

Learning to “Fear Not”

Beating Anxiety from a Biblical Perspective

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Please Note:

This book is not intended to replace mental health treatment. I do encourage you to find a mental health professional, that's a good fit for you if you haven't already.

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Introduction

Do you struggle with anxiety? Maybe anxiety has been there so long it has become a “normal” part of your day-to-day routine. Maybe you’ve become very skilled at hiding it, so others around you won’t know. Perhaps, anxiety makes you feel embarrassed and weak somehow. Maybe, it’s taken on a persona of its own, leaving you to make comments such as, “my anxiety won’t let me do that.” Maybe it leaves you discouraged and exhausted.

Anxiety is a multi-faceted struggle. It’s a topic that is often addressed with medication alone, medication and therapy, or perhaps therapy alone. Often, though, anxiety is not addressed because it can be difficult to acknowledge it has become a problem. It has a way of sneaking up on us from all sides. In this book, we’ll be exploring anxiety from different angles, observing how physical components, thinking habits, and spiritual wellness intertwine and play off one another. Our overall focus will be on beating anxiety from a faith-based perspective.

As we begin, I want to share with you just a few statistics. Don't worry, I'm not going to go into this very deeply but, I do think it's important for you to realize how common anxiety really is.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, about 40 million adults in the US alone are affected by anxiety every year. Something

that stood out to me about this statistic is that it doesn't say how many people are affected in their lifetime, just how many there are every year. That's roughly about 18% of the population.

It's important to know that anxiety disorders are highly treatable, yet only about 36.9% of those suffering receive treatment. The main point I want you to hear right now, however, is that there is hope for anxiety recovery!

The purpose of this book is to give you an overview of anxiety from a faith-based perspective and help get you started towards recovery. I'm excited to share this information! Just to let you know a bit about me, I'm a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor, and I've worked with a variety of clients over the years. While each story is very unique, I've heard story after story, and it has given me the opportunity to recognize many themes and patterns common amongst my clients. We're going to be dividing this topic into three major sections. The first section is Anxiety 101, and we'll be talking about how common some of the symptoms are, and how they're not as unique as they seem to be.

The second section is "Keys to Managing Anxiety." This section covers the basics of anxiety and depression treatment from a Cognitive-Behavioral perspective.

The final section will be about applying Scriptural truths and recommendations to anxiety (and depression) management. We will explore how Scripture ties it all together and explains our struggles from a much deeper perspective.

At the end of this book, I'll be sharing additional resources to help you apply this information and find the accountability you need. As a bonus for purchasing this book, you will also gain access to a free PDF with 30 printable Scripture cards to add to your battle plan, which we will be discussing.

Chapter One: Anxiety 101

(Your symptoms are not as unique as they seem)

Let's begin by taking just a minute to share some of the risk factors associated with the development of anxiety disorders. According to the Mayo Clinic, you may be more susceptible to anxiety if:

- You've experienced trauma,
- Are under increased stress due to an illness,
- Have a buildup of stress that hasn't been handled in a healthy way,
- Have a certain personality type (some personality types are just more susceptible to the anxiety trap),
- Have other mental health conditions,
- Have blood relatives with an anxiety disorder
- You use drugs and alcohol.

In the years I have spent as a therapist, the majority (if not all) of the clients I've treated have struggled with anxiety and depression, and usually these have been co-occurring. Clients will most often tell me that either the anxiety or depression is worse than the other at the time they come to me for therapy. This may change depending on the season they are going through in their life. The concepts we discuss in this book actually apply to both anxiety and depression struggles.

I'd like to walk you through a typical session introduction. We're going to call our hypothetical client, "Jill". She represents a culmination of different clients over time, not any one specific person. Jill comes in for her first session, and sits in my office as I go through the new client paperwork, which includes the policies, disclaimers and an introduction. Visibly tense, she looks like she's holding her breath. From time to time, she takes a deeper breath to compensate.

Jill tells me about being easily agitated and irritable with those around her. She worries about every little thing. She's exhausted and feels very isolated, beginning to lose hope. Reluctantly, she even confides in me that she feels as if she's going crazy. Her emotions are so jumbled that she's having trouble making sense of what she even thinks or feels. Jill talks about feeling as if something is true while believing the opposite is actually true. She's continually anxious and on edge, and she states she grows more depressed and hopeless by the day.

What do you have in common with Jill? Have you felt alone in your struggles with anxiety or depression?

As I'm completing the diagnostic assessment, I will likely go through a symptom checklist with Jill. She may become a bit discouraged as she answers "yes" to many of the listed symptoms. Then, I talk to her about why those specific items are listed on the paperwork. The reason all those symptoms are listed is because they are common in people experiencing anxiety and depression.

Acknowledging that they're common doesn't minimize what you're experiencing, but it does serve to help you realize you're not really alone, even though sometimes, it feels as if you are the only person who experiences such difficult and scary symptoms. Every story is different; every experience is

different, but those symptoms are listed on intake paperwork because they are so common. Sometimes it can go a long way in coping with symptoms just to know that you're not as far off the norm as you have come to believe. It can be validating and help dispel some of the feelings of isolation that come along with mental health struggles.

So often, that perception of isolation and the fear of being viewed as “crazy” keep us from speaking up about our struggles. That's exactly why finding a good support group, who can understand your struggles, can be a tremendous help. I'm pretty confident that you would be surprised by how many people you know quietly suffer from anxiety, depression, or both, but they never share this because of those feelings of isolation. When we are feeling alone in an internal struggle, believing no one else can understand, it creates a big barrier in being willing to communicate openly. In reality, if we do discuss our struggles, there's a good possibility that others will understand more than we would imagine.

One of the biggest challenges I've recognized in my clients working to overcome anxiety and depression is a lack of accountability. I can't follow clients home and make sure they follow through with what we determine in session. We may have an incredible discussion in my office where they have new insights, and major breakthroughs, but then, if they don't think more about it between sessions, we're not going to gain a whole lot of ground. It's critical to progress that the concepts we discuss are actually put into practice. Having a regular support group can help tremendously.

Let's go back again to the symptoms. Everyone experiences some degree of anxiety. There is such thing as a healthy degree of anxiety. Think about it. If

you never felt anxious, would you ever feel motivated to work harder, to make sure you got that promotion at work or kept your job?

What would happen if you didn't have any anxiety at all? Would you have ever passed an exam in school? Would you be able to keep yourself safe in dangerous circumstances? Our bodies have a natural threat system.

Physically, what happens when you're feeling anxious- all of those physical symptoms are there for a purpose. You may be familiar with the concept of fight, flight, or freeze. That's what your body does when that threat system is activated. Your body is basically preparing to either fight, run away, or freeze, depending on what the danger is. As you can imagine, there are times when those reactions are necessary if there's a physical threat to you.

When you look at the physical symptoms of what happens when the threat system is activated, they look a lot like your anxiety symptoms. You might have racing thoughts, changes to your vision, dry mouth, your heart will beat faster as it feeds more blood to the muscles to enhance your ability to fight or run away, your hands might get cold as your blood vessels in the skin contract and force blood toward the major muscle groups. Your muscles tense, and you might also shake or tremble. Your palms become sweaty (this is the body's way of keeping cool and making it a more efficient machine), you may experience increased bladder urgency (the muscles and the bladder relax in response to stress), your adrenal glands release adrenaline to signal other organs to get ready, your breathing becomes quicker, shallower, and you might feel dizzy or lightheaded.

If you experience anxiety, you're probably pretty familiar with those symptoms. The trouble comes when that threat system is activated, but there's not a physical threat in front of you. When you're in a safe situation, and you're experiencing these anxiety symptoms, it can be pretty overwhelming!

Your brain has a tendency to look for reasons to justify your threat system being activated. That's when you might have racing, worried thoughts about what could be wrong.

Think about it this way- if you are driving, and someone pulls out in front of you, you may hit them or come very close to hitting them. Of course, your threat system is going to be activated. Your body is preparing to face whatever this threat is in front of you. But, when the situation is over, and you are back in safety, your brain knows that you're safe again because you saw what the threat was. You have that connection. You are able to connect something tangible to those symptoms, so you're able to bring your body back into control.

If you are dwelling on worries and rehearsing them in your mind, those thoughts can produce anxiety for you (we can get into the habit of doing so if we're not careful), and trigger the threat system. An underlying physical problem could also trigger the threat system. If you don't see something that is actually a physical threat in front of you, it can be tough to know why your body is responding the way it is.

When you don't have something tangible in front of you that is an obvious threat, your brain tries to figure out what the connection is. You're probably more likely, then, to continue getting further and further into the anxious thoughts, threat-system-activated cycle.

When this cycle is left to continue, more severe symptoms, such as panic attacks may develop. One quick trick that can be very helpful when you find your body is engaging in that threat-system-activated mode is to think about something you're excited about, and say (out loud), "Well, I'm excited about my plans this weekend," or whatever it may be.

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The symptoms of excitement and anxiousness are actually pretty similar to one another. When you give your brain something you're excited about, and you're focusing on something positive and good your brain can associate a connection that might explain some of those symptoms, then you're less likely to have the worried thoughts and more likely to have the excited thoughts.

Looking back at my own experiences, there was a time in my life when I had a great deal of anxiety. It was a very dark period of time for me, and I remember having trouble thinking about much of anything beyond what worried me. The worry-thoughts seemed to be stuck on repeat in my head. Though I never had any intent, I even reached a point where I was having suicidal

thoughts. I knew that I would never make a suicide attempt, but just the fact that those thoughts even entered my head was pretty scary.

If you have ever been there or maybe are there now, I want to remind you that there are resources available 24/7. If you're having scary thoughts like that, you can check out the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>. If you'd rather do a live chat, there is a live chat option, but most importantly, just know you always have support available to you.

The physical symptoms we have been discussing can be triggered in many ways. If you drink too much caffeine and you feel jittery, it can trigger your threat system. If your hormones are out of whack, it can trigger the threat system. There are many medical conditions that can create the physical side of your symptoms too, and it's important to rule those out with your primary care physician.

However, when there isn't an obvious physical threat in front of you, and you're experiencing anxiety symptoms in your body, your brain is going to try to fill in the blank with what could possibly be threatening you, like we were just discussing. It can all be a very rough cycle when it's left to keep going.

I'm sure if you struggle with anxiety, you know exactly what I'm talking about when I say it's a rough cycle. It can seem like a puzzle when trying to figure out exactly what is going to work for you., and figuring out how the pieces fit together because every story is different. There might be a different combination of tactics that work for you and not someone else. This brings us into the next section, where we'll be discussing a general approach to therapy.

Chapter Two: The Keys to Managing Anxiety

Most of my experience as a therapist has been focused in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is considered to be evidence-based practice. That basically means there is scientific evidence that CBT is effective in treating anxiety, depression and many other mental health concerns as well. With that in mind, I want to share with you more about CBT, including specific techniques used to manage anxiety and depression, and what makes treatment most effective.

In a nutshell, CBT basically focuses on exploring “core beliefs.” So, what that means is that we all form unhealthy and unhelpful thinking habits. These form from experiences and exposure, and can come in the form of modeled behavior by those who we are around most often (what their thinking patterns are), and it could come from being mistreated, criticized or abused. It can also come from interpretations, or the meanings we attach to different situations we experience.

For example, if we have a friend “ghost” us in school, we might internalize, or attach meaning to that situation, that we’re not as interesting or likable as the other friends that person turned to instead. Further life experiences may reinforce that.

Without realizing, we come to expect those negative ideas to be true in other situations. We look for “proof” to support those beliefs, when we look for

proof, we're likely going to find it, even though we may be overlooking the positive and just focusing on the negative evidence that seemingly supports the unhealthy thinking habit that has formed.

If, as a child, you have a parent who operates at a very high anxiety mood all the time, it rubs off on you a bit like putting on a heavy winter coat. Maybe the other parent could be very critical of you (likely rooted in anxiety too), being quick to correct and slow to encourage, there's another heavy winter coat that's put on — another layer. Perhaps there's a school bully that takes every opportunity to insult you and just try to beat you down every chance they get. That's another heavy winter coat. You never know what else may influence you. Maybe it's a sibling who was or is continually trying to put you down and correct you, or maybe it's some other kind of abuse or trauma.

Heavy Coats. But there are layers after layers; and as you come into your adult world, as you go through life, you are so weighed down by these heavy winter coats – it's hot and uncomfortable, but you've been under that weight and in that trapped heat for so long, it feels strangely normal to you and it's hard to imagine yourself not having those layers of heavy winter coats.

