after the car has passed, that life is fragile and we are always vulnerable. The terrain is fear and anxiety. You are familiar with it, and you are not alone.¹¹

We will follow this basic understanding that fear is concern related to potential harm and worry or anxiety is a projection of such fears into the unknown. As human beings our fears and anxiety are byproducts of and reactions to the world. What we believe about and our response to circumstances in our world therefore matter greatly. This matters even more deeply in acute times of stress related to wars or global pandemics. Furthermore, as human beings who are made in the image of God, our fears and anxieties are directly related to our belief in the truth about God, ourselves, and our circumstances. The goal we have is not to eliminate all fears, but rather to see God transform how we experience life in a fearful world. Faith calls us to trust in God who can indeed help us overcome deleterious fears and anxiety. Yet before we look at the path ahead, we want to see biblically why this world is such a strangely fearful place? To these issues we now turn.

Fragmented and Fearful

If you look at the grand narrative of the Bible, we see right at the beginning why the world is at once a good and hostile place. The earliest chapters of Scripture tell us that the entire world is the creation of God who made all things good (Genesis 1-2). Human beings, made male and female in the image and likeness of God, are said to be created very good. The early creation is described as a primordial paradise, a place perfectly suited for human beings and their fellowship with the creator. The first pair of humans, by their own desires, disobey God and the world is placed under a curse with severe consequences (Genesis 3). There are many dramatic results from this human rebellion which make this world a hostile and fearful place. Though human beings were made to be in intimate communion with their creator, they are now separated from him, under a dominion of darkness, fighting with one another and destined to die. Welcome to planet earth; welcome to a good world pervasively stained with sin. The following is only a brief description of the unfolding cosmic struggle of which we are a part.

Drama with God

The result of our fall and sin is that we desire our own ways rather than following our creator. The essence of the disobedience of the first humans is that we are separated from the God we were made to worship and know in intimacy. As such we feel a sense of aloneness in the universe while surrounded by the masses of humanity. Furthermore, we feel guilt and shame for our own sin and we find no remedy. Finally, as humanity suppresses the knowledge of God we are given over to our own paths which results in destruction (Proverbs 16:25, Matthew 7:7). As we invent ways in our rebellion to make ourselves happy and safe apart from God, the alienation deepens, and we find no peace for our souls. You can read the first chapter of Romans for a great description of all of this.

¹¹ Welch, 25.

Drama in Nature

The world which was originally a hospitable Eden has been darkened by struggle, pain and death. As a result, we feel quite at home on the earth but also find deadly peril in nature all about us. The rains which enable the earth to feed us may also sweep us away in floods. The seas that make our environment hospitable to life, may also rise up and consume us. Unseen organisms which balance various ecosystems also cause severe sicknesses and disease. Our own use and abuse of the natural world threatens us with environmental disaster. The Bible describes creation as good but in bondage to decay awaiting liberation (Romans 8:18-25) and as such is a beautiful design and a fallen catastrophe. Our place in nature can cause us great joy and fill us with great fears and worry. We also feel responsible for creation and the environment in a way that turtles do not. This too freaks us out and currently causes us to fight with each other. This of course is another problem we face. Can't we just all get along?

Drama with Each Other

In this age, human beings have been at constant enmity with each other and we always blame *others* for our problems. In the very beginnings of the Bible we see one brother murder another (Genesis 4:1-10) and we have found ourselves at war ever since. People have fought with one another for all of human history over land, tribe, honor, race or ideology (both religious and non-religious ideologies). Modern humanity is somewhat of a puzzle. We think ourselves enlightened and wise and grown past our barbarous past while sitting comfortably just on the other side of the bloodiest century in the history of mankind. On a micro level each day we politic at work and fight one another in our homes. Our politics shows an absolute sickening level of division, with a constant piling on of blame and an unrelenting torrent of angry polemics. On a macro level we have literally dropped bombs on the masses and have shelled cities with artillery. All of this fighting may cause great fear and anxiety in the soul, for we now see how we are the would be authors of our own destruction.

