The

ANXIETY OPPORTUNITY

HOW WORRY IS THE DOORWAY TO YOUR BEST SELF

CURTIS CHANG

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The Anxiety Opportunity
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To Jody, Faith, and Ellie—
may we have grateful hearts
and be ever mindful of the needs of others.

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Preface

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I'm worried.

You'll read about more examples of my anxiety in this book, but here's one to kick things off. I'm worried that I will fail to include in these acknowledgments someone who deserves mentioning.

One of the ideas in the book is that every anxiety points to an outcome that is ultimately inevitable. That is certainly the case with this particular worry. Anxiety started affecting me as an eight-year-old and continues to be found in every aspect of my life today. If I tried to list every friend and thinker who has shaped my approach to this topic, I will certainly omit someone important.

So I shall instead restrict myself here to a narrower and more recent story—how those countless and nameless (by necessity) influences coalesced into this book.

This more specific origin story begins in the first weeks of the COVID pandemic of 2020. While I am a theologian and a former pastor, my primary vocation at that time was—and in many ways still is—in the broader secular world. I founded and run a consulting firm that serves secular nonprofits and government agencies. In that role, I lead a leadership development program that brings emerging nonprofit leaders together

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in monthly retreats. The first pandemic lockdown in our area was announced a few days before our March 2020 retreat and plunged everyone into unprecedented fear and uncertainty.

My colleague Kris Starr-Witort and I scrambled to shift the retreat format into Zoom. But it was obvious we also needed to scrap our previously planned retreat topic and address the anxious state of our leaders. With little time to prepare, I fashioned (with Kris's help) the new curriculum out of my own insights and experiences. The core content of the book took shape that day.

The tone of this book was also shaped by that origin story. From the start, I had to translate my insights—which were thoroughly permeated by biblical truths—for a secular audience. The gospel addresses the human condition, and there are few conditions more universal than anxiety. I hope this book will remain faithful to its origin and feel relevant to people from a wide range of spiritual backgrounds.

While seeking to remain accessible, this book does connect the universal experience of anxiety to a relationship with Jesus. My process of narrating this spiritual connection more explicitly took place in the context of River Church Community in San Jose, California. Many years ago, I served as the lead pastor of this church—before my pastoral career was abruptly ended by a catastrophic episode of anxiety. You will read more about this episode in the book, but the fact that I remained as a lay member of this church (a rarity for ex-pastors and their former churches) testifies to the special nature of this community.

Brad Wong, the current pastor (he's the one who succeeded me in that role and also happens to be one of my closest friends) invited me to lead his staff team through the material. I partnered with my wife, Jody (more on her below), to develop and facilitate a staff retreat that integrated more explicitly Christian spiritual practices and truths.

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After that retreat, Brad and other staff encouraged me to replicate the experience for the wider church community, since so many were struggling with worry during the first months of the COVID crisis. Since Jody and I could not personally lead dozens of live retreats, I realized that this anxiety material was converging with another effort of mine called Redeeming Babel. Before the pandemic, I had founded Redeeming Babel to develop video-based curriculum to equip Christians to engage fruitfully with the challenges and the opportunities of the secular world.

The Redeeming Babel team was indispensable in turning the retreat into The Anxiety Opportunity video course. I owe special thanks to Kris Carter (who helped me launch Redeeming Babel) and Josh Kidwell (who did the filming and postproduction work). Aryana Petrosky continues to lead promotional efforts and support the course (and now the book) in many critical ways. I'm also grateful for the expertise generously provided by our public relations consultants Heather Cirmo and Heather Douglass at Pinkston.

The final evolution from the video course to book was encouraged by Nancy French, the director of communications at Redeeming Babel. Since she herself is a *New York Times* bestselling author, I only agreed to undertake this project if she would serve as my initial editor. She was—and is—a joy to work with. Her skill, sensibilities, and enthusiasm have thoroughly influenced the book.

Nancy also helped me find my agent, Chris Park of DeFiore and Company. In turn, Chris did a fantastic job in guiding me to my publishing home at Zondervan. In my first exploratory meeting with Zondervan's publisher Webster Younce, I sensed an immediate fit. That sense was further confirmed when I started working with my assigned editor, Andy Rogers; his thoughtful input has made this book so much stronger.

