



SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

FINDING PEACE

Letting Go of Stress and Worry

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Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of finding peace is one of several volumes that explore **Seasons of Our Lives**. While the Scriptures remain constant, we have the opportunity to find within them a fresh message as we go through life facing various challenges. Whether the circumstances in our lives change due to our own decisions or due to the natural process of aging and maturing, we bring with us the actual lived experiences of this world to our prayerful reading of the Bible. This series provides an opportunity to acknowledge our own circumstances and to find how God continues to work in us through changing times.

Prologue

There are no easy solutions when it comes to stress. Modern life is an often-perplexing blend of things to do, decisions to make, and lists to remember. In the midst of it all, we face the daily challenges of health, relationships, and finances. From small problems to large, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, worried, and on edge.

Many things can help us cope with worry and stress, including lifestyle changes and finding ways to decrease the pressure we so often place on ourselves. Our faith also plays a key role in restoring peace in our lives. Of course, reading Scripture prayerfully—as we will do together in this book—does not “fix” stress or eliminate worry. But it can help us on our quest for peace. Scripture repeatedly reminds us of God’s abiding love for us and his desire that we find peace—and indeed joy—in our lives. This does not mean that we will never suffer or struggle, but it does mean that we have a Shepherd who carries us close to his heart.

Together we will read and reflect on three Scripture passages that will take us on a journey into peace. First, Jesus will assure us of God’s loving care and will challenge us to trust in it. Second, we will reflect on how our struggles unite us more closely with the death—and the life—of Christ. And finally, we will come to the triumphant conclusion that it is in love for others that we find the greatest peace of all.

Do Not Be Afraid



Begin by quietly asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read the passage from Luke 12 where Jesus encourages his followers not to worry.

Luke 12:22-34

²²[Jesus] said to [his] disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. ²⁴Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! ²⁵Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your lifespan? ²⁶If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? ²⁷Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. ²⁸If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown

into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? ²⁹As for you, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not worry anymore. ³⁰All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides. ³²Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”

Following a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage from the Gospel of Luke, consider the information provided in Setting the Scene. The occasional questions in the margins may be used for personal reflection or for group discussion.

What do you worry about? What are some of the sources of stress in your life?

Setting the Scene

Few Scripture passages are as comforting—or as challenging—as this excerpt from Luke’s gospel, sometimes called the “discourse on worry.” It comforts us as it declares God’s loving care for us, and it challenges us to the very core of our being, urging us to reprioritize our lives by trusting wholeheartedly in God.

As we explore this discourse on worry, it may be helpful to reflect on the broader context and

to consider Jesus' own state of mind as he speaks these words. This discourse is situated squarely in what is known as Luke's "travel narrative" (9:51–19:27). In this lengthy section of the gospel, Jesus has "resolutely determined" (9:51) to journey to Jerusalem despite the suffering that awaits him there (9:22). Along the way, Jesus preaches to large crowds and to his disciples, teaching them everything they need to know to be his disciples.

In a sense, Jesus is preparing his followers for his own death and resurrection, which will be a turning point in salvation history. Jesus is obviously resolved to face whatever awaits him in Jerusalem, yet there is genuine anxiety involved in facing death (as we clearly see in Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:39-46). Indeed, as we hear Jesus encouraging us to let go of worry and refocus our minds and hearts on God's unfailing love, we are hearing the words of a man who is facing this enormous spiritual endeavor himself.

The immediate context of the discourse on worry is also important. As Jesus preaches to the crowds, a man calls out to him: "Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me!" (12:13). Jesus has no interest in this family disagreement, but he takes the opportunity to teach about greed. He proceeds to tell the parable of the rich fool (12:16-21), a short story about a man whose land yields a remarkable harvest. Satisfied and even a bit giddy, the man makes plans to build newer, larger barns to hold the bounty. But before he can do so, he abruptly dies,



and God calls him a fool. Obsessed with himself and his own plans (his dialogue is excessively peppered with the words “I” and “my”), this man has attained earthly success but has tragically failed to secure lasting joy, happiness, or peace.

Jesus’ discourse on worry expands upon this story. Focusing on ourselves—our crops, barns, and wealth, our own plans and personal notions of success—will not bring us peace. Only a radical trust in a loving God can do that.

Luke 12:22-34 will be explored a few verses at a time to deepen your understanding and appreciation.

Understanding the Scene Itself

²²He said to [his] disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear.
²³For life is more than food and the body more than clothing.

When reflecting upon the words of Jesus in the gospels, it is always helpful to notice who he is addressing. For example, Jesus tends to speak quite differently to the Pharisees than to a weeping sinner or a desperate parent.

