

# The Plague of Anxiety

## Matthew 6:25-34

**Series:** The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

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**Worship:** The God Who Provides

**Key Sentence:** If you're dependent on the God who provides, why worry?

**Outline:**

I. Statement of the principle (and questions) (Matthew 6:25)

II. Example: birds, food (and questions) (Matthew 6:26-27)

III. Example: lilies, clothing (and questions) (Matthew 6:28-30)

IV. Restatement of the principle (Matthew 6:31-32)

V. Conclusions (Matthew 6:33-34)

**Matthew 6:25–34** “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

<sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup>And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?

<sup>28</sup>And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

<sup>31</sup>Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup>For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

<sup>33</sup>But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. <sup>34</sup>“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

## The Plague of Anxiety

### Matthew 6:25-34

Despite recent charges of political incorrectness, there is a lot to like in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* books. One of my favorites is *The Long Winter*, which is about a long winter, 1880-1881 in De Smet South Dakota. We had a week of freeze here in Texas. They had back-to-back blizzards from October to April. By February the Ingalls family was nearly out of food, the last day of their wheat supply, down to six potatoes. Laura Ingalls Wilder does a good job of showing the stupor that cold and lack of food bring on the family. "Slowly they ate the last potatoes, skins and all. The blizzard was beating and scouring at the house, the winds were roaring and shrieking. The window was pale in the twilight and the stove pressed out its feeble heat against the cold. 'I'm not hungry, honest, Pa,' Laura said. 'I wish you'd finish mine.' 'Eat it, Laura,' Pa told her, kindly but firmly. Laura had to choke down mouthfuls of the potato that had grown cold on the cold plate. She broke a little piece from her slice of brown bread and left the rest. She felt numb and half-asleep."

The first time they run out of wheat, Pa Ingalls gets seed wheat from their neighbor Almanzo Wilder. The second time Wilder won't sell his precious seed wheat, and he, Wilder, sets off with a friend after a rumor of wheat at a homestead some 20 miles away. They nearly get lost on the featureless snow of the prairie, but spot a smudge of smoke and pay the homesteader an exorbitant price for two wagonloads of wheat. Before spring comes even that is nearly gone. As the first train gets through the Ingalls family is down to its last six biscuits, neatly sorted by size for the six of them. But finally the train brings food for the town and even the Christmas barrel they had stopped expecting months before. It has clothes, cranberries and the Christmas turkey they had ordered, frozen all winter, not eaten until Christmas in May.

For most of world history starvation or pestilence or freezing to death were very real possibilities. These things weren't just seen on the news or read in the pages of the Bible. They were as close as the next drought or the next long winter. For us, in recent generations, that hasn't been the case. Even in the big freeze last month few of us were that cold and even fewer were that low on food. Yet we still have anxiety and fear. We're not anxious about where our next meal will come from, or our next rag of clothing, but we are anxious about finances, about relationships, about family, about sickness and death, about our own worth, about busyness, about appearances, about measuring up, about the future. Fallen people in a fallen world have always been anxious. Sometimes the nature of the anxieties has changed, but they have always been there.

Jesus, in Matthew 6:25-34, addresses the anxieties of the poor and threatened people of his day. Where will our food come from? Our clothing? Our very lives? But the principle extends beyond the villages of Galilee and Judea into our zip codes. His teaching applies to every area of anxiety and worry we experience. He teaches that if you're dependent on the God who provides, why worry? As we seek the God who provides, as we declare our dependence on him, we find the anxieties and worries of life fading away before his presence. Before we read this text, I'd like you to take a minute and think about your own anxieties. What were you most anxious about this past week? Or what would you have been most anxious about if you weren't consciously trusting God? What troubled your heart, mind or soul? Think on that for a moment.

