



STILL, SILENT, AND STRONG

Meditations for the Anxious Heart

VOLUME 1

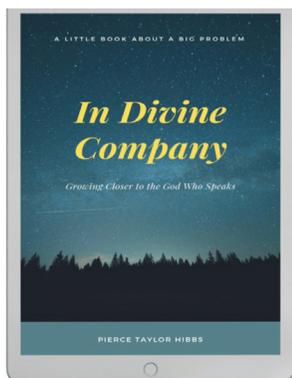
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by

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

STILL, SILENT, AND STRONG
Meditations for the Anxious Heart, Volume 1

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*For the Holy Spirit, who battles my anxiety with me as the constant Comforter.
Thank you for never leaving me as I am.*

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Introduction

Anxiety. It breaks over us, like rapids shouldering into sediment on a river bed. The constant pressure weathers, grinds, and rubs at the soul. We feel ourselves dissolve into the swirling chaos—that throat-tightening fear that we’ve lost all control, that the white water will win the day.

Some of us remember being thick and strong and dense. We remember the days of stone, when we were almost impervious to the rapids. We offered our back to the rapids and kept soldiering down stream.

But things change. For whatever reason, anxiety has grown stronger. The current keeps coming harder . . . and it doesn’t let up. When . . . *when* will the waters settle?

In *Struck Down but Not Destroyed*, I wrote about how we can learn to embrace anxiety as a spiritual tool in the hands of God.¹ Those raging rapids don’t feel good, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t serving a divinely governed purpose. Our souls, you see, are clay. They were made to be malleable. So, we *should* feel like sediment sometimes. We are made and sustained by a God who loves us enough to not leave us to ourselves. But many of us are in the habit of climbing out of the river and drying in the sun. We ossify as we sit out in the heat of a sinful world. We stop listening to God’s voice, and then we stop searching for it. Before long, we’ve hardened into

1 Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety* (Independently published: Amazon Digital Services, 2020).

something that doesn't resemble the Son of God at all. And that was the whole point to begin with—to be shaped to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29).

If we're honest, we'd rather be mighty than malleable. We'd rather be stable than Son-shaped. But God does leave us dried out on the shore. We are the dirt that he breathed into (Gen. 2:7; Job 33:4). And so he will use things like anxiety to turn us back into wet clay.

In this volume of devotions (and those, God willing, that will follow), I hope to do nothing more than pour a little water on you . . . one trickle of words at a time. God will do the shaping, as he always does. He's the soul-artist. But he uses people in the body of Christ to do his bidding. It may be that you need a cup of water not because you're thirsty and tired but because you're settled and stiff (Matt. 10:42). I pray that the water works.

As someone who's struggled with an anxiety disorder for well over a decade, I know where you are, or at least where you can be. I know that your mind often feels crazed, loud, and weak all at the same time. I am living proof that, in Christ, and by the power of God's own Spirit, you can feel still, silent, and strong again. These feelings, however, are not the end-goal; Christ-conformity is. So while I hope your mind will feel still, silent, and strong, I hope even more that you will more clearly develop the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). Here's to water and words.

– PTH

1

The Peace of Presence

WORDS OF GOD

¹¹ I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. ¹² And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. ¹³ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. (Leviticus 26:11–13)

Meditation

Presence. That's what we've always wanted. Tangible, purpose-giving, soul-beckoning presence . . . a presence assuring us that we're set in the right place, that our roots are gripping good earth, that we're growing strong and straight towards something greater than ourselves—the *presence of God*.

But anxiety lives in the absence, in the isolation, in the disconcerting sense that there's nothing and no one who can help us when fear points a pistol at our chest. That fear—of loneliness and helplessness—is ultimately a fear of isolation, often mingled with the potent thought that we have no control over what's happening. And truth be told, that fear doesn't always dissipate just because

we're familiar with it. A panic attack feels just as raw and real the hundredth time as it does the second, doesn't it? It still turns the blood in our veins to ice and the confidence in our heads to vapor.

This fear that bolsters our anxiety isn't new; it's ancient. It hung around the hearts of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. It weathered them with every step. Was the invisible God *really* with them? Was he *present*?