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I said I could not mention everyone who shaped my thinking about anxiety, but I must make a few exceptions. I have the privilege of being close friends with several extraordinary mental health professionals: Gilles Bekaert (MFT), Dr. Marsha Wadley (EdD), and Dr. John Q. Young (MD, PhD). Over the years they've not only shared key insights with me but have also cared for me directly during various personal crises in my life.

Finally, I come to the person in my life who has contributed the most to this book—my wife, Jody. At this point, my propensity for worry takes the form of the question, "How can I possibly describe how much she has meant?" As mentioned, she was my partner in the development of this content from early in the process. In every subsequent stage from retreat to course to book, she has read countless drafts, given invaluable feedback, and supplied needed encouragement. She's wise, candid, and caring. An author can ask for no better an editor; a husband can ask for no more loving a wife. This book is dedicated to her, and the many ways we are truly "better together."

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CHAPTER 1

A Surprising Opportunity

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I was a latchkey kid.

If you didn't grow up in the 1970s, you may not be familiar with this phrase describing a child who comes home from school before parents return from work. Parents gave their kids a key with the expectation they could take care of themselves until dinner. I did just that starting at age eight—I walked home from my suburban Chicago school and let myself into our red brick house on Harvard Terrace.

At least that's what I was supposed to do. What I actually did was worry. My anxiety started when I unlocked the door. I had two older sisters, but my school let out before theirs. So I always entered the empty house alone with a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. I could never shake the scenario that someone could have broken into the house and would be lurking inside. How could I know that it hadn't occurred?

I waited by myself until one of my sisters came home. We had one of those old houses that made creaky sounds at odd moments. Occasionally, I heard what sounded like a step from

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the attic, and my heart started racing. I sometimes even rushed outside and sat in the front yard until a sister came home. When they asked me what I was doing outside, I shrugged. "I just wanted to play in the yard."

I felt better once my sisters were home. But as the afternoon approached evening, and we awaited the return of our parents, my anxiety would reignite. I worried that something bad would happen to my parents on their way back home.

I concocted a pretty clever plan to help me deal with these fears. My dad generally picked up my mom from the downtown bank where she worked until around 5:00 p.m., so every afternoon at 5:30, I called my mom's office.

"May I speak to Johanna Chang?"

"She's left for the day." My mom's coworker's voice was helpful and cheery.

"Oh, do you know what time she left?" I tried to make it sound casual, to hide the concern gurgling in my stomach. This was back in the day when bank workers would physically clock out on a machine, so her coworker would check the time on the machine and tell me when she had left.

Armed with her precise departure time, I calculated when my parents should arrive at home down to the minute. It was easy math. The commute averaged sixty-five minutes, and normally they arrived like clockwork. But if that anticipated arrival time passed, my anxiety would mount moment by moment until their white Buick LeSabre rolled into the driveway.

One day, a massive snowstorm hit Chicago, and the normal arrival deadline came and went. Then another hour and another.

This was before the cell phone era, so my parents couldn't alert me of the delay. I paced by the window, watching friends play in the snow. My parents were never going to arrive. Images of the three Chang children foraging for food filled my mind.

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Who would we live with if they never showed up? My neighbors? I prayed we wouldn't have to end up with the crabby lady in her bathrobe across the street who smoked Marlboro Reds on her porch.

But my parents did finally pull into the driveway. They had survived for me to worry about them another day. And the day after that.

I never told my parents about this elaborate routine. In my eight-year-old brain, I sensed I shouldn't be calling Mom's coworkers and checking up on her. I sensed I shouldn't even be feeling this way.

One day, I called her office at 5:30 as usual, but—instead of a coworker—my mom answered the phone.

I panicked.

To cover myself, I pretended to be a bank customer. I don't remember exactly what I said. Since I was only in the second grade, my mind probably went to the bank commercials that aired during Cubs baseball broadcasts.

"So I'm just checking on what interest rates look like today," I might've said. "Maybe do a refi on the mortgage."

Mom played along—I'm sure she was trying to figure out what I was doing—and we talked for a few minutes. Finally, I ran out of things to say. "Well, uh, thank you, Mrs. Chang. I need to go now." But I still had a nagging question. "By the way, when are you leaving for home today?"

