

FEAR NOT: Five Questions for Fighting Anxiety

Who's in Control?

Isaiah 41:1-10

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Listen to me in silence, O coastlands; let the peoples renew their strength; let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgment. Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely, by paths his feet have not trod. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he. The coastlands have seen and are afraid; the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near and come. Everyone helps his neighbor and says to his brother, "Be strong!" The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer him who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, "It is good"; and they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot be moved. But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; 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 uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isa. 41:1–10).

During May, we are going to explore five important questions for winning the battle with worry, fear, and anxiety. We'll tackle this issue by asking:

- Who's in control?
- What is fear?
- What must I believe?
- How do I pray?
- What should I think?

Now, these are not the only questions that we need to ask when fighting anxiety, but these questions are particularly helpful. And there are answers in the Bible—some very specific remedies—for addressing moments when low-grade fear or full-on panic is assaulting us.

I'm assuming that I don't need to convince you about the need to talk about anxiety and fear. Sometimes when I start a sermon series like this, I feel the need to justify why we would talk about the issue in the first place. I don't feel that's necessary in light of everything happening in our world and country with COVID-19. Uncertainty, fear, and anxiety are part of our lives every day.

I like to be informed. And I'm a bit of a news junkie. I'm relentlessly curious, and I like to learn. But I've found myself needing to take a break from time to time with what I'm reading or watching because it overwhelms me. Or it feeds my anxiety as some new issue emerges. But here's what happens: as soon as I stop, I have to battle the fear that I'm missing something.

Then I hear from people who act like they're not worried. I wonder about that. And I kind of wish I was like that. But then I worry about why they aren't worried. Or I become anxious that I'm too anxious.

No matter where I turn right now, anxiety and fear are waiting there for me. And while I know it's there, it sometimes startles or scares me. You might compare it to the cardboard cutout of Mrs. Doubtfire I have at home. I use it to focus the cameras in the filming studio I have set up in my basement. But we've had a lot of fun with Mrs. Doubtfire as she keeps "appearing" in places that scare us. Recently, I asked my daughter, Savannah, to get me some hair conditioner from her shower (which should have been her first clue that something was up!), not knowing that Mrs. Doubtfire was behind the curtain. I've never heard her scream so loud!

Anxiety and fear show up in surprising ways. Sometimes we don't even know why we are anxious. Candidly, there are some days when I wake up and I feel anxious. But nothing has happened. So, I start thinking about things to worry about. And when I can't figure it out, it worries me!

Then there are times when anxiety is debilitating. I'm sure that some of you know what that's like. Worry and fear aren't just around the corner; they are the clothes you wear every day. And maybe for good reason. Perhaps something traumatic happened to you, and now you find yourself being self-protective, even wise.

Others simply have a disposition—a family background, personality, physical make-up, body chemistry—that inclines them toward anxiety. And, for some of you, it's not just a struggle; it's starting to become your identity. You don't just struggle with worry; you are a worrier. I hope that this series will help you. And I also hope that you'll feel loved as we walk through this series.

While worry, fear, and anxiety were a huge struggle before COVID-19, they are enormous struggles right now. So, I hope to show you—compassionately and biblically—how to fight worry.

If you are not yet a Christian, I'm glad you've tuned in. Please stay with us through this entire series, and feel free to reach out to our staff. I hope that you'll see how amazingly relevant the Christian faith—especially a relationship with Jesus—is to win the battle with fear. I also hope you'll see that Christians are broken, struggling people who find their hope for everything—including worry—in Jesus.

Isaiah 41:10

Our text today is from Isaiah 41, and the bulk of our time will be spent in verse 10. We are going to make this our anchor text, and I'd like you to memorize it. Let's review it again together:

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 uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isa. 41:10).

Let's not only memorize this verse, but also let me challenge you to know it so well that it feels like your heart is marinated in it. You are going to need it in ways that you don't even realize today. Get it in your soul. Or as Dale Shaw says, "Get it in your bones."

Who's in Control? – Circumstances and Promises

Our first question relates to the issue of where we go—intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally—when problematic circumstances arise. Or to put it another way, where do we look for hope when circumstances tempt us to worry?

Worry and fear always involve circumstances of some kind, so let's explore what was happening in our text and then see the promises and how they apply to our lives.

