

Anxious Care

by Alexander Maclaren

Anxious care is contrary to the lessons of nature, revelation, and Providence, and can be overcome by seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Scripture: Matthew 6:25

Topics: "Trust in God's Provision", "Anxiety"

Description

Alexander Maclaren emphasizes the distinction between foresight and foreboding, urging Christians to avoid anxious thoughts about the future. He explains that while preparation is wise, constant worry is counterproductive and contrary to God's providence. Maclaren outlines three reasons against anxious care: it contradicts the lessons of nature, it reflects a heathen mindset, and it undermines the understanding of God's providential care. He encourages believers to seek first the kingdom of God, trusting that their needs will be met, and to focus on the present rather than being burdened by future uncertainties. Ultimately, he calls for a faith-filled life that embraces God's provision and presence.

Transcript

FORESIGHT AND FOREBODING ARE two very different things. It is not that the one is the exaggeration of the other, but the one is opposed to the other. The more a man looks forward, in the exercise of foresight, the less he does so in the exercise of foreboding. And the more he is tortured by anxious thoughts about a possible future, the less clear vision has he of a likely future, and the less power to influence it. When Christ here, therefore, enjoins the abstinence from thought for our life and for the future, it is not for the sake of getting away from the pressure of a very unpleasant command that we say, He does not mean to prevent the exercise of wise and provident foresight and preparation for what is to come. When this English version of the Bible was made, the phrase "taking thought" meant solicitous anxiety, and that is the true rendering and proper meaning of the original. The idea is, therefore, that here there is forbidden for a Christian, not the careful preparation for what is likely to come, not the foresight of the storm, and taking in sail while yet there is time, but the constant occupation and distraction of the heart with gazing forward, and fearing, and being weakened thereby; or, to come back to words already used, foresight is commanded, and, therefore, foreboding is forbidden. My only object now, is to endeavor to gather together by their link of connection, the whole of those precepts which follow my text to the close of the chapter; and to try to set before you, in the order in which they stand, and in their organic connection with each other, the reasons which Christ gives for the absence of anxious care from our minds.

I mass them all into three. If you notice, the whole section, to the end of the chapter, is divided into three parts, by the threefold repetition of the injunction, "Take no thought." "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on." The reason for the command as given in this first section follows:--Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? The expansion of that runs on to the close of the thirtieth verse.

Then there follows another division or section of the whole, marked by the repetition of the command, "Take no thought, " saying, " What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink: or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?" The reason given for the command in this second section is 'for after all these things do the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God. " (vv. 3133).

And then follows a third section marked by the third repetition of the command, "Take no thought for the morrow." The reason given for the command in this third section is 'for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself "

Now if we try to generalize the lessons that lie in these three great divisions of the Sermon on the Mount, we get these: anxious thought is contrary to all the lessons of nature, which show it to be unnecessary. That is the first, the longest section. Then, secondly, anxious thought is contrary to all the lessons of revelation or religion, which show it to be heathenish. And lastly, anxious thought is contrary to the whole scheme of Providence, which shows it to be futile. You do not need to be anxious. It is wicked to be anxious. It is of no use to be anxious. These are the three things, contrary to the lessons of Nature; contrary to the great principles of the Gospel; and contrary to the scheme of Providence. Let us try now simply to follow the course of thought in our Lord's illustration of these three principles.

Anxiety Is Contrary to Nature

The first is the consideration of the teaching of nature.

"Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?" (Matthew 6:25). And then comes the illustration of the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field.

The whole of these four or five verses fall into these general thoughts: You are obliged to trust God for your body, for its structure, for its form, for its habitudes, and for the length of your being; you are obliged to trust Him for the foundation--trust Him for the superstructure. You are obliged to trust Him, whether you will or not, for the greater--trust Him gladly for the less. You cannot help being dependent. After all your anxiety, it is only directed to the providing of the things that are needful for life. Life itself, though it be a natural thing, comes direct from God's hand, and all that you can do, with all your carking cares, and laborious days, and sleepless nights, is but to adorn a little more beautifully or a little less beautifully, the allotted span, and to feed a little more delicately or a little less delicately, the body which God has given you! What is the use of being careful for food and raiment, when down below these necessities there lies the awful question--for the answer to which you have to hang helpless, in implicit, powerless dependence upon God-- Shall I live, or shall I die? Shall I have a body instinct with vitality, or a body crumbling amidst the clods of the valley?

After all your work, your anxiety gets but such a little way down; like some passing shower of rain, that only softens the hard-baked surface of the soil, and has nothing to do with fructifying the seed that lies

inches below the reach of its useless moisture. Anxious care is foolish; for far beyond the region within which your anxieties move, there is the greater region in which there must be entire dependence upon God. "Is not the life more than meat? Is not the body more than raiment?" You must trust Him for that; you may as well trust Him for all the rest.

