



*Abiding in*  
**PEACE** *through*  
**ANXIETY**

by Pierce Taylor Hibbs

Life's an ocean, not a pond. Oceans swell and rise, lower and lift. They have a thousand turning shoulders, ever grinding into the stubborn coast. Ponds, by contrast, are embraced by greenery, tucked away in depressions hugged by saplings, settled with the secrets of surrounding woods. They're still and silent and serene.

We want life to be a pond. We want it so desperately to be that way. In fact, there's a massive industry in our culture built around following others' advice on how to find a more peaceful life, a settled life, a pond life. The trouble is, despite our best efforts, we really can't sequester our souls from the pounding surf of reality. The waves keep coming.

And so it makes sense that Moses, the psalmists, and the prophets often used the imagery of a rock when referring to God (Deut. 32; Pss. 18:2, 31, 46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2-3; 42:9; 62:2;

71:3; 78:35; 89:26; cf. Matt. 7:24). And Jesus, as God, is called "the rock" by the Apostle Paul: "And all [Israelites] ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). A rock doesn't take away the churning waters; it gives you a place to stand while they churn.

It can be helpful to take this imagery with you to John's Gospel, where Jesus says, "Abide in me" (John 15:4). Abide in the rock. Why? Because life is an ocean. There are going to be swells and monsoons and hurricanes. The wind is going to keep whipping; the moon will keep pulling on the earth. Waters will rise and fall, curl and crash. But the rock is steadfast.

Life's an ocean, not a pond. In this article, my hope is to show you that anxiety can actually be a tool in God's hands, shaping you to stand more firmly on the very rock beneath you.



*The ship "Maria" in the storm 1892*  
Ivan Aivazovsky

## **Anxiety, Peace, and Shaping**

**A**nxiety is one of the areas in which people feel tossed about in the waves most powerfully. I can attest to this myself—I've long dealt with an anxiety disorder and have written a book about this to guide fellow strugglers (*Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety*). But there's more than a few of us. In fact, there are about 40 million of us in the United States alone, about 18% of the population.<sup>1</sup> And I see nothing to suggest those figures will go down. Quite the contrary, even before the global pandemic (which hasn't done much to mitigate panic), the mental health of the United States, and perhaps much of the rest of the world, was not encouraging.

What I want to get at, however, is not how we find peace in the midst of our anxiety. In fact, we already have peace because we already possess the person of peace, Christ himself. Christ is so

central to our peace of mind that Isaiah calls him "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). So many books out there on anxiety try to show us the path to peace, the way to eliminate anxiety, the way to find your pond life. But that never seems to be the central concern of the Apostle Paul, or Jesus for that matter. And why would it be? There's no point in chasing after a pond if you live in the ocean.

Now, don't misunderstand me. Peace was hugely important to Jesus, and he often referenced it. One of the most beautiful passages in John's Gospel focuses on precisely that. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). Peace is a wondrous gift that only God can give. And here's the point: he has already given it to us because he's already given us Christ.

The central concern for Paul, I've learned, isn't that we find peace, that we

go chasing after it, that we try to restore the apparent chaos in our lives. That's what the world does. The world seeks to avoid all conflict and chaos with short-term self-help methods, all the while leaving out the person that God has given us, the person who is peace.

Paul's central concern is that we are shaped to peace. That is, Paul's plea in a passage such as Romans 8:12–17 is that we be conformed to the person of Christ as heirs of his kingdom—through suffering, death, and resurrection. He says we are fellow heirs with Christ, “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17). The issue isn't finding peace; it's being shaped to peace. Or, as I read recently in Paul Miller's excellent book *J-Curve*, the issue isn't only in believing the gospel, as critical as that is; it's in becoming the gospel. It's in conforming to the person and character of Jesus Christ.

When the swells of anxiety rise, we're not told to flee, to go trudging through the wilderness in search of a pond life. Neither are we told not to feel. In my experience, there's a shameful history of Christians being condemned for feeling anxious. God never tells us not to feel. But he does tell us where to abide, where to live: in Christ. Our response to anxiety is meant to be centered on a person, the rock on whom we stand as the ocean of life throws its white-water. And

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as we stand on this person, as we abide in this rock, the Spirit starts to conform us to Christ's image. As counterintuitive as it may sound when panic and anxiety make us long to flee, standing still is what makes us become like the gospel.

