

anxiety **ATTACK**

WAGING WAR ON THE BURDENS WE BEAR



KEVIN WEEKS

Anxiety Attack

Kevin Weeks

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Introduction

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God... If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation..."

2 Corinthians 1:3-4, 6a

I often feel very grateful to God that I have undergone fearful depression of spirits. I know the borders of despair, and the horrible brink of that gulf of darkness into which my feet have almost gone; but hundreds of times I have been able to give a helpful grip to brethren and sisters who have come into that same condition, which grip I could never have given if I had not known their deep despondency. So I believe that the darkest and most dreadful experience of a child of God will help him to be a fisher of men if he will but follow Christ.

CHARLES SPURGEON

April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday

I love the church that God has called me to shepherd. I can't imagine doing what I do anywhere else. My wife, Stacey, and I planted the church in the spring of 2014 with around 160 adults and children and, today, we have enough material to fill another book with all the prayers God has answered since then. It hasn't always been easy, but it has never been short on adventure. We have been blessed beyond our wildest expectations.

On this particular weekend, Easter 2018, we were nearing the end of seven services: three on Good Friday and four Easter services through Saturday and Sunday. I don't know what other pastors are like, but I get nervous every time I preach. My heart pounds. My hands are cold and clammy. Without even realizing, one of my legs bounces up and down. Deep breaths and trust in God, I remind myself. Even after all these years with people I gladly consider to be family, it's the same thing every time. It's not that I'm fearful of the people. It's that I'm acutely aware of the responsibility God has given me to preach His word. This routine is normal for me. What wasn't normal, however, and what wasn't expected, were the emotions that blindsided me on that morning.

We were only minutes from the beginning of our first Sunday morning service, and I had major knots in my stomach. More than normal. Far more. I couldn't think straight. My brain slogged through a dense fog. My emotions were all over the place. I wasn't sure if I had the physical strength, the emotional strength, or the spiritual strength to stand up and preach two more times. Honestly, I wasn't sure I even wanted to preach again.

As this storm raged in me, I sank into a chair at the back of our Worship Centre. I cradled my head in my hands, occasionally looking up. People were walking past me, finding their seats, ready for the worship gathering to begin. I was trying to smile and say hi to people, but the smiles felt fake. I could barely maintain eye contact. There I sat, alone in a room full of people, wondering what in the world was happening to me.

After all, this was Easter weekend. This should've been one of the most joy-filled times of the entire year for me, and for us as a church. How was I supposed to stand up and lead a room full of God's people—twice more—in a joy-filled celebration of our risen Saviour when I had never felt farther from real joy than I did at that moment? Raw emotion smouldered, ready to burst through the surface in a blistering mess, and

all I could manage to do was quietly quiver in my plastic chair and wonder to God why I was suddenly overcome by a fear that I couldn't explain.

If you've ever been through something like that, then you know the questions that start flooding your mind. Have I done something wrong? Is there sin that I need to confess? Is there something physically or mentally wrong with me? Is there a spiritual component to this that I don't see? Is it something else altogether? And then: What do I do with the guilt that I feel for the way that I feel even though I don't know what I feel right now? Should I tell someone what's happening? But if I tell someone, then what? What happens next?

Plenty of questions. No answers anywhere in sight. In fact, if you had walked past me that morning as I sat at the back of the room and asked me if I was OK, I probably would've said in a moment of extreme transparency, "No, I'm not OK." I felt as if I had lost my grip on all the handles that had always held me up.

If you were then to ask me what was wrong, I probably would've said, in all seriousness, "I have no idea." All I knew was, in that moment, this was not normal. This was not right. Something had to give.

Today, I can tell you that only by God's grace did the rest of that morning pass without any kind of embarrassing or scandalous incident. He gave me everything I needed that weekend to preach every service and to try to love His people. Despite how elusive gospel joy seemed to me that weekend, it was well within reach for many others; and looking back later, that reality gave me great hope.

