

The Paradox of Anxiety

By: Wayne Jackson

A paradox is defined as a statement that appears to conflict with common sense or other credible sources of information, when, in fact, it may not conflict at all. For example, after reflecting upon 1 Peter 5:6 - "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" - one might be inclined to say: "The way up is down." That is a paradoxical statement. In the New Testament, the material on anxiety is likewise paradoxical.

The Greek noun *merimna* is found six times in the New Testament. Its corresponding verb occurs nineteen times. These kindred terms can be translated by such forms as "care," "anxious," "worry," or "thought." The context will provide the necessary information as to the most effective way to render the expression in English.

The unusual thing is that *merimna* can be either condemned or commended, depending on the setting in which it is found. A study of the difference provides a wealth of valuable information.

Negative Anxiety

Predominately, “worry” is condemned. Christ employed this word six times in the Sermon on the Mount in censuring needless anxiety over material things; (a) The Lord shows that worry is unfocused, because there is a dimension of life that reaches beyond one's body (Matthew 6:25), and that should be the prime target of one's concern. (b) Anxiety is useless; it changes nothing (v. 27) – except, perhaps, one's mental and physical well-being! (c) Worry is illogical; if God takes care of his lesser creations (e.g., flowers and birds), will he not care for his people? (v. 28). Note the “much more” contrast in verse thirty. (d) Fretfulness is faithlessness. It reveals the same unravelled level of frustration that is characteristic of those who have no relationship with God (vv. 31-32). It is tragic that some in the world appear to have a greater sense of mental tranquility than many who profess an intimate relationship with a Heavenly Father. (e) Finally, fearfulness is shortsighted; it lives on the precipice of what “might be” (v. 34). One has enough to deal with each day; there is no need to borrow trouble from tomorrow.

Martha is a prime example of one who was distracted

with inordinate anxiety (Luke 10:41); in her preoccupation she robbed herself of teaching time at the Master's feet and became a harsh critic of her more focused sister (v. 42).

Many years ago, Ashley S. Johnson founded a school in eastern Tennessee for young men who wanted to preach the gospel but could not afford the expense of a more formal education. He called it "The School of Evangelists." He believed firmly in the providence of God and thus that the Lord would provide for those lads who wanted to enroll, as well as for the school itself as it sailed under the "flag of faith." He produced a book of sermons under the title, *The Life of Trust*, which would pay rich dividends to any Christian who explores its pages.

Positive Anxiety

Not all anxiety is condemned. Turmoil invaded the church at Corinth over the use of various miraculous gifts. Some insisted on exercising their gift under circumstances where confusion could prevail. Thus Paul urged that the local members should subordinate their self-interests and have "care" (concern) for one another

(1 Corinthians 12:25). Care is an antidote for contentiousness! Paul loved the church at Philippi. He had established that congregation (Acts 16), and these precious souls had supported the beloved apostle for over a decade (cf. Philippians 4:10ff). At the time he wrote his letter to this church, he anticipated sending his protege, Timothy, to Philippi to assist these precious saints, In the process he paid a wonderful compliment to his young missionary companion.

In a note of commendation, the apostle wrote: “But I hope in the Lord Jesus [i.e., I hope it is the Lord's will] to send Timothy shortly unto you, that I also may be o god comfort, when I know of your state [i.e., how they were bearing up under persecution]” (Philippians 2:19). He continued, referencing Timothy: “For I have no man like-minded, who will care [merimnao] truly for your state” (v.20). In essence, Paul is saying, “If Timothy is with you, you can be assured of his genuine concern for your spiritual welfare and he will be a blessing to you – and to me in respect.” O how blessed we are when we have family in the Lord who worry (in the right way) over us. It's an index of their love!

That Paul was a victim of serious and sustained

persecution is well known to Bible students. One catalog of his perils is found in 2 Corinthians 11:23ff. After listing a wide range of physical abuses and serious dangers in his apostolic endeavors, Paul mentioned that “every day” there “pressed” upon him an “anxiety for all the churches” (v. 28).

There are far too many church members who care little for the condition of their larger brotherhood of Christ. When so many congregations are progressively slipping into modes of digression with innovations in worship and a reconstruction of the plan of salvation, more of us should be anxious for the cause of our Lord. The ostrich syndrome (bury your head in the sand) is not biblical.

Finally, there is the sentiment of sweetness. Peter admonishes that we are to “cast our worries” on God who “has concern” (melei – present tense) for us (1 Peter 5:7). Or as another has said: “Cast your burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain you” (Psalm 55:22). Our prayer should be: “O God, help us with these heavy loads!”