

A Song for the Anxious

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[0 : 00] Well, anxiety is on the rise. These days so many people are just stressed out of their skulls and anxious. This week on Twitter was trending, hashtag things that give me anxiety.

If you're on Twitter you may have seen it, you may have even contributed to things that give you anxiety. And they range from the ridiculous right through to some really serious issues.

Because anxiety is a serious problem for our society here in the UK and the West. The NHS Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, which was published in 2016, indicated that anxiety and depression affect about one in six people.

And also, this of course doesn't just impact adults, it impacts young people. And it's not helped by social media. So a recent YouGov survey showed that 18% of 16-25 year olds in the UK don't think that life is worth living.

18% don't think life is worth living. And just under half of those who were surveyed and who use social media feel more anxious about the future because they compare themselves to other people on social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter and Facebook.

[1 : 22] And they see what other people are like and then feel anxious and worried because they're not like them. It also impacts students. So a poll of almost 38,000 UK students suggests rates of psychological distress and illness are on the rise in universities with alarmingly high levels of anxiety, loneliness, substance misuse and thoughts of self-harm.

So students reported high levels of anxiety with 42.8% often or almost always worried. And almost 9 in 10, that's 87%, said they struggled with feelings of anxiety as students.

Anxiety has also become a multi-million pound industry. So Time magazine named Blankets That Ease Anxiety, that is weighted blankets, as one of the best inventions in 2018.

I think that would give me more anxiety, a weighted blanket, less. So from squishy toys through to fidget spinners to colouring books to weighted blankets, there's a growing number of products that are designed to combat anxiety.

There was even a company I discovered called Body Vibes, and they'll sell you a pack of anti-anxiety stickers for £30. And you're going to stick these stickers on your body, and it's meant to rebalance the energy frequency of your body.

[2 : 50] I don't have any, but £30, and you can get some. So there's always plenty of advice within our world to combat anxiety, because it is such a problem. And you've probably read an article in a newspaper or in a magazine or online that says something along the lines of 10 ways to fight your fears, or how to overcome anxiety, or how to stop worrying.

So this week I read about the seven best apps for anxiety. Some of the apps have been developed by clinical psychologists, because they want to give us the technological tools to help combat anxiety.

Helping us exercise, helping us relax, helping us breathe, meditate, channel our thoughts, fears, behaviours, to give us strategies for managing anxiety.

And so there's no shortage of suggestions to help us cope with anxious feelings, of ways to help us relax, or to change our perspective, or to visualise things differently, or to try various different techniques.

But all of these strategies and all of this advice is basically saying the same thing. And you've probably noticed this. All of these suggestions are telling us that we are the solution to our fears and to our anxiety.

[4 : 09] But if we want to combat anxiety, the answer is to be found in us or in what we do. But when we come to Psalm 27, Psalm 27 suggests an altogether very different solution.

Because it gives us an ancient answer to what is a present problem. And it's got nothing to do with you, and it's got nothing to do with me, because it's got everything to do with God.

And so if you're feeling anxious, or afraid, or worried right now, then Psalm 27 is a great song for the anxious. But even if that's not how you're feeling right now, good, then we would all do well to store up Psalm 27 in the medicine chest of our souls that bank it there for times when we do feel anxious or worried.

Because it tells us how to have confidence in God, no matter what we're facing in life. So just look down at David's situation to get an idea of what he was going through when he wrote this Psalm.

Verse 2. And then he describes what could possibly be the worst situation ever.

[5 : 33] In verse 10. And so whether David was going through all this, or whether David was imagining the worst, what he does is he gives us a strategy for dealing with anxiety.

So see how, three things, see how in verse 1 to 6, David expresses his confidence in the Lord for protection from his enemies. Verse 7 to 12, he expresses his confidence in the Lord through prayer. And then in verse 13 and 14, he concludes by expressing his confidence in the Lord with patience. He waits. So three things, confidence in the Lord for protection, confidence in the Lord through prayer, and confidence in the Lord with patience.