Then, again, there comes up this other thought: Not only are you compelled to exercise un-anxious dependence in regard to a matter which you cannot influence --the life of the body--and that is the greater; but, still further, God gives you that. Very well, God gives you the greater; and God's great gifts are always inclusive of God's little gifts. When He bestows the thing, He bestows all the consequences of the thing as well. When He gives a life, He swears by the gift that He will give what is needful to sustain it. God does not stop halfway in any of His bestowments. He gives royally and liberally, honestly and sincerely, logically and completely. When He bestows a life, therefore, you may be quite sure that He is not going to stultify His own gift by retaining unbestowed anything that is wanted for its blessing and its power. You have had to trust Him for the greater; trust Him for the less. He has given you the greater; no doubt He will give you the less. "The life is more than meat, and the body than raiment." "Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment?"

Then there is another thought. Look at God's ways of doing with all His creatures. The animate and the inanimate creation are appealed to, the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field, the one in reference to food and the other in reference to clothing, which are the two great wants already spoken of by Christ in the previous verses. I am not going to linger on the exquisite beauty of these illustrations. Every sensitive heart and pure eye dwells upon them with delight. The "fowls of the air," "the lilies of the field," "they toil not, neither do they spin;" and then, with what an eye for the beauty of God's universe--"Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these !" Now, what is the force of this consideration? It is this: There is a specimen, in an inferior creation, of the same principles which you can trust, you men who are "better than they." And not only that: There is an instance, not only of God's giving things that are necessary, but of God's giving more, lavishing beauty upon the flowers of the field. I do not think that we sufficiently dwell upon the moral and spiritual uses of beauty in God's universe. That everywhere His loving, wooing hand should touch the flower into grace, and deck all barren places with glory and with fairness--what does that reveal to us about Him? It says to us, He does not give scantily: it is not the mere measure of what is wanted, absolutely needed, to support a bare existence, that God bestows. He taketh pleasure in the prosperity of His servants.

Joy, love, and beauty belong to Him; and the smile upon His face that comes from the contemplation of His own fairness flung out into His glorious creation, is a prophecy of the gladness that comes into His heart from His own holiness and more ethereal beauty adorning the spiritual creatures whom He has made to flash back His likeness. The flowers of the field are so clothed that we may learn the lesson, that it is a fair Spirit, a loving Spirit, a bountiful Spirit, and a royal heart that presides over the bestowments of creation, and allots gifts to men.

But notice, further, how much of the force of what Christ says here, depends on the consideration of the inferiority of these creatures who are thus blessed; and also notice what are the particulars of that inferiority. We read that verse, "They sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns," as if it marked out a particular in which their free and untoilsome lives were superior to ours. It is the very opposite. It is part of the thing that marks them as lower than we, that they have not to work for the future. They reap not, they sow not, they gather not; are ye not much better than they? Better in this, among other things, that God has given us the privilege of influencing the future by our faithful toil, by the sweat of our brow, and by

the labor of our hands. These creatures labor not, and yet they are fed. The lesson for us is how much more may we, whom God has blessed with the power of work and gifted with force to mold the future, be sure that He will bless the exercise of the prerogative by which He exalts us above inferior creatures, and makes us capable of toil.

You can influence tomorrow. What you can influence by work, fret not about, for you can work. What you cannot influence by work, fret not about, for it is vain. "They toil not, neither do they spin." You are lifted above them because God has given you hands, that can grasp the tool or the pen. Man's crown of glory, as well as man's curse and punishment, is "in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread." So learn what you have to do with that great power of anticipation! It is meant to be the guide of wise work. It is meant to be the support for far-reaching, strenuous action. It is meant to elevate us above mere living from hand to mouth; to ennoble the whole being by leading to and directing toil that is blessed, because there is no anxiety in it, labor that will be successful, since it is according to the will of that God who has endowed us with the power of putting it forth.

Then there comes another inferiority. "Your heavenly Father feedeth them." They cannot say "Father!" and yet they are fed. You are above them by the prerogative of toil. You are above them by the nearer relation which you sustain to your Father in heaven. He is their Maker, and lavishes His goodness upon them, He is your Father, and He will not forget His child. They cannot trust, you can. They might be anxious, if they could look forward, for they know not the hand that feeds them; but you can turn around, and recognize the source of all blessings. So doubly ought you to be guarded from care by the lesson of that free joyful nature that lies around about you, and say, No fear of famine, nor of poverty, nor of want; for He feedeth the ravens when they cry. No reason for distrust! Shame on me if I am anxious! For every lily of the field blows its beauty, and every bird of the air carols its song without sorrowful foreboding, and yet there is no Father in the heaven to them!