The answer is deeper than a "yes." Sure, God is omnipresent. He's our environment for existing (Acts 17:28). There's no place where he is not. And yet, a relationship between him and us is distinct from the bare confession of God's presence. It's a relationship grounded on a word less frequently uttered these days: *holiness*. Central to the meaning of that word is the idea of being set apart. As two authors put it, "God's holiness means that *he is set apart by his glory, for his glory*."² God is set apart simply by being who he is ("by his glory"), and the purpose of that setting apart is his own glory and beauty ("for his glory"). Our holiness is imitative. Like toddlers mimicking their parents, we mimic the holiness of God for the sake of his glory (Lev. 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:16).

This holy God, set apart by and for his own glory, is the God who shepherded the Israelites through the whipping winds of the wilderness. This is the God who spoke to Moses and laid out all of the regulations for how the people were to live and offer sacrifices and cleanse themselves (that is, how they were to be *holy*). And at the end of Leviticus, we read the words of promise that opened this chapter: 26:11–13.

² Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 569.

¹¹ I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you.

¹² And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. ¹³ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

There it is: the precious jewel of *presence*, the ancient longing of the human heart—plain as paper, but greater than gold. God will build a house in their midst, and he won't look upon them with disgust or scorn. Even more than this, he will “walk among” them. He'll rub shoulders with humanity! And as if that weren't wild enough, he closes the circle by taking the last relational step: claiming ownership. They will be *his*, and he will be *theirs*.

“the precious jewel of presence, the ancient longing of the human heart—plain as paper, but greater than gold.”

In the depths of who you are, with all of your experiences and longings and hopes, as far back as you can remember, is this not what you want? Is this not what you've *always* wanted? Stop reading and close your eyes. Say the word out loud.

Presence.

Presence.

Presence.

Dwelling, relationship, ownership—with the God who breathed out the stars! To *be* set apart with the one who *is* set apart? Surely, if this is possible, nothing could stand in the way of our hope and resilience, not even a thousand panic attacks. This is why we are

here. This is why we are breathing. *This* is why.

But it doesn't stop there. Did you notice that? God follows promise with history, the future with the past. He rehearses what he has done to help us believe in what he will do. In this case, he reminds the Israelites of their newfound freedom. They were slaves once. No longer. They were foreigners once. No longer. They walked low under the load of their oppressors. No longer.

God has been their bar-breaker. He has bent their backs the other way, raising up their shoulders. They now stand taller, unburdened and unbound.

We're a long way from the desert-trudging Israelites. And they were a long way from Christ, so it seemed. But when we look closer, the Christ we know and love and worship is right there. They wanted God to dwell among them, a longing for a tabernacling Lord who would share in their settlement (John 1:14). They wanted a freedom-giving savior, a bar-breaker of the highest order (Gal. 5:1). They wanted *Christ*. They wanted the very Spirit of God as their constant company and comfort (John 14:26). They longed for the same things that we long for, and God gave them those things in a shadow form, anticipating what was to come.

But we *have* Christ and the Spirit. We have the whole God-head indwelling us right now (John 14:23; Rom. 8:9). We have our bar-breaking God living on the inside. We just keep forgetting that we can stand erect, tall, unbound. We forget that we are free. But more to our detriment, we forget that he is with us.

Why? The short answer: we're recovering from blindness to God's presence. The Apostle Paul wasn't the only one with scales in his eyes (Acts 9:18). We have them too, of a different stripe. Our scales, however, are self-imposed. Removing them is not a one-time

procedure. To get the scales off and keep them off, we require the help of God's own Spirit. And on our part, God asks us for a simple thing: *talk*. There can be no enraptured joy in God's presence without syllables in the silence. Talk, I am often reminded, is at the very heart of God's character. As one brother put it, "there is—and has been from all eternity—talk, sharing and communication in the innermost life of God. The true God is not silent; He talks."³ How can we even begin to believe in his presence without talk, without intentional, personal communion behavior.⁴ If we will not talk, we will not treasure. If we do not utter, we cannot see.

The presence of God, my friends, is not a matter of sentiment or self-soothing; it's a matter of speech. The God who speaks is speaking to you. Right now. Can you hear it? No? Then open the pages of his voice in Scripture and start hearing. The presence of God longed for in Leviticus, perfected in the person of Christ, enunciated by the Holy Spirit—you already *have* that. God is with you at this very moment. He is inside you, around you, beyond you, and behind you. He hems you in. It does not matter if you feel it or not. What matters is that you trust it and speak.

3 Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 487.