So first of all, confidence in the Lord for protection. Verse 1 to verse 6. David begins his Psalm by expressing his confidence in God. Verse 1. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? So David starts in the right place, doesn't he? He doesn't start with his problems, although there are many.

[6 : 44] He doesn't focus on his fears, although he's got plenty. He focuses on God and his relationship with him. And that's always where we should begin, isn't it?

We can be so overwhelmed by our worries, by our troubles, by our fears, that we forget about God. But David says, the Lord is my light and my salvation.

And the Lord is the stronghold of my life. So he's saying that the truth about who God is and the security he has in this relationship with God means that he doesn't need to be afraid of anyone, and he doesn't need to be afraid of anything.

Because David is confident that God will protect him no matter what he's facing. So verse 2. When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall.

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear. Though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. So he is reminding himself that he doesn't need to be afraid.

[7 : 52] Three times he says in those verses, verse 1, 2, and 3, he says he will not fear. Now I'm guessing that we probably won't face these situations.

We're not going to walk outside and an army is going to besiege us and take us away and kill us. They're going to threaten to kill us. That's not going to happen. And so if David here can have confidence in God in the very worst situations in life, then surely we can have confidence in God for the lesser situations that we encounter on a daily or weekly basis.

Not because we are being told here to be like David, but because we have David's God, the same God who offers the same protection and who looks after us and loves us and cares for us in the same way that David's expressing here in the psalm.

So if we can say the Lord is my salvation, then God has already saved us from the very worst that we could possibly face.

So I don't know if there's anything that you're anxious about right now or if there's anything that's keeping you awake at night and you can't sleep, but David reminds us that we can have confidence in God to protect us.

[9 : 10] Not because God's going to make all our problems go away. I'm sure David's still had the same problems when he'd finished writing this psalm, this psalm. Or because we can train ourselves to visualize things differently because we're not talking about self-confidence here.

We're talking about confidence in the Lord. And so what is David's secret? Well, the answer is in verse 4 and verse 5. So look down with me.

We'll read those together. So there's one thing that David seeks more than anything else.

It's that he may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. That's what he seeks. Well, what does that mean? Well, he's not saying he wants to spend the rest of his life in church, which is good.

It's his way of saying that he wants to be in God's presence, to gaze on God's beauty. He wants to be near God. Because even in the trouble and despite the difficult circumstances, with all that there is to worry about, being near God and knowing God's presence with him, even if things don't change, is what is going to help him and give him confidence to face life.

[10:51] Because what he's saying here is that life with God means maximum security. So God's gates can't be smashed. God's walls can't be penetrated or scaled.

And God's windows are bulletproof. He is safe. He protects his people. And so if we are with God in a relationship with him, then we're safe.

And David knew this. And that's why he's talking about more than just a physical building here, like the temple or the tabernacle. And so David's supreme priority is to gaze on the beauty of the Lord. Gazing is not just a one-time glimpse, but it is a steady and a sustained focus on something. If you gaze on something, you really appreciate that thing that you gaze upon.

This past week, we had somebody come to visit us and they wanted to see the Stella McCartney photographic exhibition at the Kelvin Grove Art Gallery and Museum. And so we dropped them off outside so they could go in to look at the photographs.

[11:57] And then I parked the car, which took about three minutes. Then walked around the block to look for somewhere to eat for lunch, which took about two minutes. And then after five minutes, walked back into the door of the Kelvin Grove Art Gallery and Museum.

And the person who will remain unnamed was standing there. And I thought, oh, the organ was playing. They were listening to the organ. And I thought, oh, they must just be enjoying the lovely music. And then he said, oh, I've been to see the exhibition.

Paid money to go to the exhibition and I'd been to see it. And took about three and a half minutes to walk around all these photos and was out. And I thought, you can look at something and if it isn't really worth looking at or it doesn't move you in any way, you'll soon get fed up and you'll move on to the next thing.

But a gaze is a sustained looking and focus on something. And that's what David here is doing with God. He wants to gaze on God's beauty, God's character, God's attributes, what God's like.