Drama with Demonic Powers

In addition to our struggle with nature and one another, spiritual powers of darkness war against our souls (Ephesians 6:10-20). Demonic and deceitful influences bring false accusation and oppression upon the lives of human beings (John 8:44, 1 Peter 5:6-11). If you have ever gazed into the face of pure evil, the fear that it can bring does not depart with any sort of ease. The denial of God and the war against God by Satan and demons is often ignored in our context, but never absent from the world.¹²

Drama with Death

Finally, the great enemy of death itself looms large on the horizons for every human being with physical and psychological suffering along the way. Death is a peculiar thing. It is at once one of the most common and "normal" things about life but feels to be an alien invasion to it. The loss of loved ones, the death of a child, the finality of someone passing from this life and the regret of years lived without meaning haunt the human soul. Modern humans live with little discussion of or answer to death. We think we can prevent it, cure it, or at least have short term triumphs over it. Some are resigned to think that it is the silent, final snuffing out of an individual life, while others simply never prepare for its coming. After all, we have too much Netflix to stream. The book of Hebrews teaches us that it is appointed for us to die and then face judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Tens of thousands die every single day. This too should bring pause to the thoughtful soul.

¹² For a balanced and creative look at demonic activity see C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York,: The Macmillan company, 1944). There is also an excellent audio version of this work I would highly recommend.

It is in this world: a world of death, fighting, disaster, disease, and rebellion against God that we find ourselves. It is in this world Jesus taught us plainly “You will have trouble.” (John 16:33) In this world, there is no way to avoid concerns, cares, worry, and anxiety. It is in this world where we must face up to our fears.

Before we conclude with some important truths, I want to be clear that worry, fear, and anxiety are not categorically “bad” things. Fear can be useful as it can keep us from true dangers. Concern for the future can cause us to pray and plan well in light of God’s leading. We clearly see this in the Scriptures. In the book of Nehemiah, the disastrous state of Jerusalem caused a man deep concern and led him to faith and action (Nehemiah 1-2). In the New Testament, Paul lists two times in one of his letters to the Corinthians that his spirit was anxious and concerned for a friend as well as the new churches (2 Corinthians 2:12; 13 11:28). Furthermore, Jesus, who was fully human and lived without sinning (Hebrews 4:14-16), was so psychologically burdened the night before he was crucified that he was physically devastated (Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22)¹³. These are simply a few examples to show that fear and anxiety in and of themselves are part of the *human* experience and not in themselves sinful. In fact, an unmoved apathy towards the concerns of our lives, other people, and the fallen world is profoundly at odds with the demands of love.

The key questions for us are as follows:

- How will we handle fearful and anxious thoughts and emotions when they come?
- Will we go to God or run from God in our fears?
- Will worry cause us to seek other gods to save us or will we turn to the God who is mighty to save?
- In the anxiety of the day and our worries about tomorrow, will we park our seats before the idols of entertainment, comfort, money, government or false pleasures? Or will we truly place our trust in Jesus, the living God?
- Will fear and worry cause us to pursue selfish paths of self-protection, or will we be free to love and serve others?

I hope these questions help us to see one thing clearly. How we respond to God in our fear and anxiety will make a huge difference to our daily experience and our usefulness in the mission of God.

Where We Stand or Fall

There are several doctrines of Scripture which are crucial for us to understand in order to find peace of mind and rest for the soul in our world under the sun. There are four foundational truths which settle the heart in the hands of the Father.

1. The Sovereignty of God
2. The Love of God
3. The Presence of God’s Spirit with us, and in us
4. An Eternal Perspective about our Longings for Safety and Security.

These foundational truths set the table for the practical teaching of the Scriptures related to fear and anxiety. The battle for joy, hope and and courage is fought upon these grounds What do I believe about God? What do I believe about God’s heart towards me? What do I believe about God’s relationship with us? What do I believe about the future? If we understand that God is in control (Daniel 2:20,21; Isaiah 46:5-11), we will know that the world is not out of control. If we understand that God has a steadfast unmovable love for his people (1 Chronicles 16:34; Lamentations 3:22-24; John 3:16, Romans 5:8), we will know he has our good as the ultimate end in mind.