Circumstances

The text that we are examining today relates to circumstances in the eighth century BC and also the sixth century BC. There are two dates because part of the book of Isaiah is written historically and other parts of it are prophetic, looking to the future. The entire book of Isaiah is about the trustworthiness of God.

At the time, the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Assyria dominated the world as the major superpower. Syria, just to the north of Israel, posed an immediate threat. Therefore, Israel embraced an alliance with Assyria and put pressure on Judah to join. But the plan backfired.

Assyria conquered Syria in 735 BC and then moved into Israel. The northern kingdom fell in 722 BC. Chapters 1-39 of Isaiah are written in this context. Fast forward to the sixth century and Babylon became the dominant superpower. Judah was overthrown in 586 BC and the people were taken into exile. Isaiah 40-55 is also written with this backdrop.

So, as we pick up our text, it's helpful to see words that were written in the middle of politically turbulent and culturally troubling times. One of the uniquely challenging things about this pandemic is the way it's affected the entire world. We are unfamiliar with the scope of these circumstances.

For most of us, anxiety and fear have been historically limited to things in our personal lives. A health scare, relationship conflict, wayward kids, work issues, financial challenges, and other things are a big deal. But this is new territory for most of us. When I was young, I remember hearing my grandmother talk about how scary it was when she and my grandfather learned about the invasion of countries near the Netherlands. And I remember her crying when she told me about the Dutch royal family fleeing the country.

For many of us, we've not known anything like our current circumstance before. That makes it unusually challenging. But it's also good to be reminded that this is not unprecedented. It's unprecedented in our lifetime. And think about what that means. It's a humbling reminder of how little control we've had all along over our lives.

Isaiah 41 begins with this kind of consideration. It's as if God is inviting people into a cosmic court to consider their circumstances. Notice the call for silence in verse 1; the invitation to approach and speak, and the statement about judgment.

In verse 2 it talks about God stirring up one from the east. That one is Cyrus of Persia who eventually conquered Babylon and allowed the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-3). Verses 2-3 tell us that Cyrus's military successes were the result of God's sovereign control. Verse 4 makes it very clear that God is asserting his control. Even pagan and brutal leaders are part of the divine chess pieces that God moves. Deadly viruses too, by the way.

Notice next how Isaiah describes the response of people. In verse 5 there's fear and trembling. But there's also an effort to find encouragement in verse 6. Isn't this what we do? When people are fearful, they are desperate for any ray of hope. Is there a vaccine? What about hydroxychloroquine? When are businesses going to reopen? When can I get a haircut? When can we come back to church? You feel it, don't you?

But look at what happens next. Isaiah talks about the way that people turn to their idols (v. 7). Take note of the irony of having to put extra nails around the base of your idol to be sure it doesn't fall over. It sounds like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic!

Now stop for a moment and think with me, "Why would fearful people run to their idols?" Because they've made the idol! Why in the world is an idol comforting? Here's why: idols represent promises. It's not the idol that people pursue; it's the promise behind the idol. It sounds like this: "If I pray to my idol, then..." Whatever you fill in the blank with, that's the promise.

Hope is connected to that promise. What's the promise of a vaccine? People will be inoculated from the virus. What's the promise of money? It will give me options to meet my needs. What's the promise of alcohol or drugs? This will make me feel better.

The circumstances that lead us to fear and worry then lead us to pursue things that seem promising to us. Worry and promises are connected. And that's one of the reasons why worry can be a gateway to other sins. We'll talk more about this next week, but worrying about money can lead you to be stingy, to hoarding, or to stealing. Worrying about what people think about you can lead to the fear of man, deception, or lying. And all of those issues are directly connected to false promises that we believe.

This is the way that we try to regain control. A fearful event enters our lives and what we do next very much relates to what we believe. Now, this could be liberating for some of you. It won't solve every problem because some people's anxiety has layers and is complex. But it could be a start to realize that sinful worry is rooted in false promises that you believe. The first step, therefore, would be to consider what promises you are believing when worry sets in and you start to take action.

When circumstances cause you to worry, ask yourself what control-promises are in play?

Promises

So, where does the Bible take us when overwhelming fear and idol-trusting anxiety set in? Let me show you five promises all connected to God's relationship with his people. Now, take note that verses 8-9 are directed to the audience at the time—the people of Israel. But these promises are rooted in who God is and who his people are. Being "in Christ" makes you part of God's people. While you are not an Israelite, you are part of God's family.