I also knew that "just getting through" that weekend was not enough. That was not the end. It couldn't be the end. It was too scary to be the end. But what I didn't realize was where the journey would take me next.

GOD'S GRACE IN THE STRUGGLE

Four lessons emerged from that weekend, all of them evidence of God's abiding grace. The first lesson was how important it is to keep praying, especially in the midst of uncertainty and fear. I had to pray. I didn't know what else to do. The problem was that I didn't really know what to pray for. I had no idea why this was happening. I didn't feel as if there was one specific burden that might be the cause of what I was feeling. Was it the build-up of a bunch of smaller things?

Possibly. Was I not thinking properly about some of those things regardless of how big or small they were? Probably. Even still, I couldn't nail down one event or even a logical series of events to explain it. I felt as though I was still in the fog of war. So, I just prayed: "Lord, please deliver me from this...whatever *this* is. And if you don't deliver me right away, please just help me to survive it."

My prayers on that Easter Sunday morning were desperate, short, and to the point. My prayers after that morning felt more guttural. The emotion that was so close to the surface drove me to my knees. Some of the Psalms took on a fresh meaning for me as I prayed them to God from my heart. And then I waited for Him.

The second lesson was how important it is to let people in and gather a support network. I told my wife, Stacey, and our elders what I was going through. I held nothing back and told them everything I could think to tell them: "This has never happened to me before...I feel lost...I'm confused...I don't know what to do"...and on it went. For many weeks, I sat across from an accountability partner and simply asked him to pray for me because I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what it was.

Frankly, there's not enough space in this book

to express to God how thankful I am for a godly wife, godly elders, and godly friends. They listened. They prayed with me. They prayed for me. They spoke truth from God's word into my life. Stacey texted me some mornings (and she still does) to tell me specifically how she was praying for me and, without fail, she was praying for the very things I needed God to do for me. These people around me graciously saw that the loving Saviour who is still sanctifying them is still sanctifying me, too, regardless of my position in a church.

The third lesson was that it's important to work through the emotion but still be level-headed. Something was wrong. I knew that, but since I didn't know what, I had to take into consideration all possibilities. I went to see my family doctor. I didn't know if there was something physical going on inside of me that needed to be addressed, but I didn't want to leave anything unchecked. After I told my doctor what was happening, he said I was showing some of the physical symptoms of anxiety, maybe even depression. I was shocked, not to mention a little more anxious than I was before I got there. I left his office after my appointment was over and, as I was walking back to my car, all I could think was: How did this happen? How did I *let* this happen?

And maybe more importantly: How do I get out of here?

Which led to the fourth lesson after Easter weekend: God can take a scary situation and turn it into something that can help people. This ongoing experience drove me to learn more specifically what God has to say about anxiety. I had preached on anxiety before. I had counselled others on how to respond to anxiety. But before that Easter weekend, I had never known anxiety like this. This experience changed how I viewed it and how I view others who struggled with it. And then the questions started to flow:

What does God say anxiety is?

What does God say about how we get ourselves into patterns of anxious living?

What does God say about how God gets us out of those patterns of anxious living?

And how, by the strength of God, do I attack anxiety before anxiety attacks me?

What I experienced on Easter weekend of 2018 is not unique. That particular circumstance is unique to me, but the greater problem behind it is not. Anxiety, in all its different forms, is not only overwhelming our culture, but it's also infiltrating the church. This should not surprise us. We are humans living in a broken and sinful world. I imagine you could probably tell a story or two of

how you have experienced anxiety, worry, fear, panic attacks, or any number of challenges at different times and in different ways and to different levels. The question is: *How do you make sure the anxiety you experience through your life does not become a sinful pattern in your life?*

That's the purpose of this book.

WHERE WE'RE GOING—THREE WORDS TO DESCRIBE THIS BOOK

SMALL

This is a small book divided into smaller sections. It's small on purpose. If you're anxious, depressed, fearful, worried, or any number of related emotions, you need to hear the truth and authority of God's word spoken into your life and over your circumstances. But sometimes, the most helpful approach is to have small doses of truth in consistent portions, just like a prescription from your doctor. Read one section at a time or as many sections as you want, but if you're in a spot where all you can handle are smaller slices, that's OK. Just be sure you're consistently filling your mind with the truth from God that you need to hear, believe, and apply.