My scheme was blown.

She stormed into the house sixty-eight minutes later. Not that I was counting.

"So you thought it would be funny to fool your mom, did you?" She assumed I was pranking her and being disrespectful.

I looked at my shoes and nodded in silence.

She punished me for lying, and I accepted the punishment

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without protest. I could not bring myself to explain to her what was going on inside. I never told her. Perhaps at some level, I didn't recognize the depth of the anxiety that was driving me. Or I didn't have the words to express it. Or perhaps, at a deeper level, I did recognize I was anxious but was too ashamed to admit it.

As I grew older, I developed much more sophisticated coping schemes. I evolved into what some psychologists call "high-functioning anxiety," which involves practices driven by anxiety that help you be successful in the world.

I became adept at staying on top of tasks, thinking several steps ahead, anticipating issues, coming up with fallback plans quickly. I excelled at school, got into Harvard, and graduated with honors. Only in retrospect have I realized how much my success was driven by this anxiety. I thought I was simply successful.

Coping schemes for anxiety run the risk of eventually getting blown.

But like my "call the bank" ruse, coping schemes for anxiety run the risk of eventually getting blown.

In my late thirties, I replaced the founding pastor of a large church in Silicon Valley and became senior pastor. I suddenly faced the pressure of preaching regularly and leading the church through a rocky season. Turns out, it is difficult to replace a founding pastor. Then the dot-com bust hit, the church hemorrhaged members, and we had to lay off staff.

None of my high-functioning anxiety practices could stem the sense of mounting failure. I felt I was in way over my head because I was.

For two weeks straight, I couldn't fall asleep. I may have had microsleep, where I went into sleep mode for a few minutes in the technical sense, but I don't remember falling truly asleep during that entire period.

I had panic attacks at inexplicable moments. For example,

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my wife, Jody, and I took our two young daughters to a Halloween pumpkin patch—a pumpkin patch for toddlers, mind you; not one of those haunted houses for teens. Yet in the parking lot, I started to hyperventilate. The thought of entering the pumpkin patch was overwhelming. The world was closing in, and I was suffocating.

"Can you take the girls into the play area by yourself?" I muttered the words to Jody with a grimace and closed eyes.

"What's wrong with Daddy?" My daughters exchanged worried glances. I couldn't even find the breath or the words to answer. I remained in the car, gasping, alone . . . and ashamed.

Eventually, the anxiety slid over into depression, which can happen with severe and prolonged anxiety. My depression was so dark that it disabled me from doing even very basic tasks. I took a lengthy medical leave from my pastoral role, sowing confusion in the congregation. I could barely function as a parent. Jody shouldered the load for practically everything, from handling the girls' bedtime routines to shopping for groceries to paying the bills.

The experience was devastating. It ultimately ended my career as a church pastor. Could I ever work again at any job? If I couldn't even take my own children through a pumpkin patch, what in the world could I do for the rest of my life? The fear—and the shame—overwhelmed me.

I share all of this to say, *I know anxiety*. I know firsthand the suffering involved. While anxiety of any sort feels terrible, even functional anxiety doesn't feel good. In large doses, anxiety can cause immense damage, as it did in my life. Anxiety is not a good thing. And yet, there is more to the story.

Anxiety: A Short History

The American Psychological Association defines anxiety as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts,

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and physical changes like increased blood pressure." Anxious people may have "recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness, or a rapid heartbeat."[1]

This condition has affected everyone since the beginning of time. In classical antiquity, Greek and Roman physicians and philosophers classified anxiety as a medical disorder. Ancient Epicurean and Stoic philosophers advised people on how to achieve victory over their anxieties.[2]

In subsequent eras, anxiety would be reported under different names. For example, Nitsuh Abebe reports that doctors in the nineteenth century described a nervous condition called "neurasthenia," thought to be caused by the accelerating pace of industrialization. Its symptoms included fatigue, worries, and irritability. Abebe quotes Andrea Tone, author of a book called *The Age of Anxiety*, as saying that this condition "was regarded . . . as the price Americans paid for their stunning success." The psychologist William James began calling it "Americanitis."[3]