Those layers become “core beliefs,” firmly rooted in place. For example, some common core beliefs may be: “You'll never get it right.” “You'll never amount to anything.” “You're not worth it.” “You're unlovable.” “You're not enough.” “You're a waste of time,” “Nobody's going to listen to you.” Those coats become your default way of thinking and they influence how

you interpret every situation you come in contact with, so when you set out on any type of life goal, you feel the weight and the trapped heat of those coats.

If you make a mistake, it usually seems in your head to further validate those layers of heavy winter coats and then to further validate those beliefs that are so unhealthy and that are weighing you down. Once you realize they are there, you can start removing those layers!

Just as with any unhealthy habit, you have to acknowledge, become aware, and replace.

1. Acknowledge what the behavior is. In this case, we're talking about the unhealthy thinking habits. You have to actually identify what that thinking habit is; what is the core belief? What is the belief holding you captive and causing you to interpret every situation in such a negative way? What's holding you back?

2. Raise awareness of the behavior. You can do this by starting to keep track of every time you begin to feel those negative emotions because that will raise your awareness that you are doing it again. Every time you start feeling down, discouraged and defeated, identify your feelings and change directions- As soon as you recognize them. This leads to the third step.

3. Change the behavior by replacing it. When it comes to thinking habits, the way we change those is to start replacing those with what we believe is true, even if it doesn't FEEL true all the time. We can choose to believe the things we know are true in our heads and not just base it on what we feel.

I have talked to so many clients that will use that language. They'll tell me what they believe is true, and then they'll use the words, "but I FEEL like this

is true,” or “it feels like so-and-so thinks this about me,” or “it feels like this is how I portray myself.” The specific statement may come in any form, but they always use that language- that “feels like” language. When you see the disconnect between what feels true and what you believe is true, it is going to cause emotional conflict every time.

As soon as you realize you’re doing it again and feeling those emotions, look and see what the belief behind it is. Then, replace that belief, and do it consistently.

4. Repeat it consistently.

Look for affirmations to replace those unhelpful and unhealthy thinking habits. Choose affirmations (positive self-talk statements) rooted in truth and that are time-oriented. This means they are in the present tense (not something that you’re someday going to do, but something right now). Phrases should not contain negative words such as “don’t,” “not,” “can’t,” etc. For example, “I am lovable,” instead of focusing on thoughts like “I’m not unlovable” to replace the negative, harmful self-talk that says, “I’m unlovable.” Implementing even such simple shift and saying, “I’m lovable,” “I am enough,” or “I can do this” can be an incredibly powerful tool in helping you reform thinking habits.

It could be very simple, and it’s something you consistently use to replace those negative thinking habits. People often find it helpful to post those affirmations where you can see them regularly. Some ideas to do this are to use a reminder app on your phone that does push notifications, use post-it notes around your house, your office, or car - just put them where you can see them often. You can also do a pretty printable graphic or note. I personally use Scripture

printables and post those around my house, in cabinets, mirrors, or frames. It helps me focus on what I believe to be true and counteract some of the negative thinking habits I've dealt with in the past. When you do this consistently, especially if you have an accountability partner you can touch base with just to keep yourself on the right track, then you'll start to feel those heavy winter coats coming off, and you'll start to really take a deeper breath that comes along with the emotional freedom of letting go of those unhealthy, hurtful beliefs.

When you implement these techniques, it releases barriers so you can actually meet goals- you can start that business venture or whatever you set in front of you because you're not weighed down with those heavy winter coats anymore!

Identifying underlying beliefs you have, and replacing unhealthy and inaccurate beliefs with statements that are healthy, true and helpful, are the basic concepts of CBT.

To go a step further, your thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors are all highly interconnected, and each one affects the others. For a good example of this, imagine that you walk into a room full of people and a close acquaintance doesn't speak to you. If your belief is that the person who didn't speak to you when you walked into the room must be angry with you, you're likely going to feel very defensive, it will impact your behavior toward her (which, in turn, will influence her behavior toward you). If your belief is that she was just distracted by other thoughts that may have nothing to do with you, you're probably going to feel more sympathetic toward her. Those thoughts and interpretations you have in

every situation make all the difference in how you feel about what happens around you.

From the behavioral aspect, if you have ever taken the time to do nothing but lay in bed all day, you're more likely to feel depressed than if you're up and moving. This also speaks to the value of scheduling and engaging in enjoyable activities when you're feeling down, because doing so can help motivate and inspire you. Sometimes, we have to "act as if," so we can keep moving forward to who we want to be. You've likely heard the term, "fake it till you make it," but I recently heard a wonderful TED talk around the concept of "do it until you become it."

Do the action you don't feel like doing until you become the person who does that action. Getting up and moving, doing any small thing can be helpful in battling anxiety and depression, working to lower severity levels. It's actually a technique called "behavioral activation." Depending on how severe symptoms are, a pleasurable activity to schedule may be something as simple as getting a shower, washing your hair, or walking to the mailbox, just to put it into perspective. It doesn't need to be something big. In fact, in the beginning, you don't want to schedule overwhelming tasks. You want to schedule tasks that feel like an "easy win." You need the satisfaction and motivation boost of being able to mark something off your to-do list.

Aaron Beck, who was the founder of CBT, used the triangle to introduce what he called the cognitive triad, and he used this to explain his theory of depression in the 70s. The concept applies to anxiety very well too, but in the cognitive triad, if the person's view of herself, the world and her future is

distorted, it can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety or depression. There are many types of cognitive distortions, which are basically unhealthy thinking habits. They are all beliefs about self, the world, or the future that are contrary to what is accurate and helpful.

For example, if you operate through the belief that you are merely a victim, and therefore, nothing will ever go well for you, you're going to understandably feel very defeated before you even begin anything new. When you're feeling defeated in your mind, any kind of success is nearly impossible. BUT, if you operate through the belief that the events in your life are painful, but are stepping stones, building you into a more complete and mature person, you're going to be much closer to success. Your outlook and your beliefs about yourself, the world around you, and your future are going to shape how you respond and how you interpret everything that happens.

Some examples of unhelpful thinking styles, or cognitive distortions may be:

- Always being right - Feeling the need to prove yourself right regardless of how it impacts others because to NOT be right would be horrible.
- Blaming - It's always someone else's fault (or they are going to be blamed anyway)
- Disqualifying the positive – Somehow, the positive information doesn't count, so it is written off.
- Emotional reasoning - Basing decisions and beliefs on feelings/emotions rather than fact or logic.

- Fallacy of fairness - “things should be fair at all times!” In reality, it’s not going to be, so this belief can create a great deal of internal conflict.
- Mental filtering - Sifting experiences to block the positives and only let the negative pass through. This would be like ignoring the beautiful day, the unexpected free coffee in the drive-through, the compliments of others, and focusing on the fact that there’s a hole in your sock, so the day is ruined.
- Jumping to conclusions - assuming you know what the other person is thinking (mind reading) or predicting the future with the assumption that it’s true and accurate.

Labeling and mislabeling - Attaching a label that overgeneralizes a situation or mislabels entirely. For example, making a mistake equals being a failure, or someone forgetting to call equals being betrayed.

- Magnification and minimization - Making an issue a bigger deal than it needs to be or the opposite, not taking a serious situation seriously. Making a mountain out of a molehill or making a molehill out of a mountain.
- Personalizing - Internalizing situations to attribute meaning to one’s self as a result. For example: if someone is grouchy toward you, assuming it means you’ve done something horribly wrong or you must be a bad person when in reality, maybe the person was just having a bad day.
- Making "must" or "should" statements - This one is incredibly common and doesn’t leave room for human error or variation. There are many

times it would be wonderful if something could happen. Saying “I should be able to _____” isn’t always realistic. Instead, “it would be great if _____” can relieve a lot of pressure.

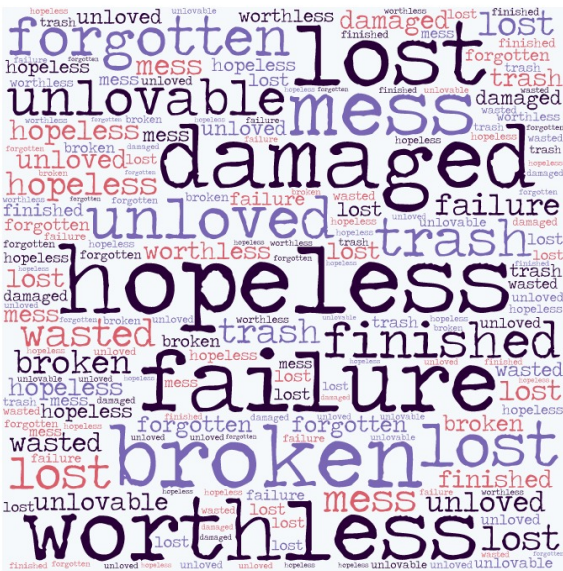
Splitting (All-or-nothing thinking, black-or-white thinking, dichotomous reasoning) - “If I don’t do it perfectly, I’m an utter failure.”

You probably see multiple examples that hit home because, to be honest, all of us probably at one point or another have been prone to some of these, and these are just a sample. There are many others. I have learned through my clients that we engage in this kind of thinking because it feels true even though, most of the time, we can probably acknowledge it is not really. We have a tendency to react based on what feels true rather than what we actually believe is true and having these kinds of core beliefs and the thinking habits that go with them is a bit like having someone follow you around all the time making negative comments in your ear.

Think about that for just a minute. Think about some of your most common negative thoughts. What if you had a person following you around all day long saying those things to you? If they just kept pointing out all the negatives in every situation, correcting every minor mistake, telling you that you’re incapable, that you lack intelligence, that no one likes you? What if that person woke you up in the middle of the night, just to recite a conversation you had earlier in the day and try to convince you that the other person in the

conversation now thinks you're stupid and will always avoid you from this time forward? How long would you put up with that?

Looking at the cognitive distortions concept, it can be really easy to see how thinking like that can be internalized and lead to what we call “core beliefs.” It’s like wearing a name tag that says “I’m hopeless and lost” until you eventually change your name and identity to “Hopeless Ann Lost.” The more you dwell on those beliefs, the more you become them. “Do it until you become it” can apply negatively as well.



I want you to look at this image for just a minute. Do you see words that you have used or thought of to describe yourself? Do these words paint a picture of how you view yourself, your world, or your future? What stands out most to you?

What have you been telling yourself? That you should have it all together? That

WHO ARE YOU BECOMING FROM YOUR THINKING HABITS?

you shouldn't have made that big mistake? That not reaching an achievement mess that you are an utter failure and have disappointed everyone in your life? That you're worthless because you never finished that degree?

This is what we do to ourselves if we're not careful because:

What if you operated from a place that believes every bit of scripture is true and God really cares about you more than the sparrow (and that he cares a lot about the sparrow)?

What would that change in your life?

If you believe Scripture is true, can you do it until your identity becomes who God created you to be?

MEDICATION:

I'd like to talk about managing specific symptoms for a bit. In managing some of those symptoms, one of the biggest debates seems to be whether to medicate or not. I'm not going to give you a blanket yes or no. I think the answer to this question is different for every person and it's something to discuss with your primary care physician. As I said earlier, it's very important to rule out any possible medical conditions that may be contributing to your anxiety. In some cases, there may be a vitamin deficiency, or there may be some other medical condition that can mimic those physical anxiety symptoms. Of course, physical make-up is going to vary from person to person, so I can't make any kind of overall statement about medications.

If you ask 100 different clinicians, you're probably going to get a lot of different opinions on this, but I always tell my clients that medication does not fix the problem. Medication does not make anxiety and depression go away.

While again, it's important to make sure you're ruling out medical problems that may be present and treating them appropriately, medication is not a cure-all.

With that said, medication can be helpful in treating symptoms which are presenting a barrier to completing daily tasks. I generally recommend that clients really focus on their therapy and if they and their prescriber think it's best to use medication while they're doing so, then that's what they do.

One concern to consider though, is that often if medication is in the picture and symptoms are being managed through medication; then the underlying problem is not being fully addressed.

When you're dealing with anxiety and depression, it's so important to look at the fact that mental health is multifaceted. Struggles are not just coming from one angle. There's a physical side, a mental/emotional side, and a spiritual side. Because it comes from every angle, it's important to take a holistic approach to each of those and make sure you're dealing with the whole picture and not just masking the symptoms.

So, while I don't think that medication is spiritually wrong in and of itself, there's a bigger picture to address. Going a step further, based on scripture, it's possible to have healing from mental health concerns. Any Bible study on the topic of healing will tell you that healing is possible, and I definitely believe that God is in the healing business. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, when we are fully seeking God, a deeper freedom is available to us, even through mental health concerns. This is not to say it's a simple issue of having "more faith," but I'm talking about a spiritual closeness that comes through actively seeking a

deeper understanding of God, the spiritual world, and claiming your authority as a child of God.