4 I call language "communion behavior." For a simple definition, see "What Is Language? Communion Behavior," <http://piercetaylorhibbs.com/what-is-language-communion-behavior/>. For a longer discussion, see my book *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

PRAYER

God of presence,
God of *with*,
I forget you.
I don't see you.
I'm blind and deaf.
Spirit, pull down the scales.
Loosen my tongue.
Open my ears.
Bring communion.
I am faithless. Fill me with faith.
I am speechless. Fill me with speech.
I am distracted. Draw out my gaze.
Help me to stare at you,
My invisible God.

POEM FOR MEDITATION

God, you are here, still and strong.
In the silence, I speak out.
Utter peace, the ancient song,
And burn away my tired doubt.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When are you most prone to doubt God's presence?
2. In situations of anxiety and panic, what has been your response?
Describe it to a friend.

3. What is a passage of Scripture you could memorize to speak out in moments of panic, when you are most likely to doubt God's presence? (You might begin with Exodus 14:14.)
4. Be candid with yourself: Do you *really* believe that God is present in and all around you? If not, what is keeping you from believing? Dig deep.
5. Jesus left the Holy Spirit with us as our comforter. In what ways to do you seek comfort when you are anxious? Write down a prayer that you can pray, asking God to pour out his Spirit on you for comfort.
6. We need continuous dialogue with God, and when we don't have that, we doubt his presence. What is a time and place in your day when you can read Scripture and pray without interruption? Build it into your routine, and guard it fiercely.

2

The Peace of Union

WORDS OF GOD

²² Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” ²³ therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22–24)

Meditation

Expulsion. Isolation. Distance. The bitterness of being apart. It’s an ancient feeling, and one that causes great anxiety. Many of my worst moments with anxiety were crushing precisely because I felt alone and helpless. My lungs were going to stop working. I was going to forget how to breathe. And there was nothing that anyone could do about it.

That heart-thudding hyper-vigilance that makes the whole world seem as if it’s closing in around you, like giant stone curtains pushing against the perimeter of your line of vision—it comes from an evil way back in Genesis 3. There once was a garden of God, and

we were driven out of it. We were hurried out of God's presence, sent out beyond the brier and the barberry, closed off from the intimate presence of God by a green wall and a sword-wielding angel.

"So, harsh," we think. "Couldn't there have been another way, something less severe?" God's grace often comes disguised as great trouble.

"God's grace often comes disguised as great trouble."

You see, God's expulsion of Adam and Eve was really his first act of salvation. Once they had tasted the forbidden fruit, it was not just their eyes that were opened; it was their soul. And into that soul came the crushing malice of life apart from their maker, life alone, life in isolation. Had they reached out and eaten from the tree of life, they would have been eternally separated from God. Eternal isolation. Eternal distance. Eternal . . . anxiety.

God would have none of it. He sent us away so he could bring us back. He kept us from what we wanted most (eternal life) because the timing was mortally wrong. We were not who we should have been when we wanted to take from the tree of life. God would work on us first. He would make us who we should be, and then he would offer what we wanted most: life *with him*.

We shutter at the judgment of God. We cringe at his holiness, as a light too bright to bear. But our self-seeking ignorance is what really threatens us. The isolation and distance we fear most is not something that comes from without; it comes from within. It comes from our own hearts, beating with the blood of self. We are

blind to the better things of God. We don't see what he's set before us, even eternal life (Deut. 30:15–20; John 14:6). We choose the darker path for fear of God's brightness, or perhaps because we doubt that he can really exist. "Could a personal God of light really beckon us out of darkness by name?"

Yes.

Yes.

And even more than that is the breath-taking beauty of the extent to which God went to do this. He didn't just call us back to himself. He came to us in the ditch of the world. While we were dead in ourselves, dead in our blindness, lying by the roadside, our great and good Samaritan came and threw us on his donkey (Luke 10:25–37). He brought us through the harrowing night of sin, and to the house of the Holy Ghost, God's own Spirit. "Stay here," he said. "You will be safe with me." Isn't that the truth that's been burning at the center of reality since the world began? "You will be safe *with me*."

I know, my weary family, that we're tired of feeling anxious, tired of the constant fight, tired of pulling on the long bell-rope of hope, waiting for the chime to sing our freedom. I know.