In 1895, Freud wrote about "anxiety-neurosis," which occurred when fear attached itself to any idea. He wrote, "A woman who suffers from anxious expectation will imagine every time her husband coughs, when he has a cold, that he is going to have influenzal pneumonia, and will at once see his funeral in her mind's eye."[4]

In 1947, W. H. Auden captured the spirit of his time in his long poem titled "The Age of Anxiety," which won a Pulitzer Prize.[5]

In 1955, a muscle relaxer called Miltown became a popular anxiety antidote in Hollywood and New York, where martinis were served, garnished with Miltown pills. Lucille Ball, Tennessee Williams, and Norman Mailer bragged about consuming the new

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drug nicknamed "Executive Excedrin." Bob Hope dubbed it the "I don't care" pill. Tiffany & Co. sold jeweled pill cases so women could carry them in style.[6]

In the 1960s, Valium became the tranquilizer of choice, and anxiety—and its medicinal coping mechanisms—became a staple of songs. A 1966 Rolling Stones song called "Mother's Little Helper" dealt with the popularity of prescription tranquilizers among housewives. "Mother needs something today to calm her down," they sang. "And though she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill."[7]

When Xanax became the stylish way to fight anxieties, musicians sang about that too. In 2004, U2 released a song called "Xanax and Wine." In 2007, Lil Wayne rapped, "I am a prisoner locked up behind Xanax bars."[8] In 2012, Whitney Houston reportedly died from Xanax (in a deadly cocktail of three sedatives that also included Ativan and Valium).[9] In 2013, Jason Isbell sang about his friend who took enough Klonopin—yet another medicine designed to help ease anxieties—to "kill a man twice his size."[10] Even more recently, Billie Eilish sang a song about Xanax abuse among her and her teen friends—a song titled "xanny"—in which she said that taking the pills caused a mental confusion that made them "too intoxicated to be scared."[11]

In recent years, all kinds of new terms emerged in the national discourse—terms such as racial anxiety, climate change anxiety, and election anxiety. As writer Matt Haig tweeted, it was difficult to tell "where your anxiety disorder ends and where actual news begins."[12] In the era of smartphones, *doomscrolling* entered the vocabulary to describe how we can get addicted to consuming information that makes us feel worried. We can't seem to stop ourselves from feeding our anxiety.

Anxiety has become the most common mental illness in the United States. In 2018, 63 percent of American college students

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reported overwhelming anxiety,[13] and COVID-19 made it worse. One study revealed depression globally rose 28 percent above pre-pandemic levels.[14] Some seek help through their churches, but "only 30 percent of pastors feel well-equipped to help congregants deal with matters of mental or emotional health."[15] Only 36.9 percent of those afflicted with anxiety seek assistance through medication or professionals, which means the vast majority are isolated and confused.[16] Many mental health experts believe we will be living with elevated levels of anxiety for years to come.[17]

•

I'm glad you're reading this book. We may indeed be in the midst of an "anxiety pandemic" in terms of increased intensity. But as our short history indicates, the condition has always afflicted humanity in some way.

Think for a moment. Was there ever a period in your life when you were free of anxiety? Has a year ever gone by in which you felt absolutely zero concern about the future of the world? Has a month ever passed by when you never felt even a stab of worry that perhaps you were failing or falling behind at something? Has a week ever passed without a moment of unease about what someone else may be thinking about you or whether someone is displeased about something you said or did?

All humans exist somewhere on the anxiety spectrum. On one end of the spectrum, some individuals live with so much anxiety that it feels like it's a part of who they are. Some may have been officially diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. On the other end, people balk at any description of themselves as "anxious," preferring to describe themselves as "occasionally stressed" or by some other label. Many people fall somewhere

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in between—people who may admit to a tendency to anxiety in certain situations or around certain topics, but not in or around other situations or topics.

Regardless of the intensity, regularity, or labeling of your anxiety, we've all suffered this condition. It is a universal human problem.

But here is the little-known truth about anxiety: it isn't only a *problem* we wish would go away; it is also an *opportunity* for spiritual growth. In fact, for a Christian, anxiety is one of the most powerful opportunities for transformation we'll ever encounter. My most transformative growth as a follower of Jesus has happened because of anxiety. This doesn't mean anxiety is good—that would be a ludicrous idea for anyone who has experienced anything similar to what I experienced at the pumpkin patch. Anxiety is not good, and even a book called *The Anxiety Opportunity* should not pretend that it is good or claim that God causes this condition for our good.

