

## Part Three: The Way Out

### Session 18

## Overcoming Your Anxiety and Fear, Part 2

*“So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience [as Israel].” Heb. 4:9-11*

*“Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” Isaiah 41:10*

#### **Overcoming Your Anxiety and Fear, Part 1 (REVIEW)**

- A. Understanding the Nature of Your Emotions
- B. Understanding the Source of Your Fear
- C. Reviewing the Path from Unbelief to Anxious Thoughts

#### **D. Tracing the Path from Anxious Thoughts to Obsessive Thoughts**

1. Obsessions are unrestrained doubts. Obsessions begin with attempts to control the uncertainty by thinking through the problem and its possibilities. The uncertainties can be normal concerns of daily life or junk thoughts generated by the evil heart within all of us. Some examples would be:
  - a. Doubts about health:
    - *What if I have cancer, a tumor, an incurable or undiscovered disease?*
    - *What if there are germs on my hands and body? I must be sure I am disinfected.*
    - *What if I am losing my mind? I have such crazy feelings.*
  - b. Doubts about driving:
    - *What if I run over someone and kill him?*
    - *What if I have another panic attack, but this time while I'm driving?*
    - *What if I have an accident and injure or kill one of my passengers?*
  - c. Doubts about responsibilities:
    - *What if I don't remember reading every word of the assignment? I don't want to lie.*
    - *What if taking two samples at the grocery store is considered stealing?*
    - *What if I make a mistake in my cooking and poison the family?*
    - *What if I am not doing a good enough job for the boss and he is about to fire me?*
    - *What if I didn't repent enough, and I'm not really saved?*
    - *What if I have committed the "unpardonable sin" when I...?"*
  - d. Doubts about physical safety:
    - *What if I didn't lock the doors properly, and someone gets in and kills us all?*
    - *What if I didn't turn off the gas burner on the stove and the house burns up?*
    - *What if my husband is trying to poison me?*
    - *What if I let my daughter drive to work or go to camp, and she is killed in an accident?*

- *What if I accidentally drown my infant son giving him a bath in the bathtub?*
- e. Doubts about situations out of your control:
- *What if I get sick during the service and vomit before I can leave the room?*
  - *What if the elevator gets stuck, and I am confined for hours?*
  - *What if I get food poisoning from eating at someone else's house or at a restaurant?*
  - *What if my son goes to a Christian college and surrenders to go to the mission field? I won't see him very often, and he might die in another country.*
  - *What if my daughter marries that guy, and they move to another state where I can't see her every day?*
  - *What if the plane goes through turbulence, and I go crazy in front of everyone?*
- f. Doubts about your own self-control:
- *What if I listen to that voice inside and drive off the bridge?*
  - *What if I give in to an impulse to murder my children?*
  - *What if I can't restrain myself, and I yell out a profanity during the meeting?*
  - *What if I actually act out that nightmare in which I murdered my parents?*
  - *What if I give in to an impulse to remove my clothing and run outside?*
  - *What if I have a nervous breakdown, forget who I am, and no one can figure out my identity?*
  - *What if I impulsively grab the person I am talking to and kiss him/her?*
  - *What if I give in to the impulse to pull the fire alarm?*
- g. Doubts about relationships:
- *What if my boss is trying to make me look bad so he can fire me?*
  - *What if my spouse is cheating on me?*
  - *What if my teenager is sexually active or doing drugs and the spirituality that I think I am seeing is just a sham?*
  - *What if my fiancé wants only a mistress to sleep with but doesn't really love me?*
  - *What if my wife rejects me when I start going bald?*
  - *What if I never get married?*
  - *What if my spouse never changes and I'm trapped in a bad marriage forever?*
- h. You scare yourself with your negative thoughts.
- 1) You meditate upon uncertainties (possibilities) and create imaginary crises.
  - 2) Your body interprets every imaginary crisis of your mind as an emergency and kicks into action. You are killing yourself with your thoughts.
2. Bizarre obsessions occur when common junk thoughts of the sinful nature—usually sexually perverse or violent thoughts—are processed through a heart that is already habitually anxious and full of doubts.
- a. These evil thoughts are immediately dismissed by a mature believer as reminders that his heart is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.”<sup>11</sup> He thanks God for that “reality check” and also thanks God for the grace that is available to refrain from actually doing the things his heart is capable of dreaming up (Romans 7:18-25).