While you're looking for, and actively seeking a closer relationship with God and freedom from bondage of the enemy, you have to take care of yourself. You have to make sure you're managing symptoms. You have to make sure you're still functioning, but don't discount the healing power of God.

BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

As we discussed a bit earlier, behavioral activation can be a powerful emotional management tool. You can start small, by scheduling something like a 5 or 10-minute walk and coloring one page in an adult coloring book for one week. That might be a good place to start. If your anxiety or depression is severe, it might be something as simple as "I'm going to make sure I take a shower tomorrow afternoon," or "I'm going to be sure to eat at least one balanced, healthy meal this week."

Behavioral activation in the form of exercise can also be extremely beneficial. It may be the last thing you feel like doing, yet one of the most helpful actions you can take. You can start small, and you can always consult your physician (there's the disclaimer - consult your physician regarding what exercise may be best for you).

RELAXATION

One of the first recommendations I often give my clients as they are beginning to address their anxiety is to practice relaxation exercises. Many clients immediately tell me the relaxation exercises don't work for them, but the main barrier to effective relaxation exercises is that they're not actively practicing them regularly, and wait until they are already very anxious. To be completely straightforward, it's probably not going to work well for you if you wait until you're actually in the middle of an anxiety attack before you start attempting to do deep breathing exercises for the first time - unless maybe you have somebody talking you through it. That can potentially help a bit more.

One of the first exercises that I want to share with you would be controlled breathing. A simple version of this is just to count to five as you breathe in slowly through your nose, then you hold it for a few seconds, and breathe out very slowly through your mouth as you count to five. You can also find guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation exercises. One specific page that I recommend to a lot of clients is Dartmouth University's relaxation downloads. If you just Google that, you can find their page, with a big list of relaxation downloads that are free to stream from the website or save to your own device, and they can be very helpful. Some of them are very short, and some of them are much longer, but the key is to practice them daily (or even more than once a day would be helpful).

Something incredible happens while you engage in relaxation exercises regularly. You are training your body to recognize the symptoms of anxiety (and depression). You're starting to recognize more readily when you are tense, and

you train yourself to loosen those muscles. When you start training yourself to engage in those relaxation behaviors, it's like a manual override, so to speak, to prevent heightened anxiety or a panic attack.

GROUNDING

One technique I recommend for rapidly worsening anxiety is called Grounding. Many of my clients tell me they find this technique quite helpful. Grounding is the practice of using your senses to fight panic. When you recognize the beginning of a panic attack, begin to focus on your five senses.

Take just a moment to go through this with me and actually do it.

Just for a minute, think about what you see. Look around the room and take note of what you see.

Then, think about what you feel. Think about what the chair feels like underneath you. Focus on whatever your hands are resting on and how that feels. Notice what your feet feel like on the ground or in the chair under you. Really pay attention to what those physical sensations are. Note what the air feels like and the temperature in the room... anything you feel.

Next, think about what you hear around you. It might be a clock ticking. Maybe it's the heating and air unit or traffic outside. Whatever it is, take a mental note of it because it brings you back to the here-and-now, and lets your body know that you're not physically in danger at this moment, that it's just the physical symptoms of your body's natural threat system being activated as you're noting current sensations you are experiencing. If you were actually in a panic attack or trying to prevent a panic attack, you can add to that by using

affirmations. Like we mentioned earlier, you can choose something you're excited about and say that out loud. You can also use other affirmations, such as, "I have the coping skills to manage this. This is just an anxiety attack, and it will pass." This can be helpful because if you experience panic attacks, you probably already know sometimes it can feel like you're having a heart attack because it can be such a scary experience. Reminding yourself (out loud, preferably) of facts can be helpful. In the midst of a panic attack, your emotions are already starting to take over, so try to balance that with logic as much as possible. Activate the logical side of your brain by focusing on tangible facts.

Again though, as with any of the techniques, the idea is to practice until it becomes second nature, so you're not waiting until the last minute to try to use these.

HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Another long-term way of caring for yourself and managing your emotional and mental health is setting and enforcing healthy boundaries. Boundaries can be tough to achieve though, right? If you have others in your life who leave you feeling manipulated or "bull-dozed," sometimes, that can be a result of not having effective and healthy boundaries in place.

In discussing boundaries with clients over the years, I've often referred to a "Personal Bill of Rights," which outlines the basic human rights we assume all people have. I've seen several variations of this list, but it all boils down to respect. Respect yourself as you respect others. Respect others as you respect yourself.

Probably, the best way to explain is that boundaries are set for a person's protection. Ultimatums are set as an attempt to somehow control the other person's behavior.

As you are thinking about boundaries you have set, think about what you really need in order to keep yourself healthy. Whether with family, friends, workplace, or even strangers, if you do not set clear boundaries in your life, you are most likely a person who is frequently taken advantage of by others.

If setting boundaries is not something you currently do well, just remember that it IS a skill that you can work to improve. Practice. Address any unhelpful, unhealthy thinking in which you tell yourself you don't deserve better, or that you have to give in to others so you don't have conflict. Recognize that you have the same basic human rights as any other person, and it's not only okay to stand up for your rights, but it is healthy.

Assertiveness is the key to healthy boundaries. Being assertive basically means standing up for your rights while respecting the rights of others. Do you treat yourself like you have the same rights as those around you? Or do you treat yourself like you don't deserve better than what you currently have, while you are treated with a lack of respect by a person or people around you?

Setting boundaries can also apply internally. Some areas of wellness are just more enjoyable to give focus than others, right? Sometimes, we have to set boundaries for ourselves to exercise self-control and find that balance we keep referencing. If physical wellness is a tough one for you, you may use another area as a reward, such as being creative after a work-out session. Instead of spending

all of your time occupied in a good book, set aside time to work on building your (offline) social network.

Each individual will have her own favorite areas of wellness – those areas that come easy, and those that are more of a challenge. Strive for balance. Your balance may not look like the next person's, and it's certainly not about perfection, but you're aiming for a blend of peace and progress.

MINDFULNESS and EMOTIONAL LITERACY

As you're working to address your problematic symptoms, it's important to train yourself to be more aware of how you feel. To do this, you can check in with yourself often. Set reminders in your phone, use post-its where you will see them, download a mood tracking or thought record app - you have many options.

When you are checking in, you can write your anxiety level on a 1 to 10 scale before and after you use your coping skills and permit yourself to just be in the moment. Sometimes, that might be allowing yourself to feel sad, or whatever other emotion may be there. It may be giving yourself five minutes to cry, and then, if you need to schedule time later, you can do that. The point though, is to increase your awareness of what you are feeling and acknowledge it in some way, but not dwell there. You're not allowing it to take control, but you are allowing yourself to recognize and label it before moving on, rather than just shoving it under the rug.

It has always amazed me how many adults are unable to label their emotions, let alone children. I can't even tell you how many adults I've had in my office that couldn't label the emotions that they were experiencing. They would

tell me what they think about everything, but they just couldn't put into words what they felt about it because they've never really practiced doing so. There is value in just simply labeling what emotions you're experiencing, acknowledging them, and allowing yourself to experience them. It's not a skill that has received proper attention in general. As children, we are often taught to label happy, sad, mad, and some of the surface emotions, but our language contains words to explain hundreds of variations and combinations just waiting to be used!

So often, we may be guilty of putting off dealing with emotional events because they seem like they would be too difficult to manage. The problem is, putting off dealing with difficult emotions doesn't make them go away. The pent-up emotions keep building until you spring an emotional leak. We've all had them. They often come out in the forms of anxiety, depression, anger, health problems, or some combination. Simple point – it's not healthy to let your emotions sit and simmer. We have to deal with them to find a healthy balance.

When we talk about dealing with the emotional issues and not sweeping them under the rug, we're generally talking about unpacking them so you can explore them, name them, and lay them back down so they're not controlling you.

If you imagine being a kid and looking over to the closet at night because you thought you saw something move. In the closet, you see something that seems to be peeking around the door, and it's furry. Your brain fills in the gaps.... and in your mind, it's a huge, furry, mean monster with big teeth capable of eating you in just a few bites.... you tell yourself you should go check it out, but then convince yourself it's just too big and you wouldn't survive.... but then

eventually, either you work up courage, or a parent comes in the room, opens the closet door, and turns on the light. Then, you see it's a pair of fuzzy house slippers, and you realize you can totally handle that.

If we stuff emotions in long enough, they grow and grow into these big monsters we tell ourselves we wouldn't be able to handle if we were to release them from the closet. In reality, what looked like it could devour us in childhood may look a bit different as an adult, and we can handle it better than we've given ourselves credit.

Sometimes, we have to do a spring cleaning of the emotional closet.

1. Come up with a plan. What are you going to do with the items in the closet? How are you going to cope with the difficult emotions? What healthy coping skills can you use if you begin to feel overwhelmed? How can you allow yourself to enjoy the positive in what you find buried under the difficult experiences and emotions, etc.? As you get started, be sure to pray for wisdom and guidance.
2. Open the closet door and turn on the light. Allow yourself to acknowledge what is IN your emotional closet. Take the items out of the closet, one at a time, taking time to name each item and allow yourself to experience it. Take coping breaks as needed. Use a journal to write about what you find, or talk to a trusted friend, spouse, therapist, or mentor.

When you come across something that is overwhelming, stick to your coping plan and recognize that you have the ability to get through it, then celebrate the progress when you do. If you are feeling overwhelmed (or even if

you're not), be sure to find a mental health professional to help you through the process.

3. Keep moving forward, one piece at a time, until you have worked through the piles.

As you do some spring cleaning, you'll realize you are now looking at all those items piled in that emotional closet from an adult perspective, rather than the child perspective you had when you pushed them all in there. Even emotional baggage shoved in the closet as an adult will be a different experience when you look at it after taking a break from it. Give yourself some grace and remember that you can't expect your past self to have dealt with those emotional piles from your present perspective.

You have the strength it takes to tackle those monsters in the closet. Once you flip on the light, you may be pleasantly surprised to find a pair of fuzzy house slippers.

AFFIRMATIONS

When working to address unhelpful and unhealthy thinking habits, or core beliefs, we have to first identify them. To do this (in addition to working with an individual mental health clinician), you can use thought records. When you begin to recognize intense or painful emotions, you can use a thought record to write down what happened, what emotions were triggered (and how strongly), and what automatic thoughts were activated by the event. When you start to do that, you can start to recognize patterns that emerge, and this can help you start to see what underlying beliefs may be lurking.

Some of the most common ones that I see are beliefs such as:

“I am not enough.”

“I’m not loved.”

“I’m not lovable.”

These are thoughts and beliefs that scripture very clearly speaks against by telling us what is true. Scripture tells us how loved we are (and we’ll get more into that in a bit). The unhealthy thinking is also often referred to as “stinking thinking,” and our goal is to catch it and replace it with healthier thinking...that doesn’t stink. Just telling yourself to “stop thinking about it” is not going to help. When you tell yourself to stop thinking about something, you’re just going to think about it even more. Research confirms that!

In 1987, social psychologist Daniel Wegner published research in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* on the topic of thought suppression. He experimented with telling research participants to NOT think about a white bear. He found that participants still thought of a white bear more than once a minute, on average. Further, those participants were then told to think about a white bear, and they thought much more about a white bear than a separate group who had not been given the same instructions in the first round. The point? Thought suppression is ineffective, and when a person attempts to simply NOT think about something, there is a rebound effect when they begin to think about it again, and they actually end up thinking about that something more than they would have otherwise.

Rather than thought suppression, thought replacement is more recommended. To replace “stinking thinking,” we change the thoughts and replace them with statements that are more helpful and healthy.

Remember: Acknowledge, Become Aware, Replace, Repeat.

We can change the channel from the stinking thinking. It’s something that takes a lot of practice to do, but that’s one of the most helpful actions you can take to stop your anxiety. When you start training yourself to break the cycle we were talking about earlier, using affirmations to focus on what’s true, helpful and accurate helps to form healthier thinking habits, which serves to improve emotions and behaviors as well.

Affirmations will be different for every individual, so finding affirmations that work for you is important. It wouldn’t be very helpful if everyone had the same affirmation because not everyone has the same struggles.

When you are deciding what affirmations you would like to focus on each day, begin by looking at the areas of the biggest struggle for you. We’ve talked about doing thought records and recording details about arguments or situations that cause distress for you, then looking more closely to explore what thoughts or beliefs may have influenced those situations. When you’re looking at what your underlying thoughts are, and working to challenge any unhelpful/unhealthy thoughts or beliefs by replacing them, affirmations are born.