Anxiety isn't only a *problem* we wish would go away; it is also an *opportunity* for spiritual growth.

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But Jesus is our Redeemer, which means he can redeem something that is not good originally into something that benefits us ultimately. With Jesus, we can experience anxiety as an opportunity for transformation.

This truth is evident from my own life. I'm able to share this book with you now because Jesus is accomplishing in me his redemption of anxiety. I've seen it in the lives of countless followers of Jesus, and this opportunity is confirmed by Scripture itself.

It doesn't have to end in sleepless nights, ruined careers, or secret shame.

Anxiety can be used by God to transform your life with a blossoming of spiritual growth.

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A Different Approach

Taking advantage of this opportunity requires us to think differently about the relationship between anxiety and spiritual growth. Broadly speaking, Christians have been taught to consider anxiety in one of two ways—either as an *obstacle* or as *irrelevant* to spiritual growth.

In the "anxiety as an obstacle" approach, you tend to imagine you are stuck on earth in your worries, while Jesus is in the heavens somewhere looking down reproachfully. Anxiety is viewed as a problem, as a flaw, perhaps even as a sin indicating you don't trust Jesus. It is evidence of a lack of faith. It's like me as a kid looking down at my shoes, feeling there was something wrong with me for being anxious.

The "anxiety as an obstacle" approach thus prescribes methods to get rid of anxiety as quickly as possible. The methods of elimination are spiritual in nature, such as "just having faith," "praying anxiety away," or "meditating on a particular Bible verse." Anxiety is then supposed to vanish. Once you push anxiety away, only then are you free to grow closer to Jesus.

In the "anxiety as irrelevant" approach, anxiety is treated as only a mental health condition to manage by "nonspiritual" methods. Anxiety and spiritual growth are separated. In many secular mental health approaches, spiritual growth is fine, but that's supposed to happen somewhere else, like at a church, a yoga studio, or on your own personal time—it is irrelevant to treating anxiety. The primary goal of mental health treatment is to lower anxiety. Common anxiety-lowering methods are therapy (especially what is known as cognitive behavioral therapy) and medication.

Let me be clear. The particular methods prescribed by both

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"anxiety as obstacle" and "anxiety as irrelevant" all have value. Prayer, faith, and Scripture meditation are absolutely critical, and this book will cover various ways to engage in these practices when we are anxious. I also want to emphasize that we absolutely should treat anxiety as a legitimate health condition. I have benefited from both cognitive behavioral therapy with secular therapists and medication prescribed by doctors. I am all for lowering anxiety through these medical means.

But even some secular mental health leaders are starting to recognize that treating anxiety solely as a problem is counterproductive. Listen to Dr. Tracy Dennis-Tiwary, a leading researcher in the field:

> As a clinical psychologist and neuroscience researcher, I have devoted the past 20 years to understanding difficult emotions like anxiety, and I believe that we mental health professionals have made a terrible mistake. We've convinced people that anxiety is a dangerous affliction and that the solution is to eliminate it, as we do with other diseases. But feeling anxious isn't the problem. The problem is that we don't understand how to respond constructively to anxiety. That's why it's increasingly hard to know how to feel good.[18]

Both Christian and secular approaches miss "anxiety as opportunity"—the ways we can grow spiritually *through* anxiety. Anxiety is not an obstacle to spiritual maturity. It is not some moral flaw we must get rid of in order to grow toward Jesus. Anxiety is also not irrelevant—as if our mental health were disconnected from our spiritual health. Anxiety can be the very place where we meet Jesus. Through anxiety, we can actually become more like him.

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The "Clobber Verse"

You've heard it.

The most commonly cited verse about anxiety is Philippians 4:6: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Among Christians, this is the verse most often wielded by the "anxiety as obstacle" approach.

Dr. Dan Allender, professor of counseling psychology at the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, cautions the use of this verse in addressing anxiety. He says Philippians 4:6 can often be used by those who aren't experiencing anxiety as a means of "'clobbering' those who are anxious." Dr. Allender warns against "the idea of hearing Philippians 4 and assuming 'my anxiety goes away.'"[19]

I happen to like Philippians 4:6, but I also don't like how it is used as a "clobber verse" to make anxious people feel like they're doing something wrong or, even worse, that there is something wrong about them. As with most clobber verses, in this situation it is being used out of context.