It's what he wants to be, the focus and the attention. Of his life. So he's admiring God for who he is. And he's enjoying God for who he is. So David doesn't just want to know God for what God can do for him or for what God can give him or how God can protect him.

[13:22] He wants to know God for God. He wants to know God. He just wants God. He wants God. Everything else is a byproduct of being in the relationship with God.

So having God and being satisfied in God is what sustained David and gave him contentment. So it's obvious he's having difficulties, but gazing on the beauty of the Lord enables David to live in confident peace.

So whilst all hell might break loose around about him, he'll be at peace. Because he's gazing on God. He's in a relationship with him. He wants God.

Because if, think about it, if his gaze is on God, then he's not looking at all the problems in his life. Because when you're looking at all the problems in your life, probably you're not looking to God.

And so for David, God did become too small for him. And people and problems became too big for him. And so often, that's how we can be.

[14:28] People, problems, circumstances can become far too big in our vision, in our gaze, that God becomes too small. And so David here is making sure that God has his rightful place and we don't forget or overlook what he is really like.

And so this doesn't just help David survive through this anxious period. It actually helps him thrive. So look at verse 6. Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me at his sacred tent.

I will sacrifice with shouts of joy. So David is able to see past his enemies so he can shout for joy and sing and make music to the Lord, despite what's going on around about him.

So how is he able to do this? Well, it's because God was at the centre of his life. The Lord was his light and his salvation. The Lord was the stronghold of his life.

That's why he had no need to be afraid, no need to fear. Because if God is not at the centre of our lives, if he is not first placed in our hearts, then something else will be.

[15:37] Something else will dislodge him and take his place as our main focus in life. Because if our gaze is fixed on the beauty of the Lord, it will be fixed on another thing.

If our greatest treasure in life is dwelling with God, then other things or other people, no matter what they're like or what they do, won't disturb us or unsettle us because we know that God is with us. And so when we're anxious or when we're afraid, and what we're anxious of and what we're afraid of, that will indicate to us what is central in our lives.

Because that will be the thing that we focus on. That will be the thing that we look to for security.

And when it fails, we don't have the security, and we're anxious.

So basically our fears show us what our real treasure is. So if we trace the fear back to our heart, then we begin to see the thing that we love more than God.

[16:42] That's the thing we'll look to more than God when we feel worried or afraid. And it might be our success, it might be our job, it might be our security, it might be our relationships, it might be our money.

Whatever we fear losing will be what we look to for confidence instead of looking to God. Because we'll look there for protection, we'll look there for comfort, we'll look there for peace rather than to God.

And that's why the psalm isn't really a quick fix for anxiety. It's not like sticking on a plaster, it's not like taking a pill, or having immediate surgery in an emergency for something that's wrong with your body.

As if all things, problems will disappear in the morning. That's not what the psalm is like. It's telling us that it really takes time to know God. That's why David seeks, David dwells, David gazes, because if something is beautiful, we gaze at it for a long time so that we can appreciate its beauty. Unlike this person who didn't look for very long at Stella McCartney's photographs because they didn't think they were so beautiful. And so it is with God. If we gaze at Him, we'll see the beauty in Him and that will satisfy us and that will help us and sustain us.

[18:07] Because when you make God at the centre of your life, or you put Him at the centre of your life, when He's the one object of our beauty, when He's the one object of beauty, then everything else just won't look so good anymore.

So if we gaze is on other things, it's no wonder that we're anxious or afraid that those things fail us because ultimately only God can protect us and He will never fail us.

And so that's the first point, confidence in the Lord for protection. The second is confidence in the Lord through prayer, verse 7 to 12. Now David talks to God in prayer.

So verse 7, hear my voice when I call, Lord, be merciful to me and answer me. Talking to God. So what's going on here? In a sense, the psalm seems to be back to front because normally in most of the psalms, they start with a prayer of desperation, comes from David, and then there's a resolution, and then there's an answer, and then there's the reason for the confidence.

