

INTRODUCTION

A Soul Beset

A Personal Perspective

It was incredibly disorienting. *Why do I have a perpetual impulse to confess past sins to God and to others?* Day after day, my mind (seemingly against my will) would scan for past sins, some of which I had committed several years earlier—sins pre-conversion *and* sins post-conversion. Like a constantly running film in the mind, the memories kept on rolling, day and night. Some of the memories may not even have been of sins at all. But the rumination continued: *Have I confessed that sin yet? If so, did I relay enough details for it to be a genuine confession?* It wasn't long after a moment of confession that my mind found a new memory—a new transgression to admit. *But Christ died for those sins—the sins I remember and the sins I don't*, I would remind myself. No matter; the visceral urge to ruminate, rinse (confess), and repeat was plaguing me.

I had suffered before, but nothing seemed to compare with this type of suffering. Most other suffering came from things that happened *outside me*; this suffering was *inside me*. It felt like an ongoing wrestling match with my mind, but my mind was also the referee. Saturday nights were the worst; I had to get everything off my chest before church the next morning. Sometimes, though I'm ashamed to admit it, I'd forgo attending worship because it was just too painful. (To be sure, such a response to the inner fear was unwise and disobedient.)

This inner turmoil peaked in my early college years. One day, as I was walking out of the college dining hall, I glanced across the quad at the counseling center sign. I'd contemplated for a few days whether such a visit would be worthwhile. I thought my experience was so strange and peculiar that perhaps a counselor would sit opposite me and simply say, "Sounds like you just don't trust God enough." This prediction only made the prospect of going in scarier.

Finally, the impulses were so strong and disruptive, I became desperate. I had spoken with friends, family, and mentors, but I was on the brink of despair. Living with this strong impulse was becoming unbearably miserable. I needed to talk to someone that I didn't feel the urge to confess sins to. My fiancée (who is now my beloved wife) agreed. I walked along the brick walkway across campus a couple of hours before basketball practice, entered the double glass doors with a pit in my stomach, and asked the kind receptionist whether a counselor had time to speak with me. She guided me back via a long hallway with dim lighting into a cozy office that reminded me

of my grandmother's living room growing up—green glass banker's lamps, flower-upholstered furniture, bulky window valances. It was quiet, too. I sat down sheepishly on a cushy leather chair. *Was I really in a counselor's office?* The counselor, Sam, walked in and warmly greeted me. I don't remember much about that introduction other than being handed a bottle of water. Sam was kind. I could tell immediately. His countenance was warm.

Fear, embarrassment, and uncertainty jumbled my thoughts. Sam mentioned something about confidentiality, which made me feel safe but crazy—my thoughts were so embarrassing that they needed to be locked in a safe place. We spoke for a few minutes about my life and experience. I don't remember much about what I said. What I do remember, however, was how little I had to share with Sam before he offered a definitive declaration: "You have obsessive-compulsive disorder, Aaron."

I was stunned but also at ease. Confused, but comforted. The only things I knew about OCD were from the A&E documentary series *Obsessed*. I wasn't a germaphobe or hoarder. When I left the counseling center, the thoughts (obsessions) and impulses (compulsions) were still there. But strangely, I felt a bit lighter than when I'd walked in. Having a name for my suffering—even if that name had been made up by people with a totally different worldview from mine—gave me a sense of calm. And a sense of calm, for those with intense anxiety, is hard to come by. I walked back across the bricked campus quad with gratitude to God for granting me the courage to make that walk the first time. I thank God for Sam, though Sam probably remembers little to nothing about me or our visit that day.

At Sam's behest, I ordered two books: John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and a book that described OCD as an anxiety disorder. This purchase all but drained my college-student bank account, but I didn't care. For perhaps the first time, I felt understood, both by Bunyan and by the people whose stories the OCD author had recounted. Ever since, anxiety—and its close ally, depression—has been a regular guest. Not a particularly welcome guest, but a guest that I have nonetheless learned over the years to appreciate.

