

Is There Good Anxiety?

by John Piper

John Piper explores the concept of good anxiety, emphasizing its role in caring for others while maintaining joy in God's sovereignty.

Scripture: Genesis 6:6, Isaiah 46:9, Luke 19:41, Romans 8:28, Romans 9:2, 2 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 11:28, Ephesians 4:30, Philippians 4:6

Topics: "Emotional Health", "Sovereignty Of God"

Description

John Piper delves into the concept of 'good anxiety' by exploring the emotional states of the heart that are highlighted in the Bible, particularly focusing on the tension between experiencing anxiety and the command to have no anxiety. He examines Paul's expressions of anxiety and fear for the churches, juxtaposed with commands to rejoice always, to understand the legitimacy of such emotions. Piper delves into the idea that God, despite His sovereignty and omniscience, grieves over sin and loss, revealing a capacity to view certain aspects of reality with a narrow focus that excludes other parts, leading to a deeper understanding of human emotions towards sin and destruction.

Transcript

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2 Corinthians 11:28

IS THERE GOOD ANXIETY? In retrospect I think I can see that one of the deeper reasons why I left Bethel College to enter the pastorate is that the things that concern me most are states of the heart rather than states of the mind. In my own set of values orthodoxy is penultimate, personal faith is ultimate. Reasoning to and from God is penultimate; joy in God is ultimate. Ethics is penultimate; love is ultimate. Hermeneutics (no offense, sweetheart) is penultimate, obedience is ultimate. Theology is penultimate; doxology is ultimate. I think my life over the past five years or so has been a spiritual and vocational movement toward the place where the flower of the ultimate bursts forth on the stem of the penultimate.

Of course, I don't want to imply that I spend all my time now inside a tulip cup (though I am still a 5-point Calvinist) or that I am constantly drunk with honeysuckle juice. In fact, just like you I still spend most of my hours nurturing the stem of the penultimate rather than sniffing the flower of the ultimate. So there is still a restlessness in me which I suppose will never go away until I see God face to face and everything I do is swallowed up in the immediacy of divine life.

The reason I mention all this is to set the stage for what I really want to talk about, namely, some states of heart that we are told to have in the Bible. The problems in the Bible that get under my saddle most are problems about the emotional states or conditions of will which are supposed to characterize God or us humans. For example, in Galatians 5:20 anger is called a work of the flesh to be avoided and James 2:20 says, "The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God." But in Ephesians 4:26 Paul says, "Be angry but do not sin," and in Mark 3:5 it says that Jesus looked at his opponents "with anger." And there are many such things in the Scriptures. And the reason they get under my saddle is because something ultimate is immediately at stake here. If I can't solve this problem then I am at a loss how to obey, and obedience is ultimate. But this isn't the problem I want to look at this morning. I want to look at the problem of anxiety.

About a year or so ago I read a meditation by David Hubbard, president of Fuller Seminary, on 2 Corinthians 11:28 where Paul says, "And apart from other things there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches." Hubbard's point was that Paul loved his churches and that their spiritual welfare weighed heavily on him. Hubbard called all of us to share this burden for the churches of Christ. But now here was a new problem that I had never thought of before and it hasn't let me go yet. Paul claims to be anxious for all the churches, and he doesn't even want to hide it. Hubbard is right, Paul thinks he is saying something exemplary.

But all my red flags go up when I hear the word "anxiety" or begin to feel it myself. Paul himself said in Philippians 4:6,7:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

My first thought was that there must be different Greek words behind these two texts, but they are the same. My second thought was that this is perhaps an isolated instance of anxiety for Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:28 and perhaps he didn't mean it to be so exemplary. But then some other texts came to mind which shot this idea down.

For example, Paul said to the church at Corinth (in 2 Corinthians 11:2,3):

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. But I fear that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Here it was again in an even more powerful word: "I am afraid," "I fear" what might befall the churches. This brought to mind 1 Thessalonians 3:5 where Paul writes to the new church:

When I could bear it no longer, I sent that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor would be in vain.

