

Also by Catherine Haddow
Emotions: Mirrors of the Heart

JARS OF CLAY

*Peace for the
Anxious Soul*

Catherine Haddow

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leadership of our family.
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in Christ.
*'Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures
all things'*
(1 Corinthians 13:7, ESV)

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*'For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light
shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory
displayed in the face of Christ'*
(2 Corinthians 4:6)

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Introduction

Do you experience anxiety? I do.

And so, it seems, do many others.

Accurate figures stating the extent of anxiety are difficult to obtain. A recent government briefing paper on mental health suggested that one in six of us regularly experience mental health disorders.¹ Combined anxiety and depression are the most common of these.

However, this figure is likely to be a considerable underestimation. For every person who seeks help for anxiety, many more suffer in silence and slip the statistical net. Overall, the amount of people experiencing anxiety is increasing. In addition, and perhaps more alarmingly, the age of those experiencing anxiety is falling. Parents of children as young as four years old are now seeking medical intervention for their children's anxiety. Unsurprisingly, our mental health services are under unprecedented strain.

This problem isn't unique to the UK. The award-winning Calm app is reported to have had over 14 million downloads since its launch in 2012.² With around 40,000 new subscribers per day, it suggests sufferers worldwide are desperately seeking peace in the midst of anxiety. Additionally, most of us will have experienced

heightened anxiety during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Finding accurate statistics for those experiencing anxiety in the church is even harder. However, in recent years, many helpful Christian organisations have emerged to educate, encourage, equip and support in this area. The demand for their services suggests there is a significant level of need. In my one-to-one work with struggling believers, I would estimate that around 90% of requests for help concern anxiety.

Nevertheless, the biggest indication of the level of anxiety in the church comes from God Himself. Throughout His inspired Word, He tells us, ‘Do not fear’ (or similar expressions) hundreds of times. Our loving, heavenly Father knows how anxious His precious children will be as we navigate the complexities of life in this fallen, uncertain world. Unlike other commands He gives us in Scripture, references to anxiety always come with additional reassurance. He lovingly and mercifully reminds us that He understands, He loves us, He is near, He cares and He will help us.

As we suffer anxiety, I wonder if we struggle to connect God and His wonderful promises to our experience? The truth of being a child of God seems far removed from the stomach-lurching sensation when anxiety awakens within us. It fails to penetrate our chaotic, catastrophic thinking. It doesn’t help us stand firm when we feel an overwhelming sense of threat and vulnerability that consumes us.

In this book, I hope to draw all suffering anxiety into a deeper relationship with and dependence on God. I want to help us all to connect in faith and love to our faithful God and His glorious promises. However, to do that, we first need to understand how anxiety operates in our complex bodies, at both a physical *and* spiritual level. Part one of this book seeks to do this. Then, we can be reminded how the treasure of the gospel enters into our

struggle and alters our experience of anxiety. We can grasp anew how Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the promises fulfilled at the glorious cross of Christ, penetrate our struggles. We can cling to the hope of sanctifying change through the Holy Spirit as we turn to God in anxiety. This is what part two of the book seeks to do.

I hope that both parts together will show us that there is another, better way to contend with our anxiety. It’s the way we can:

- Understand anxiety through the lens of Scripture
- Listen to God’s voice telling us how He meets us in our anxiety
- Find peace in the midst of anxiety, not through a process but through a Person who cares: Jesus

Friday the 13th

My first memory of experiencing anxiety had such an impact on me, I can still recall it clearly.

When I was 10 years old, I had a friend named Kathryn who lived five minutes’ walk from my home. One bright, sunny summer’s day, I arrived at her house to play. Her parents had gone out for the afternoon, leaving my friend in the care of her two older sisters, aged 16 and 18. Her sisters sat down to watch a movie whilst Kathryn and I played in the corner of the lounge with our scented rubber collections. As we compared our latest additions, we started glancing at the movie. Soon, we’d abandoned the rubbers and joined her sisters on the sofa. Their token expression of concern was quickly pacified by our eager and naïve promises that we wouldn’t get scared.

We sat engrossed on the edge of our seats. The film was *Friday the 13th*, an 18-certificate, graphic and gruesome tale of a group of teenagers who are, in turn, murdered whilst campaigning to re-open an abandoned campground.