If you are reading this book, you likely have your own experience with disruptive anxiety. Perhaps you are in the throes of it now, or maybe you're preparing for the next bout. Or perhaps anxiety, for you, is an irritating guest that makes life a bit more difficult, but it doesn't bring significant distress and agony. It's more like an annoying neighbor than a soul-sucking squatter.

Anxiety and depression mean different things to different people. Some people have experienced debilitating anxiety and despair that has found them in the back of an ambulance, in a psychiatric ward, or in a counseling center, while others have the occasional anxious or despairing thought that passes briefly through their minds before they fall into a peaceful sleep. For some, anxiety and depression can make it difficult to perform daily basic tasks. For others, they might come around only a few times every year and not significantly disrupt everyday life. This experiential range is demonstrated in the various ways in which people use the words. "I'm anxious" could mean no more than mild eagerness (e.g., "I'm anxious for the outcome of this basketball game"), or

it could mean an unbearable distress. “That’s depressing” could be a reaction to an inconsequential alert (e.g., “It’s depressing that the Chicago Bulls lost”), or it could mean indescribable darkness.

Yet no matter where one finds himself or herself on the spectrum of this affliction, the reality remains: Anxiety and depression are not merely modern phenomena, nor are they outside the scope of God’s providential care. The Puritans spoke of the “dark night of the soul,” that period of despair when the assurance of God’s love feels as distant as the stars on a cloudy night. Nothing is more painful. Even the psalmist cries, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” (Ps. 42:5). The experience of anxiety and sorrow is not foreign to the people of God, and yet Scripture does not leave us without comfort. Nor does it leave us without resources to press on in faithfulness.

For many Christians, the question of suffering—particularly suffering that arises from within—is among the most perplexing of theological challenges. *Why, if I belong to Christ, does my soul still tremble? Why does peace, which He promised to leave with His people, seem so elusive? Where is the peace that surpasses all understanding that I was promised in Philippians 4:7?* These are not questions that can be answered with mere sentimentality. They require a robust biblical understanding of both the nature of human frailty and the unwavering sovereignty of God.

To that end, it is crucial to acknowledge that anxiety and depression, while certainly influenced by spiritual realities, are also deeply intertwined with the way we are

physically made. We are not souls trapped in bodies; we are embodied souls. The great minds of the Christian tradition—John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, and even the great theologian of joy, C. S. Lewis—understood that the human experience is one of profound complexity. The fall has wrought havoc not only on the will and affections but also on the mind and body. Thus, the experience of anxiety and depression is not necessarily a mark of weak faith but a mark of our shared human frailty.¹

What, then, shall we say? If anxiety is an unwelcome guest, should we seek only to expel it, or is there something to be learned even in its presence? The gospel speaks to our fears and our sorrows, not by offering a quick fix or a mere change of perspective, but by grounding us in the eternal realities of God’s unshakable love, His providential care, His sovereign power, and His glorious promises. The God who calls us to “[cast] all [our] anxieties on him” (1 Pet. 5:7) does not do so as a distant deity unconcerned with the details of our distress. He does so as the one who took on human flesh, who wept at the tomb of His friend, who sweated drops of blood in Gethsemane, and who bore our griefs on the cross.

This book is not written to provide a simple, formulaic solution to the struggles of anxiety and depression. In fact, it’s not even written to provide a “solution” at all. Rather, it is written to remind weary hearts that they are not alone—that the God who holds the universe together is the same God who upholds His children, even when their minds feel fractured and their hearts weighed down.

1 See Kelly Kopic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Brazos Press, 2022).

It's written to offer a different perspective on what might seem to you to be your biggest setback in life.

If you find yourself in the midst of anxiety's tightening grip or depression's dark shadow, take heart: This is not an accident. The one who formed you in your mother's womb is the same one who sustains you even now. The Christian life is not a life free from affliction, but it is a life in which affliction is never meaningless—nor is it by accident. In the hands of our gracious and sovereign God, even our sorrows become instruments of grace. And in the end, we hold fast to the promise that though “weeping may tarry for the night, . . . joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5).