And the last inferiority is this: "Today it is, and tomorrow it is cast into the oven." Their little life is thus blessed and brightened. Oh, how much greater will be the mercies that belong to them who have a longer life upon earth, and who never die! The lesson is not--these are the plebeians in God's universe, and you are the aristocracy, and you may trust Him; but it is--they, by their inferior place, have lesser and lower wants, wants but for a bounded being, wants that stretch not beyond earthly existence, and that for a brief span. They are blessed in the present, for the oven tomorrow saddens not the blossoming today. You have nobler necessities and higher longings, wants that belong to a soul that never dies, to a nature which may glow with the consciousness that God is your Father, wants which "look before and after," therefore, you are "better than they," and "shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?"

Anxiety Is Contrary to Revelation

And now, in the second place, there is here another general line of considerations tending to dispel all anxious care--the thought that it is contrary to all the lessons of Religion, or Revelation, which show it to be heathenish. There are three clauses devoted to the illustration of this thought: "After all these things do the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:32-33).

The first contains the principle, that solicitude for the future is at heart heathen worldly-mindedness. The heathen tendency in us all leads to an over-estimate of material good, and it is a question of

circumstances whether that shall show itself in heaping up earthly treasures or in anxious care. They are the same plant, only the one is growing in the tropics of sunny prosperity, and the other in the arctic zone of chill penury. The one is the sin of the worldly-minded rich man, the other is the sin of the worldly-minded poor man. The character is the same turned inside out! And, therefore, the words "ye cannot serve God and mammon," stand in this chapter in the center between our Lord's warning against laying up treasures on earth, and His warnings against being full of cares for earth. He would show us thereby that these two apparently opposite states of mind in reality spring from that one root, and are equally, though differently, "serving mammon." We do not sufficiently reflect upon that. We say, perhaps, this intense solicitude of ours is a matter of temperament, or of circumstances. So it may be; but the Gospel was sent to help us to cure worldly temperaments, and to master circumstances. But the reason why we are troubled and careful about the things of this life, lies here, that our hearts have got an earthly direction, that we are at heart heathenish in our lives, and in our desires. It is the very characteristic of the Gentile (that is to say, of the heathen) that earth should bound his horizon. It is the very characteristic of the worldly man that all his anxieties on the one hand, and all his joys on the other, should be "cribbed, cabined, and confined" within the narrow sphere of the Visible. When a Christian is living in the foreboding of some earthly sorrow to come down upon him, and is feeling as if there would be nothing left if some earthly treasure were swept away, is it not, in the very root of it, idolatry, worldly-mindedness? Is it not clean contrary to all our profession that for us "there is none upon earth that we desire besides Thee"? Anxious care rests upon a basis of heathen worldly-mindedness.

Anxious care rests upon a basis, too, of heathen misunderstanding of the character of God. "Your heavenly Father knoweth that you have need of all these things." The heathen thought of God is that He is far removed from our perplexities, either ignorant of our struggles, or unsympathizing with them. The Christian has the double armor against anxiety: the name of the Father, and the conviction that the Father's knowledge is co-extensive with the Father's love. He who calls us His children thoroughly understands what His children want. And so, anxiety is contrary to the very name by which we have learned to call God, and to the pledge of pitying care and perfect knowledge of our frame which lies in the words "our Father." Our Father is the name of God, and our Father intensely cares for us, and lovingly does all things for us.

And then, still further, Christ points out here, not only what is the real root of this solicitous care--something very like worldly-mindedness--heathen worldly mindedness; but He points out what is the one counterpoise of it--seek first the kingdom of God. It is of no use only to tell men that they ought to trust, that the birds of the air might teach them to trust, that the flowers of the field might preach resignation and confidence to them. It is of no use to attempt to scold them into trust, by telling them that distrust is heathenish! You must fill the heart with a supreme and transcendent desire after the one supreme object; and then there will be no room and leisure left for the anxious care after the lesser. Have in wrought into your being, Christian man, the opposite of that heathen over regard for earthly things. "Seek first the kingdom of God." Let all your spirit be stretching itself out towards that Divine and blessed reality, longing to be a subject of that kingdom, and a possessor of that righteousness; and "the cares that infest the day" shall steal away from out of the sacred pavilion of your believing spirit. Fill your heart with desires after what is worthy of desire; and the greater having entered in, all lesser objects will rank themselves in the right place, and the "glory that excelleth" will outshine the seducing brightness of the paltry present. Oh, it is want of love, it is want of earnest desire, it is want of firm conviction that God, God only, God by Himself, is enough for me, that make me careful and troubled. And, therefore, if I could only attain unto that sublime and calm height of perfect conviction, that He is sufficient for me, that He is with

