

# Battling the Unbelief of Anxiety

by John Piper

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*John Piper's sermon emphasizes that anxiety is rooted in unbelief and can be overcome through faith in God's promises and prayer.*

**Duration:** 30:50

**Topics:** "Faith And Anxiety", "Trust In God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the promise made by Jesus that if we prioritize God's purposes in our lives, He will meet all our needs. The preacher emphasizes the importance of faith in believing this promise. He refers to a passage in Philippians 4 and Matthew 6 to provide examples of battling unbelief and overcoming anxiety. The preacher highlights the issue of anxiety about food and clothing and how it can be rooted in unbelief. He encourages listeners to trust in God's promises and seek His kingdom and righteousness first.

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## Transcript

The text for this morning's sermon is found in Matthew chapter 6, verses 25 through 34. Matthew chapter 6, verses 25 through 34. Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.

Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you, by being anxious, can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

We acknowledge at the outset, Father, that anxiety is a power that is very hard to conquer. Indeed, in our own strength, we can't. We want so much to live in accord with the word of your Son, as he has spoken

now.

And so my prayer, Lord, is that a great counter-power would come into this service. A great victorious spirit and truth. And that anxiety would be banished by severing the root of unbelief that feeds it.

Be pleased, Lord, to come and get victory in the hearts of your wavering people. In Jesus' great and mighty name, I pray. Amen.

Let me hang a bridge for you between last week's text and this week's concern with anxiety. We looked at Hebrews 3.12 last week, and it said, Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, leading you to fall away from the living God. And then verse 14 of Hebrews 3 said, For we have shared in Christ, we have shared in Christ, if we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

Now, that means that one of the evidences that we have come to share in Christ, One of the evidences that we are savingly united to Jesus Christ is that we endure to the end in the confidence that we have in God and not make shipwreck of faith. In other words, the new birth introduces a person into a life of persevering faith, a life that is lived by faith, not just begun by faith. We call it a warfare.

2 Timothy 4.7, it's called the fight of faith. And right here in this text, I believe it's called the battle against unbelief. Let me read it again.

Take care, brethren. That's the vigilance of battle. Lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief.

That's the terrain or the battlefield. Leading you to fall away from the living God. There's the warning that the battle is serious.

It is not war games. It's real warfare with heaven and hell at stake. In other words, the most basic battle that everybody in this room fights every day is the battle against unbelief in the promises of God.

It's the battle to have the kind of heart that rests in God. If unbelief gets the upper hand, Hebrews 3 says, if unbelief begins to get the upper hand, what can happen is that the heart can become hardened like a rock and we then can get beyond the ability to repent and be lost forever. Now, we don't believe that that happens to people who are truly born of God.

And the evidence of being truly born of God is perseverance in faith, that you keep on fighting the fight until the last day. He who calls you is faithful. He will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5, 23. Now, the bridge that I said I wanted to hang between that text, Hebrews 3, 12 and 14, and today's concern with anxiety is simply this. We saw that the root beneath an evil heart is unbelief.

Take heed lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief. Unbelief is the root and the essence of all evils in the heart. So, when I come over to Matthew 6 and I hear Jesus say, don't have an anxious heart, I know what the root problem is already from Hebrews 3, but we'll see it in the text lest you think we need to import it from Hebrews.

Today's text illustrates with the specific condition of an evil heart of anxiety what last week's text was saying. Last week's text said, take heed lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief. Today we could say, take heed lest there be in you an anxious heart of unbelief.

But now, before we get into that, let me just ponder with you a moment what comes from anxiety and why I begin. This is my first of about ten sinful conditions of the human heart I want to show have their roots in unbelief and how to fight them by fighting unbelief. Why do I begin with anxiety? The reason I begin with anxiety is because of all the sins that I am able to think about that grow up in the heart from unbelief, anxiety has the most branches.

It produces more other sins than all the others that I could think of. For example, when I'm anxious about finances, it can give rise to coveting or greed or hoarding or stealing. When I'm anxious about succeeding in some endeavor that I'm assigned to do and I'm anxious about that, I can become very irritable or I can become abrupt with people and surly in my disposition.

