

Name _____



To Worry or Not to Worry?



How to have concerns and cautions
without unhealthy worry and anxiety.

John Sullivan

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Introduction: We probably all know that the global threat that is monopolizing today's headlines is not the first time that humanity has been saddled with an overwhelming situation, and it probably won't be the last. While the exact situation has some new features about it, the thing that is not new is the divergent voices that are pulling us apart. One voice yells frantically that you need to panic. Another voice calmly encourages you to not worry. Which one is right: should we worry or not worry?

Equipped by the Scriptures

This question, like all good questions about the quality and purpose of life, is answered thoroughly in Scriptures. After all, it is God's Word that is able to equip us for every good work (**2 Timothy 3:16 – 17**). Read and meditate on all of the Scriptures that are referred to in this devotional. They will do what the Word of God always does: they will teach us the truth about this subject, rebuke us and correct us about any mistakes we are making, and train us to live God's way. So, before we go any further, look up the following two Scriptures and meditate about what they are saying:

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:7

The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

Proverbs 27:12

You can see that even the Bible gives a voice to both sides of the story. Those who are proclaiming that we need to worry about what is happening around us point to the second Scripture and say "See, the Bible says we need to worry about some things!" Those who are trying to calm us down point to the first Scripture and continue to encourage us to not worry.

Again, which is it: to worry or not to worry?

The short answer, of course, is both. Here's a brief statement of the thesis of this study:

God's Word teaches us to have a wise sense of caution when it comes to danger, without becoming overwhelmed with anxiety. God frequently tells us in his Word to exercise concern. At the same time, we are just as frequently told in Scripture to make sure we do not let that become worry. Concern and caution are clearly helpful; worry and anxiety are not.

Meditate on the following Scriptures that show us how to be cautious without being anxious, and how to be moved by concern without being plagued with worry. Then see if you agree or disagree with the above conclusion.

I. Solomon, in his proverbs, spoke about both sides of this issue.

- a. Read the following examples that show the need for caution:
 - **Proverbs 27:12** (as quoted earlier and repeated in **22:3**) Having caution is wise, and ignoring it is foolish.
 - **Proverbs 4:26** Take only steps that are firm. This follows the famous warning about guarding your heart (**4:23**).
 - **Proverbs 14:15** Don't be one of those people that believe everything you hear. This, of course, applies equally well to both sides of this issue. Don't panic about every rumor you hear. At the same time don't believe everything you hear about ignoring warnings. Always pray for wisdom and discernment from God.
- b. Now, read the following examples that show the problem of too much caution:
 - **Ecclesiastes 11:4** Too much caution can lead to inaction; the old "*paralysis of analysis*."
 - **Proverbs 22:13; 26:13** The excuse of a "*lion in the street*" can keep us locked up in our fears. Of course, if there truly is a lion in the street, then I don't know about you, but you can bet that I will stay inside. But we know that sometimes our worries and fears are exaggerated to the point that the worry actually causes more damage than what it is that we are worrying about.
- c. The balance between too much caution and not enough is seen in the following:
 - **Proverbs 3:21 – 26** Note his emphasis on sound judgment and discernment (vs. 21) while he also points out the valuable peace that trusting God provides (verses 24 and 25). "*No fear of sudden disaster*" is similar to **Psalms 112:7**. Note clearly that this Scripture and, in fact, the whole Bible never promise that there will be no disasters or bad news. The point is that God will always walk us through it. That's the kind of strong faith that we all want, right?
 - **Proverbs 14:26** Being in awe of God brings security to ourselves and to our families. Again, that's what we all want, right?

2. Now, let's look at what Jesus said about the subject.

- **Matthew 6:25 – 34** This is probably his most famous discussion on worry. In verse 27 he reminds us of what we all know to be true: worry does not fix anything! He also brings it back to the all-important issue of our trust in God as the Father (verses 26 and 32). But notice that he doesn't say to replace worry with a lack of concern. Rather, he says to replace it with the action of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (verse 33). It's amazing that Jesus is calling us to have great vision and hope even in the middle of great trial.
- **Matthew 10:26 – 31** Jesus doesn't say that there is absolutely nothing to fear. Instead he tells us to make sure we fear the right things, or more accurately the right One, namely God. How does your awe of God help you overcome your other fears?

