

# Panic and the Personal God



by PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

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Have you ever stood on a rock in the middle of the ocean—no boat in sight, no shoreline—just water and waves and danger? I used to do this every day when I commuted to work. Well, not literally. I was driving on a road, of course. But the drive made me *feel* as though I was on a rock with the waves threatening to overwhelm me. It wasn't the drive so much that bothered me. It was leaving home, leaving my place of comfort and stability. It felt so discomfoting, so dangerous to leave home behind. Every day as I made the trip, panic paralyzed me. I was convinced that I was going to die, afraid I would forget how to breathe. I felt completely unguarded and vulnerable, and everything around me posed a threat.

What made matters worse was that anywhere I looked for comfort, I found none. It was all water and waves. Leaving home was easier when I was with other people, but I had to travel by myself sometimes. When I did, the world around me seemed chaotic, coldly whispering that I was completely and utterly alone. And I believed it. But was I really alone? I could look around and see trees, fences, deer, pavement, sky, birds, other cars and drivers. I wasn't actually alone. But these things in my environment all felt impersonal. They couldn't reassure me or help me feel less alone. At least, that's what I used to believe.

During this difficult season of my life, the Spirit of God comforted me by enlivening this biblical truth I had learned from one of my favorite theologians, Cornelius Van Til:

Our surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God.<sup>1</sup>

It's difficult to immediately grasp Van Til's meaning. Or at least it was difficult for me. Had you quoted this to me before my anxiety-ridden morning commute, I would have sarcastically thanked you for handing me a frozen abstraction.

Rich theological statements like these can seem meaningless when you are going through a hard time. They often need to be "thawed out" before we can use them, and it can take a while to remove the chill. In fact, it took much practice in my case. But over time, I was able to see how this particular truth *is* comforting to someone who is anxious. I learned to see that the world that I feared so much when I was driving was anything but cold and impersonal. And as I came to know God's comfort, it soothed my feelings of panic.

So what did Van Til mean? It's really quite simple. He means all created things express God's personality. And by putting himself into what he has made, he has also been personal with us. In other words, all that he made for us bears his personal touch. This is not surprising given the personal nature of who he is. The triune God is himself the warm and bright hearth of personal communion. The three persons of the Trinity ceaselessly communicate—speak—with one another. The Father shows the Son all that he does (John 5:20). The Son obeys the Father's commands to perfection, just as he instructs us to do (John 14:15, 21, 23). And the Holy Spirit is so united to the Son that both Paul and Peter refer to the Spirit as the Spirit *of Christ* (Rom 8:9; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Pet 1:11). They are *that* close, completely united in mission and purpose. Indeed, our God is inherently personal. Each person is committed to the others in love, in service, in active cooperation. Long before creation came into existence, the eternal life of God was deeply *personal* and always involved speech.

This personal, speaking God then created all of reality with his words. In Genesis 1, every time we read "And God said . . ." another part of the world buds into being. He starts with the light. God opens his mouth, utters a word, and darkness flees to the outer rim of the cosmos. A few verses later we read of the creation of the stars, sun, and moon. Now, ask yourself, if the light is the effect of God's speech, can we truly say that it is impersonal? What about the mountains and the plains, the lilies and the laurels, the goose and the grouse—can they be fundamentally impersonal if they are the products of the speech of a personal God? No. Speech is personal, so creation is personal.

When I wake up in the morning and look outside my kitchen window, I am

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith, vol. 2, A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1969), 78.

seeing a world spoken into being by a deeply personal God. I often think about the silver maple tree on the side of our house, the one whose lower branches I pruned, leaving deep brown scars where limbs used to grow (I still feel guilty about it). Do you know why that tree is there? God spoke. That tree is the physical product of his holy triune language. Just as when we sign our names, we mark the world with our presence, so when God speaks creation into existence, he marks it with his presence. That tree is an echo of God's voice. It is his verbal signature.

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In light of this, I can say that my Father and his Son (my older brother) and the Spirit who indwells me did not create the world cold and removed; rather, every atom and molecule is steeped in an ancient and holy conversation. In fact, because he spoke it into being, the world “speaks” back to him. Trees clap their hands at the wonder of God (Ps 148:9; Ps 96:12), and the mountains and hills “burst into song” (Isa 55:12). The sky proclaims his handiwork (Ps 19:1). We live in a world that simply cannot be muted because the personal God spoke it into existence. And now the creation itself pours forth its own testimony of the greatness of the personal God (Ps 19:2).

If all creation is the product of a personal God's speech, and if all creation bears witness to him and gives him praise, then we can see where Van Til was headed when he said that “our surroundings are shot through with personality.” When I pick up a stone, is it just a stone—an impersonal gathering of elements? Certainly, it is inanimate and, in that sense, impersonal. But in another sense, a deeper sense, it *is* personal because it reflects its maker: the personal, speaking God.

Consider this story from the New Testament. When the Pharisees scold Jesus' disciples for shouting royal salutations, Jesus said, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). The stones may not have shouted “Hosanna,” but they were there as witnesses to Jesus, to the very Word that brought them into being.

