When You Believe in God but Still Worry All the Time

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[0:00] Well, we continue our series today as we think about the theme of worry. When you believe in God, but find that you worry all the time. A Christian union in a university was doing a session where they were looking at this subject of worry.

And they invited a minister of one of the local churches in that town to come and speak. He was very carefully briefed and when he came, he spoke at length, in great depth and detail, and with real authority as an expert on the subject of worry, stress and anxiety.
And he held these people throughout this fairly lengthy talk actually, on the subject of worry and stress. And he said it's really important that you don't worry. And the reason why you shouldn't worry is because the Bible talks about it at length.
And he quoted chapter and verse in great detail as he unpacked Scripture before these students. Every time he made another point, he said, you must not worry.
Having brought his talk to a bit of a climax, he gave an open appeal. He said, if you are worrying about something right now, I'm going to pray for you. And he led them in a time of prayer, inviting them to bring their worries before God.
[1:26] Because, as he brought his message to a close, he said, do not worry. People responded in prayer. He got to the end of... He went and sat down.

After the meeting closed, the leader of the Christian union went over to this minister. And he was sat there looking really quite awkward and uneasy. In fact, he seemed to be breathing in a rather unusual kind of way.
And in fact, it became apparent that he seemed to be having some kind of panic attack. And the student, president of the Christian union said, are you okay?
He said, no, I'm just really worried that I didn't get my message across. I'm going to level with you this morning, good and proper. I'm not the minister in that story.
But I could have been. I'm a worrier. And for as long as I've known myself...
[2:28] It's always been that way. I could try and work it out by sort of thinking about, well, you know, my DNA, maybe.

I could think maybe it's stuff that's happened. It's probably a combination of the two. But I'm a worrier. And as I honestly think about that question, what do I worry about? You know, I don't think I can think of a single thing that I haven't worried about at some point in my life.
Sometimes I worry because I feel like I haven't got enough to worry about. Sometimes I'll lay awake at night just worrying about one thing after the other. I'll wake up in the morning with my stomach churning and I can't even tell you what it is that I'm worried about.
I'm just feeling anxious. Of course, sometimes it's circumstance. I worry about something. It's come, it goes, it's absolutely fine. But do I stop worrying? No.
No. No. So why am I telling you this? Well, I'm telling this to you because I know, I know how if you are somebody who worries, I'll come on to that in a moment, if you are somebody who worries too, and if you're somebody who's feeling fraught with anxiety right now for any reason whatsoever, I know that one of the most unhelpful things is when somebody else comes along and tells you not to worry.
[3:59] So I'm not taking any moral or spiritual high ground on this subject because I have not the right or the authority to do so. Anything I'm going to share with you is as one worrier to another.

Sometimes I actually wonder whether God lets me worry or whether God chose me to be a minister because he knows I'm a worrier and knows that there's perhaps just a chance that I might be able

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to connect with you if you're a worrier.
It might well be that you're listening to me talking right now and thinking, Russell, I don't really know what you're talking about because I've got worries every now and then, but I don't really know what it's like to feel anxiety in any depth.
If that's you, I am genuinely, honestly pleased for you. I really am. But if that is you, please don't switch off because I can guarantee you this, that if we approach this theme of worry and anxiety right now, whilst you might not feel it's directly relevant to you, I promise you, I guarantee you that either the person sat next to you or somebody sat very near you will be somebody that struggles.
And I can say that to you as somebody who's been in pastoral ministry for my entire working life.
And I know wherever I've been, wherever I go, whatever age or stage in life I look at, the most common pastoral issue is anxiety.
[5:42] Often it goes hand in hand with depression. Perfectionism often has something to do with it as well. But you'd be surprised just how widespread anxiety is.

So that's that rather extended introduction out of the way. Let's just think about what worry is. What are we talking about? I want to recommend a book to you. Some of you may have read it before.
It's called The Worry Book. If I'd have thought this through, I'd have had a picture of it and ready to shine up on there and put it on the notices, but I forgot. I'm sorry. Now I'm going to be really worried.
Google The Worry Book.
It will come up. It's written by Will van der Hart and Rob Waller. One of them is an Anglican vicar based in HDB in London. The other is a consultant psychiatrist working in Scotland.
It's a brilliant book. It's deep, but it's easy to understand. And it connects from a Christian perspective on the theme of worry. It's based on, some of you may be familiar with, something called CBT, cognitive behavioural therapy, which is a standard approach to dealing with anxiety.
[6:58] And as they unpack worry, they say that there is something which is referred to as neuroticism that is part of what it is to be human.