To understand the verses in Philippians 4, you have to grasp the teachings of the previous chapter, which presents the theological core of the entire letter. Philippians 3 sets the overall context for Paul's words in 4:6 about anxiety and, in fact, establishes a key framework for how Christians should understand all aspects of their life.

The framework of Philippians 3 is that Christians live as "Now and Not Yet" people. This is sadly undertaught in Christian circles, which is why anxiety is so often misunderstood and why many clobber verses are misused.

What is a "Now and Not Yet" person? This person is summarized by Philippians 3:21, which declares that "our current lowly

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bodies are being transformed to the body of Christ's glory." The Now and Not Yet life is defined by the life goal of becoming like Jesus. This is the amazing promise of the gospel: God is at work to transform every bit of ourselves to conform to Jesus, the one who will give us his "glory." *Glory* is the biblical term describing the amazingly good way of life when we fully reflect God's intentions for us. Jesus obtained his glory because he fully reflected God's intentions in his life. Philippians 3:21 promises that as we become like Jesus, we will share in that same "glory."

However, the same verse assumes that this glorious destiny requires an understanding of spiritual growth that allows for the struggles of our current "lowly bodies." Note that *lowly* in Paul's usage here means "incomplete" (it does *not* mean "sinful"). He is emphasizing that the full completion of our transformation awaits the future, the Not Yet when Jesus returns (Philippians 3:10). In the Now, we will still struggle with experiences like the complex physical and neurological misfirings that were behind my hyperventilation in that parking lot. My current "lowly body" will still fall quite short of "glory."

Nevertheless, the Now and Not Yet are organically connected. This connection is missed entirely by the "anxiety as irrelevant" approach. My hyperventilation was not disconnected from my future glory; rather, in a mysterious way, it constituted the raw material of my transformation. This is what it means that our current lowly bodies are *being transformed* to the body of Christ's glory. Our Not Yet body of glory grows out of our Now body of struggle.

Paul isn't making up this Now and Not Yet dynamic. He gets it straight from Jesus. Jesus often used agricultural metaphors to convey this dynamic of spiritual growth. His favorite metaphor was to point to how a seed of some plant is growing in the present Now and still is on its way to becoming its fully completed self

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in the future Not Yet (see, for example, Matthew 13:3–8, 19–23; Mark 4:3–9, 14–32; Luke 8:4–8, 11–15; and more).

Because this is such a complex and crucial truth, Paul often adds to Jesus' agricultural metaphors for the Now and Not Yet. In Philippians 3, for example, Paul draws on the metaphor of a runner in the middle of a race, who is "straining toward what is ahead" (3:13) at the finish line. He switches to the metaphor of dual citizenship to capture the duality of the two time frames—living as citizens of the present earthly reality while awaiting the future arrival of a heavenly citizenship (3:20).

This overall "Now and Not Yet" framework is critical to understanding why Philippians 4:6 should not be wielded as a clobber verse that defines anxiety as a sin. Anxiety is an intrinsic and unavoidable feature of our Now and Not Yet incompleteness and should not be conflated with moral failure. Incompleteness is not the same as sin. We would be mistaken if we morally blamed an eight-year-old for being small or not knowing calculus . . . or was still racked with worry about their parents coming home.

Incompleteness is not the same as sin.

In Paul's letters, he is not shy about calling out actions rightly labeled as sin and disobedience. But he's not using such moral categories in Philippians 3 and 4. For instance, the encouragement right before 4:6 is to "celebrate joyfully in the Lord, all the time" (4:4 NTE). But no one actually stays at this elevated spiritual state "all the time." We all regularly slip back down into more "lowly" moods.

Continual celebration is an aspirational description of the final transformation of our emotional self. While Christians are invited to taste more and more of those celebratory emotions here and now, I do not fall into sin when I stop celebrating joyfully in the Lord and, for example, lament the awful pitching of

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the Chicago Cubs. Paul describes periods when he is decidedly not in a celebratory mood but is instead struggling with deep despair (see 2 Corinthians 1:8, for example). He never labels those negative emotional experiences as sin.