As I walked home that sunny afternoon, I felt fine. I'd viewed much of the film through my fingers (which is tricky when you are also trying to block your ears from distressing sounds) but what I had seen and heard were quickly fading. I remember feeling quite proud that I'd watched a horror movie and felt ok. I arrived home, played with my younger sister, ate our evening meal and had a bath. And then it began to get dark! As darkness set in, the more focussed the film's images became in my mind's eye. I couldn't even walk upstairs on my own and had to persuade my sister to come with me. I didn't dare tell my parents what I'd watched.

That night set the pattern for the coming months. As darkness arrived, so did my anxiety. I dreaded bedtime. Terrified, I delayed going into my bedroom. I developed a nightly routine of triple-checking in my wardrobe, behind the curtains and under my bed. Each night, I was gripped with anxiety concerning my fate.

Does this description resonate with you? The situations that make you anxious are likely different from mine. However, the terrifying, pervasive, disabling and sometimes sudden nature of anxiety is common to us all. Our loving, heavenly Father, who knows each one of us intimately, is present. He invites us to come to Him and be drawn in by His love to the security and certainty of His power and protection.

The aftermath of *Friday the 13th*

Eventually, trembling and sobbing, I would cry out each night as scenes from the film haunted me. My lovely, strong and gentle dad would come in and comfort me. He would wrap his big arms around me. As he stroked my hair, he reassured me that I was safe, that he would help and protect me. Eventually, I would drift off to sleep. The next night, this happened all over again. It took some months for my nightly anxiety to subside.

Early Learning Centre

Fast forward about 23 years and one day I found myself in a branch of the Early Learning Centre with our oldest child, Sophie, who was about three years old at the time. I had momentarily become distracted whilst looking at some books and predictably, in that moment, Sophie had wandered off. I realised she was gone and quickly began looking for her. Although I couldn't see her, she wasn't a very adventurous child, so I didn't feel too concerned. Suddenly, I heard an ear-piercing scream of 'Mummmyyyy' followed by hysterical crying. I ran towards the commotion to find her standing at the door of the shop, white as a sheet and looking terrified. A shop assistant and a few concerned-looking mums were glancing around unsure as to how best to help. I ran over to Sophie, fell on my knees in front of her and pulled her into my arms. Fear gripped her little body. As I held her, I could feel her heart pounding like crazy in her chest. I whispered in her ear, 'Sophie, it's ok. Don't be frightened, I'm here. You're safe.' She was clinging to me so tightly I thought I was being strangled. Soon, I heard her little voice snivelling, 'Mummy, I lost you.' I felt the tension leaving her body as I continued to

hold her and reassure her with my words. Ten minutes later, she was happily skipping along beside me without a care in the world.

In both of those examples, fear and anxiety had consumed me and then my daughter. It was reduced by the protective and reassuring words and presence of someone much bigger and stronger, who loved them dearly. A loving and compassionate earthly parent offers much comfort and security in times of fear and anxiety. Yet how much more does our gracious heavenly Father offer His precious children when they cling to Him in their fear?

Becoming more like little children

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, like little children, *our* anxiety was replaced with peace as we hear the reassuring words of our loving, powerful, heavenly Father? He is the Creator and Sustainer of our next breath, who draws near and speaks words of comfort: 'Do not fear, I am with you.'

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, like little children, *we* could believe with all our heart, soul and mind that He is present and close to us when we are afraid? We are *always* held securely in God's protective, everlasting arms and His Spirit dwells in our hearts, with us always in everything we face (Matthew 28:20).

Wouldn't clinging to these truths encourage us to quickly turn to Him, declaring, 'When I am afraid, I put my trust in you' (Psalm 56:3)? Then we will know a tangible sense of His peace and grace.

The good news is that as we re-orient our gaze away from our circumstances and towards Jesus, we can. Jesus enters into the midst of our troubling circumstances. Jesus is more certain than any uncertainty we experience.

As we reflect on Jesus coming to earth to be our Saviour, we see that we are chosen, beloved, adopted children of our mighty God, who spoke everything into being. He is more powerful than anything we could possibly face, real or imagined. As we gaze upon the blazing glory of the cross of Christ, we see that God loves us more fervently than even the most devoted parent. As we read God's written Word, we grow in our knowledge of who He is and what He has done, is doing and will do. We can cling to the truth of His promises that are all 'Yes!' in Christ. As we consider Jesus' life here on earth, we see that He has experienced everything we suffer. He understands and draws close to help us.