And it exists in all of us to some degree or another. And in fact, it's something that we all need to some degree. There is such a thing as a healthy level of neuroticism.
Because it's the kind of sensitivity that stops you getting into trouble. It's the kind of thing that when alarm bells start going off and lights start to flash and you can see that danger is on its way, that's a healthy level of neuroticism going on you.
It's the sort of thing that stops you getting into trouble, stops you making rash decisions, stops you getting into fights. We need a healthy level of neuroticism in us.
But it can get out of control. And when it does, it can develop into something that is called generalised anxiety disorder.
[8:08] And that's the thing when we start getting things way out of proportion, out of perspective. When worry and anxiety gets a hold of us really deep within so that independently of circumstances, we're feeling anxious.

And when that happens, it can get us into a lot of trouble. Now, what I think they very unhelpfully unpack in this book is the way in which, because there is such a thing as a healthy level of neuroticism, that the danger for us when we worry is we think that there could be something good and helpful about the habit of worrying.
You see, there are two, broadly speaking, types of worries. There's what you call solvable worries. Those are worries that have a solution. And normally, they're quite simple, actually.
You're worrying about something, but it is solvable. There's an answer there. And in that situation, worry has a helpful place to play because it's as you start to think about it, perhaps get a little bit nervous about it, that it leads to solutions.
And the nervous worry is something that drives you to that point of solution. So there can be such a thing as a good type of worry. And because there can be such a thing as a good and healthy type of worry and such a thing as a good and healthy type of neuroticism, the danger can be that we latch ourselves onto that so that we can't tell the difference between good, helpful worry and unhelpful worry.
[9:45] So we start to worry about everything because there's something deep inside us that's telling us it's a good thing to do this. If you worry, it's somehow going to help the situation along. Whereas, in fact, it's doing the very opposite.

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It can destroy you completely. So, if that's broadly how worry can help us and how worry can actually also be our worst enemy, what can we say in terms of faith?
Now, I've already said that one of the most unhelpful things to hear if you're worried is somebody else telling you to get a grip, to get some perspective. But I just want to think about perspective for one moment.
We're going to watch a very short video clip from my favourite all-time TV vicar, Father Ted. What will we do for the next two weeks?
Will I put on the kettle? Yeah, go on. Must be one of the ones that clicks off automatically.
[10:54] Yes. Yes. Bit of steam there. Incidentally, did you bring any tea bags? No. Right.

Okay, one last time. These are small, but the ones out there are far away. small, far away.
I forget it. Perspective. And that's how worry can get into the system and things can get totally out of perspective.
When we see something, when we're lying there awake at night, it's keeping us awake and we're worrying about it, it can seem so much bigger than it does in the cold light of day. And getting things into perspective can be one of the first and most helpful things that we can do.
Samuel Johnson, apparently, came up with this idea called the 100-year rule. And he said this, that if you're worried about something, ask yourself the question, what's the worst possible thing that could happen if what you're worrying about actually does go wrong in the way that you're thinking it might?
[12:24] And ask yourself the difference. Would it make any, what difference would it make to you or to anyone 100 years from now? Now, putting it in that perspective, then ask yourself the question, what difference would it make if this thing you're worrying about goes wrong, what difference would it make in 20 years' time?

What about in 10 years' time? Five? What about next week? And sometimes when we begin to ask those questions and unpack our worries, it puts things into a certain perspective.
Now, I'm going to come back to that for a moment, but before I do, I just want to share with you another thing. J. Arthur Rank had a way of dealing with his worries. He kept what was called a worry box. And whenever he worried about something, he wrote it down on a piece of paper and he put it in his worry box.
And he resolved that once a week he would open that box. I think it was a Wednesday. He would open his box and he would go through his worries. And almost every time, without exception, he found that by the time he'd opened the box, the thing that he'd written down earlier in the week had been and gone and he'd forgotten about it.
Now, I share this with you because perspective against time is a really important thing when it comes to disarming worry of its power. Jesus has this to say.
[13:55] Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life. Simple as that.

Clearly, Jesus had not read the pastoral care manuals. You know, I've already said to you, I don't like it when somebody says to me, stop worrying, get a grip.
But strangely, with Jesus, we can make an exception. And I find there's something amazingly empowering about the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord of all eternity, the one who conquers sin and death on a cross and walks away from the grave, says, therefore, I tell you.
Next time you're worrying about anything, don't just read those words, but read those words and think about who it is that's saying them.
Jesus says, do not worry. Now, I'm not going to pretend it's easy. The evangelist J. John said that of all of Jesus' commandments, the commandment not to worry is arguably the most challenging.
[15:23] What might it look like in practical terms? Let's just take this up to the next level and go to Paul.