Here are the five promises—anchored in God's control—that the Bible offers as hope when fear and anxiety hang in the air. God says:

1. I am with you
2. I am your God
3. I will strengthen you
4. I will help you
5. I will uphold you

Let me explain what each of these promises means. And I'd like for you to prayerfully consider which of these promises you need today in light of your worries.

1) I Am With You

The first promise is that we are never alone, never abandoned, never deserted. God is always with us. This promise is listed as the reason that God's people are commanded not to fear. Verse 10 connects the two together. God's promised presence is the reason we are told not to fear.

Consider each of these words: I. Am. With. You. The sovereign God, who is orchestrating all the events of life, walks with his people through their sorrows.

Isolation, abandonment, and being alone are contrary to the very nature of our humanity. How many of you remember a moment in your childhood where you were lost and you thought you were all alone? Or how many of you know the sick feeling of people not standing up for you?

Listen, friends, Satan loves to tempt us into believing that God has abandoned us. But this text tells us that, while we can't see God and while we don't always know what he's doing, we can bank our lives on the fact that he's with us.

2) I Am Your God

The solution for being dismayed is resting in the promise of who God is. The word "dismayed" means to look around you. I'm sure you know what this looks like. Imagine that you walk into your living room and a member of your family is frantically running around, pulling out cushions, moving books around, opening drawers, etc. They're trying to find a solution to some problem. If you asked them, "What's wrong?", they'd reply, "I wrote down my Netflix password on a piece of paper, and I've lost it." Or something far more serious. You've been there.

We'll look at the nuance of fear and dismay next week. But when dismay—looking around you for a solution—takes over, this promise is essential. Why? Because it reminds us that the most comforting solution to our worries is not looking for a solution, a reason, or a plan. It's resting in who God is.

Worry and fear run to questions like “Why?” and “What?” and “When?” But, as I've said before, the most comforting question is “Who?” The answer is God. God is in control.

3) I Will Strengthen You

The third promise is that God promises to provide the strength that his children need when fearful events and circumstances come our way. This word means courage or determination. It means that God gives you endurance, strength, and internal support that you know is not from you. It's connected to our text for next week, so you need to tune in next week to learn more about this.

At the end of his life, Paul said, “At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me...but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me” (2 Tim. 4:15-17). God is going to give you the strength that you need.

4) I Will Help You

The fourth promise provides assurance that God is going to work for us. He promises to help us. This means that he is going to work out his plan which is always for our good and his glory. Sometimes we can see this immediately. Sometimes it emerges over time. At other times, God is helping us—working on our behalf—and we don't even know it. But the promise is still true. This is one of the reasons we have historical records of God's works in the Bible. They remind us that God works for those who wait for him.

5) I Will Uphold You

This final promise is about God's ability to save his people, not just physically but also spiritually. “Righteous right hand” refers to God's power and his might. It takes us back to the courtroom scene where God is inviting an inquisition into his power and might. God promises to hold his people up by the essence of his power as a righteous God.

Underneath the life of every Christian is a foundation of love, care, and righteousness that God uses to sustain us and to uphold us. That's one of the reasons why memorizing Isaiah 41:10 can be helpful! You can't see the “upholding” with your eyes. But as you rehearse the promises of God, there's a strength that comes from him.

Now, that doesn't mean the battle with worry always evaporates. Sometimes it does. But often it's a struggle to believe the right promises. It looks like a promise battle. It's a battle over where we think control really lies.

How does all of this connect to being a Christian? Well, God's plan of redemption—to save sinners—is the foundation of our lives and the ultimate backstop for our worries and fears. The Apostle Paul made

this very important statement in Romans 8, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32). In other words, there’s nothing you should fear more than the judgment of God without atonement. And God provided that through the sacrifice of Jesus. For those who trust in Christ, we can see the way Jesus becomes the greatest expression of God’s control over all events.

- Jesus is alive and with us
- Jesus is God
- Jesus strengthens us by his Holy Spirit
- Jesus helps us
- Jesus upholds us by his righteousness

Maybe your worries will lead you to realize your ultimate need of a Savior. Maybe your sense of losing control will push you to the one who controls the universe.

Worry and fear are a battle. And the first step in winning that battle is rehearsing who’s *ultimately* in control.