me forever--the satisfying object of my desires and the glorious reward of my searchings, let life and death come as they may; let riches, poverty, health, sickness, all the antitheses of human circumstances storm down upon me in quick alternation, yet in them all I shall be content and peaceful. God is beside me! And His presence brings in its train whatsoever things I need. You cannot cast out the sin of foreboding thoughts by any power short of the entrance of Christ and His love. The blessings of faith and felt communion leave no room nor leisure for anxiety.

Anxiety Is Contrary to Providence

Finally, Christ here tells us, that thought for the morrow is contrary to all the scheme of Providence, which shows it to be vain. "The morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6:34).

I interpret these two clauses as meaning this: Tomorrow has anxieties enough of its own, after and in spite of all the anxieties about it today by which you try to free it from care when it comes. Every day, every day will have its evil, have it to the end. And every day will have evil enough for all the strength that a man has to cope with it. Thus it just comes to this: Anxiety, it is all vain. After all your careful watching for the corner of the heaven where the cloud is to come from, there will be a cloud, and it will rise somewhere, but you never know in what quarter. The morrow shall have its own anxieties. After all your fortifying of the castle of your life, there will be some little postern left unguarded, some little weak place in the wall left uncommanded by a battery; and there, where you never looked for him, the inevitable invader will come in! After all the plunging of the hero in the fabled waters that made him invulnerable, there was the little spot on the heel, and the arrow found its way there! There is nothing certain to happen, says the proverb, but the unforeseen. Tomorrow will have its cares, spite of anything that anxiety and foreboding can do. It is God's law of Providence that a man shall be disciplined by sorrow; and to try to escape from that law by any forecasting prudence, is utterly hopeless, and madness.

And what does your anxiety do? It does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows; but, oh, it empties today of its strength. It does not make you escape the evil, it makes you unfit to cope with it when it comes. It does not bless tomorrow, and it robs today. For every day has its own burden. Sufficient for each day is the evil which properly belongs to it. Do not add tomorrow's to today's. Do not drag the future into the present. The present has enough to do with its own proper concerns. We have always strength to bear the evil when it comes. We have not strength to bear the foreboding of it. As thy day, so thy strength shall be. In strict proportion to the existing exigencies will be the God-given power; but if you cram and condense today's sorrows by experience, and tomorrow's sorrows by anticipation, into the narrow round of the one twenty-four hours, there is no promise that as that day thy strength shall be! God gives us power to bear all the sorrows of His making; but He does not give us power to bear the sorrows of our own making, which the anticipation of sorrow most assuredly is.

Then, contrary to the lessons of nature, contrary to the teachings of religion, contrary to the scheme of Providence--weakening your strength, distracting your mind, sucking the sunshine out of every landscape, and casting a shadow over all the beauty--the curse of our lives is that heathenish, blind, useless, faithless, needless anxiety in which we do indulge. Look forward, for God has given you that royal and wonderful gift of dwelling in the future, and bringing all its glories around your present. Look forward, not for life, but for heaven; not for food and raiment, but for the righteousness after which it is blessed to hunger and thirst, and wherewith it is blessed to be clothed. Not for earth, but for heaven, let your forecasting gift of prophecy come into play. Fill the present with quiet faith, with patient waiting, with

honest work, with wise reading of God's lessons of nature, of providence, and of grace, all of which say to us, Live in God's future, that the present may be bright; and work in the present, that the future may be certain! They may well look around in expectation, sunny and unclouded, of a blessed time to come, whose hearts are already "fixed, trusting in the Lord." He to whom there is a present Christ, and a present Spirit, and a present Father, and a present forgiveness, and a present redemption, may well live expiating in all the glorious distance of the unknown to come, sending out from his placid heart over all the weltering waters of this lower world, the peaceful seeking dove, his meek Hope, that shall come back again from its flight with some palm branch broken from the trees of Paradise between its bill. And he that has no such present, has a future, dark, chaotic, heaving with its destructive ocean; and over it there goes forever--black-pinioned, winging its solitary and hopeless flight, the raven of his anxious thoughts, and finds no place to rest, and comes back again to the desolate ark with its foreboding croak of evil in the present and evil in the future. Live in Christ, "the same yesterday, and today, and forever," and His presence shall make all your past, present, and future--memory, enjoyment, and hope--to be bright and beautiful, because all are centered in Him!

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