But don't mistake feeling for finality or the present distance for lasting distance. God has closed the gap. We have already been carried to the house of the Spirit. We're just caught in a thousand fever-dreams as we wait for the reality of what God has done to etch itself on our souls. And it will. It will. God is the best writer. He knows how to mark us for himself. But sometimes his pen moves more slowly than we wish.

The slowness, too, is an act of grace. The waiting we have, the longing for union after so long a life of separation—that's with us because God said "no" to the tree of life when we wanted him to

say “yes.” He knew . . . “lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” Had we taken from the tree we longed for, we would have been separated without hope of reunion. We would have wandered in the dark, dazed by our blindness to eternal truth and communion with our maker. We wanted the instant life, the life of “now.” Thank God he said, “no.”

In place of an instant life of loneliness and despair, we have a life drawn out in time, like a tense rope stretching across a valley. As the days drift on, the rope grows stiff. After years have passed, we see clearly that, deep down, we want nothing more than the absence of tension, the final, immovable peace of rest, when our feeble fibers can fall into the hands of God. Time can be painful.

But our mighty God guards our eternal union with him as fiercely as military flanks guard their king. He even set a captain at the gate, with a sword of fire. Nothing will come in to take us from our eternal union with Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Keep the peace of union with God like a coin in your pocket. Reach your hand into the pockets of God’s promise, draw out the coin and stare at it in the light. Let the emblem and inscription push themselves into your eyes: “That they also may be in us” (John 17:21). That is the greatest coin the world will ever know, the only coin worth keeping. Carry it with you always.

PRAYER

God of peace,
 We left you.
 We pretended you were not there
 And wandered into the dark.

And we would have been lost forever
Had you not said, “No.”
We ache for union with you.
Our anxiety is a constant noise
We long for you to silence.
And one day you will.
One day there will be
The peace of union.
Let me carry that truth
With me as a coin
In my soul’s pocket.
You are my currency.
You are my hope.
You are my peace.

POEM FOR MEDITATION

It’s the distance between us that kills,
The gap and the gate we can’t pass through.
But your “no” is a “yes” that fulfills,
Because one day soon we will have you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When do you feel yourself most longing for the presence of God?
2. The separation we feel from God is unspeakably painful, but sometimes we don’t even feel the pain. Why do you think that is?
3. Union with God does not always take priority in our lives. Oth-

er things vie for our attention and treasure. What is something you prize right now more than peaceful union with God? Start attacking it.

4. What passages in Scripture seem to answer the curse of separation from God? In other words, which passages seem to comfort us most with the presence of God?
5. Earlier in the chapter I said, “God’s grace often comes disguised as great trouble.” Do you believe this is true? If so, what is an experience in your life that confirms it? How might this change the way we respond when bad things happen?

3

The Peace of Sanctity

WORDS OF GOD

³¹ So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the Lord. ³² And you shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you, ³³ who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 22:31–33)

Meditation

Holiness. It's hardly a synonym for peace. And yet God repeatedly emphasizes sanctity throughout the book of Leviticus, and throughout all of Scripture. In fact, one of God's punishments for the Israelites breaking the covenant with him was *panic* (Lev. 26:16). The loss of sanctity, of holiness, leads to the loss of peace.

Think about it with me. Holiness, sanctification, is really just another way of saying "right with God." God is holy, and so when we become holy, we become more like him.

Sin builds a brick wall between us and God. Every careless thought, every hint of ill-will, every word misspoken, every touch unkind—these are the bricks, baked hot in the fires of selfishness. And the mortar? That's the continuation. The more bricks come,

the more mortar amasses. The irony of it all is that we are the wall builders. We are the ones layering up stone, our own flesh and bone. God, you see, is the sanctifier. He is the wall breaker. “I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” With an ancient hammer, God walks faithfully up and down our wall on a daily basis, breaking through the stone, letting the light of himself onto the other side.

“With an ancient hammer, God walks faithfully up and down our wall breaking through the stone.”

He keeps breaking. We keep building. It’s exhausting work. When are we going to lay down the spade and wash off the mortar? When will we sit down and rest? When God works.

The white flame of God’s beauty has always flickered amidst our darkness, in the shadow of our wall. When Christ came, he burned brightly for us “while we were still sinners” (Rom. 5:8). He came onto the other side of the wall. And he spoke. It’s *in* our sin that God does it all. He doesn’t wait for us to be holy before he starts healing. He sets his own feet down in the mire of our rebellion. He puts his own hands around our raging body. He lifts us up when we’re begging to go down. God never leaves us to ourselves. Never.