SIMPLE

I'm a simple guy. I like simple things. Hence, your guarantee that this will be a simple book. Consequently, this book will not attempt to provide medical answers to why we struggle with anxiety, nor will it address psychological remedies for the problems that ail us. There is certainly a place for medical help in some cases, but that is not the purpose of this book. My goal is to explore some passages from God's word to see what He has to say about our battles with anxiety, and I think we'll find that, in the end, God's answers are pretty straightforward, as well.

My desire is to keep this as simple as possible because simplicity is the seed of transformation. The gospel of Jesus Christ is simple but demanding. Grace-filled *and* life-changing. Gospel truth properly applied in the believer's life by the power of the Holy Spirit is truly dynamic, and the enemy wants nothing to do with it! So, can we all agree? The simpler, the better.

SIGNIFICANT

What makes this significant is not what I have to tell you. It's what God has to tell you. This book

is based on the word of God. When it comes to the most significant burdens you bear, you don't need my thoughts, opinions, or philosophies. You don't need clever tips, tricks, or ideas about how to have a better life by Friday. You need truth. The truth of God's word is what transforms us. At one of the most critical times of his life, Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). A life surrendered to the truth of God's word will know the favour of God's presence. And that, more than anything else, is what we need in the most difficult moments of our lives.

So, let's begin here: Ask for God's help in prayer, open your Bible, and keep reading. It's time to wage war on the burdens you bear.

Part One:

Getting on the Same Page

1

Getting on the Same Page

Before we go any further, let's define anxiety. What are we talking about when we refer to being anxious?

When the Bible talks about anxiety or being anxious, it means to care for something, to be encumbered with a heaviness, or to be troubled with cares. It means to be pulled in different directions. Think of it like a tug-of-war. Some of my fondest playground memories are the battles fought over a rope that blistered the skin off the insides of my hands. (Some might say I had a misguided childhood!) Teams form on each end of the rope, and the tug-of-war begins when both sides start pulling in opposite directions. But what happens when both sides start to pull? All of a sudden, the middle of the rope becomes extremely tight. All the tension is in the middle of the rope.

Our anxiety works in much the same way. On one side of our life are all our hopes. We hope for things both now and in the future, and we often work hard not only to protect our hopes but also to defend against anything that might pose a threat to them. In turn, that opens our eyes to what's on the other end of our life, which are our fears. We fear many things in life. It is good for us to fear some things, like driving too fast around a sharp corner. There are other things that our fear tends to super-size. Often unwittingly, we give those things attention that is disproportionate to their ability to harm us. And all the while, there's a tug-of-war happening with our hearts. Hopes pull one way while fears pull the other way, and we find ourselves living right in the middle of that rope. Everything is tight and tense because the cares and concerns of our lives are pulling our hearts in a different direction than where God wants us to go. And that's when we get anxious and start to feel as if we're being stretched to the breaking point. The question is: how do we stop living in the middle of the rope?

See, the challenge for us is that this life is full of cares and troubles and concerns that meet us on a daily basis. The Bible acknowledges that fear and anxiety are unavoidable in a sinful, broken world. That's why Scripture talks about fear and

anxiety more than three hundred times. God knows we struggle, and He informs us that He is the answer to that struggle; He will provide whatever comfort we need to free us from our anxiety:

***Psalm 34:4:** I sought the LORD and he answered me; He delivered me from all my fears.*

***Psalm 55:22:** Cast your anxieties on the LORD and he will sustain you; He will never let the righteous be shaken.*

***Psalm 94:19:** When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul*

***Proverbs 12:25:** Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad*

***Matthew 11:28:** Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*

***Psalm 56:3:** When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.*

God knows we struggle. And the war begins for us when the cares and concerns of our lives are trying to pull us away from God rather than drawing us closer to him.