### **Anxiety: Tool or Torment?**

**S**peaking from over a decade of experience with acute anxiety, I can attest that God often uses anxiety as a tool. I'll give you an example in a moment, but for now, notice the difference between anxiety as a tool and anxiety as torment.

If anxiety is a torment, we're right to want to get rid of it as fast as we can. We long for elimination. We long to feel “normal” again. That's why there are scores of books out there that talk about “getting rid of” your anxiety, or “overcoming” your anxiety, or “ending” your anxiety. The basic assumption in books like these is simple: the goal of humanity should be to eliminate torment and suffering so that you can go back to living “your best life.” Does that sound like the prosperity gospel? It should. It's a very popular and yet often undetected form of it. “The goal of humanity,” say prosperity preachers, “is to enjoy your life, to be happy. That's what God wants for you.” Treating anxiety as a torment can easily lead us to embrace a hidden form of the prosperity gospel.

So, what is the goal of humanity? According to Jesus and Paul, the goal of humanity is to become like Christ by the power of God's own Spirit. The more you progress towards your true identity, the more you will look like Christ. But here's the clincher: Christ looked like suffering unto glory. As Philippians 3 tells us, Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (3:8). And then, only after that death, came resurrection. In fact, it was precisely because of that death that resurrection came. That's why Paul says “therefore.” “Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (3:9). And Paul wants to follow in Christ's footsteps. He clings to the

righteousness of Christ, to the gospel, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (3:10–11). Do you see the goal of humanity for Paul? It’s to become like Christ in his suffering so that we can be like Christ in his resurrection.

What does that mean for our perception of anxiety? It means that anything God can use to lead us through suffering and into resurrection life is welcomed. Suffering is not torment; it’s a tool. And we don’t use tools by trying to get rid of them. The best use of a hammer is to strike a nail, not to toss it in the trash.

This is amazingly good news, even if it doesn’t sound so good at the outset. It’s good news because, like it or not, suffering on this side of paradise is the norm, not the exception. Anxiety is going to come to us, as the numbers already attest. And while there are a host of ways to address that, and while I admit much complexity in it regarding sin and our spiritual development, one thing is clear from Paul: this should not surprise us, and neither should we always seek to avoid it at all costs. In his good and wise providence, God has set out our path for Christ conformity. And that path goes through suffering, not around it.

Now we can go into suffering with a clear intention, a constant question: God, how do you want to shape me to Christ through this? That’s a very different question from the

more common one—why is this happening? We know why suffering is happening: It’s happening because we’ve chosen the path of Christ, and that path leads through suffering and into glory. We can easily waste time asking the why question, when what we really need is the how question. The how question brings hope because it points us constantly to the good and purposeful work that God is doing in us through suffering.

Paul calls us to view anxiety (and every other form of suffering) as a tool, not a torment. That doesn’t mean we won’t weep and groan. Christ did his fair share of that, especially in Gethsemane. But the weeping and groaning can now happen in the context of knowing what God’s purpose is. We know the why; we want the how. We want God to show us how he’s using the tool of anxiety.

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*The more  
you progress  
towards your  
true identity,  
the more you  
will look  
like Christ.*

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### **How Anxiety Shapes Us**

**N**aturally, then, we should be curious about just how anxiety can shape us. There are many ways, but I’ll focus on just two. Keep in mind that each of these

ways happens in the context of our abiding in Christ, of our constantly turning to him in our weakness, calling out in prayer, knowing him in his suffering. We don’t experience the tool of anxiety in isolation. Christ is with us, even in us. He knows our pain. He knows all of the attendant physical symptoms that come with anxiety—difficulty breathing and swallowing, a racing heart rate, surging heat from adrenaline, a sense of being detached from the world.

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He knows all of it. He is with us in the feelings, and we are with him. Nothing breaks that bond.