When I'm anxious about relationships, how am I going to come off with that person and so on, I can be very withdrawn and very indifferent and very uncaring about that person who may be just as anxious as I am about the relationship. Or when I am anxious about how someone will respond to me, I can become very inclined to dishonesty, cover up who I really am or just lie outright. And you could take the list further, couldn't you? Anxiety, this stem or trunk coming up from the root of unbelief has many sinful branches.

But the question we want to ask therefore this morning is, what's the root of anxiety? Where does it come from? How could that be severed? Now, the answer in Matthew 6 is going to be plain, but before we look at it, notice that anxiety really is the point of this text. As I'm sure you saw, let's look at the four verses where it's mentioned. Verse 25, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.

Verse 27, Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? Verse 31, Therefore don't be anxious. Verse 34, Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow. So I can say with absolute certainty and authority, on behalf of the Lord Jesus this morning, He wants you to be free from anxiety.

He wants a free, hopeful, joyful, resting, confident people. He wants anxieties out. Nothing He ever taught was designed to increase anxiety, but to help you conquer anxiety.

Now, what's the root of it in this text? Verse 30 gives the answer. It says, But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you? The RSV says, O men of little faith. The older versions, O ye of little faith.

The literal Greek, it's just one Greek word, little faiths. It's a word Jesus might have made up. Little faiths.

O little faiths, don't be anxious. So what's the root of big anxiety? Little faith. Or you switch it around, as faith grows or increases, anxiety goes down.

They work like this. And so if you want to battle anxiety, you battle unbelief in the promises of God. The root cause of anxiety is disbelief in the Word of God.

When Hebrews says, Take heed lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief, Jesus means, take heed lest there be in you an anxious heart of unbelief. Now, a step back here for a minute and imagine the kinds of responses that could emerge right here. I can think of two disheartening responses to what I just said.

Let me respond to the responses. Number one, someone may say, that's not good news. In fact, it's very discouraging to learn that what I thought was a mere wrestling with my bent towards melancholy or my bent towards anxiety is really a far deeper and more dangerous problem of my disbelief in the living God.

That's not good news. And I agree. And I disagree.

Let me illustrate. Suppose that you have been suffering from pain in the stomach for some months and you have tried all manner of medicines and diets and nothing seems to take this pain away and on a routine visit to the doctor, they discover that you have cancer in the small intestine and they tell you that. Now, is that good news? And you say emphatically, not.

It is not good news. Cancer is bad news. And I agree.

But let me pose the question just slightly differently. Are you glad that they found it, identified it and told you about it while it may still be treated? And you would say, yes, I'm glad they found it and told me about it while it may still be treated. Well, then it is good news.

Well, no and yes. And that's exactly right. No and yes.

It is not good news because cancer is bad. It's good news because finding out the real problem with my life is good news while it can be treated. And so my response to this first concern is to stress that while in one sense to be told that there is a deeper and more dangerous problem beneath your struggles with anxiety is bad news because I don't like to have deeper problems.

Nevertheless, it's good news because this problem is eminently treatable by our great physician. A whole book was written about this disease. Now, that's response number one.

Response number two, that's disheartening, would go like this. Look, I have to deal with feelings of anxiety almost every day. And so you tell me now that my anxiety is rooted in unbelief and that every day I'm disbelieving God.

I just feel like giving up because I don't know how I could have any assurance of being saved if I have that much unbelief in God. That's response number two. And here's my answer.

Suppose that you're a race car driver and you're racing to the finish in this Daytona 250 or Darlington 500. You may not even know about those stock car races, I don't know. And some enemy who doesn't want you to finish because he's got somebody else as a favorite slings mud on your windshield from the side.

And you, all of a sudden, have a blank out on your goal and your course and you begin to swerve and try to get your bearings and become very fretful. Now, the mud that has just hit your windshield is, number one, no proof that you're not going to finish this race. Number two, it doesn't prove that you're on the wrong course either.

In fact, your enemy probably would very gladly let you go right on and win if you were on the wrong racetrack. What the mud signifies is not that you're on the wrong track or that you won't finish, but that you ought to turn your wipers on and push that little squirter button. Do something.