OK. Matthew 6:25-34 *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup>And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup>For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup>But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. <sup>34</sup>“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*

“Do not be anxious.” Only Jesus can give this command. We can say “don’t worry; don’t worry.” But only Jesus can make it work. This word anxious has the implication of dithering, sorting and resorting, almost compulsiveness. As we’ve already seen, anxiety over food and clothing and basic sustenance was part of everyday life in Jesus’ day. But the anxieties we’ve identified this morning are just as much part of our everyday lives. We may be worried about keeping our job. We may be worried about our bank account next month. When a loved one is diagnosed with cancer or battles with depression or gets involved with the wrong substances or the wrong people, that’s a gut-wrenching trigger for worry and anxiety. When we ourselves have health problems or chronic pain or when we deal with constant criticism that’s anxiety. When we are bombarded with social media panic, we can get anxious.

But we also have to recognize that some of the things we worry about are not at that level. We don't have any real concern about whether we will eat, but we may spend too much time worrying about eating anyway: whether we can get the kind of food we think is best; whether we can stick to a diet. Or we fuss just out of boredom. We want a new restaurant or a new recipe. One of the things that struck me reading the long winter was how, though they did live, they lived on rough brown bread every day. Once for a treat they had it with codfish gravy. I don't even know what that is. Our concerns are trivial compared to those. In the same way, we have few concerns about what we will wear, but we may spend many hours rejecting what's in our closets. Jesus implies that we need not only to trust God for real needs, but we get past anxieties that are more distraction than true distress. Our cell phones and social media apps do not help in this. They allow us to be bombarded with the distresses and worries of the world, so that "Social Media Anxiety Disorder," is a real thing. I read an article called "Digital Distraction" this week and the author ends up saying "I want to become a Psalm 1 person: delighting in and meditating on God's law day and night. I don't want to live a life of digital distraction."

The answer Jesus gives addresses our real concerns, but in doing so addresses the frivolous distractions of our hearts as well. The principle is found in verse 25 "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" In the midst of concerns, real or imagined, Jesus says there are more important things than our fears and worries. Life, he says, is more than just feeding a machine. The body, he says, is more than just an object to be kept warm. As creatures made in the image of God, there are more important things in life than life, such as good in the face of evil, love in the face of hate, joy in the face of suffering and eternal life in the face of mortal death. That's the principle: focus on the more than. There is more beauty, there is more good than your anxious heart can allow.

Jesus then gives two examples of un-worry and asks questions to get us to recognize that they apply to our lives. First example? Birds. Verse 26 "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." We love this image. The robin hopping after the worm, the woodpecker digging into the tree, the hummingbird sipping the flower, they are working, not worrying. They can't manufacture what they need to live. The worm in the ground, the insect in the tree and the nectar in the flower are the direct care of the Heavenly Father. The implication is that if you live your life the way it's designed to be lived, God will have put in place what you need, in advance, at every moment. And worrying about it will not change that placement. It will only dampen the beauty and the joy.

Birds are a great example. Unlike ants and squirrels they do not store things up. They find the next seed, the next insect, the next flower when they are hungry, not in advance. In the same way God puts into place what we need when we need it. The time between realizing we will or may need something and before it is provided or shown to be unnecessary can be filled with worry, or it can be filled with peace and work and beauty. The birds get it right.

Then Jesus asks a question to force us, as hearers to apply the example to our lives. “Are you not more valuable than birds?” Uh, yeah. If God values the birds enough to care for them, how much more will he value those made in his image. He loves us with an intense crazy love. He loves us more than he loves the birds in the air, the stars in the sky or any other created thing. And not because we deserve it: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, <sup>4</sup>what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” Your life is more valuable in the Father’s eyes than the birds he feeds or the flowers he’s made or anything else. Your life is so valuable that Jesus died to save it.

But this value thing can be overdone and often is in our culture. As one Christian group wrote a few years ago “Whoa you're oh so beautiful, you don't need anyone's approval. You've got to believe in yourself you know you are, you're crazy beautiful. There's no need to change; you're beautifully made.” That's taking our value way too far toward crazy uncritical self-centeredness. That's not the Gospel of salvation from sin and brokenness because of the Father's love shown in Jesus. It's way more like the Gospel of “you do you,” the Gospel we heard last week that the purpose of life is to look inside to define yourself and then pursue your deepest desires. Or to put it another way, you are more valuable than birds, but there is no value in valuing yourself. It is only God valuing you that can make the difference between anxiety and peace.