- b. The doubting, anxious heart takes these intrusive thoughts as just one more “uncertainty” in his already unsettled world. In an attempt to keep his life from going out of control, he now worries, *“What if I actually go through with this thought? Since I have thought it, am I destined to do it? If so, when am I going to do it? Something must be wrong with me! No one in his right mind would even consider such a thing. I can’t let anybody know I think these things. I would be fired from my job and disciplined out of my church. My wife would leave me, and my kids would hate me for being so perverted.”*
- These kinds of internal questions reveal much about the person’s lack of understanding about the human heart and reveal much about his lack of understanding about the provisions God has made available so that we do not have to sin in these ways. Obsessive thoughts are common reactions of normal people to seemingly overwhelming challenges and doubts when they do not know God well. They are not “crazy”; they are overwhelmed by life’s problems and are spiritually unprepared for them.
3. Since he doesn’t have a solution to his dilemma, the thoughts seem to plague him when they return again and again as “unresolved mysteries.”
4. The real “behind-the-scenes” story is that of “sowing and reaping” (Galatians 6:7-8; Proverbs 1:20-33). The LSD sequence (i.e., Lust, Sin, and Death) of James 1:14-15 is being played out in his life.

“Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust [in these cases, a *strong desire to be certain about something* before he will let his soul rest], and enticed [to do something sinful to fulfill his desire—like worry]. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin [he gives in to worry and avoidance of responsibility]: and sin, when it is finished [full-grown], bringeth forth death [there is a deadening impact on every aspect of his life—physically and spiritually].”

5. Obsessive / anxious thoughts keep the autonomic system (ANS) on high alert. Much body chemistry is being changed with the result of greater agitation, feelings of panic, and thus greater uncertainty and doubt, and consequently, a return to the obsessive / anxious thoughts to try to solve the increased agitation.
6. *Unbiblical responses to uncertainty produce anxiety*, which if not dealt with, can easily move to obsessive thinking. Obsessive thinking is at the root of compulsive behavior, as we shall see next.

## E. Mishandling Anxiety with Controlling Behaviors

1. Perfectionistic behaviors
- Perfectionistic behaviors are characterized by a preoccupation with orderliness in one or more areas of life in order to control the sense of vulnerability and to extinguish the doubts. They are most often driven by a fear of losing control and accompanied by the pride of accomplishment when successful. Perfectionistic (controlling) behaviors include several things:
    - a. Preoccupation with keeping physical appearances in order
      - *I must dress myself and my children in matching outfits and accessories.*
      - *I must not wear the same clothes within a three-week rotation.*
      - *I must not wear anything that shows I am not up on the latest fashions.*
      - *I must not be seen anywhere without my makeup.*
      - *I must not wear clothes that are not perfectly pressed or shoes that are not perfectly polished.*

- b. Preoccupation with keeping surroundings in order
- *I must always have a perfectly clean house. I will use a Q-tip and toothbrush if necessary.*
  - *I must vacuum the house at least three times a day to be really clean.*
  - *I must have all the books on the bookshelf in precise alphabetical order and sitting with the same distance from the spine of the books to the outer edge of the shelf.*
  - *I must rotate the furniture in every room often enough so that the carpet wears evenly in all places. I must not let anyone think the carpet is worn excessively in any one spot.*
  - *I must redecorate the Christmas tree so that it is perfect after the kids have tried to decorate it.*
  - *I must have the absolute perfect Christmas gift for everyone at Christmas, or I have failed to show them I love them.*
  - *I must stack every piece of clothing in my dresser drawers so that they are precisely uniform.*
  - *I must arrange everything in my closet so that all the hangers go the same way and the blouses are arranged by color in the order of the rainbow.*
  - *I must not allow anyone to touch anything on my desk—stapler, note cards, letter opener, and so forth. I want to know precisely where they are.*
- c. Preoccupation with keeping performance in order
- *I must practice more than the teacher so requires so that I can play my violin piece perfectly for my next lesson. I cannot miss any notes.*
  - *I must know ahead of time if I am going to accompany the song service at church. I will not play if there is a chance I will mess something up.*
  - *I must hit all the baskets whenever I shoot in the game.*
  - *I must have a clear desk and in-box before I will allow myself to go home at night.*
  - *I must work 50-60 hours a week to show the boss I am not a slacker.*
  - *I must send a birthday card to every relative every year if I am to consider myself to have a “good testimony” in the family.*
  - *I must take the time to look through every newspaper and magazine for coupons so that I am a good steward of my money.*
- d. Preoccupation with keeping schedules and responsibilities in order
- *I must plan out every day in ten-minute increments if I am to be a good steward of my time.*
  - *I must keep a list of everything I have done each day so that my husband will appreciate the freedom he gives me to be a stay-at-home mom.*
  - *I must keep the kids on a strict schedule for everything from their wake-up time until bedtime if I am to develop a responsible character in them.*
  - *I must raise and provide for my family the Walton way. I should bake all my own bread, milk my own goats, sew all the clothes for myself and my children, grow my own garden, can my own fruits and vegetables, and raise my own chickens.*
- e. Preoccupation with keeping spiritual disciplines in order
- *I must be sure to “do” my devotions every day or God will judge me for my unfaithfulness.*
  - *I must volunteer for every need that is announced at church or I am not being a servant to others.*
  - *I must be sure that my children always behave in church or I am showing that I am not a good parent.*