Similarly, the encouragement right after Philippians 4:6 is to think only about holy, upright, virtuous things (4:8 NTE). Again, our minds will one day be transformed by the resurrection so we'll be able to accomplish this constant mental focus. In the meantime, we only sometimes experience periods of such a pure mindset, though we should aspire to have more of it. When our minds wander to, say, the latest celebrity gossip news, we have not committed wrong. Paul reveals how his own mind occasionally wanders to some fairly uncharitable (and crass) thoughts about his enemies. Galatians 5:12 includes some trash talking that would make a National Basketball Association player blush. Paul seems to accept these thoughts as part of his life in the Now.

In fact, those who wield Philippians 4:6 as a clobber verse to condemn anxiety as a sin neglect an important detail. Earlier in the letter, Paul describes his own anxiety for the Philippian church. Worry surrounded his decision to send his colleague Epaphroditus back to them. "This has made me all the more eager to send him, so that you'll see him again and be glad," he writes, adding, "and my own anxieties will be laid to rest" (Philippians 2:28 NTE). Having freely admitted his own anxiety—without a trace of self-condemnation—it would be bizarre for Paul to intend his words "do not be anxious" in Philippians 4:6 to be taken as an expectation that Christians would—or should—never feel anxious.

Therefore, in context, "do not be anxious" in Philippians 4:6 is not meant as condemnation; it is encouragement to experience anxiety within the larger "Now and Not Yet" dynamic of spiritual growth where our current lowly bodies are being transformed to

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the glory of Christ's body. Even as we aspire to more freedom from anxiety—an aspiration that will be met completely only in the Not Yet—we simultaneously should expect anxiety to always be part of our current life in the Now. We should no more expect Christians to be free of anxiety than we should expect Christians to be free of colds, mosquito bites, flat tires, sadness, or mental distraction. Paul brings up anxiety in 4:6 precisely because he expects it to be a persistent problem for his audience.

Those "lowly" experiences, far from being sins, are meant as signs. Your worries are like those people hired to dress up in a Statue of Liberty costume, twirling an arrow that points to a sale at a carpet store. These people can be annoying and distracting, but they are doing a job. They get our attention ("Look at me! Look at me!"), all the while redirecting you to the intended destination ("Go there! Go there!"). The Now and Not Yet person should be alert to ways that *current* and *lowly* experiences of anxiety serve as signs pointing to our future and complete transformation in Christ.

Or, to use one of Jesus' favorite metaphors, think of your worries as seeds. Anxiety anticipates some future payoff in the same way that tiny seeds of grain contain within them the anticipation of a future abundant harvest. Sometimes in our current lives, we get to sample an advance taste of this future payoff. In the Now, Christians can and do sometimes receive miraculous deliverance from anxiety. But any healing and deliverance are inevitably temporary on this side of the final resurrection. The healed person will still get sick and eventually die again; the person who was able to "pray away" one worry will inevitably struggle with another concern. Everyone must still await the final day when our healing and deliverance will be made permanent in Christ. Until then, there is always an incomplete, "Now and Not Yet" quality to our lives. Healing in the Now is always

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an anticipatory pointer to the final and permanent healing that only comes in the Not Yet.

The Bible expects Christians in the Now to get sick, suffer loss, and feel anxious. Those Now experiences are not evidence of moral sin; neither are they completely irrelevant to our spiritual destiny. Rather, these are expressions of our bodies still longing for the Not Yet. We were created for something better, and we are called to look forward to that future. Paul elsewhere describes how our bodies in fact join all of imperfect creation in "groaning" for our final redemption (Romans 8:22–23). My hyperventilation in the pumpkin patch parking lot was not me sinning; it was me groaning for transformation.

Therefore, this book does not promise that you can "pray your anxiety away" or give you some other technique to make your worries disappear. Anxiety most likely will be an ongoing—perhaps daily—issue for you as well. In fact, ironically, the more you accept this reality, the less anxious you will probably feel. But for a follower of Jesus, anxiety reduction is not the primary goal of life; our true goal is being transformed to the body of Christ's glory. This book will guide you to receive your anxiety as the seeds of transformation. You will learn to read your worries as signs calling for your attention and follow them to your ultimate destination: "Go there! Go there!"

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