But here, confidence in God is then followed by crying out to God. And so what's it saying? Well, it's saying that those who are confident in God will automatically pray to God.

[19:23] Confident believers are praying believers. So David lived in the real world, and so he's praying here about the difficulties and the dangers that he faces. And if we enjoy a relationship with God, then we can be honest about how we are feeling and express to him the troubles and the worries of our hearts.

Because prayer isn't just about asking for things. Prayer is about depending on God for everything. Because God wants his people to seek him.

That's clear here. Look at verse 8. My heart says of you, seek his face. Your face, Lord, I will seek. So it's God who says to his people, seek my face.

And so to seek God's face is to seek this intimate relationship, this fellowship with him. And so David responds to God by saying, your face, Lord, I will seek.

Because there's a difference, isn't there, between knowing God and knowing about God. So in verse 7 to 12, David is saying he wants a deep experience of God in his life.

[20:33] Doesn't just want to know him, but wants to experience him. Sorry, he doesn't just want to know about him, but wants to really experience him. That's why he's crying out in prayer, seeking his face.

So just, I mean, just think about it. If you want to have a genuine relationship with somebody, then you need to see that person face to face. I guess that's why Facebook has got such a misleading name.

Because you don't get face-to-face contact with people through Facebook. And we've probably all got loads of friends on Facebook. I checked how many friends I had on Facebook. And I can't believe it. Because I think I only know about 100 people. And I've got so many more on Facebook. Many of whom I've never even met. So I can't have any kind of genuine relationship with some of these people.

Facebook might as well be called Remote Book. Because all these people are remote. It doesn't give those face-to-face interactions that are necessary for a genuine and an authentic relationship. [21 : 41] And so that's why David here wants to come face-to-face with God. He didn't just want to know God in a general way. But he wanted to know God. He wanted God's presence in his life.

That's why he says in verse 9, Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger. You have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me. God, my Savior.

What he's saying is, I want to know that you're with me, God. You're my Savior. I know in my head that you'll protect me, but I'm crying out to you because I want to feel the experience of being protected by you, to know that you're with me.

So David knows that God is never going to abandon him. Even if his parents do. Verse 10, Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.

So what David does is, he takes this strongest of all human relationships, that between a parent and a child. We've got plenty here today. And he takes this relationship to express God's relationship with his people.

[22 : 49] It's even stronger than a parent and a child. So David's not just praying here to save his own skin, and nor is he just a worshiper seeking God's face.

He's not just seeking an experience. He also wants to follow God's way. He says in verse 11, Teach me your way, Lord. Lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.

So he's praying that he would know God's will and that he'd walk in it, whatever that will of God for him looks like. And I wonder how often that's our prayer, when we're worried or afraid.

We probably just pray, Protect me, God. God, save me. Rescue me. God, make this stop. But David prays, I want you, God, not just what you can do for me.

And I want to walk in your ways. So teach me what they are that I would faithfully follow them. I think that some Christians can emphasize one or other of these, either seeking an experience of God, so emotional, or seeking knowledge of God's cerebral.

[24 : 01] But David wants both. He wants an experience of God in his life. He also wants an understanding of God so that he might be able to obey him and follow him.

And so if we've got this relationship with God, then we can follow God and his ways and be confident in prayer. And so when you're anxious or when you're afraid, the worst possible thing is to stop praying because God is inviting us to seek him.

And Jesus says the same in one of the Bible's great passages on worry in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 6. Three times Jesus says, do not be anxious, do not be anxious, do not be anxious, but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness because when God is at the center of our lives and when God's priorities become our priorities through prayer, then we'll have confidence in God.

So confidence in the Lord for protection, first of all. Second, confidence in the Lord through prayer. And then thirdly, confidence in the Lord with patience. So the psalm ends in confidence, but the encouragement to be patient.

So look down at verse 13 and 14. I remain confident of this. I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

[25 : 27] So David waits. Now, presumably, his circumstances haven't changed that much from when he took the pen in his hand and began to write this psalm to the end.