Because Paul offered some very, very helpful advice when it comes to worry. In 2 Corinthians 10, he writes this, for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds.
We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God. Now, listen to this. And we take every thought captive to obey Christ.
We take every thought captive to obey Christ. Now, when Paul was talking here, he was talking about fighting a spiritual battle and engaging in the objections that people put up against the Christian gospel.

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But hey, if anxiety isn't one of those obstacles, then I don't know what is. So whilst he may not specifically have been talking about the psychology of worrying, there's a really important principle here, and it's this.
[16:48] Paul is saying pay really close attention to your thoughts. Take every thought captive. Let me give you an illustration. I've got a coin in my hand here, and you probably won't be able to make out what that is exactly, other than a coin, but I've got a drawer at home, and in that drawer there's an old ice cream tub.

It's full of coins. I carry loose change with me most of the time, and when I've got too much of it, I just chuck it in this ice cream tub. A few months ago, it was full up, so I decided to take it into the bank, where they've got one of those fantastic machines where you tip loose change into.
It counts it out within a fraction of a nanosecond and spits out a piece of paper saying how much it is. You take it to the counter, you cash it in. You've probably seen them. On this occasion, it's not only spat out the piece of paper, it's spat out this coin.
Now, from where you're sitting, you might just about be able to make it out and think, well, that looks like a 5p. Do you know, I'm holding it up right here and I think it looks like a 5p, but it's not. In fact, I haven't a clue what currency it is and I don't know where it came from, so if anyone wants to come out afterwards and try and identify it, you're welcome.
The point is this. For ages, it was sat on a pile of 5ps and I thought it was another 5p. You see, it's not easy to tell the difference between coins when they look the same.
[18:13] It's even harder to filter out thoughts from helpful thoughts to unhelpful thoughts. And what I want to say to you is that sometimes when we are worrying, the problem is that we have not learnt to filter out what is helpful from what is unhelpful.

And because of the subtlety of neuroticism, it can come in a healthy form but it can also be destructive. And it might well be that the thing that we're thinking about is a healthy type of worry. But you know, more often than not, I bet it's not. And so Paul says, take every thought captive to obey Christ.
What does that mean in practical spiritual terms? Next time you have a worry and a thought, just pay attention to that thought and unpack it and think, what is it? How helpful is that? But don't stop there.
Take it captive. In other words, take it in prayer and offer it to Jesus. And if you're thinking, well, how do I do that?
[19:19] Well, let's stay with Paul because he gives us even more advice. Because in Philippians he says this, rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. 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 your minds in Christ Jesus. Now, notice there that Paul directly instructs, do not worry about anything.
Now, I've already told you this morning my hang-ups about being spoken to like that. I did say, however, that I make an exception when it comes to Jesus. And because I regard Scripture as God's word, I'm also up for being told what to do by Paul.
But notice that Paul here simply doesn't tell us to quit worrying. Rather, he urges us to bring our worried thoughts before God in prayer.
[20:26] So another way of putting it would be to say, take your worried thoughts captive. Filter them out and take them captive. And then let them go, releasing them to God in faith.

And all of that's set within the framework of rejoicing and thanksgiving. In other words, to contemplate the eternity of God who's near. And so it all is that Paul continues, finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.
If there's any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. We're going to pray now and I want to help us into that.
Think about this. There is a saying, glance at your worries, gaze upon God.
God. I think that's what Paul's saying to do there. To think about the good things of God. Not as a form of distraction, but as a way of letting go of that which is unhelpful.

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[21:37] I've shared this picture with you before, but I'm going to do it again. Imagine you're behind the wheel of a car and you're driving forward. Now in terms of observation, in the broadest sense, there are two things that need to be going on.

One is to be gazing forward through the windscreen. Two is to take the occasional glance in the mirror so you can see what's behind you. Imagine the disaster that could occur if you got it the other way round.

You were gazing in your mirror and just occasionally glancing forward. And yet that's exactly what we do when it comes to the distinction between helpful and destructive thoughts.

When it comes to those forms of contemplation that are helpful and life-giving and those that will bring us down. And Paul's invitation to each one of us is to filter out those thoughts, to take every thought captive and to take those destructive ones, to take them before God and not to ignore them, but just to glance at them, to hold them in their rightful place of perspective because we gaze on God.

It doesn't deny the reality of those things that worry us, but it puts them into perspective. anything that are very important to identify the hygiene

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