When developing affirmations, create them to be spoken in the positive. Try to avoid words like, “don’t,” “stop,” or “not.” For example, instead of “I’m going to stop doing this,” or “I’m not _____,” use positive, present-tense words. Even if it doesn’t feel real yet, use it anyway. Rather than saying, “I’m going to

stop eating unhealthy things,” you might say, “I make good and healthy eating choices.” Instead of dwelling on, “I’m not enough,” you may want to focus on, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” or “I am a loved child of the King.” Some of the best affirmations I have ever used or seen are straight from Scripture.

Whether you find an affirmation that resonates with you on a list of affirmations, connect with a Scripture passage that states a message you need to hear often and make into a habitual thought, or you come up with your affirmation by challenging an unhealthy belief it's important to make an effort to repeat the affirmation until it becomes more of a habit than the unhelpful self-talk was. Be creative in finding ways to keep your chosen affirmation fresh in your mind. Find the affirmations that work best for you. Here are some examples:

I like myself because I was lovingly created.

I am enough.

I exist free of fear.

I am loved.

I'm a loved child of the Most High God.

I live and follow God's perfect plan for my life each day.

Success is within my reach when I allow God to guide me.

I choose to dwell in God’s truth and peace.

I am proud of my progress.

I am proud of my success.

I am proud of myself.

I am secure in my identity as a child of God.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13

I am likable.

I am lovable.

I am an interesting creation.

I trust God and His plans for my life.

I have access to the resources I need.

My life has meaning and purpose.

I have a right to say no.

I have hope.

I am calm and confident.

I am responsible.

Now, I want us to turn back to our hypothetical client, Jill. As Jill continues her therapy, she begins to dig deeper and to understand what her core beliefs are and how they impact her view of herself, the world, and her future. She begins to recognize the patterns that she has in her thinking, and she works hard to change those thinking habits that have been triggering her anxiety or tripping her up all along the way. She decides to join a support group and the accountability that she finds in the support group helps her make the lasting changes she was really needing to make.

In the final session, Jill comes in, and she's relaxed. She's breathing normally. She speaks and laughs freely, and doesn't look visibly tense like she did when she first came into the office. She is now able to describe the connections that she's made to help her feel normal again.

As a side note, over the years, I've gained a pretty wide variety of experience in working with a lot of different groups. Something that seems to be noteworthy to add right now is something that I've heard many times while working with clients who have been struggling with substance abuse, especially. Just about every client that I worked with who struggled and relapsed would tell me that they did great as long as they were going to the AA meetings or NA meetings and meeting up with people consistently. I think that there's a lot to be said for having that kind of consistent support to keep you on track along the way.

One final note on these coping methods is that with any of these; don't wait until you need it the most. All of them require repetition, just as a runner needs to train for a marathon long before the day of the marathon. Practice is what makes them effective!

Chapter Three: Applying Scripture to Anxiety Management

We have discussed the physical side of anxiety, the cognitive, or thinking side of anxiety, and the emotional side of anxiety. Now, we're going to be exploring it all from a biblical perspective. The longer I have worked as a mental health care provider, the more I have realized just how well the cognitive behavioral therapy approach we've been talking about can be backed up by Scripture.

Before I get into this section though, I just want to pause and say I know talking about the scriptural side of struggles can be a touchy topic. I realize that many of you have likely dealt with some judgment from others or have had negative experiences with religion and spirituality, but I want to ask that if you find yourself feeling angry or insulted at all, bear with me.

You might not agree with everything I say, and I think we can deal with that, but just keep in mind that those core beliefs we talked about earlier are certainly no stranger to this topic too. Be careful how you interpret and know that the purpose of this section and the purpose even of the Scriptures we're talking about are to offer hope that situations can improve. It's not to condemn, and it's not about whether or not we're "good Christians," because Scripture says that all of us have sinned. 1 John 1:8 says that if we claim to be without sin, we deceive

ourselves and the truth is not in us. So basically, all of us have made mistakes, all of us have tripped up at times, and I would never say somebody has anxiety because they're not a "good enough Christian." This book is not that at all, but it is about learning how our enemy works and what that means for our mental health. It's about what we can do about mental health struggles through prayer and scriptural advice. Now that we've got that out of the way, let's just move forward.

We all form unhealthy thinking habits.

I have recited that line as I begin the spiel to explain where unhealthy thinking originates so many times I can almost say it in my sleep. Client after client, I have explained the general concepts of cognitive behavioral therapy, like we've been discussing to this point. I discuss how our thinking habits affect how we feel and therefore, how we behave or react to situations. It's such important information, yet so infrequently taught.

I used to wonder, though, how we could tell when the presentation of mental health illness was a result of spiritual oppression, possession, or simply "Mental Health." I realize now that it is not that cut and dry.

From a mental health perspective, we really do form thinking habits, whether positive or negative. We form core beliefs that shape how we view the world and interpret every situation we face. Like looking through colored glasses, they impact how we see and process our experiences.

Have you been thinking about where your core beliefs originate?

Did you grow up surrounded by criticism and anxiety? Anger? Depression? What are you surrounding yourself with now? Do you watch television shows that dwell on those themes? Do you spend time with people who respond in those ways? Have you experienced abuse or traumatic experiences?

There is a very real, unseen influence in it all. To help understand that concept though, let me back up a bit to give a brief overview of “spiritual warfare.”

God created angels.

Lucifer, one of the most beautiful, powerful angels decided he wanted to BE God and tried to take over, convincing 1/3 of the other angels to join him.

They were cast out of Heaven.

“The Heavens” actually refer to multiple places. The first heaven is our sky/atmosphere. Then is second heaven (home of the planets, moon, stars, etc.), and the “Third Heaven,” or paradise, where God is and where we will go when we go “home.”

Satan and his underlings were out of the 3rd Heaven (and the presence of God) and left to operate in the 1st Heaven/sky. It's a bit like a bully being kicked out of class; he hangs out in the hallway and tries to manipulate the students into not going to class to learn what they want to learn- only it's a whole lot more extreme.

God formed mankind to rule over the earth and allows us to invite Heaven to intercede on earth. God WANTS to help us- WANTS to give us

blessings and operate on our behalf, but we need to invite Him (that's what prayer does! We ask God to intervene on earth!). We often block Him from doing so by 1. Simply not asking and 2. Allowing the enemy (Satan and his underlings) to distract and defeat us with lies, so we miss what God has for us.

Satan, the thief, liar, and accuser, comes to "kill, steal, and destroy." We have an enemy that operates unseen, working to distract, defeat, discourage, and destroy us, so we do not remember or understand who we are or that God is STILL on the throne.

God's truth VS. Satan's lies.

God's truth is that He loves us and wants what is good for us. God is all-powerful.

Satan and crew will do anything in their power to keep us from believing that. What that looks like is that they manipulate and twist the truth, they intervene in communication by planting seeds of thought that warp interpretations, creating conflict in relationships. This results in trauma, heartbreak, and destruction. Their efforts stir up confusion, anger, bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, etc. and as soon as they can get our minds off God and God's truth, they have a foot in the door. Like a bridle in a horse's mouth, they can then control and direct, as soon as we "bite."

As soon as we give in to the temptation to believe those lies, they use guilt and shame to keep us beaten down and in submission - to make us forget who and whose we are. We are deceived into thinking we've messed up too badly to be forgiven and must be punished for our sins, that we're not enough, not

lovable, too broken, too weak, too insignificant, too busy; too human. We become slaves to that path of thinking, and when those seeds of thought take root, they grow and choke out the good seed, like weeds. With each new seed and each new set of roots, the enemy has a better grasp on us, to keep us believing the lies and forgetting who we are in Christ. We settle further and further into darkness.

Because of this slavery to sin, we needed SOMEONE to come and win victory - to live blamelessly. Jesus came to earth to become ONE OF US. He lived a pure life on earth and was crucified and died on behalf of us all. Satan wants us to believe we are powerless against him. Jesus was proof that we're not. He was proof that Satan CAN be resisted and defeated. After He won victory, He sent His spirit for further help, in addition to His angels that He already commanded to watch over us and battle on our behalf.

None of us are perfect like Jesus, and we give the enemy footholds in our lives when we give in to the lies and accusations. BUT, God had a bigger plan. He gave us a way out. He provided redemption and grace. He gave us victory as part of our inheritance when He adopted us into His family as His children. Jesus' blood and sacrifice cover us all!

The enemy's method of attack is consistent. Plant seeds of thought, manipulate situations, bury the truth in lies, accusations, and guilt. Rinse and Repeat. We do the rest when we allow those seeds to grow. Even worse - when we nurture them. Nurturing seeds from the enemy only leaves us vulnerable to further torment. Giving in to the temptation to withhold forgiveness removes our ability to have forgiveness.

The ground is fertile and ready for those seeds if we've been hurt, abused, weakened, sick, distracted/busy, traumatized, neglected, rejected, betrayed, etc. For every "enemy" you have, there's an unseen enemy behind the behavior. The seed was planted by someone. That person may have nurtured it and let it grow, but they didn't plant it.

I'd like to take time now to be more specific about some of the strategies of our spiritual enemies and some of the information that can help us learn to understand, acknowledge, and stand against the attacks that come our way.

We know from Scripture that Satan is not omnipresent. As a created being, he can't be everywhere at once. God is omnipresent and can take care of everyone at the same time. Satan's following is limited. The demons that fell with him are limited. He works against us in different ways; but here, he and his demons commonly interfere by planting those seeds of thought. Fears, doubts, insecurities, thoughts of injustice... they begin to grow. He may whisper in our ear, "come on, you don't really think they could love someone like you, do you?" "You have a right to be angry. How dare they do that to you."

He stirs the pot.

"You have made too many mistakes for anyone to love you."

"You'll never be enough."

These statements are such a stark contrast from what Scripture tells us is true, aren't they? Because they are lies!

He pokes and prods.

He pours salt in wounds.

He gets the water churning.

He plants weeds among the healthy plants.

He recruits his army to torment too.

Scripture says that the devil roams around the earth, looking for someone to devour.

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

1 Peter 5:8 (NIV)

Like a lion, he'll be watching for the weakest of the herd. The one that's too tired, too old, too young, too sick, too injured, too weak, too isolated, too distracted. Being a master strategist, he's also going to target the ministry leader, the faithful Christian parent, or anyone working hard in ministry against his efforts. If he can tear down a leader and negatively impact those in that individual's sphere of influence, he's going to do just that!

A dear friend shared with me a proverb he grew up hearing in Haiti, which is loosely translated, “They only throw rocks at a ripened fruit.” How true that is! I have learned that when God is moving and I'm being obedient, I go through a series of “unfortunate” happenings that could potentially be discouraging and defeating. Hacked websites, sickness, a busted water heater and ruined floor, a broken-down refrigerator, leaking roof, car trouble - all in the span of a few weeks, while preparing and leading a 7-day prayer challenge. In another series of events, I was even rear-ended while turning into the parking lot to lead a workshop on the very topic of this book! While sometimes “bad things just happen,” sometimes there is a lion-like enemy seeking to tear down and destroy

in an attempt to avoid being exposed. I have learned that when I remain faithful, God always turns those weapons of the enemy into blessings. Always. The struggles tend to confirm that I'm doing something right, and only serve to strengthen my resolve to keep pushing forward in the calling my Heavenly Father has placed on me!

If we're not alert, we fall for the attacks. We take the bait and start chewing on those damaging and defeating thoughts. They're a bit like poorly prepared squid that seems to become more and more rubbery the more you chew.

While you're busy chewing, and really working those thoughts over in your head, he's free to move on to the next individual and wreak havoc there too.

The thinking habit takes shape.

If we start to realize it and make changes, around he comes again to fight a little harder. He wants to keep us distracted, discouraged, and defeated. He doesn't want us to replace unhelpful self-talk with truth because then, he can't win. He wants us to keep the "stinking thinking."

The best place I can think of to start when discussing how Scripture talks about anxiety and how Scripture can help you defeat your anxiety is to focus on putting on the full armor of God.

“10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor

of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. 18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.”

Ephesians 6:10-18 (NIV)

The big part I want to focus on first is that our struggle is not against flesh and blood. You may feel like your struggle is against other people that are fighting against you. It might be a family member, your spouse, your children, boss, co-worker, neighbor... the truth is they are not your enemy. No matter how much they feel like your enemy, they are not your enemy.

I want you to think back about our question from earlier. How long would you put up with someone following you around whispering negativity, criticism, and lies in your ear? Because that's exactly what our spiritual enemy does. We've been talking about the thinking habits we form, and we do form them through repetition. Often, it's because of criticism from other people or traumatic events, and all the situations we've discussed. But with all that said, we have to remember to look a little deeper.

