

IN THE BEGINNING: CREATION—MOOD ORDER

Anxiety, fear, panic, phobias, stress—even those words create anxiety! Where does this set of distressing feelings come from?

My premise is simple: every dysfunctional, fallen emotion is a distortion of God’s original, pre-fall design. God intended for us to experience a mood that is the flip side of anxiety. If we are to understand the disorder of anxiety, we must first understand the order that sin has disordered. What normal, healthy, God-given process has become disturbed in anxiety?

Vigilance—Called to Sentry Duty

God placed Adam in the garden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15). The KJV says “to dress it and to keep it.” The Hebrew word behind “take care of” and “keep” means “to guard, protect, keep safe, watch over, keep vigil.” God called Adam to be on sentry duty. To fulfill this calling, he created Adam (and us) with the mood or emotion of vigilance.

The root “vig” (in *vigil*, *vigilant*, and *vigor*) relates to a sentry. God built into our brains a sentry, a sentinel. Vigilance is the God-given emotion that urges us to act quickly in response to a threat. Vigilance is the proper, constructive concern for the well-being of others and for the advancement of God’s kingdom. Vigilance motivates us to implement “tend and befriend” behaviors.

Warriors or Worriers

This perspective was very helpful to Mike, a counselee I was mentoring. After looking at the passage in Genesis 2 and interacting about vigil, Mike responded,

That changes everything. Whenever I face a threat and respond with fear, I’m then attacked and overwhelmed by

shame. I feel so weak, so puny, when the feelings of fear arise. But now I can reshape how I respond to those initial feelings of fear. I can say, “Okay, this feeling is the God-sent, God-given warning sign to kick me into high gear, so I will spring into action on behalf of others in God’s power!” It won’t eliminate my anxiety, but it sure knocks out the shame.

Mike got it. Vigilance motivates us to be God’s warrior. Anxiety, the flip side of vigilance, attempts to cripple and disarm God’s warriors, turning us into worriers.

Applying the Gospel to Daily Life

- What difference could it make in your life if you saw anxiety as the flip side of vigilance?

IN THE GARDEN: THE FALL—MOOD DISORDER

I grew up with an alcoholic father. Sometimes my dad would come home drunk, be happy, and want to play catch in the front yard. Other times he would come home drunk and go ballistic if he saw us walking on the lawn.

I learned *always* to be on guard. I experienced hyper-vigilance, stuck vigilance.

Stuck Vigilance—Failing to Guard the Garden

Anxiety is vigilance that is out of control. You continually scan your environment, worried about the what-ifs of life. Anxiety is toxic scanning.

Anxiety is also vigilance that is trying to maintain control in a self-protective and self-sufficient way. Anxiety is vigilance minus faith in God.

God called Adam to guard the garden. Yet while the serpent tempted his wife, Adam stood right there with her (Gen. 3:6)

and did nothing. Failing to trust and obey God, Adam failed to guard the garden—he went off sentry duty.

Anxiety results in flight-or-fight behavior. After sinning, Adam evidenced both behaviors. He hid in the garden because he was afraid (Gen. 3:8–10)—the flight response. He also blamed his wife (Gen. 3:11–12)—the fight response.

The Family Tree of Anxiety

Vigilant faith, anxiety, and anger are cousins. Picture their family tree:

- Anger: the fight response to threat—attack (vigilante justice).

Here we take matters into our own hands, in our own power, for our own benefit. Notice that the angry tough guy is just as fearful and terrified as the anxious person—the response is just different.

- Anxiety: the flight response to threat—retreat (vigil without action).

Here we take our safety into our own hands. “If I worry enough, at least I feel as if I have some control.”

- Vigilance: the faith response to threat—befriend and tend, or engage and protect (vigorous response).

Here we place our safety and the safety of others in God’s hands, while we take a stand for his plan. It is befriending and tending to others, even when we feel threatened.

God says, “Be vigilant! Be alert! Take your stand, and having done all, stand firm!”

Anxiety says, “What if I can’t handle this? I have to run. I have to fight. I have to self-protect!” Anxiety is scanning without

standing. It is continual worry, a perpetual state of alarm, the constant startle reflex.

Anxiety is vigilance that does not turn us back to trust. Anxiety and anger involve vigilance without faith and without love. They are untrusting, nonrelational responses to threat.

Vigilance, on the other hand, is a trusting, relational response to threat. It relates to others by protecting the person being threatened. It relates to others by engaging, challenging, and confronting (not attacking) the person doing the threatening. It relates to God by trusting that what he calls us to do, he equips us to fulfill.

The Fear Factor

Where does fear fit into the anxiety equation? Fear is our response when we feel uncertain about our resources in the face of danger. We're assaulted by a force that overwhelms us. The threat drives us to face the fact that we're helpless and that ultimately our safety is out of our control. Fear compels us to face our neediness. Of course, the core question is, "Where do we turn?"

In anxiety, we turn to self instead of turning to God. Anxiety is fear without faith. It is vigilance run amok. We scan the horizon constantly, fearfully, but without ever taking action or responsibility and without clinging to God.

In vigilance, we turn to God. Through faith, we face the reality of our neediness by trusting in the unseen reality of a God who cares and controls.

Applying the Gospel to Daily Life

- When anxiety attacks, what is your typical response: fight, flight, or faith? Where do you think you learned this pattern of response?