Jesus brings this out in his next question, verses 27: “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” Anxiety doesn't help. You can't change circumstances by worrying about them. Some of the versions say you can't add a single cubit to your height by worrying, which brings out the absurdity even more clearly. You can't wish yourself taller. Now I'm not saying you can't lament when things are hard, but lament is the cry to God that leads to trust. And I'm not saying you can't plan or take precautions toward the future. Taking steps toward good health now might add years to your life later. But what Jesus is saying is anxiety doesn't help. If anything, anxiety can paralyze you so that you don't do what's needed to prepare for the future or address the legitimate concerns you face.

So that's the first example. The second example is flowers. Verse 28: "And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." It's a beautiful picture. Because we live in Texas, I hope we've all seen a field full of wildflowers. The lilies of the field Jesus mentions could be one of several kinds of wildflowers, or it could refer to wildflowers in general, which are almost as abundant in Galilee as in Texas.

But his point is that the beauty of these flowers is given freely by God. Solomon, who had more riches than any other Hebrew king, couldn't buy clothes that rivalled this free gift of beauty. Jesus is implying that dependence on God, as opposed to anxiety, leads to better, more beautiful outcomes. When God is the one who provides out of his bounty, the result is more beautiful than what anxiety settles for. As we trust God we see his provision.

Again, Jesus asks a question to force his hearers to apply this. Verse 30: "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" How much more will he provide for us, the ones made in his image, the ones redeemed by his son, the ones whose here-today-gone-tomorrow lives are transformed by redemption into eternal life. Even if our earthly possessions are not abundant, God's people have found that he does provide for our hearts, everything we need for life and godliness. Paul said "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup>I can do everything – thrive in all these circumstances - through him who gives me strength." He says "My God will supply your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Having stated the principle, having illustrated it with these two fine examples, and having applied it to us and our anxiety, "O we of little faith," Jesus does not hesitate to repeat himself and state the principle again. Verses 31 and 32: <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup>For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all." God is not ignorant about our needs. He designed us physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He knows what will be best for us in every circumstance. If that means that at times he uses physical or relational poverties to accomplish emotional or spiritual growth, that's because he takes a wholistic view toward us. We see it as a problem because we don't have the whole picture. I'm not saying God causes suffering or that the suffering itself is good. But he uses suffering and need and weakness to accomplish his purposes.

The story is told of a pastor on a long plane flight. At some point the fasten seat belt light came on. A voice said, "We will not be serving the beverages at this time as we are expecting a little storm turbulence." Within minutes they entered the storm. Thunder could be heard even above the roar of the engines. Lightning lit up the dark skies, and within moments the plane was like a cork tossed on a celestial ocean. One moment it was lifted on terrific currents of air; the next, it dropped as if about to crash. The pastor shared the fear of those around him. "I could see that nearly all the passengers were upset and alarmed. Some were praying, wondering if they would make it through the storm."

"Then, I suddenly saw a little girl. Apparently the storm meant nothing to her. She had tucked her feet beneath her as she sat on her seat; she was reading a book and everything within her small world was calm and orderly. Sometimes she closed her eyes, then she would read again; then she would straighten her legs, but worry and fear were not in her world. When all the adults were scared half to death, that marvelous child was completely composed and unafraid." When the plane safely reached its destination and all the passengers were hurrying to disembark, the pastor lingered to speak to the girl. Having commented on the storm and the behavior of the plane, he asked why she had not been afraid. The child replied, "Cause my Daddy's the pilot, and he's taking me home."

That's the attitude Jesus wants us to have "My daddy is the pilot and he's taking me home." My life is more than my needs, way more than my concerns. God cares for me with a crazy extravagant love, and he can provide. My worries can't provide. So faith will trust in his sovereign care.