¹³Some read the description in the gospel as demonstrating Jesus had stress induced Hematidrosis, a very rare condition where a person’s sweat glands secrete blood. Others find the sweating of blood to be metaphorical. Either way, the intense emotional anguish affected Jesus physically and was in no way sinful. It was a human reaction to facing certain and painful circumstances. The important thing we see in this narrative is that Jesus goes “to God” in prayer during his hour of greatest anxiety.

If we know God is with us by his Spirit and is our ever present help in a time of trouble we will walk in the world as cared for children (Psalm 46; John 14:15-18) even in the midst of strife and difficulty. If we know that this present difficulty is not the end of the story, we will understand our ultimate safety and security is with God and will be fully and finally realized in the Kingdom of Heaven. Each of these truths are like the four legs of a strong and sturdy table. If either of the legs were to be broken, the whole thing would topple and fall.

The early 17th century British mystical poet John Donne once penned these wonderful lines of verse. These lines help us to fix our gaze in life upon Jesus, the Son of God, in light of our own mortality.

I shall rise from the dead...I shall see the Son of God, the Sun of Glory, and shine myself as that sun shines. I shall be united to the Ancient of Days, to God Himself, who had no morning, never began...No man ever saw God and lived. And yet, I shall not live till I see God; and when I have seen him, I shall never die.¹⁴

Each of the four truths above actually converge in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, the ruler of all things steps into a world of pain and brokenness to demonstrate the love of God to sinners. He steps with the greatest of love by giving his life for his people. God then sends his Holy Spirit in us to be our comforter and sends us out as a comforting people to others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). His death for us reconciles us to God and gives us a future hope that is beyond comparison. It is in light of all these central truths that Jesus said to us, “let not your hearts be troubled.” (John 14:1) Jesus was not ignorant about how all of this would be accomplished for us. He knew very well the nature of his mission amongst the pain of our world. The late medical doctor and preacher Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones describes it well:

[The gospel] comes and tells me, “Let not your hearts be troubled.” But it comes in light of Gethsemane and Jesus’ trial and cruel death up on the cross, the broken body, the burial, the utter hopelessness and despair. Then, and only then, it goes on to tell me of the Resurrection and the glory of the Ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit, and that puts me in an entirely different position. It has taken me through the facts, through the tunnel of darkness to the dawn that lights on the other end.¹⁵

Conclusion

In all honesty my own personality and constitution teeters between being a visionary, faith filled, focused planner and being a concerned and anxious worrier who freaks out over the smallest of things. I am very much in process with all the matters of which I write here. It is both humbling and exciting to take this journey with you so that we might see worry, fear and anxiety properly related to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is the one who calls us forward with the words “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Long ago a group of Jesus’s followers heard these words but later forgot them as they watched their master executed on a Roman cross. They remembered these words after they saw him rise triumphantly over the grave on the first Resurrection Sunday. From that age forward, many of his people have been bold as lions and peaceful as doves in the face of many a trial, crisis, pandemic, and man-made atrocity. They knew the one that held the keys to death and hell loved them and would bring them safely home. They believed deeply the words of their Lord “in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Of these men and women, the world was said not to be worthy (Hebrews 11). May we be numbered among them.



Reid S. Monaghan, Founder and President, Power of Change

¹⁴ Randy C. Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 165. Table of contents <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0418/2004011329.html>.

¹⁵ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2009), 24, 25.

Recommended Resources

- Ed Welch, *A Small Book for the Anxious Heart: Meditation on Fear, Worry, and Trust*
- Ed Welch, *Running Scared: Fear, Worry and the God of Rest*
- Martin Lloyd Jones, *Let Not Your Hearts be Troubled* (Forward by Elizabeth Catherwood and Ann Beatt)
- Sermon Series – Freakin Out: Worry, Fear and Anxiety and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
<https://www.jacobswellnj.org/messages/series/freakin-out--worry--fear--anxiety>

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