- *I must be out of fellowship with God today because I feel a bit “down.” I must read my Bible until I feel good again. I don’t like feeling “down.”*

f. Preoccupation with keeping finances in order

- *I must spend whatever time is necessary on the Internet to be sure that the model of appliance I am purchasing is the best deal for my money.*
- *I must stay up all night if necessary to find the five-cent discrepancy in the checkbook this month.*
- *I must not throw out any magazines, newspapers, or junk mail because there may come a time when I really need some of the information in it.*
- *I must not throw out any of the shipping cartons or cardboard boxes of anything I buy in case I have to return it—even if it is years later.*
- *I must not discard any fabric or trim scraps from my sewing just in case I need them for some reason in the future.*
- *I must find a job that makes better money. I owe it to myself and my family.*
- *I must check my stocks hourly on the Internet to be sure I’m not losing any money.*

g. Preoccupation with keeping health in control

- *I must keep strict accounting of my caloric intake, fat grams, refined carbs, preservatives, or I cannot say that I am being a good steward of my body.*
- *I must be sure I take the absolute most healthful food supplements, or I have nobody to blame but myself if I get sick.*
- *Either I must have a room of my own at the company convention or I won’t go. I cannot be put in a situation where I might have a diarrhea attack when I’m in the room with someone else.*

h. Preoccupation with keeping relationships in order

- *I must not let my children ever question my decisions. It is the only way they will learn to respect my position.*
- *I must spend every Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter with my family.*
- *I must daily spend a minimum of two hours with each of the children or they will grow up thinking I didn’t love them.*
- *I must call my daughter at college every day so that she can see how much I love her.*

2. Compulsive behaviors

- Compulsive behaviors are excessive, repetitive activities that seem to give temporary relief from the obsessive thoughts that plague the mind.
  - These behaviors are performed even when negative effects are experienced—valuable time is wasted, relationships are destroyed, work performance declines, health is compromised, and spiritual life is hindered.
- a. Ritualistic behaviors—repeated hand-washing; extended shower routines; checking and rechecking locks, stove controls, electrical sockets, test answers; touching certain items in a precise sequence before leaving a room or performing certain routines before driving; repeatedly asking for assurances of love and forgiveness, and so forth
- These behaviors should not surprise us. Ritual is at the heart of every manmade attempt to quiet a guilty and/or fearful heart.
- b. Destructive behaviors—self-inflicted injury (cutting, burning, banging head on the wall, standing up for hours without moving, exercising to exhaustion, sticking pins into the body, pulling out hair, pulling out eyebrows, starving self [anorexia], scratching the skin until it bleeds, and so forth)

- c. Avoidance behaviors—will do anything to escape the feeling of being overwhelmed
  - 1) Escape to isolation (agoraphobia)
  - 2) Escape to pleasure (sex, gambling, alcohol, drugs, risk-taking)

**CONCLUSION:** Anxiety is the fear that I will not get what I need or want. It is driven by unbelief and discontent. This is why anxiety is always portrayed in the Bible as a spiritual problem.

Any solutions we pursue, therefore, must deal with the spiritual issues involved. If this is not our approach, we can expect further isolation from God and further complications from our anxiety.

Jeremiah 2:13—*“For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”*

We must be willing to let God sift our anxious thoughts and show us the evil of our unbelief

Psalm 139:23-24—*“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my [anxious]<sup>ii</sup> thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way<sup>iii</sup> in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”*

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<sup>i</sup> Jeremiah 17:9

<sup>ii</sup> The word for *thoughts* in verse 23 means “disquieting, anxious thoughts.” The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the *LXX*) translates thoughts by a Greek word that means “a beaten, well-worn path.” It is the same word used in Psalm 94:19—*“In the multitude of my thoughts within me [speaking of the barrage of anxious thoughts] thy comforts delight my soul.”*

<sup>iii</sup> The phrase *wicked way* means, literally, “way of pain.” David is praying, “God, show me the anxious thoughts in my soul—the noises—that create so much pain for me. Lead me in the way that focuses on eternal things.”