Set in motion a process of resistance against what is blanking out the glorious future of victory. Don't ride it to the ditch. Do something.

The issue in the Christian life is not whether Satan slings mud, throws you into a swerve, fills you with anxiety. The issue is how are you going to deal with it. Are you going to fight or are you going to cave? That's the issue.

And so, my response to the person who says, look, I deal with anxiety every day. I wake up anxious. I say, you're not telling me anything.

I've said 50 times in this church I have to get saved every morning. The issue is not whether we deal with anxiety every day, but how we deal with anxiety every day. What we do with Satan's attacks, the rising of our own remaining corruption and the insults and blindings of this world system.

And the answer, of course, is that you must turn on your windshield wipers and use your windshield washer. Let me try to show you what I'm getting at from a couple of texts. We are going to get to Matthew 6 in a minute.

Psalms 56:3 says, When I am afraid, I put my trust in thee. Now, notice the wording. It didn't say, because I put my trust in thee, I never struggle with fear.

It said, when I am, am, am afraid, then I put my trust in thee. When the mud hits the windshield, I lose my bearings, I do something. So there is a textual evidence that normal Christian living is to deal with anxieties.

It's to have them hit. Here's another one. 1 Peter 5:7, Cast all your anxieties on Him, God, for He cares for you.

Well, you can't cast them if you don't have them. In other words, normal Christian living is to be attacked, to feel the blow, to stagger under Satan's lies about your future, the black picture that he paints right on the windshield of your life, to stagger under it, to fret, to begin to swerve in your life. That's normal Christian living.

And then battle sets in. And this text says, cast those anxieties on the Lord, for He cares about you. So my response then to this second disheartening concern is, when you say, look, I deal with anxiety every day, my response is, that's okay.

But, let's really deal with it. Let's get those windshield wipers going, and let's squirt the windshield washer. Let's not ride on without fighting back against the blinding effects of Satan's lies that take away our confidence in the future.

How do you battle then unbelief? Because it's unbelief that sets in. As soon as the future, God's future of welfare and joy and hope and gladness are cut off, the issue is, is God for me? And is there a future out there? It's an issue of belief in God's promises. Now, I'll just tell you right off what the windshield wipers and the squirter are.

The windshield wipers are the promises of God, and the squirter is prayer for the help of the Holy Spirit. And both are absolutely crucial. Now, we in Minnesota don't have any trouble with this, because we've driven.

You know the hardest time to drive in Minnesota? It's not January. It's March. Because it's all starting to melt.

Remember what happens to the road? It's starting to melt, but it's about 30 degrees. And that's slush just constantly up on your windshield, and you've got to keep pumping that washer fluid in there. Otherwise, what do your windshield wipers do? They just go, brr, brr, brr, brr, brr, brr, and nothing.

You can't see out going down the freeway at all. So, you're telling me the Word of God just goes, brr, brr, brr, brr, over Satan's lies? Yes. Without the power of the Holy Spirit, that's exactly what happens.

And you've all tasted it, too, early in the morning when you've tried to read the Word of God and nothing happened. It's both. The squirter, let's get that Holy Spirit going.

Oh, Lord, come, come, create in me a new heart. Make Your Word so moist and rich and glorious and full that it just cleans the mud right off the windshield of my life. Bring life and power and razor sharpness to those windshield wiper blades of God's promises.

So, we fight the anxiety of the swerving of our life by fighting with the promises of God to get the lies of Satan off of there that are making us disbelieve in the future that God holds out to us. Let me draw to a close by taking you to the text and then giving you a couple of personal illustrations about how to battle unbelief and thus overcome anxiety. Here in this text of Matthew 6, Jesus is dealing with anxiety about food and clothing.

Now, here we are in America, right? Insurance policies, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, all manner of welfare programs. There's not a person in this room probably who is anxious right now about where lunch is coming from, like two-thirds of the world's population probably is, and 40 million people in Bangladesh. But, having said that, I know for a fact that finances, just the raw materials of keeping life and limb together, educating kids and putting clothes on our back and heating our house in the winter, does create tremendous anxiety in the lives of Americans, including Christians.