**1. Growing as a listener and observer.**

In my experience, anxiety brings out the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se*, to be “curved in on oneself.” In our anxiety, we are extremely self-aware and self-focused. We can't see or think about anything other than ourselves. Our bodies are on high alert as the fight-or-flight instinct rages in one direction (flight). And the painful truth about anxiety, pointed out by numerous writers, is that the more you focus on yourself, the worse the anxiety gets.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on others is actually a wonderful antidote. And so, in the midst of our anxiety, we can be shaped to Christ by forcing ourselves to stare at someone else, to listen to and observe those around us. I've often encountered this when I'm anxious in the car if our family is traveling. I ask my wife pointed questions about how she's doing, about how I can pray for her.

Taking the focus off of ourselves is one of the clearest ways we can conform to the person of Christ, the one in whom we abide. Christ was constantly focusing on others. And he listened to those who, in our opinion, didn't deserve his ears. I'm not just talking about the lowly and disenfranchised, the poor and the sick. I'm talking about his critics, the scribes and pharisees. How many times did Jesus listen to those who only meant him harm? Living an others-focused life in the presence of these people is truly something only the God of mercy and grace could model. Christ had every right to focus on himself and the poor treatment he

was receiving. And yet he chose to focus on and listen to others. He observed them. He truly saw them, and he listened when they spoke.

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**2. Growing as a giver.** In anxiety, we're often compelled to clench our fists, to keep the focus on what we need. Anxiety pushes us not just to frailty but to hoarding. We start looking for ways other people and other things might be given to us. We play the patient; we want to be constantly served by others. We want to take, not give. This taking mindset is what's so dangerous about living a “pond life.” Making peace and prosperity your primary aim turns you into a taker, but God is a giver. And you were made to look like him.

And Christ was the ultimate giver. In fact, we can even see this in our Trinitarian God. The Father gives the Spirit to the Son without measure (John 3:34). The Son gives himself to us in the power of the Spirit, at the will of his Father. Giving is central to who God is. Christ, as the ultimate gift for our salvation, embraced every opportunity to give himself to others. How? By giving his time, his actions, his words, even his possessions. Christ allowed his enemies to take the shirt off his back. He was constantly giving.

When we follow in his footsteps through the power of his own Spirit, even as anxiety screams at us to take, we can give. We can look for ways to give our time in prayer for others, to give our actions, to give our words, to give

our money or possessions. There are always more opportunities to give. When anxiety squeezes our soul, pushing us to clench our fists, we can open them. We can offer something to someone else. This, like listening, takes the focus off of us and puts it on someone else.

Listening and giving are just two of the ways that anxiety can shape us to the person in whom we abide. But there are plenty of other options to explore. There are as many ways to conform to Christ in our anxiety as there are personality traits of Jesus.

### Abiding in Peace

I want to end with encouragement, which is precious for anyone battling anxiety. God may be doing more through your anxiety than you could ever dream. The greatest thing that could ever happen to us is that we would better resemble—with clarity, grace, and beauty—the God who made us in his image, in the image of his Son. Though it feels terrible, anxiety isn't mere torment; it's a tool. And it's in the hands of the most skilled, most unflinching, most loving physician in the world. As we abide in Christ, as we live in him through our anxiety, God will always be faithful to shape us in love. Always. The heart of God is not merely to give us peace. He's already done that in giving us Christ. His heart is for us to be shaped to peace, as we follow in the footsteps of his Son. This is what the Christian life is all about: being formed to the fullness of Christ. As one of my favorite theologians put it, "Just as [the Holy] Spirit first sanctified Christ through suffering, perfected Him, and led Him to the highest pinnacle, so He is now committed in the same way to forming the body of Christ until it achieves its full maturity and constitutes the fulfillment, the pleroma, of Him who fulfills all in all."<sup>3</sup>

Abide in Christ, my friend. Stand still in him as your anxiety comes and goes. Don't flee. He is with you, and the Spirit will be faithful to shape you ever more beautifully to his glorious image.

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**Pierce Taylor Hibbs** (MAR, ThM, Westminster) is Associate Director for Theological Curriculum and Instruction at Westminster. He is the author of many books, including *Struck Down but Not Destroyed*, and the forthcoming *The Book of Giving*. You can read more of his work at [piercetaylorhibbs.com](http://piercetaylorhibbs.com)

<sup>1</sup> "Understanding Anxiety," Anxiety and Depression Association of America, <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Barry McDonagh, *Dare: The New Way to End Anxiety and Stop Panic Attacks* (Williamsville, NY: BMD, 2015), 76–86.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 371.