There is a problem, however. Unlike the stones, we don't always recognize God's presence in creation. This explains why I felt like everything was only water and waves on my morning commute. Even though we are personal beings who were made by a personal God and live in God's personal world, our sin blinds and deafens us. It alienates us and makes us feel like the world is cold and

menacing. We need the Spirit to remove the scales from our eyes, to unstop our ears, to loosen our tongues, to help us recognize that every part of the world is marked by the presence of a personal God.

But thank God: he spoke again! In Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—God overcame sin and reconciled the world to himself (Col 1:20), by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3; 1 Cor 6:11). And it is by this restoration that we come to recognize how all his creation is personal. Standing on a rock in the middle of the ocean, then, is not a reality; it is an illusion, one that I had to dispel by faith.

I had to rethink everything I saw on my morning drive—the half-broken split-rail fence hemming in an unkempt field, the oak and maple trees hanging heavy in the morning mist, the stoplights and the street signs, even the pavement. All are comprised of molecules and minerals created by God. And all these things are intrinsically personal because they were made and are sustained by the tripersonal God of the Bible.

God never leaves us with only water and waves. When anxiety and panic creep into your mind and heart, remember that God speaks to you...*everywhere*. Look around. Every fiber of creation is a gift personally designed by God for his children. A rock, a window, a car, a couch cushion—they all exist because of the God who knows your name. The whole world is filled with objects that point back to him. That God, *your* God, is everywhere, personally present in what he has made.

That means *he is with you and me*, even when we feel as if we are by ourselves. And he is with us not just through the things that he has made. He also communicates to us in Scripture and he invites us to communicate with him in prayer. Not surprisingly then, Scripture and prayer are two profound weapons we have against panic and anxiety. Think about prayer first.

Christians pray directly to the one who is upholding the world around us by the word of his power (Heb 1:3). Because all of reality is marked by God's presence, and because we are speaking creatures made in the image of a speaking God, it makes perfect sense to draw these truths together and pray prayers that help slow our racing hearts and rein in our wild minds. Here's an example of the kind of prayer I used to pray when panic seemed to take hold of me. I would pray slowly, out loud, sometimes taking a deep breath before each line. I would repeat the prayer until I could hear my heartbeat begin to settle.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

You are here. You are present. You are with me.

My heart races and my mind is wild.

The devil is telling me I am on my own—that I am helpless and stranded.

He is lying.  
 You are true. You have spoken and speak.  
 I see the evidence of that all around me.  
 Speak to me now.  
 Father, tell me about Christ.  
 Christ, give me your mind.  
 Spirit, comfort me with your peace.  
 You are here. You are present. You are with me.  
 I am never alone.

Whenever you are walking (or driving) the long and lonely road of anxiety, pray this prayer or something similar. Use your God-given ability to speak in order to commune with the God who speaks—the God who spoke the reality that surrounds you. If that doesn't work—if you still feel paralyzed—it's okay. God does not leave us to ourselves. He will be there to help and strengthen you against the devil's assaults in the future. Because of Christ, God's Word spoken into the flesh for our redemption, there is nothing that does not work toward the devil's defeat, toward a day when panic and anxiety evaporate and are seen for the illusions that they are.

Then, as a necessary supplement to prayer, always keep a Bible with you. Carry around God's speech, and immerse yourself in it. It was written for you, so that you would know him. Read it. Devour it. God wants you to store up his word in your heart (Ps 119:11), so do this. Memorize brief passages of Scripture that help in these situations. Psalm 131 and Philippians 4:4–7 are prime candidates, but there are countless other passages. Psalm 19 will help you remember God is in his creation. The point is to memorize and recite a passage during moments of panic. Wrestle it into your heart. Look *through* the Word to see the world. The Spirit will begin to show you how the world around you is steeped in God's presence.

I still face anxiety and panic sometimes, though I've gotten much better over the years (that's right: it takes years). By God's grace, I am now able to look at the past for hope in the future. Though I used to be terrified to drive thirty minutes to work, two years ago I did something much harder. I took a train into Philadelphia for jury duty—by myself! I came home and told my wife, “Can you believe I did that! I took a train by myself to a city full of strangers—and I was okay!” She was ecstatic. Those victory stories are always good to remember when you face another bout of anxiety. We will always have something we can worry about, something that can paralyze us with panic. But we also have a speaking God who is always present with us.

As it turns out, what seemed to be a cold theological abstraction from a Dutch apologist ended up bringing great comfort to me. Our world is truly “shot through”

with God's personality. You and I are never standing on a rock in the middle of the ocean. We are never parted from the ever-present personal God of Scripture.

So take note of this truth in your daily routine. Tomorrow morning, when you turn your face into the cotton sheets on your mattress, do not simply notice your bedding from the Martha Stewart Collection. You are looking at the woven cloth that came from the cotton seed, that came from the field, that was watered by the Father (Lev 26:4), spoken into existence by the Word, and given life through the Spirit (Gen 2:7; Acts 17:25; 1 Cor 3:6). The ever-present Trinitarian God is *that* close to you. Even when you feel isolated and distant from everything and everyone, you are not apart from your Father, your mediator, and your comforter. He shows his handiwork everywhere in the world, to remind you that he is "with you always" (Matt 28:20). There is nothing you can find in God's spoken world that is outside the personal plan he has for you—a plan that is meant to bless you and give you peace (Num 6:24–26).

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