That’s why he adds the little relative clause after claiming his identity as sanctifier: “who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord.” God carries us with him because he bound us in relationship with himself. We rest on his shoulders, fleeing from the bolt and chain of our every Egypt because he is *our*

God, and we are *his* people. Our relationship with him is what carries us away from bondage.

This is what happened to the Israelites. And we somehow think that is more real than what happens to us each and every day. But think of it this way: The Son of God is our freedom, and he did not show up only on a starry night in the dusty town of Bethlehem. He's always been there, with the Holy Spirit. God does not have time restrictions, and he does not change. The freedom the Israelites experienced in fleeing Egypt was linked to the pure and wild freedom we all would one day have in Christ (Gal. 5:1). Their freedom from physical bondage and our freedom from spiritual bondage are wedded by the blood of Christ. What they tasted was a shadow. What we taste is the reality.

Perhaps we struggle to believe this because our taskmasters don't carry whips and wield swords. We're oppressed not by the sweat and bones of a labor lord but by the distraction and desire of lesser things. Yet our war and our sin of wall-building is the same as the Israelites'. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). The wrestle is real. The wrestle is ancient. The freedom of God is faithful *across* generations.

The peace of sanctity that we've always sought has been faithfully given by the God of grace. Even now, at this very moment, while you hold this book in your hands, God is behind your shoulders. The Spirit has his hands full of keys to every chain that the devil and his minions have wrapped around you. Your freedom is always a finger-length away because the work of Christ is final. There's no challenging it. It's still, silent, and strong.

So why don't we have this peace of sanctity, this peace that comes from being holy as God is holy? We're in process. And the process is not a mistake.⁵ God has willed to work through process and relationship. He works change in us incrementally as we surrender to him and give up the lesser passions of the world. Holiness is an exercise in minimalism. As we give away all of the distractions, passions, and yearnings that can't ever satisfy us, God fills us up with more of himself. The peace of holiness comes from parting with toys and trinkets—things that hold our attention but cannot shepherd our souls or burgeon our breath-taking relationship with the God who gives himself away.

Today, I will ask God to take what is less than himself, to clear the fog and haze of temporary pleasures with the burning light of eternity. Will you do the same?

As you make that request, understand that your anxiety—no matter where it comes from—is going to help you do this. God is going to use your anxious feelings to free your stubborn heart. The heart-palpitations and heat flashes and tingling limbs are going to burn away everything in your soul that is not the pure and holy peace of God. You will long for him more than anything else. And with that longing comes the peace of having exactly what you most desire, what you most need: God himself. Use your anxiety this day, my friend. Use it. And the peace of holiness will start creeping into your heart as vine shoots creep through the soil, striving toward the light. You will find it. Just bow your heart in patience.

5 For more on how God works through process and relationship, see chapter 10 in *Finding God in the Ordinary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

PRAYER

God, you are holy.
Your white light would blind us
If we saw it all at once.
So you give it to us
Ray by ray.
Your history of sanctifying
Is written on the pages
Of every saint
Who has called you Lord.
Write on our pages today;
Author our holiness.
Use our anxiety
To purge the dross of sin.
Set us free again.
Help us to feel the key of Christ
Put in our palms by the Spirit.

POEM FOR MEDITATION

I am bound and chained and weighted.
Holiness wrapped with rope and knot.
Burn through the binds that I've created.
Bring forth the freedom I cannot.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What seems to get in the way of your own growth in holiness? List three lesser desires or distractions that seem to draw you away from focus on Christ-likeness. Ask a brother or sister to pray that the Spirit would work in you to bring freedom.
2. Have you considered the relationship between peace and sanctity before? How does this relationship offer insight into the anxiety you deal with?
3. We often struggle to grasp and treasure the freedom we have been given in Christ. What does this struggle reveal about our faith? What might we ask for in prayer as a result?
4. Think of someone in your life who appears to be enslaved by something. Pray for that person right now. Ask that the peace of sanctity would be brought to his or her soul as the Spirit works.
5. In what ways has your anxiety been linked to your growth in holiness? Be specific and ask a fellow believer to share about this as well.
6. Focus on one area of your life that you feel needs sanctification. Write down how peace might result in that area as sanctification grows. Prayerfully come up with one concrete action you could take to start working with God to bring about that sanctification.