As Christians, we need to be fighting the root enemy, who tries to work in secret. The enemy, comprised of satan and his crew, wants to keep hidden. I

know sometimes, if you're already struggling with anxiety, it can seem as if no one understands and your loved ones are against you. This can add a lot of weight to your anxiety, but again, those loved ones are not your enemy. Turn your attention to the real enemy.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

II Corinthians 10:2-5

Those core beliefs we were talking about earlier- you can refer to them as strongholds. During a time when my family was facing some pretty serious spiritual attacks, I realized I had not been wearing my spiritual armor as I should. I had it, but I wasn't really using it. It was more like I was playing dress-up. My sword was more like an accessory than a defensive weapon. I wasn't really wielding it.

When I realized early in the year that year that our family had been under attack, I found a prayer in a Bible study I was reading about spiritual warfare. I printed the prayer and put it on my bathroom mirror. I was praying it often and even set a reminder on my phone for every morning to make sure I didn't forget. I started seeing some gradual changes. I started to recognize the influence of our spiritual enemy. It was a start, and God was really tightening my spiritual armor

so I could take my stand as a warrior. This went on for months - praying and seeking understanding in Scripture.

One night, as I was reading the nightly Bible story to my boys, I picked the story of Balaam's talking donkey because I thought the boys would like it. As I was reading, I felt like God smacked me in the face with it. I'd been reacting to people and situations as if the people and situations were the enemy, but like Balaam, I had been blind to the spiritual influences behind it all. From that point, I added to my prayers to regularly ask God to open my eyes as He opened the eyes of Balaam, so I could see the spiritual influences in the situations I was facing. Not long after I began to add that to my prayers, I walked into my boys' room while they were out with their dad one day, and I just started praying out loud. As I prayed, I recognized the Holy Spirit guiding me and bringing to my attention how my efforts to defend myself in a certain situation were coming out of pride, rather than giving it over to God. I repented, and it was like the floodgates of Heaven opened. I've been a Christian for a very long time, but I'd never experienced a spiritual freedom like that.

God used that to help me understand the pieces of the armor more thoroughly. Now, I want to look at the armor of God with you and talk about what that really means for us in our defense against the anxiety and so much more. I'm sure you are probably familiar with the concept of the armor of God, but have you ever really focused on it? I know I was familiar with it before but hadn't really looked as deeply into it as I now have. It is truly a game-changer, so perk up and pay attention, now!

BELT OF TRUTH

As in the scriptural description, we begin with the belt of truth. Just as a belt wraps around you, it is important to wrap yourself in the truth. How would your life look if you were legitimately wrapped in truth? How would that change those anxious or depressive thoughts echoing in your head?

John 8 verse 32 says, “then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

When you think about what freedom could really feel like, that verse can be pretty powerful. In armor, your belt is also where your scabbard is held, and that's where you keep your sword, so it's on hand at all times. If you lose your keys often, you know it's important to have a proper place for items, so they are there when you need them most. The sword of the Spirit, or God's Word, is held in the belt of truth. When you wrap yourself in truth, you're always going to have that sword readily at hand when the enemy attacks.

You do not want to be forgetting your sword and having to go look for it when you're under attack! You want to have it at hand and be ready to stand your ground!

What would happen if, every morning, you wrapped yourself in what God says is true? How would that impact you? If you laid a foundation each morning, acknowledging truth such as: You are loved (John 3:16)? You are a child of God (John 1:12), You are a co-heir with Christ, whose blood paid the price and won the victory over ALL sin and death (Romans 8:17)? You have been accepted by Christ (Romans 15:7), You are a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) and there is no longer any condemnation for you (Romans 8:1),

so guilt and shame are invalid!! You have been set free in Christ (Galatians 5:1) and are no longer a slave but a child of the King (Galatians 4:7)!

These truths make me feel so excited and victorious! Do they make you too?

You are redeemed and forgiven by the grace of Christ (Ephesians 1:7), God supplies all your needs (Philippians 4:19), and you are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Ephesians 2:10)!

These are only a glimpse of the truth found in God's word. If you were truly wrapped in these listed truths alone, what would that do for you each day? What would it do to your anxiety and depression?

BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Next, we have the breastplate of righteousness. This is a very powerful passage laying out so clearly what the basis of righteousness, or "right living" is.

"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self,

which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin.” Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:17-32

Righteousness is basically about living rightly, and that's what protects you. It's not about condemnation or guilt. As the breastplate protects your heart in a physical battle, right-living protects your heart in a spiritual battle. It protects the vital parts of you. If you're holding on to bitterness or unforgiveness, you weaken your defenses because the breastplate is not properly fitted to you. It leaves gaps for the enemy to strike and mortally wound you. Alternatively, when you dwell on the truth and resist the lies Satan tries to feed you, it lays the solid

foundation for God to protect you. It creates a barrier between your vital organs and the enemy.

Because forgiveness and letting go of resentment and bitterness can be challenging, yet unresolved can do so much damage to our spiritual health, I really want to take time here to focus on forgiveness. There are many misconceptions about what it means to really forgive, so it's important for us to talk about what it does and does not mean.

First, it doesn't mean letting them off the hook. Forgiveness of a debt may mean the person no longer has to pay the debt, but it doesn't mean removing all the consequences of the actions. For example, I can forgive my kids and not hold their actions against them in the sense that I withhold love from them but still stay consistent in issuing a timeout or removing privileges. I'm still going to show them love when I do that.

Second, forgiving does not mean condoning what they did or telling them it's okay. It's not inviting them to continue acting in the same way. It's important to set healthy boundaries. There are consequences to all actions, whether positive or negative.

Third, forgiveness is not just a one-time choice. There will be times that something happens to stir up those feelings of bitterness or resentment and you'll have to make a conscious effort once again to forgive and let those feelings go. If you're sick or tired, or worn down and weak, then those thoughts may pop back in your head again. You have the choice to let them go or dwell on them and feed them so they grow. When you dwell on those thoughts and feelings, you give the enemy a foothold. He studies you. If we give in to a selfish, hateful thought, if we

give in to a self-defeating or self-critical thought - those become footholds and give the enemy a legal right to come in and torment. We may be providing him with the very weapons to bring us down. We absolutely have to learn to resist those thoughts and use the authority given to us by the Heavenly Father to evict any spiritual enemy trying to attack us.

In Scripture, we read a parable about a servant who was about to be sold because he couldn't repay a debt. The short version of this parable is that the man owed the king a lot of money and he couldn't repay it. He begged for mercy. The King had pity and forgave the debt entirely, but when the man left, he ran into somebody else who owed him a little bit of money. Because that man couldn't pay, he had him thrown in prison until he could pay. When the king found out, he was furious. We read that "in anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

From a spiritual perspective, when you're not forgiving, you don't have forgiveness, and you're not protected from the enemy's attacks.

Going back to the full passage of Ephesians 4:17-32 above, let's look at some of the key aspects of righteous living:

1. Speak truthfully. This means no passive-aggressive, say-one-thing-and-mean-another speech, no blatant lies, no "I'm fine!" while seething and plotting revenge... speak truthfully. In love.
2. We are all members of one body. The body only functions if it works together, and one part is not better than the rest. Have compassion for one another! We all

make mistakes and do stupid things at times, and every single one of us is susceptible to being manipulated and used as pawns by enemy forces if we are not standing our ground. The 12 disciples weren't even immune.

3. Don't let the sun go down while you're angry and don't sin while you are angry. "Do not give the devil a foothold." When you give in to the temptation to seethe and dwell in bitterness and anger, you are throwing the door wide open to be tormented by your spiritual enemy. When you give your spiritual enemy footholds, you keep yourself in spiritual bondage. You are providing spiritual handles by which the enemy can control and manipulate you. You are living like a slave in chains when you are meant to live royally!

4. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, build one another up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen – Don't badmouth and gossip about the person who wronged you, dragging their name through the mud, etc. It's not going to help. Acknowledge their spiritual needs and pray for them fervently.

5. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." – Aren't these the attitudes and behaviors that PREVENT forgiveness? They are what keep us from being able to focus on the truth and the hope that God has for us, because if the enemy can get us distracted and focusing on bitterness, anxiety, anger, rage, and any other detrimental mindset or behavior, he knows that we're not going to be focused on the hope, truth, and love that God has for us. Getting rid of these attitudes and behaviors is how you package up forgiveness for whoever has wronged you, whether they apologize and accept that package or not. Replace those hang-ups with kindness and compassion.

Now, we're getting into the tough stuff, right? Is there unforgiveness, anger, bitterness, resentment, etc. keeping you from accessing a deeper relationship with your Heavenly Father? If so, are you willing to let it go? It could be exactly what is keeping you in bondage.

Part of the process of living rightly and finding peace and forgiveness for others and yourself also involves confession. There is much power in the spoken word! God spoke the world into existence. Our enemy wants to keep us silent, but it's our responsibility to pick up our fellow warriors and encourage one another. We all struggle. We all have our weak moments. We're all more susceptible when we're sick, when we're facing trauma, or when we're isolated, but the Bible is very clear on the importance of meeting together.

James 5:16 says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Prayer changes things; especially if we are able to lean on one another and hold each other accountable while living rightly (not dwelling in sin) so that our prayers are effective.

Do you ever wonder what sin actually is? We're all familiar with the word, but have you stopped to look at what it means? We often think of sin as being those big behaviors that we know not to do. In 1 John, we read that sin is a transgression against the laws of God, and in Deuteronomy and Joshua, we read that it's rebellion against God. Part of a definition I found at Wikipedia, of all places, says that "sin can also be viewed as a thought or action that endangers the ideal relationship between an individual and God." I love that definition because when we think about what separates us from an ideal relationship with God;

those thoughts and behaviors are sinful. But it's important to look at what makes it sin and why that's such a bad thing.

I know it's easy to get caught up in the rules and the regulations, just like the Pharisees. It's easy to get caught up in doing things because that's what's expected and doing things because that's what the law says, but that's not what it's about. It's not just about doing what you do because you're supposed to. When you look at what happens when sin enters the picture, that's when you really start to have a deeper understanding of why it's so important to make choices and to keep your focus where it should be to keep you focused on God and having that wonderful relationship with Him that you can have without the presence of sin.

It's truly not just about following the rules for the sake of following the rules. It's because God knows if you start down that path, you get sucked into it. You're walking out of his protection.

To illustrate, I'm sure you've noticed that if you're going about your day and something out of the plan happens (something that is not pleasant), it can be really easy to get trapped into a negative line of thinking. One negative thought quickly leads to another and can snowball. Not only does it affect you, but it affects everybody around you, that's what sin does. That is sin.

“Like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.” Sin is dangerous, when you engage in thinking and actions that separate you from a loving relationship with your Heavenly Father, you're giving the spiritual enemy the right to manipulate and torment you. You're stepping out of God's protection and giving Satan and his underlings a legal right to interfere in your life. That's where our struggles originate! We often don't even realize the connection.

When we start to believe the lies of the enemy instead of the truth God has already given us, our relationship with Him is damaged. It leads us to anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. That's not what God wants for us! That is exactly why He sent His Son to die for us on the cross, so we can have freedom from sin.

We have a God of HOPE. God sent His Son to die for us so the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, would defeat the enemy. The authority that comes from being able to claim the blood of Jesus- to claim that same victory is an incredible inheritance!

God sent His Son to die for us so we could have victory by association. We can have victory and authority over the enemy, so we don't have to allow him to have a foothold in our lives. We don't have to give in to sin. We can choose a different path, focused on the truth. We can be protected by right living.

Satan is the accuser. He's going to take any chance he has to accuse you of being wrong; to accuse you of being "not enough," to accuse you of being "less than."

That's not what this is about. We are talking about sin as being those thoughts and actions drawing you away from God. We're talking about what happens when we feed into those lies from the accuser. Feeding into those lies of the accuser (the lies of the enemy) is where sin comes in, but it's not about being wrong; it's about recognizing those barriers preventing you from having spiritual freedom.

When you struggle with guilt about sin- the guilt that you've messed up... you know what? Scripture tells us everybody has sinned. All of us. This message

is not about being guilty. It's about the potential for you to have freedom. Yes, we are guilty of our sin, but Jesus has already paid the price. He TOOK guilt from us. We don't live there anymore.

When you think about sin, don't allow yourself to dwell in hopelessness and despair. Redirect those thoughts. Don't listen to the enemy. Put on the full armor of God, starting with the belt of truth, because there is so much freedom when you really understand the freedom that comes from repenting of sin-acknowledging the sin, giving it over to God, and restoring that right relationship with Him. There is incredible freedom in having your armor in place and walking in the authority you have as a child of God.

With all of that said, maybe a very practical definition of sin would be, "feeding into the lies of the enemy." When you feed into the enemy's lies, the accusations and guilt keep you from having a good relationship with our Heavenly Father. It's not about being wrong, even when you are. It's about not letting it keep you from having the freedom God wants for you. You are His beloved child.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 6:23 (NIV)

Sin is separation from God. It's a break in the relationship. When we sin, we are pulling away from a relationship with Him, spiritually dying a bit each time. Those who die with no relationship with God (the source of light, life, and love), are destined for eternity without Him - and all that He is. Physical death is rather insignificant in these terms.