Here he is again in fear of what Satan might do to the churches. And then finally, Galatians 4:19 where he says to the churches of Galatia, "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you." Paul describes himself as having emotional labor pains until Christ comes to full term in the lives of the Galatians. How in the world can all this anxiety and fear and emotional labor pain fit together with the words, "Have no anxiety about anything?" That's my latest problem, and what I would like to do is take you

with me as far as I have gotten into a solution.

First, let's start with a definition. Anxiety seems to be an intense desire for something, accompanied by a fear of the consequences of not receiving it. We do not say we are anxious when we desire a tool box for Christmas because we don't fear the consequences of not getting one. But we do say we are anxious about our wife not arriving home on time because our desire for her to come home is accompanied by the fear of a car accident and a telephone call from the police. Paul evidently speaks of his anxiety for all the churches because he intensely desires them to remain faithful to Christ and he fears the consequences of their not being faithful. The consequences of a wife being in a car accident might be her death and a wrenching grief and loneliness for her husband. The consequences of the churches not remaining in the faith is that they would be "accursed and cut off from Christ." Paul knows what he would feel if this happened, because it has already happened to some that he loves. We see this in Romans 9:2,3, where Paul says "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race." This is what Paul feared, the damnation of those he loved and the anguish of his own heart that accompanied it. So anxiety implies that we think there may well be some sorrow and anguish around the corner.

Now, what this understanding of Paul's anxiety for the churches enables us to do is pose our question in a new form. First we asked, "Can Paul's anxiety be squared with his own command to be anxious for nothing? That is, can there be good anxiety?" But now we see that Paul is anxious because of the real possibility that grief and anguish could fall on him if his churches committed apostasy. So the question now becomes, "Is it right to experience such grief and anguish of heart?" This is the real question behind the other question whether anxiety can be good. Because, if it is right to feel grief and anguish at some loss, then it would seem right also to be anxious about the possibility of that loss. Or to put it another way, it would be inconsistent to say it is O.K. for our emotions to respond negatively to a loss that is past, but it is not O.K. for our emotions to respond negatively to the possibility of that loss in the future. No, if there can be good regret then there can be good anxiety. If there can be good grief there can be good fear. So the real question for me is, "How is it right for Paul to have 'great grief and unceasing anguish' for his lost kinsmen?"

You might say, "Well, what could be more natural?" But the problem is that Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always," and in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice," and in Ephesians 5: 20, "Always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." And these unlimited commands to rejoice are grounded in the unlimited promise of Romans 8:28, "In everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." So, given Paul's theology and his explicit commands, it is not readily obvious how it can be right for him to have "great grief and unceasing anguish" in his heart even at the loss of his kinsmen, and consequently it is not obvious, either, how it can be right for him to have anxiety for all the churches.

The pathway to a possible solution led in what may seem a surprising direction. It occurred to me that, since Paul's commands to rejoice always flow from his conception of God as one who is powerful enough and good enough to work in all things for my good (Romans 15:13; 8:28), then God should be a perfectly happy being, free from all anguish and grief. But in fact we find each member of the Godhead grieving over sin and the loss of human life. Genesis 6:6 says that during the evil days of Noah, "The Lord was sorry he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." And Jesus wept over Jerusalem's failure to know the time of her visitation (Luke 19:41-44) and Mark 3:5 says He looked around on His adversaries, "grieved at their hardness of heart." And Paul says in Ephesians 4:30, "Do not grieve the Holy

Spirit of God in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." So the whole Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as the apostle Paul, appear to grieve over sin and the loss of man's righteousness and salvation. If we could account for how it is good for the Trinity to grieve over sin, then we could probably account for the legitimacy of Paul's grief as well as the unhappy anticipation of that possible grief in the form of anxiety for all the churches.