But there's more. Jesus is teaching us not to worry, but he adds a wonderful alternative. Verses 33-34: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. <sup>34</sup>Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." When you are caught up in worries, fears, true concerns, or frivolous Facebook distractions, just being told 'stop it,' even by Jesus, is ineffective. A negative command is hard to obey. Jesus knows this. His main purpose in the Sermon on the Mount is not to get us to stop doing things, but to begin being what he designed us to be and living that way. This is the expulsive power of a new affection. "Seek first the kingdom of God." Seek his kingdom, seek righteousness and you will no longer writhe under the anxiety of seeking other things. And God who knows your need, will supply your need. A new obsession with the kingdom, an affection for righteousness will displace the worry and fear that can so easily dominate our lives.

But what is this kingdom that we are to seek? What is this righteousness we are to pursue? The kingdom is the place where Jesus is recognized as Lord, where his desires are obeyed and where his obedient followers reap the benefits. We seek this kingdom by seeking the character qualities of Matthew 5: poor in spirit, mourning our sin, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, merciful, gentle and humble, willing to be persecuted for the Kingdom's sake. We seek righteousness when we hunger and thirst for integrity in our prayers in our giving, in our marriages, in our words, in our witness. We seek the kingdom when we seek to love our enemies, to care for our neighbors, to pray with God's priorities. We can't read these chapters without gaining some idea of what it is to be part of the Kingdom that is now and not yet. We can't read the Gospels without getting some sense of our utter dependence on God and the heart integrity he longs to build in us. We can't read the New Testament without seeing the awfulness of our sin and the greatness of his salvation, the glory of his promised return and eternal reign. This is what we are to seek, what we displace our anxieties with.

Jesus caps off the argument with the practical truth that worrying about tomorrow is useless. If we take care of seeking him today, tomorrow will take care of itself. C. S. Lewis says this so well in *Screwtape Letters*. Remember this is a fantasy where a senior tempter or devil gives advice to a junior tempter on how best to draw their human victims away from the Enemy (God). The junior tempter, Wormwood is instructed to keep his victim focused on the future, because the future is unknown and you can make the victim fearful or anxious, seeking security, sufficiency, or safety. But, Lewis, says, God intends us to either be "continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present; either meditating on eternal union with Him, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure."

David Powlison, one of the pioneers of Biblical Christian counseling had a great set of talks on this passage, or actually on the parallel passage in Luke 12. He talked about anxiety and panic. "Let me just say a word to you. If even right now you are experiencing panicky feelings. That experience is one which you well know. You're probably familiar with those feelings. It's probably not the first time. It's perhaps a very familiar enemy, as it were, arising from within your very own heart which is the most distressing kind of enemy of all. And if I had to say one thing it's that however alone, isolated, that experience of fear feels that the reality that actually wraps around us is that you are not alone, that there is someone who is described, who describes himself in words that say I will never, never leave you or forsake you. Never, never, never. You are not alone.

“And it's not as though just hearing that said is some kind of magic answer. It's one of those things that sometimes gets worked into our hearts more effectively during a moment when we're not feeling anxious or panicky, but it is the reality on which you can build your life. We live in a world that when you really think about, it we have many many good reasons to feel fearful. We are in fact incredibly vulnerable and fragile beings. There is a passage in Romans 8 that doesn't tend to get a lot of the airplay it deserves, but where Paul says the Spirit (and the Spirit is the one who mediates the presence of God to us, the one in whom we are not alone); says the Spirit helps us in our weakness. It's really interesting that it doesn't say our weaknesses, as if there were a list like 10 things that I'm weak. I have 10 weaknesses or 20 or 5. It says our weakness and weakness is a fundamental aspect of our humanity that our culture doesn't like to tell us that and often we as Christians don't even like to admit that most fundamental of realities. But by creation we are weak. We are like little children, infants who are utterly dependent on the care of somebody else. And our sin in which we run from that weakness, that essential dependency, makes us even more weak in a different sense. We are weak and in need of mercy because of our sinfulness and we are in need of mercy because the God on whom we depend he must come through for us or we die. And there's this fundamental reality that in our weakness he promises that he will not leave us.’

The famous missionary E. Stanley Jones, said much the same thing. He uses the word faith where Powlison uses the word dependence. “I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath--these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely--these are my native air. We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality.”

If you're dependent on the God who provides, why worry?