When we sin; when we give in to temptation to engage in thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, actions, etc. that are not in line with God's attitudes, actions, character, etc. – we distance ourselves from God. When we are focusing on self rather than pleasing God, sacrifice is required to demonstrate repentance and restore the relationship.

If you have a friend who is focused only on herself, would it be hard to have a relationship? It would crumble! To right the relationship, it would definitely take some sacrifice on her part. Her time, attitudes, etc. would have to change and be evident. A relationship with our CREATOR is so much bigger; so much deeper... it requires a much deeper level of sacrifice to understand the gravity of the damage created by sin. Adam and Eve were told they would die if they sinned in the garden by eating of the forbidden tree. Their sin separated them from God, who IS life. They experienced a spiritual death that required a sacrifice for reconciliation. Something had to die in their place to offer life back to them.

God wants SO much better for His children than living with the effects of sin! Otherwise, He wouldn't have offered His one and only Son as a sacrifice!

Referring back to the parable about the wicked servant who refused to forgive, it's easy to ask, "why would God turn us over to be tormented if He's such a loving God?" It's because sin comes with a price, and we have a spiritual enemy who takes it upon himself to collect.

When we break the law, there's a legal debt to pay — a consequence. Breaking spiritual law is no different. When we break God's laws, which are in place to keep us close to Him so He can provide for and protect us, we are

withdrawing ourselves from God's love (which does not change or fade). We are then stepping outside His protection, as if walking into Antarctica wearing a t-shirt and shorts. God will allow us to go. He'll turn us over. He's not going to force us to stay in His presence; It's not in His nature. He will, however, welcome us back with open arms when we decide to repent and sacrifice "self" to follow His commands.

A great example of being "turned over" in scripture is King Saul. After continued rebellion and walking away from God, we read in 1 Samuel 16, "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." God withdrew His Spirit and protection after being continually rejected by King Saul. He allowed an evil spirit to go to Saul to torment him.

God's desire is reconciliation, and sometimes, we have to "hit rock bottom," as the saying goes, before we're willing to turn back to God. As a parent, there have been times I've allowed my children to engage in activities they were absolutely determined to do, knowing that they would not be pleased with the results, because I wanted them to come to me to help them. I always want to help, but sometimes, their pride gets in the way, and they are absolutely not receptive until they've tried their own way and it just didn't work well for them.

To further complicate things, we have a spiritual enemy that stalks us, studies us, and tempts us to leave God's presence and protection. God may allow us to be tempted by the enemy because, as in the story of Job, He wants to bring us to the next level closer to Him. Trials expose areas that need to be resolved so

we can rely on Him more and ourselves less. If we give in to temptation, we may be immediately plagued with guilt and shame, which pushes us further down that slippery slope.

Imagine you're in a classroom — your all-time favorite class. There's a bully in the classroom who wants everyone's attention. He tries to take over the class. He wants to be the center of attention and get everyone to see how handsome he is and how good he is at everything he does. Though the teacher responds patiently and lovingly, he eventually has to tell the bully to leave. He can't conduct class for the bully.

The bully goes out into the hallway. As you and the other students walk through the hallway, he claims to be the hall monitor, taking it upon himself to manipulate you and your classmates into making mistakes. Then, he can seemingly justify bullying you. He continually follows you down the hallway, telling you you're a failure, saying you will never amount to anything, telling you you're not enough and that you're unlovable... relentlessly.

Some days, he has you so beaten down that you decide to just skip class. When you skip class, he mocks you. He tells you that you're stupid for not going to class and that your teacher will never forgive you. He tells you you're a failure and you're going to be in the hallway with him forever, never again enjoying the classroom.

One day, a classmate is heading to class and the bully steps away from you long enough to start tormenting her. She turns to face him and boldly tells him that the teacher says he has to leave her alone. She reminds him that he's not

the hall monitor and that he still has to answer to the teacher. Angry, he backs off and sulks down the hall. You watch in amazement. How did she just do that?

Just then, she sees you watching her, and she smiles. She reminds you of what your teacher once said, about how you are always welcome in class. She tells you he's hoping you'll come back in today.

Reluctantly, and full of shame, you follow her into the classroom, with your head down.

The teacher says your name. When you look up, he has a huge smile on his face as he welcomes you back. As he gives you the warmest, most loving hug, he tells you he understands where you've been and that he's glad you're back. Then, in a very kind tone, he asks why you never asked him to come to the hallway and help you deal with the bully. He reminds you that you will always be his student, and that you are always welcome in his class when you are willing to show up and participate... you just have to remember you are his student and not a hallway-dwelling failure. You have to stand up to the bully and not give in to his lies.

Have you been in the spiritual hallway, being tormented by the bully? Stand up for yourself. Remind him who he is and who he's not. Remember who YOU are. Call to the Teacher for help. The bully has to listen to the teacher, and the teacher gives you the authority to stand up for yourself in His name. You have a choice. You can't have a relationship with the Teacher if you listen to the bully and allow him to torment you instead of stepping into the teacher's presence.

SHOES OF READINESS

Next, we have the shoes of readiness. Who doesn't love a great pair of shoes, right? Once, my husband and I decided to get more dressed up than normal for his company's Christmas dinner. My mom went shopping with me, and I picked out a black dress I just loved. Next we went shoe shopping and, of course, my eyes were drawn to this pair of very sparkly stiletto heels. They were ridiculous... but they were so pretty. I loved them. Just to establish something here, I am not much of a shopper, and I'm a pretty low maintenance girl. I tend to err on the practical side of decision-making.

My mom insisted I try on the shoes and adamantly insisted on buying the shoes for me, along with a pair of soft ballerina flats to carry in my purse to put on when my feet inevitably could no longer stand the beautiful shoes. They make me laugh because... let me be perfectly transparent here - those shoes were painful. It was hard to even walk in them! But, they were so beautiful. They didn't last long at the party, but while I had them on, they did something to my confidence (and my toes, but that's beside the point). I felt "fancy," and even saying that makes me want to laugh. It seems so silly of me to put myself in shoes that were so uncomfortable just because they were pretty (but seriously, these shoes rocked). Having "the right" shoes on makes a difference.

Shoes not only protect your feet, they also prepare you for what is to come. Wearing the right pair of shoes, you're ready for the day! You're ready and anticipating what's coming ahead. I like how it's worded, "the shoes of readiness from the gospel of peace." THAT peace comes from knowing who God is, from knowing who you are in Him, and from knowing about the inheritance you have

in Him. THAT kind of peace, when you truly know who and whose you are, and the authority you have in the name of Jesus Christ as a much-loved child of the King... THAT kind of peace is better than any sparkly shoe on earth: no pinched toes, no painful arches, no blisters. Perfect fit!

For the record, I actually have worn the shoes a few times since, they have become quite a bit more comfortable to wear (I've worn them around the house a bit to help break them in). My middle son even requested I wear them with my blue shirt and the little plastic gemstone ring he bought for me with his tickets at a local pizza arcade. You'd better believe I did... and yes, I felt ready!

SHIELD OF FAITH

After the shoes of readiness, we have the shield of faith. The shield protects you from the fiery darts of the evil one. Have you ever stopped to think about what those fiery darts, or flaming arrows really are? Have you ever thought about how those fiery darts are those lies that Satan tries to throw into you? Darts like, "you're unlovable," "you're not going to ever get anything right," or "you don't deserve anything good because of what you've done." I'm sure you know what your darts are, but faith is trusting that you are who God says you are in Him. It's trusting that He is who He says He is to you.

He says you're lovable- so much so, He gave His only Son to die for you. He says He is going to protect you, and He has given you armor to protect yourself. God says you are much more valuable than the sparrows, and He even cares for them. He says He is going to take care of your needs. Scripture- the

Sword- says faith is believing this. Faith (your shield), tells you these truths block out the fiery darts from the enemy.

There is a type of Roman shield called a scutum that soldiers carried into battle for protection. When attacked, they would hold their scutums closely together, forming a nearly impenetrable wall-like covering over themselves. Together, they could shelter against the weapons of the enemy. They had greater strength in numbers. I just love that! The analogy reinforces the idea of how much being in fellowship with other rooted believers can make a massive difference in staying alert, in formation, and with our armor securely fastened.

HELMET OF SALVATION

In our spiritual armor, we also have a helmet of salvation. Salvation means a preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss, or it is deliverance from sin and its consequences. That's pretty powerful too, right? Romans 10:9-10 says, "if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."

I didn't realize until recently just how important the confession with your mouth really is. Again, there's so much power in spoken word. Since we are justified with the belief in our hearts, and the profession of our faith through our mouths is what saves us, we can only imagine the fiery darts the enemy may try to throw at us to keep us from speaking.

There's a verse in Proverbs that talks about having the power to bring life or death with our tongues.

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

Proverbs 18:21 (NIV)

This is why it is vital to wear the helmet of salvation - we must know and declare we have been saved from the consequences of sin - from the torment of the enemy. Satan wants to keep us in punishment and bondage for sins that have already been covered! I sincerely want you to really understand what happens when you're covered by the blood of Jesus. When you recognize the enemy's role in your struggles and actively claim that victory is a part of your inheritance as a child of God, it means you can tell Satan to leave you alone in the name of Jesus.

Scripture says to resist the devil, and he will flee from you. A big part of how our enemy attacks us will be through our thoughts, but we must remember that, while enemy forces can influence our thoughts, they cannot read our minds. Only God can do that. Speaking victory through prayer, praising our Heavenly Father, and speaking scripture tells the enemy where we stand!

Scripture calls Satan a liar and the father of lies. As a child of God, you already have victory over him and his underlings. Understanding this is vital. You already have victory over Satan. You have victory by association as part of your spiritual inheritance. You have authority over him when you're operating in the name of Jesus and claiming what God has already spoken in His Word. When you are claiming the promises in Scripture and living rightly (with your full

armor on), you have the ability to claim that power and tell him to leave you alone as you block the fiery darts he sends your way.

In 2 Corinthians 10: 3-5, we read how the weapons we use in battle are not weapons of the world but have divine power to demolish strongholds. Knowing we have the help of Heaven on our side is incredibly empowering! Whatever you are facing right now, you don't have to do it on your own!

As Christians, we have the opportunity to develop the ability to recognize spiritual influences and stand firm against them, using those weapons. As soon as we realize the growth of those seeds of thought, which are rooted in the enemy's lies, we need to verbally renounce those thoughts and uproot them. We need to claim the blood of Jesus Christ over them. For example, say out loud, "I now recognize the belief that I am _____ ("not enough," "not lovable," "only valuable for what I can do or provide") is a lie from the enemy and I choose to no longer believe it or be bound to it. I destroy that stronghold in the name of Jesus Christ."

We need to then train ourselves to take every thought captive and bring it into obedience to God. We need to "change the stinkin' thinkin'."

"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV)

To do that, you can try writing those thoughts down and challenging them with what Scripture says is true. We talked about thought records earlier,

and that's helpful here. When you write them down, you can challenge them on paper, and even verbally with what scripture tells you is true. Like we talked about "changing the channel" in cognitive behavioral therapy, you're going to be changing the channel to what is true, accurate, and helpful. You choose to dwell on the truth!

As we say about the stinking thinking, we have to change it. Acknowledge (and Repent), Raise Awareness, Replace, and Repeat. Though we've already discussed some tactics to do this, the same concepts still apply when approaching anxiety and depression from a spiritual context.

Acknowledge and repent of giving in to the lies of the enemy rather than what God has already told us is true.

Raise Awareness by keeping a record of how often you have the negative thoughts. Use a journal, use a thought record smartphone app. Use your phone. Just keep track, whatever you do. As you become more aware, it becomes easier and easier to resist.

Replace the negative thoughts with affirmations, scripture, and prayer.

Repeat consistently. Surround yourself with people who are in the habit of focusing on the truth rather than the lies of Satan.

The more you recognize those unhelpful thoughts, the stronger you become in the war against any evil forces of this world. Like Jesus, as He was tempted in the desert by Satan, challenge temptations and lies with what you know to be truth – what can be backed by Scripture. Most importantly, remember you are not doing this alone. We have divine power to destroy strongholds. We have heavenly help!