[See also **Matthew 11:28 – 30**, **Mark 4:18 – 19**, and **John 14:1, 27**.]

3. Finally, let's look at what the apostles said about worry versus concern.

- **Ephesians 5:15 – 17** Today is not the first time that the world has been full of troubles and dangers. Think about some of the dangers that people in Paul's time faced. Does it make sense that God would inspire the authors of his Word to exhort us to exercise care and wisdom? Again, though, notice that he used the word "*opportunity*" in this context. A lack of caution is foolish and not in tune with God's will, but our faith in God will still see times like this as an opportunity to spread the good news about the peace that comes from God. What kind of light can you be to the people in your neighborhood?
- **Philippians 4:4 – 9** God tells us to not be anxious about anything. But he does not say to replace that anxiety with carelessness or lack of concern. Rather, the replacement is prayer (verse 6), focus on positives (verse 8), and action (verse 9). How does that apply to you?

Personal Note (J.S.) I first started studying these Scriptures in the 1970's. There were a number of worries that were plaguing the world, and therefore, me at that time: a devastating war for which I was expecting to be drafted at any time; rampant racial prejudice and bigotry; riots and anger at home over civil rights; energy crisis; political dishonesty; financial uncertainties; blatant immorality and drug use; the Hong Kong flu pandemic (as well as Legionnaires' disease and swine flu); failed, ineffective churches. Any of those sound familiar? Plus, I was starting my new family, and I wanted them to know how to deal with these issues as well. A book that helped point me to some of these Scriptures was: *What to Do About Worry*, by Jay E. Adams. But it was a detailed study of God's Word that equipped me the most. What follows in this study are some of the conclusions that I have drawn through the years and have tried to practice (with obvious lack of success at times). As I often do, I break it down to heart and strategy: what I need to believe in my heart and what I need to do in my actions. You don't have to agree with all of these conclusions, but I hope they will help you come to your own convictions about it.

How Can We Keep Caution/Concern from Becoming Worry/Anxiety?

Caution and concern are clearly valuable aspects of wisdom and are encouraged in Scripture. They prompt us to do something about the problem rather than just stew over it. However, they are also the pre-cursors for worry and anxiety. While it is definitely not easy to keep concern and caution from becoming worry and anxiety, here are some keys that might be helpful:

I. Change of Mind and Heart

The way the Word of God trains us in righteousness sometimes is to retrain the way we think and feel about certain issues. That may be the case in dealing with worry and anxiety. We may have to unlearn some unhealthy ideas and replace them with healthier ones.

a. Know the value of concern and caution.

- Imagine what your life would be if you had no concern about the problems in your personal life or in the world around you. Clearly Jesus' life is defined by his concern, so could we even claim to be like Jesus if we showed no such concern? The passage in **I Peter 5:7** quoted at the beginning of this study makes it clear: God cares. Concern is what causes us to do something about the needs we see around us. When God says to cast our anxiety on him, he is not telling us to abdicate our responsibility to care and act.
- Likewise, imagine what your life would be like if you never exercised caution. One would hate to see the havoc that would cause. Faith in the protection of the Almighty is no excuse for acting like an idiot. While we don't want to be paralyzed by caution to the point that we never take any risks, we don't want to be devoid of cautions either.

Concern and caution are both valuable traits.

How much do you value them in yourself and in others?

b. Know when concern and caution have gone too far.

- If you are consumed with what might happen tomorrow more than what you can do today (**Matthew 6:25 – 34**), then it's probably more worry than concern.
- If your concern is keeping you up at night, rather than putting you to work in the day, then it's probably more worry than it is concern.
- If you prefer listening to the conspiracy theorists, prophets of doom, and fear mongers more than you do to faithful proponents of courageous activity, then it's probably more anxiety than it is caution.
- Perhaps the biggest sign for Christians: if you are not turning it over to God and trusting him for the outcome, then it is not caution nor concern, it is anxiety and worry.