In this discourse, Luke tells us that Jesus is speaking “to his disciples.” This is noteworthy for several reasons. First, Jesus is not known for “going easy” on his closest followers. He sometimes seems to tire of explaining things to them (Mark 4:13) as he pushes them to understand and accept difficult, challenging teachings (Luke 9:22-23). And yet it is obvious that Jesus loves his disciples deeply. He shares with them intimate truths about God’s kingdom (Mark 4:11). He keeps them close to him in his darkest hour (Matt 26:37). He calls them “friends” (John 15:15). Here, in this discourse, Jesus is both demanding and loving. This is the stance of a master teacher with his disciples.

The fact that Jesus is speaking to his disciples is important for another reason: we too are Jesus’ disciples. When we read this text, we know that Jesus is speaking to *us*—just as immediately and intimately as he spoke to them. He will not “go easy” on us, but we do not really want him to. We want him to place the same demands on us that he placed on his first disciples. And we know that along with those demands comes his deep and abiding love. Just as they did for Jesus’ original followers, these words will help us to become better disciples.

Jesus begins his discourse with a simple directive: “do not worry.” As quickly as these words

Have you had any teachers, family members, or mentors who held you to a very high standard because they cared about you? How did their expectations and encouragement help to shape you?



bring us solace, they may also create questions and even frustration in our minds: *How are we to follow this advice? How do we stop worrying? What do we do with our anxiety?* As we read on, we will find that Jesus is indeed offering us solace, but he does so by calling us to completely

reassess our priorities. Instead of adopting the priorities of the world—the obvious preoccupations like our finances, our work, our future, our appearance, and our health (“your life and what you will eat . . . your body and what you will wear”)—Jesus is calling us to adopt the even more fulfilling priorities of discipleship (“life is *more* than food and the body *more* than clothing”).

²⁴Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds!

Jesus elaborates on his “do not worry” maxim by offering his disciples an engaging example from nature. The raven does not live as though it is concerned about the future. It does not plant or store food in order to have enough. The raven simply lives day by day, relying completely on nature’s bounty.

Jesus' reference to "storehouses" and "barns" may remind us of the parable of the rich fool that immediately precedes this discourse. The rich man exclaimed that he would build newer, bigger barns to store all of his success, and in doing so he became dependent not upon God, but solely upon himself. This is not the carefree, trusting life of the raven.

One more note about this verse. Ravens were considered unclean by Jews (Deut 14:14). In telling this story, Jesus does not choose the most beautiful or graceful bird for us to emulate. Rather, he chooses a common scavenger bird. And then he tells us that "God feeds them." In other words, we do not have to be a certain kind of person before God will take care of us. God will care for every single thing that he created, and that includes each one of us. No exceptions.

How can we strike a balance between sensibly planning for the future and excessively worrying about it?

²⁵Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your lifespan? ²⁶If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? ²⁷Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. ²⁸If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?

As Jesus continues, two rhetorical questions offer some basic common sense and help us rethink the energy we expend on worrying about the future: *Can worrying about the future add a moment to your life? Haven't you noticed that*

What is the best advice anyone ever gave you about dealing with worry or anxiety? How have you implemented it into your life?

nothing is ever fully under your control? Reflection on this candid philosophy may save us a great deal of “fretting” over things we cannot control.

Like the example of the ravens, Jesus shares another example from nature: flowers. Some translations are more specific, identifying the flowers as “lilies” (NRSV). Known for their beauty (even more beautiful than a wealthy king’s wardrobe!), lilies are also ephemeral, short-lived, like the grass that grows one day and is burned for fuel the next. Is something that lives such a short time worth God’s care? All we need to do is look upon a lily to answer in the affirmative. Jesus’ conclusion is not far behind: If God makes something that lives such a short time beautiful, won’t he care for you who are so valuable? Won’t God make your life beautiful too?

Jesus’ description of his disciples being of “little faith” actually serves as further encouragement. Our faith may be small at times—too small to place our full trust in God, too small to



hand our futures over to God, too small to completely reset our priorities as disciples—and yet our faith *does* exist. It can always grow—like a mustard seed (Luke 13:19) or a pinch of yeast (Luke 13:21)—into something much greater.

²⁹As for you, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not worry anymore. ³⁰All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides. ³²Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.

Verse 29 is almost incomprehensible when read by itself. Jesus is advising his disciples against two very typical human behaviors: focusing on food and drink (i.e., physical survival) and worrying. How could we possibly stop doing either of these things? Verse 30 sheds light on this question. First, Jesus points out that the “nations of the world” (or the Gentiles, those who are not in relationship with God) are focused on material things, implying that those who know God should know better. Second, Jesus tells us that the reason we do not need to worry is because *God already knows we need these things*. And if God already knows, we can rest assured that he will provide for us what we need, much as he cares for the ravens and the lilies.