One night when I was going to sleep, I closed my eyes and was about half asleep, when I saw the tail-end of a snake slithering away from me. Then, I saw these creepy pale faces with white eyes, one after another. It seemed like I was on a train, and the train was picking up speed. As I continued down the track, there were more dark things. One looked like some kind of dark, demonic creature in a heavy black coat. Everything was very dark, and it wasn't like a clear vision, but I could see it. I was asking God, half-awake, if He wanted to show me something. I realized the longer I was on the train, it just kept getting worse. I felt somewhat panicked, like I needed to get off the train because I wasn't supposed to be there. Then, suddenly, I was off the train and scrambling in a field, at the edge of a dark forest, trying to get back where I belong (feeling very exposed/vulnerable). I opened my eyes.

It came back to mind the next morning when I was fully awake, and I realized it is like how the enemy will set us on a train of thought that takes us farther and farther into the darkness, inviting in demonic influences. Those faces. When I finally realized and got off the train, I was still in a very dark place, feeling panicked trying to get back, but I knew I had to leave that place.

The message I gathered from that dream, or vision, or whatever it was is this: Don't follow that serpent down any train of thought, that is going to get you into a dark forest and allow his underlings access to you. Guilt, resentment, bitterness, anger, criticism, pride, negativity, worry, etc. - Get off the train!! If you catch yourself starting to board it - STOP and start praising God for something - ANYTHING- instead.

SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

I recently had someone tell me that they wanted to start reading the Bible more, and they asked me where to start. That's a question I've seen a lot of people address, and I've seen lots of recommendations on what book to start with, or what Bible study to start with, and you can find some great ones out there. You can find reading plans where you can read through the Bible in a year or two years, or you can find a Bible study that fits a certain theme. There are many options out there, but I want to go in a little bit different direction, and I want to encourage you to ask yourself why you want to.

When you're thinking about wanting to read the Bible more, if it's because you just feel like you should read the Bible more, or because you've been told you should read the Bible more, you're probably not going to get as much out of it. If it's because you feel guilty that you haven't picked up your Bible for a while, it's going to be very hard to stick with it!

Here's a tip though: when you're digging into God's Word, you're not going to go wrong. As long as you are asking the Holy Spirit to guide you in what you're reading and to reveal truth to you in God's Word, you're not going to go wrong.

The Bible is your Sword. It is the very Word of God- and remember that spoken words are powerful (God SPOKE the world into existence).

The sword is a weapon, not an accessory! It is a powerful, deadly weapon in battle. Jesus modeled this when He was in the desert being tempted by Satan. Every attempt Satan made to tempt Him or to wear Him down, Jesus responded with more Scripture. He responded with the Word of God, and that's

exactly what we need to do. We need to use the sword to fight off the enemy. When you're going into Bible study, make sure you are remembering the purpose of it. Make sure you're looking at it as sharpening your sword and getting ready for battle... because it IS a spiritual battle, and we have to be prepared. No matter what book you start with; no matter what Bible study you start with, go into it with the knowledge that you are sharpening your sword, and you are getting ready to fight against a very real, though unseen enemy.

As you go into Bible study, ask the Holy Spirit for guidance, ask Him to reveal the truth to you, and just remember that you are sharpening your sword.

PRAY IN THE SPIRIT

Prayer ties all the pieces together and fills in the gaps. When I started learning to wear my armor as it is intended, I started a prayer book. In my prayer book, I started writing Scripture passages that contain promises I can pray back to God, as well as prayers that I find or prayers that I write, so I can go back to them and keep that fresh in my mind. I want to be able to claim those passages of Scripture in my prayers. Sharpening my sword.

One of the best explanations of prayer I have ever heard (in a message by Dr. Tony Evans), was that Prayer is inviting Heaven to interfere on earth.

Also, when we pray (especially when we pray Scripture back to God), we are aligning our thoughts and hearts with the thoughts and heart of God, learning and meditating on His character so we can set "self" aside and leave room for Him to work. We train ourselves to change the stinking thinking when we pray.

Prayer is actually acting on your battle plan. If you've never seen the movie War Room, I highly recommend it. It highlights the importance of going into battle with our spiritual enemy with a battle plan. Prayer is how we go into battle. When we're wearing our armor and, to look back at what we read in Ephesians, praying in the spirit "on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests, with this in mind be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." Praying in the spirit is referring to allowing and asking the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers. Romans 8:26 tells us, "in the same way the Spirit helps in our weakness we do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings the word cannot express." I think that's some pretty powerful stuff.

One day, after being properly fitted for my spiritual armor, I was feeling overwhelmed by the items on my to-do list. I started to feel stressed and was almost in tears. Then, it hit me. I can resist that. I don't have to give in to feeling stressed and overwhelmed just because I'm tempted. It was like a switch flipped. I said, "No. I'm not doing this anymore." I realized it was a tactic of our spiritual enemy, and I felt indignant.

Rather than tears, I felt fired up. I adjusted my helmet of salvation and breastplate of righteousness. I tightened my belt of truth and my shoes of good news. I picked up my shield of faith, and I drew my sword. I chose to fight back. I told Satan there may be times he catches me off guard, but AS SOON AS I recognize his handiwork, I will stand my ground. I WILL draw my sword and claim the authority given to me as a child of the Most High God. Scripture tells me that Jesus won victory on the cross. It tells me that I am a co-heir with Christ

and that if I have accepted Him, confessed my sins, accepted His forgiveness and payment for my sins – I have victory by association.

I realized I had been cowering at the thought of addressing the enemy. I wasn't using my sword as it was intended. My armor wasn't secured properly in place. Before, I would run to the Father, armor slipping, but hadn't started to stand my ground.

We don't have to keep looking back to check and make sure our Heavenly Father is still there, as a child does in a new environment. We can have confidence that He is ALWAYS there, and He told us to stand our ground. He gave us a sword and told us to resist the devil. Jesus answered Satan's tempting with scripture. We can do the same.

After I addressed the enemy, sword in hand, I prayed to the Father, and jotted down this version of what I had prayed:

“Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, I ask that you send the Holy Spirit to bring to my attention very quickly when the enemy is attacking. Help me to be able to stand my ground and claim the authority given to me through Jesus' death and victory on the cross, and my acceptance of it. I have applied the blood to myself and my household, and I know that we have authority over evil. I know that scripture says no weapon formed against us will prosper, so the weapons of discouragement, depression, stress, anxiety and fear, pride, anger, unforgiveness, bitterness, feeling overwhelmed... None of those will prosper because we have been bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ. I know the truth, and Scripture says the truth will set me free. I am free indeed. In my freedom, I thank you, Abba, for the joy you've given to me, the peace you have

given my soul, the healing you give me for past hurts, and the ability and the authority to exercise my power through your Holy Name over our enemy. I know it's nothing of my own authority, but the authority of your name. Amen”

Prayer acknowledges where we are in the hierarchy of the spiritual realm.



Have you ever thought, "I'd give anything to have a closer relationship with God," or some variation of that?

IF you have... and you are sincere, here's one simple action I want to challenge you to take.

Go into your phone and set a reminder, to repeat 2-3 times daily, "Heavenly Father, open my eyes and let me see myself and others through your eyes."

Every time you are tempted to give in to bitterness and resentment toward ANYONE, let it serve as a reminder to pray that again.

Every time you are tempted to give in to self-defeating thoughts or guilt, let it serve as a reminder to pray it again.

If you could only see yourself through the eyes of your Heavenly Father... your Abba.... it would change everything.

Those people who get under your skin? You have no idea what they've been through or what they are going through now - or the potential God sees in them.

While we are all responsible for our own behavior, we all also have wounds and spiritual influences pulling us away from the right path. Unless you are actively seeking to see yourself and the world around you as God does, it's easy to forget that and just focus on what is right in front of our faces.

There's a much more dimensional scene unfolding. Ask God to help you see it clearly. Ask persistently. Ask fervently. You won't believe your eyes!

If you want to see some serious change, start now by praying fervently that:

1. God would open your spiritual eyes as He opened Balaam's eyes and the eyes of Elisha's servant.
2. He would reveal any footholds/strongholds that you need to address.

3. He gives you wisdom, as James 1:5 says He will give you wisdom if you ask for it.

Keep praying until you break through!

Also, remember how powerful the spoken word is. After all, God spoke the world into existence!!

Proverbs 18:21 says the tongue has the power to bring life or death. Try praying out loud!

Conclusion

To recap, there are many causes to physical anxiety symptoms. Coping skills must be practiced to become effective. Behaviors, emotions, and thoughts or beliefs are all closely connected, and they all need attention to break that anxiety cycle. As Christians, we have divine power to help break the anxiety cycle by wearing our spiritual armor, by fervent prayer, by taking every thought captive and choosing to focus on the truth (resisting and rebuking the enemy), and by spending focused, strategic time with fellow believers.

“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Matthew 18:19-20 (NIV)

Let's face it- when we get overwhelmed, we tend to worry. A lot. It's not a new struggle. It's a natural inclination of the flesh.

While I know that not every struggle in life is a direct spiritual attack, I also recognize how much of our struggles actually are related, being rooted in the enemy's lies. I'm keenly aware of how much we are influenced by spiritual factors.

The more I've studied, the more I've realized how decisions we make can create circumstances leading to spiritual bondage. Sometimes choices we make in life give 'forces of darkness' a legal claim to harass and oppress us. At

times, harassment and torment can even be the result of the actions and attitudes of past generations! Being a Christian does not exempt us from this.

Unforgiveness and pride are two of the biggest footholds for many Christians. Have you ever wondered how we know if we are prideful? All of us are susceptible to being deceived by pride!

What is your reaction when you're asked if you're prideful? It can prompt feeling insulted, indignant, or angry. I hope it prompts peace, and a reminder to ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart for any symptom of pride. You know, we're all tempted by the Spirit of Pride. So, how do we recognize it? Is it okay to take pride that job well done?

In Galatians 6:4, (NIV) we read, "Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else."

That verse seems to give a very good distinction about what is okay and what is that unhealthy, dangerous kind of pride that scripture talks so much about.

In thinking about some of the symptoms that show up in pride, I thought about 1 Corinthians 13. That isn't often a passage referenced in a discussion about pride. However, I just want to share part of it with you.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It

always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.”

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NIV)

You may be wondering why that passage came to mind when I began to speak to you about pride. I have realized that pride is the opposite of love, according to 1 Corinthians 13. Pride is not patient, Pride is not kind, pride envies and boasts. It dishonors others, it's self-seeking, easily angered, and keeps a record of wrongs. It delights in evil and doesn't rejoice with truth. Pride doesn't protect (other than itself), it doesn't trust, doesn't hope, pride doesn't persevere. Pride fails us, and it causes us to fail others.

Pride comes from a place of self-preservation with the pretense that nobody else will take care of us, including God. Psalm 10:4 says, “in his pride the wicked man does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.”

We often don't realize how not taking our challenges to God is truly a symptom of pride. When we try to do it all on our own, perhaps thinking, “I don't want to bother God with such a little thing. I have to do this on my own”- that's pride. Pride is sneaky like that! It comes in ways that you don't expect.

If you think there is any area of pride in your life, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to it. When you discover pride, repent. Change that in your heart. Pride is very destructive. It keeps you from being able to have a good relationship with God. It creates barriers that allow evil to interfere in your life.

To have spiritual wellness, the pride HAS to go. When you turn from pride, and earnestly seek God, taking every struggle and situation to Him, you're going to find Him; and it's going to be incredible!

I encourage you to pray today and ask God to reveal to you through the Holy Spirit any areas of pride in your life. Ask Him to search your soul. Try praying, "Search me God, know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23-24.

Pride is destroyed by humility. We must humble ourselves before the Lord, repenting of taking things into our own hands, of judging, criticizing, and being impatient with others, of being boastful, and comparing our successes to see how we measure up. When we repent of these attitudes and behaviors, taking them to the Lord, letting Him be our vindicator and defender, the healing and freedom in Christ which comes from that surrender can be pretty incredible.

Many people go through their lives oppressed or harassed by Satan's minions because we never take our claim back and tell them, with the authority given to us by God, to leave us alone. I want to encourage you to take some time for reflection and meditation on God's Word today. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what might be standing in the way of your spiritual health. Ask Him what footholds you may have given that need to be renounced or let go.

What are you clinging to that may be clouding your spiritual vision? Are you finding it difficult to forgive someone? Do you have bitterness in your heart? Are you holding on to some object from your past that represents sinful actions

you have taken? Do you speak self-defeating thoughts that go against who God says He is and who God says you are to Him?

What does Scripture say is true? That is what you need to focus on at all times. Learn to make it a habit.

Philippians 4:8 says, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Not only do the negative, untrue thoughts keep you feeling beaten down, they can also give evil a foothold to continue to oppress and harass you. I’ll tell you what, thinking about that fires me up. How often have I in the past given a legal right where I didn’t even realize I was doing it?

We know that scripture says there are evil forces at work around us, yet it is something that is difficult for us to discuss for various reasons. We often turn a blind eye to it, as if it’s something only in the cartoons. Y’all, it’s real. To truly have overall wellness, we’ve got to address this first.