There is an old saying that some trace as far back as Ignatius in the 1500's or even Augustine in the 400's which goes: *"Pray as though everything depends on God, and work*

as though everything depends on you.” If you can say that sincerely and can put your heart and mind to rest at night, you have a healthy and active view of concern and caution, rather than an unhealthy and inactive dose of worry and anxiety.

Meditate on this question awhile: How do you distinguish what depends on you from what depends on God?

c. Know what casting your anxiety upon God means and what it doesn't mean.

- It doesn't mean that your goal in life is to have a life free of worries. Rather it means that you understand that God cares about those concerns and that you believe that he is able to handle them without getting bogged down with them.
- It doesn't mean that we have nothing to be concerned about or no reason to exercise caution. Rather, it means that we are willing to work hard to deal with the issues of our life and of the world, but we understand that only God has enough strength and love to really deal with them.
- It doesn't mean that God promises us a stress-free and fear-free life. Stress and fears sometimes have a bad rep. Faith does not eliminate either one. Faith in the almighty, all-loving God helps us manage both. While it may be tempting to think otherwise, a completely stress-free and fear-free life would be meaningless, not to mention boring. Don't try to handle today's fears and stresses without God, but with God you are a lot tougher and can handle a lot more than you probably think. Think of God as saying, *"We got this!"* Then, think of yourself saying, *"That's right; together, we got this!"*
- One thing that we need to make sure we realize: turning my anxieties over to God doesn't mean that nothing bad can happen. We are not ignoring the *"worst case scenarios."* [By the way, I want to thank Lauren Peterson for this reminder.] Rather than ignoring them, it is healthier to take a hard look at them. We can ask ourselves: *"What good will my worrying today do about anything bad that might happen tomorrow?"* It will only make it worse. Right? Turning it over to God, on the other hand, gives me peace today and the full assurance that he absolutely will walk me through anything that might happen tomorrow.

In short, casting our anxiety on God doesn't mean that we don't have any anxiety. If you don't have any anxiety, how can you cast it on God? It means just what it says: we throw that anxiety at his feet. We transfer it from us to him, and we believe that he is willing and able to handle it. We need to understand that we are not made to live in worry and anxiety. It will do physical, mental, and spiritual damage to us and to our family. God, on the other hand, because of his infinite wisdom, power and love, is capable of handling it.

Are you willing to transfer it to him?

2. Change of Action

The above three keys deal with the heart issues and thoughts about understanding worry and anxiety. They all deal with mentally and logically thinking it through with the heart of faith in the all-powerful and all-loving God. But what are some practical strategies that can help us cast our anxieties on God? I don't know about you, but just being told "Don't worry" or "Worry is a sin" doesn't help me much. Does it you?

Here is a series of questions that could help (from Jay E. Adam's book¹):

1. What is my problem?

Specifically naming and writing down what is causing me concern or caution can often be a major step in keeping it from becoming worry and anxiety.

2. What does God want me to do about it?

Is it concern/caution or is it worry/anxiety? Search the Scriptures and pray about that.

3. When, where and how should I begin?

Am I working as though it depends on me and praying as though it depends on God?

After writing that down, pray even more, share it with a godly friend, and look for a specific action that you can do today.

One final note: don't add worry itself to the list of things you are worried about. In other words, if you have a tendency to worry, don't spend even more time worrying about your worry. If you recognize worry as a sin of your life, repent of it and turn your direction to God and his faithfulness. Then believe that he will not only forgive you, but heal you of worry, just as he has done with many other issues in your life. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (**Matthew 11:28**) That's one of Jesus' signature features, and he invites us to take full advantage of it.

Conclusion: God does not call us to be careless, unconcerned individuals nor to look down on others who are. But he does instruct us to use our concerns and cautions in an active, visionary way and to cast all of our worries and anxieties on him so that they do not damage our lives and the lives of our families. Let's pray for his peace in our lives and for the ability to pass that peace on to others. God bless!

*Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Trust in God, trust also in me.
Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*
John 14:1, 27

¹ *What to Do About Worry* by Jay E. Adams; Baker Book House, 1972.