Because God already knows our needs and will provide for us, we can focus our time and energy on other things. Jesus urges us to focus

The Greek verb that is translated as “worry” in verse 29 is *meteorizō*, which literally means “to hang in the air.” What does worrying feel like to you? Why is it so destructive?

Jesus says that God will provide for our needs. But there are many people in this world who do not have what they need. How might we pray and think about this? Do we have a role to play?

The message “do not be afraid” or “do not fear” is a common refrain in Scripture (e.g., Gen 15:1; Acts 18:9). Why do you think God repeats these words to us so many times?

on the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the healing, saving, transforming presence of God in the world, especially present in the ministry and person of Jesus. This focus on the kingdom of God is what discipleship is all about. It requires an enormous amount of trust and surrender, a total shift in perspective, an intimate relationship with God. This intimate relationship with God is ultimately what allows us to follow Jesus’ advice—to stop worrying (v. 29), to not be afraid (v. 32). According to Jesus, those who know God are as free as the birds.

Jesus’ reference to his disciples as “little flock” is a comforting detail. In Jesus’ time, his audience may have heard beautiful echoes of the prophet Ezekiel (“I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest. . . . The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal”; 34:15-16) or the psalms (“The LORD is my shepherd; / there is nothing I lack. / In green pastures he makes me lie down; / to still waters he leads me; / he restores my soul”; 23:1-2). The refrain echoes once again: *God loves us; he will care for us.*

³³Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”

The final words of Jesus’ discourse urge the disciples one step further. Not only should they not *worry* about what they will eat, drink, and

wear, but they should actually sell what they *do* have and give to the poor! What Jesus asks is difficult, but it is meant to bring total freedom and absolute peace. The more we clutter our lives with things, with complications, with burdens, the more stressed and anxious we become. But



when we are able to hear and understand the words of Jesus, when we let go of unnecessary attachments, release our burdens, and restore our hearts in God's love, then we will be free.

A final note of realism emerges in these last verses of the discourse on worry. Jesus' reference to "inexhaustible treasure in heaven" that cannot be destroyed by the ups and downs of human life reminds us that for now, loss and pain are part of our earthly reality. Jesus himself will walk on to Jerusalem, where he will be verbally assaulted, physically tortured, and violently killed. Clearly, trust in God's care and providence does not mean that bad things will never happen to us. It does not mean that we will never go without or that we will never be in pain. But the radical dependence on God that Jesus encourages us to embrace means that *we will always be with the God whose kingdom, whose love, already surrounds us*. Like Jesus himself, no matter what we experience, no matter what we lose, our treasure is in that which

How do you reconcile the belief that God will care for us with the reality that bad things still happen to us? How can the example of Jesus' death (and resurrection) help us understand this?

can never be stolen or destroyed—God’s inexhaustible love for us.

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Stress was clearly an issue in Jesus’ day just as it is in ours. In the passage below, Jesus encourages one of his friends to let go of her anxiety and worry. Ponder the story. Then say the prayer provided, or offer a heartfelt prayer of your own.

As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary [who] sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me.” The Lord said to her in reply, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

Lord Jesus, your friends Martha and Mary both loved you. Martha wanted to express her love by serving, and perhaps at times she did so with joy. But on this day, she was burdened, anxious, and worried.

Mary sat with you, listening, at peace. This was “the better part”—to focus on you, your voice, and your words. This was the “one thing” that was needed that day.

Gently teach me, Lord, to sit, to listen, to let go of my burdens, to set aside the many things that make me anxious and worried. May I too find peace listening to your voice, focused on you as you speak into my heart: “Do not be afraid.”

Living the Word

The beginnings of worry are not necessarily destructive. Sometimes worry and stress can motivate us to make a needed change or are natural expressions of our concern and affection for loved ones. But when worry gains momentum and cripples us, it can be spiritually and even physically draining.

This week, try to make a conscious effort to identify any worries you have and intentionally respond to each one with a simple action or a prayer of trust.

Examples of taking action in response to stress:

- *Reach out to someone you have been worried about.*
- *Spend time with a friend or loved one.*
- *Have that difficult talk with your boss, spouse, or friend, and clear the air.*
- *Help someone who needs you in a concrete way.*
- *Apologize or accept an apology.*
- *Change your lifestyle in some small way to benefit your health.*

Examples of prayers in response to stress:

- *“I can’t. You must. I’m yours. Show me the way.” (St. Óscar Romero)*
- *“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” (Serenity Prayer)*

At times, we may need help processing our anxieties so we can restore peace in our lives. If you feel that your worry, stress, or anxiety is interfering with your daily life and happiness, resolve to seek help with a counselor or mental health professional who can help you process deeply rooted anxiety or debilitating patterns of stress and worry.