The slander, the violence, the danger are still there. But he's confident because he knows that God is good. So he says, be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Because it's only when you know God that you can wait with patience as opposed to panicking with fear. Because if you leave God out of life and live life with no relation to God whatsoever, there's no reason to be strong and take heart, is there?

It's useless saying to somebody, be strong and take heart and always look on the bright side of life. Be strong and take heart and try and just forget about all your problems. Be strong and take heart and just relax a bit more.

Or try these breathing exercises and then you be held. Or be strong and take heart because what you believe will happen will probably never happen anyway. It's never going to work, is it?
[26 : 37] Why? Because it's putting confidence in ourselves, in us, in our strength and in our ability instead of putting our confidence in God.

So this psalm doesn't teach us to live like the poet W.E. Henley and his poet Invictus suggests when he said it matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. Like in confidence is foolishness because the message of the psalm tells us there's only confidence in the Lord that will do anyone any good in their life.

If that's the case, well how do we wait? Well waiting doesn't just mean sitting around doing nothing on a sofa. It means dwelling dwelling in God's presence. As David says, it means gazing upon his beauty.

It means seeking his face. That's how to wait. Keep on dwelling, keep on gazing, keep on seeking. Because when we make this the central purpose of our lives, we might not know what the future holds, but we know the one who holds the future.

[27 : 53] Because if we can say the Lord is my light and my salvation, the Lord is the stronghold of my life, we've got nothing whatsoever to fear. And yet, we probably still feel anxious.

So you may be sitting there thinking, well I still have worries and fears, I still feel anxiety. But we're never going to stop feeling anxious if we just think that trying harder is the answer.

Because again, that's just putting the confidence in ourselves. We can't do it on our own. We need Jesus Christ. And that's why the psalm points us to Jesus.

Because Jesus shared David's confidence despite facing the very worst. Jesus encountered wicked enemies who wanted to kill him.

And they used false witnesses against him. And they were even more violent towards him. And ultimately, they crucified him. And so as Jesus died on the cross, he was forsaken by God the Father.

[28 : 56] So we would need to never be forsaken by God. And yet, Jesus didn't fear, but he trusted his Father. And his one desire was for his Father's presence.

And so Jesus prayed with loud cries and with tears to the one who was able to save him from death. And he was hurt. that Jesus had to wait for the Lord to do his work through him.

As he hung on the cross, separated from his Father for the first time in all eternity, waiting for God to complete his work. And so it's as we pray this psalm with Jesus that we can learn the confidence that he had in God so that we can be saved and rescued.

It's only through knowing that Jesus died in our place for our sins that gives us this confidence.

Because if God has saved us from the worst that could ever happen to us, which is an eternity in hell separated from him, then we can be sure that we've got nothing to fear in this life.

Nothing at all. What's the worst that anybody can do to us if we're in a relationship with God? And so this psalm should be a psalm that gives us strength.

[30 : 15] Let me tell you a man called James Hannington who found strength in this very psalm. He was an Anglican missionary in Uganda and he became the first bishop of eastern equatorial Africa.

And in 1885 he was aged 37, young, and he was seized and he was imprisoned. And the day before he died a martyr's death, he wrote this in his journal.

And I quote, October the 28th, seventh day, a terrible night, first with noisy drunken guards and secondly with vermin. I don't think I got one hour of sleep and woke with fever fast developing.

Oh Lord, do you have mercy on me and release me. I am quite broken down and brought low.

Comforted by reading 27th Psalm. Fever developed very rapidly, soon was delirious, and then he soon died.

How could he be comforted by Psalm 27, despite what he was going through? It's because he knew the Lord his God. And so whether in life or in death, he had nothing to fear.

[31 : 24] And so whether in life or in death, the Christian who trusts in Jesus Christ has absolutely nothing to fear. And so do we have this confidence confidence in the Lord?

Because if we don't, then we can get it. Seek God and you'll find him in Jesus Christ. And through him, you'll find ultimate security that nothing in this world can take away.

That's why there's no need to be anxious.