Now, I'm going to do something that will require a good deal of sympathy on your part. I'm going to exclude, with almost no discussion, two possible explanations of God's grief. Not because I haven't thought about them. God knows I have struggled with them for years. But because in twenty-five minutes you can't solve all the problems. You have to assume some sympathetic common ground. First, I exclude the solution that says God lacks the knowledge of the future acts of His creatures and therefore when they turn out contrary to His wishes He is regretful and grieved. Second, I exclude the solution that says God knows what His creatures will do beforehand but He has given up control over them so that they often use their freedom to frustrate His designs so that He grieves. I reject both of these solutions because I believe the Scriptures teach that God is omniscient and sovereign. He knows all things including all future events and He "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). God says in Isaiah 46:9,10,

I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose.'

You could hardly ask for a more succinct statement of God's omniscience and His sovereignty. But if that is not palatable for you, I simply ask for a sympathetic suspension of disbelief while you consider the last stage of my proposed solution (which is not new with me). I am going to assume that God is never frustrated in the performance of His ultimate purposes. Why, then, should such a God ever grieve over anything?

I want to acknowledge that my weak efforts to understand the divine mind and heart are not the least impressive to God but that He probably smiles with fatherly condescension on my baby talk. But He has encouraged us (infants that we are) to seek wisdom and to understand His ways, because He has laid Himself open to us in the Bible. And so I push further up and further in until there are no more signposts and He puts a roadblock in the way.

I think the reason that our sovereign God can grieve over sin is that He has the ability to view it and its consequences in a limited focus that excludes certain other parts of reality. By showing us His grief He reveals to us this capacity of narrow focus and enables us to understand our own apparently ambivalent attitude toward sin and destruction. God's grief over the sinfulness and loss of man reveals that in and of itself sin is not praiseworthy or good or delightful or pleasing to God. In relation to its own ends it is hateful to Him and grievous. As an attitude or an act which aims to dishonor God sin grieves God. The death and suffering of the wicked, considered simply as the loss and destruction of human life is not a delight to God, but a pang.

God's grief over sin and condemnation is owing, therefore, to His ability to view sin and condemnation as ends in themselves, which thus considered are grievous. But He is not an eternally unhappy or frustrated God because He can and does view sin and condemnation in relation to the universality of things where it is considered not for its ends but for God's ultimate ends through its existence. When God looks at the totality of redemptive history in this way, He rejoices at what He sees, with even sin and condemnation

redounding to His great glory.

If God has this ability of narrowing the lens of His attention onto a limited portion of reality and responding with different emotions to that perspective than He does when broadening the lens to take in all of reality, perhaps we creatures share some of that same ability. This possibility opens the way to see how Paul could speak of having "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" over the loss of His kinsmen (Romans 9:2), and yet say that we should "rejoice always" (Philippians 4:4) and "be thankful for everything" (Ephesians 5:20). Sin, considered as sin and for its own ends, and the damnation of a sinner considered for itself alone --these are grievous and painful to us and should be, when viewed in such limited relations. But if we leave our lens focused so narrowly we will despair; joy will be impossible, gratitude incongruous and heaven unthinkable.

God intends for us to lift up our eyes to the whole panorama of reality and remember His sovereignty and that all things will indeed work out for good. When we attain this perspective of faith we can rejoice with a sense of confidence.

Completing the circle then, I conclude that there is a place for good anxiety. The destruction that can befall a church through unbelief is a grievous thing from one limited perspective. And therefore, the contemplation of that possibility before it happens will not be pleasant. We will be anxious that it not happen. In this sense, I think, Paul has anxiety for all the churches.

Nevertheless, Paul also sees things in a larger perspective. He is not immobilized by his anxiety, nor is his anxiety always so strong as to squelch the joy that rises persistently from his eternal perspective on God's sovereign goodness. He is able to say,

Thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Corinthians 2:14-16).

Even when the fragrance of the gospel is the omen of death for unbelievers, God is still leading Paul in triumph. When we mount to this perspective we may rejoice always and be anxious for nothing.

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