These great truths will also help if we are supporting someone in anxiety. They will shed light on how we can:

- Love them well, shining gospel truth into their struggle
- Walk alongside them in the midst of their fears
- Help them to grow in their knowledge of God by renewing their minds in Christ
- Connect their anxieties to God's promises in Scripture

My prayer is that this book will help you whether you are a sufferer or a supporter. Often, I will address all of us as I try to connect the great truths of Scripture to the experience of anxiety. As the Holy Spirit applies these gospel truths to our soul, we will increasingly know the tender touch of His grace, bringing peace into turmoil. More quickly and more eagerly, we will recognise anxiety for what it is and turn to God, being real and raw about our concerns. As we do, we will become more dependent on Him and grow closer in relationship to Him. Through our anxiety, though an unpleasant experience, we will be transformed more into the likeness of His Son as we turn to God in humble

Jars of Clay

dependence. As God's power breaks into the turmoil of anxiety, we will be enabled to live in the freedom of His love, rather than being imprisoned by the chains of anxiety.

Does that sound good to your soul? If so, read on as together we see how the treasure of the gospel is present and active in every uncertainty we face. The power and light of Christ shine through fragile and cracked jars of clay, like you and like me. Even in the midst of anxiety, we can taste and see that the Lord is good and know His peace that surpasses all understanding.

PART 1

Experiencing anxiety in everyday life

A biblical world view of emotions

Before we delve more deeply into anxiety, it is important to have a robust, biblical understanding of emotions in general because we live in an individualistic, emotions-led culture. Its philosophy is encapsulated in the narrative of so many popular songs which capture people's hearts. The signature track of *The Greatest Showman*, entitled 'This is me', and more recently Taylor Swift's 'Me!' both embrace the perceived necessity of following your heart. They, and many others, promote the celebration of individuality; following your feelings and being true to yourself is all that matters.

The world often gives precedence to feelings over facts; being true to ourselves based on how we feel is the ideology of the day. When we are consumed by powerful emotions, there is a danger that we conform far more to the world's way of thinking about emotions than God's.

To illustrate, here is a secular definition of anxiety:

Anxiety is a normal, if unpleasant, part of life, and it can affect us all in different ways and at different times. Whereas stress is something

that will come and go as the external factor causing it (be it work, relationship or money problems etc.) comes and goes, anxiety is something that can persist whether or not the cause is clear to the sufferer.

Anxiety can make a person imagine that things in their life are worse than they really are, and prevent them from confronting their fears. Often, they will think they are going mad, or that some psychological imbalance is at the heart of their woes. What is important is the recognition that anxiety is normal and exists due to a set of bodily functions that have existed in us from our cave-man days.³

This definition perhaps summarises the average person's, including many Christians' understanding of anxiety. But there are many nuanced ways it pulls us away from Scripture and God's way of understanding things. To ensure we are firmly rooted and conformed to His ways, rather than the world's ways, it is vital that we are able to discern the voice of culture from the voice of God.

Most people believe that emotions are automatic responses – perhaps to their circumstances or relationships with others – and therefore are completely unable to be controlled. Indeed, when we experience the grip of any strong emotion, it *can* feel as though we are a helpless, passive bystander – 'like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind' (James 1:6).

But as we look at emotions biblically, we see a very different picture emerging.⁴ They are *not* an automatic response triggered by external situations that we face; they are something much more. Emotions overlap body *and* soul. They are experienced as physical feelings in our body, yet also speak loudly of important aspects of our inner soul. As we consider emotions through the lens of Scripture, I will use the terms emotions and feelings interchangeably.

1. Emotions reflect our image-bearing status

Our emotions are part of us being created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). We see the vast array of God's emotions displayed throughout His Word, the Bible:

- Joy (Zephaniah 3:17)
- Compassion (Exodus 34:6)
- Hate (Proverbs 6:16)
- Jealousy (Deuteronomy 4:23–24)

We see them physically displayed by Jesus, the Living Word, 'the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus' perfect emotional life shows:

- Grief (John 11:35)
- Concern (Matthew 15:32)
- Anguish (Luke 22:44)
- Anger (Matthew 21:12)

As we experience a range of positive *and* negative emotions, we image God's emotions. However, there is an important difference we must note. God always experiences emotions perfectly. He experiences the appropriate emotion, for the right reason, to the right degree. We don't. Our emotions are fallen, so we display a *fallen* image of God's emotions.

Culturally, we tend to categorise some emotions as bad and negative, and therefore to be managed, stopped or avoided. Conversely, those emotions our culture considers to be positive and good are to be sought at all costs. However, this is not a biblical understanding. God experiences a full array of emotions, and they are *all* good and appropriate. When God hates something, is jealous or is angry, it is very different to when we experience or display those emotions – we usually do so in a godless way. Jesus