And so, Jesus deals with that practical issue and says in verse 30 that it's owing to unbelief. He says, O you of little faith. And then verse 32, there are about six promises in this paragraph that are intended to blast that unbelief out of the car.

But let me just look at a couple of them. Start at verse 32, about the second half. Your heavenly Father, that's supposed to be filled with hope, knows that you need them all.

That's supposed to double the hope of the named Father. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. And here's the third one.

All these things will be yours as well. That is a spectacular promise. Do you believe that promise? That if you at work and home and on the way put God's purposes first in your life, he'll meet every single need you have from the most practical to the most spiritual.

He will. That's what Jesus says. Do you believe him? It's an issue of faith.

Now Paul took this very command and this very promise and provided in the context of the windshield squirter and the windshield wipers another model of battling unbelief. It comes from Philippians 4. You know these two texts by heart just like I do. I hope anyway.

In Matthew 4, 6 it says, Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by squirting the squirter or by prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known to God. Prayer and supplication. Oh, Holy Spirit, come and meet my needs and work through your word to clear away the mud on my windshield that I might see the future you have for me and go on in power.

And then 13 verses later in verse 19, he says, My God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. That's a lot of riches. That's a lot of riches.

My God will supply all your needs. So Paul picked up the very same teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6 and he applied it to the people in his day. And he said, First, don't be anxious.

Then he said, Pray, ask God for help. And then he gave you a windshield wiper blade that has a razor sharp edge to it and combined with that good moist answered prayer from verse 6 and that razor sharp promise, the window comes clear and there is the future of welfare and hope that God has described in his promises for us. And the anxiety begins to sink out and we move on into the tough circumstance that lies in front of us.

Let me close by just describing for you my own personal warfare in a few areas. When I was heading out to Germany, I've described this to you probably four or five times in the last eight years. I was at Radio City Music Hall before I got on the plane to go to Germany for three years and my father called me long distance because he couldn't be there.

And the last thing he said on the phone was, John, he probably said, Johnny, don't forget. Fear not for I am with you. Be not dismayed for I am your God.

I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

And I quoted that text to myself 500 times in Germany as I faced one challenge after the other to my faith and my life and my finances as we were going through school over there. When I am anxious about my ministry, wondering whether it is paying, whether it is fruitful, I attack the unbelief that's beneath that anxiety by going to Isaiah 55, 11 where it says, My word shall not return to me empty, but will accomplish that which I purpose and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. And when I become anxious that I might be too weak to get through a morning or to get through a week, I go to 2 Corinthians 12 and I take my stand and do warfare with the sword of, My grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in your weakness. And I go back to Deuteronomy and I take that little dagger. As your days, so shall your strength be, says the Lord.

And when I'm anxious about decisions that I have to make or we have to make as a church, like perhaps tonight after the evening service, I steady my hand with, I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you shall go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you, says the Lord. And when I'm anxious about facing opponents, people that might be opposed to me, I do battle against that unbelief with Romans 8, 31, If God is for you, who can be against you? And when I'm anxious about getting sick, I steady my hand with, Tribulation works patience and patience works approveness and approveness does not make ashamed.

And when I'm scared that I might die and wonder what death would hold for me, I steady my hand with Romans 14, None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's, for to this end Jesus died and rose again that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

And when I'm anxious finally that I might make shipwreck of faith, that some sin might rise and get control of my heart and it might be hardened and I fall away from God, I steady my hand with Philippians 1, 6, He who began a good work in you will complete it under the day of Christ. Or over in Hebrews chapter 7 where it says, He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him since He always

lives to make intercession for them. So what I'm trying to say is take up the book, pray for the spirit and do battle against unbelief as the tap root of anxiety in your life.

And remember the promise of Proverbs 21, 31. The horse is made ready for the battle but the victory belongs to the Lord. Let's affirm together and encourage one another by just one verse of the song that's printed there in your worship folder.

Give to the winds thy fears. Just that first verse. Shall we stand as we sing together?

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