As in the parable of the sower and the seed, the enemy will try to come snatch away the good seed from us, so we do not recognize the truth. We have to seek it. Prepare the soil of our hearts for it. Ask God to water it. Matthew 6:33 says that if you seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, all these things will be added to you. It’s referring to all of the worries that we often have, such as what we’re going to eat or wear or what tomorrow will bring. Keep. Seeking.

WAR ROOM: SAMPLE PRAYERS!

Heavenly Father, I come boldly and humbly before your throne. In James, Chapter 1, I have read that You give wisdom to those who ask for it. I ask you now for the wisdom I need. As Paul prayed for the Colossians, I ask that you fill me with the knowledge of Your will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. I want to know You more. I want to please You more.

I ask that you open my eyes to see the spiritual influences around me, that I am able to have the discernment I need in order to move forward in your plan for me. As you opened the eyes of Balaam and of Elisha's servant, I ask that you allow me to recognize not only the dark forces at work around me, but also the mighty warrior angels fighting on my behalf, for which I am grateful.

I ask that you send your Holy Spirit to bring to my attention any footholds I have given the enemy. Bring them to my attention that I may confess and repent of them and turn to rely fully on you.

In the name of Jesus Christ, I tear down, smash, crush, and destroy every stronghold created by mistakes I have made, trauma I have experience, or generational sin before me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I cancel every assignment by evil forces against me and against those in my life. I tear down, smash, crush, and destroy every stronghold that goes against Your truth and Your love, including the strongholds of fear, anxiety, depression and hopelessness, inferiority, anger and resentment, bitterness, unrealistic expectations, and

anything else that interferes with my ability to see myself for who I am and You and to see You for who You really are.

In the name of Jesus Christ, I claim the victory that has already been won through the cross. I apply the blood to my life and the lives of my household. I thank you, Father, that I don't have to remain in bondage to spiritual forces because my debt has already been paid. I thank you, Jesus Christ, for willingly taking on the torment intended for me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I ask that you send Your spirit of truth. For it is written that you shall know the truth the truth will set you free. I claim that freedom in The name of Jesus Christ. I willingly repent of the sinful attitudes, actions, and beliefs that have kept me distanced from you. Draw me close to you, I pray. In the Holy Name of Jesus Christ, Amen

Heavenly Father, I ask that you put a hedge of protection around me. Help me to remember to put on my spiritual armor and grant me the discernment I need to recognize when there are dark forces at work. Help me to quickly recognize and resist Satan's efforts. Please, give me the strength I need to focus on you and continue praising you whatever the situation may be. I praise you in advance for your help, Lord. I praise your Holy name because you are who you say you are. I praise you and thank you for having wonderful, loving plans for me. I thank you for helping me focus on you today. In Jesus' name, Amen

Heavenly Father, I pray that you would give me peace today. You know the spiritual battles that are being fought around us all the time. You know every insecurity, every fear, and every hurt that may cause me to struggle. I pray that today you would let your voice of truth be louder than any negative, unhealthy thought that has ever been planted in my head. I pray that you would give me healing and help me to run to you with my hurts rather than dwelling on them. I thank you for your promises and your peace. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Search me, God, know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23-24

Heavenly Father of all Peace, Love, and Comfort, your Holy Word says that we have divine power to destroy strongholds. 2 Corinthians 10:3- 5 says, "for though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ," and now, in the name of Jesus Christ, whose blood shed on the cross gives us victory, I pick up the weapons of our warfare. In Jesus's name, I claim the power and claim the authority to destroy the strongholds in my life. I tear down, smash, crush, and

destroy every stronghold of the enemy built up in the lives of my family and myself. I repent of my personal sins and willingly turn from the sins of previous generations. In the name of Jesus Christ, I apply the blood of Jesus to the lives of those in my family and myself. I thank you for the grace, Heavenly Father, which you have extended to us, and ask that you continue to extend that Grace over all of our failures and sins. As Elisha prayed that you would open the eyes of his servant, I ask that you open my eyes and the eyes of my family to the spiritual forces around us. I ask that you remove all spiritual blindness, deafness, and hardness of heart for me, for my spouse, and my children. I thank you for the spiritual armor you have given and ask for your help in keeping it secured on us. I thank you for the victory you have already shared with us through Christ's death on the cross. I thank you for loving me even when I feel unlovable.

In the holy name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Heavenly Father, Prince of Peace, today I feel overwhelmed. I feel as if I am being pulled every direction and I'm having trouble staying focused because of all the distractions that come my way. It is creating anxiety in me, even though I know I can rest in you and don't need to be anxious. Your Word says to cast all of our cares on you because you care for us. Thank you, Lord, for caring for me and the details of my day. Help me to seek you first, so I don't get caught up in worry about the details of the day. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

SCRIPTURE TO SHARPEN YOUR SWORD

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

John 8:31-32 (NIV)

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Matthew 13:18-23 (NIV)

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on

me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NIV)

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.”

1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

Ephesians 6:12-13 (NIV)

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

“give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV)

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NIV)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

Armor of God Meditation Script

(For a recording of this script, visit: <https://everydayincredible.net/armor-of-god-meditation/>)

In Joshua chapter 1:8 (NIV) we read,

“Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Psalm 19:14 (NIV)

May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord.

Psalm 104:34 (NIV)

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

Psalm 119:97-99 (NIV)

As we begin today, I want to encourage you to find a place that is comfortable and as free of distractions as possible. While you are sitting, or even laying down (whatever is most comfortable for you at this time), settle in, close your eyes, and pay attention to your breathing.

Take a very controlled, slow breath, in through your nose. Hold it for a few seconds and then breathe out slowly through your mouth. Continue doing this as you imagine that you are blowing up a balloon in your chest.

Breathe in slowly through your nose, hold it for a moment, then breathe slowly out of your mouth. Breathe in through your nose, hold it for a moment, and breathe out through your mouth. Notice how your body feels as the air is coming in and out as you continue the controlled breathing. Do a mental scan of your body. Pay attention to areas where you are holding tension, and make a conscious effort to release the tension in those areas.

Heavenly Father as we begin this meditation may these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14 NIV)

Once you are relaxed, imagine that you are in a room. The floors, the wall, and ceiling are all white. In this room, you are completely safe. You are

protected from any outside influences. You're protected from your spiritual enemy. You are dwelling in the presence of the Most High God, you are focusing on His promises and His peace and love. While you are in this room, you see in front of you a suit of armor.

“be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

Ephesians 6:10-13 (NIV)

As you look at your armor, the first piece you decide to pick up is your belt of truth. You wrap this truth around your waist, making a conscious choice to believe God's truth over any lies of the enemy, and recognizing that what feels true does not always match up with what you believe. You take a moment to acknowledge that the belt of truth is the foundation of your spiritual armor. This belt will hold your scabbard and your sword of the Spirit and keep them close at hand. As you wrap yourself in God's truth, you make a commitment to yourself and to God to allow His truth to permeate all of your beliefs about yourself, about the world around you, and about your future.

Next, you pick up your breastplate of righteousness and strap it in place.

"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin" Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and

compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:17-32 (NIV)

While you secure your breastplate of righteousness, or right-living, firmly in place, keep this passage in mind as you allow the Holy Spirit to examine your heart for any of these traits or attitudes that may be preventing your armor from fitting properly. As the Holy Spirit reveals anything to you that may cause your armor to be ineffective, verbally pronounce your new stance on the matter, repenting of the thinking or attitude that has been a contradiction of God’s truth. If it is a matter of forgiveness, speak the words out loud claiming your forgiveness of the person who has harmed you. Remember that forgiveness requires a willing heart and a choice to turn that hurt over to God; it does not require an apology from that person. Remember that a lack of forgiveness can give the enemy a legal right to torment you.

If the unforgiveness causing you to struggle is toward yourself, remember that the price has already been paid for your sin when Jesus died on the cross for you. Allow yourself to humbly accept the freedom, power, and authority you have been given in the name of Jesus Christ as a child of the King.

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the

likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in the flesh.”

Romans 8:1-3 (NIV)

With your belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness fitted firmly in place, you will now cover your feet with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Dwell for a moment on the concept of the gospel of peace, acknowledging that the Word of God is not about condemnation or guilt or shame, but rather, it is about protection from sin and the consequences of sin, that you may have peace and joy in Him.

As you protect and prepare your feet with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, you are preparing to walk out into the world and share your testimony with others who desperately need to find peace of their own.

Next, pick up your shield of faith. As you pick up your shield, pull out any arrows that have been extinguished by it. Those arrows that were once flaming as they were shot at you, are now burned and covered in ash. Acknowledge each arrow and the source of those arrows. Any thoughts promoting shame, guilt, low self-worth, anger, bitterness, resentment, thoughts about not being loved or lovable, not being enough or doing enough- all of these flaming arrows have been extinguished by your shield of faith. As you pull out each one, snap them in two. As you drop them, visualize them turning to dust and blowing away with the wind. Take a moment to once again, give your belt of truth a tug and remind yourself who you are in Christ Jesus.

You are loved. You are enough. You are an incredible creation of the Most High God. You are a child of the King and a joint heir with Christ. You have victory over the enemy by association.

The peace of God guards my heart and mind. Philippians 4:7 (NIV)

Next, you pick up the helmet of salvation and place it on your head. This helmet of salvation - this knowledge that you are saved, protects your mind from the whispers of the enemy. While you are wearing this helmet of salvation, you are not susceptible to the attacks of the enemy suggesting that you are on your own or have no one to protect you.

Lastly, pick up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. This sword, the spoken Word of God, is your defensive weapon against the enemy. Just as Jesus defended Himself from Satan in the desert, you too can wield your sword against spiritual forces as well. From this point forward, any time you read scripture, treat it as if you are sharpening your sword to prepare to defend yourself in battle. Remember that the spoken word is powerful. God spoke the world into existence. Speak God's Word and God's truth into your daily experiences. Claim the promises He has already given you.

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.”

Ephesians 6:14-18 (NIV)

As you prepare to face your day or face whatever is next, remember that you are not a slave. You are a child of the King, and you have been given authority over your enemy in the name of Jesus Christ as His adopted child. Your Savior has already paid the price for your sin on the cross, therefore the attempts of the accuser to distract, defeat, or discourage you will not prosper.

Heavenly Father, we come boldly and humbly before your throne to ask that you secure each of these pieces in place for anyone reading the words of this script. On behalf of those listening, I claim your promises and thank you for those many promises and for your wonderful and loving plans for us. We thank you for your protection; we thank you for your presence, we ask for your intervention each day. Help us to stand firm. Help us to be continually taking every thought captive and bringing it into obedience to you, that we may have peace and joy and protection from the enemy. We praise your Holy Name, for you are worthy of all praise. I ask that you bless those listening to this recording and give them a deep desire to continue to seek a closer relationship with you each day. I ask these things in the precious, Holy Name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Additional Resources

Here, I would like to provide additional resources that you may find helpful:

- Restored to Freedom (Deliverance Ministry)*: <https://restoredtofreedom.com>
 - Going Beyond Ministries with Priscilla Shirer*: <https://www.goingbeyond.com>
 - War Room (Movie): <https://warroomthemovie.com/>
 - The ministry of Dr. Tony Evans*: <https://tonyevans.org/>
 - The ministry of Derek Prince*: <https://www.derekprince.org/>
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- Every Day Incredible - Women's Ministry options: visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/EDILadies> or consider our monthly membership at <https://diggingdeeper.everydayincredible.net>
 - For FREE Printable Prayer Cards and access to the accompanying Learning to "Fear Not" Journal, visit: <http://fearnot.everydayincredible.net>

* denotes that content is also available on Youtube.com

Seeking FREEDOM from fear, anxiety, depression, and more?

Join the private community of professional, Christian women to give and receive support and accountability as you work toward your wellness goals!



Are you TIRED of the chaos?
Do you feel ALONE in your struggles?
Are you having trouble finding motivation?
YOU ARE NOT ALONE!!
If you are ready to dig deeper
and take step-by-step action to find Christ-centered balance in your life,
Join the Incredible Ladies' Private Community!

Follow a step-by-step plan to guide your wellness journey!

- Focus on Spiritual Armor
- Reduce anxiety, depression, and stress!
- Boost your motivation!
- Receive more individualized consultation!
- Get help clarifying personal goals!
- Group members keep one another accountable while working toward personal goals!
- Exclusive Content!
- Receive personalized feedback on overcoming your personal barriers!

<https://diggingdeeper.everydayincredible.net>

"Having a place to share with women of a like faith and similar issues is very valuable."
-Shannon

"This group reminds me to be kind to myself because I am my own worst critic.
I need to remember to wear my spiritual armor each day."
-Erin

