Chapter 4

Woe, Be Gone
I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough.

—Matthew 6:25 nlt
Worry stands in the airport security line and removes her bracelet. She’s already placed her shoes in a rubberized bin and liquids in the plastic bag and has removed the boarding pass from her purse. Her stomach tightens as she awaits her turn to step through the body scanner that will identify her as weaponless. Worry wonders about the fungus on the floor, the skill of the screeners, and what happened to the day when a traveler could walk straight to the gate and catch the flight. She hates the thought but permits it anyway. Any day now our luck is going to run out. She looks beyond the X-ray machine to the TSA agent, who runs a wand around the body of a grandmother. Worry starts to feel sorry for her, then decides not to. Terrorists grow old too. She worries that the grandmother is on her flight.

Worry sits on the back row of the English as a Second Language class. He’d prefer the front row, but by the time he caught the city bus and
endured the evening traffic, the best seats were taken. His hands still smell of diner dishwater where Worry worked since six this morning. Within twelve hours he’ll be at the sink again, but for now he does his best to make sense of verbs, adverbs, and nouns. Everyone else seems to get it. He doesn’t. He never diagrammed a sentence in Spanish; how will he ever do it in English? Yet with no English how will he ever do more than wash plates? Worry has more questions than answers, more work than energy, and thinks often about giving up.

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Worry thinks her son should wear a scarf. Today’s temperature won’t warm beyond freezing, and she knows he will spend the better part of his lunch hour kicking a soccer ball over the frozen grass. She knows better than to tell him to wear it. Thirteen-year-olds don’t wear scarves. But her thirteen-year-old is prone to throat infections and earaches, so she shoves a wrap into his backpack next to the algebra homework that kept them both up past bedtime last night. Worry reminds him to review the assignment, gives him a kiss, and watches him run out the door to board the awaiting bus. She looks up at the gray sky and asks God if he ever air-drops relief packages to weary moms. “You have one needing some strength down here.”

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Worry awoke at 4:30 a.m. today, struggling with this chapter. It needs to be finished by 5:00 p.m. I pulled the pillow over my head and tried in vain to return to the blissful netherworld of sleep that knows nothing of deadlines or completion dates. But it was too late. The starter’s pistol had fired. An Olympic squad of synapses was racing in my brain, stirring
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a wake of adrenaline. So Worry climbed out of bed, dressed, and slipped out of the house into the silent streets and drove to the office. I grumbled, first about the crowded calendar, next about my poor time management. Worry unlocked the door, turned on the computer, stared at the passage on the monitor, and smiled at the first verse: Jesus’ definition of worry.

That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough. (Matt. 6:25 nlt)

Whether you have enough. Shortfalls and depletions inhabit our trails. Not enough time, luck, credit, wisdom, intelligence. We are running out of everything, it seems, and so we worry. But worry doesn’t work.

Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? (vv. 26–27 nlt)

Fret won’t fill a bird’s belly with food or a flower’s petal with color. Birds and flowers seem to get along just fine, and they don’t take ant-acids. What’s more, you can dedicate a decade of anxious thoughts to the brevity of life and not extend it by one minute. Worry accomplishes nothing.

Suppose I had responded differently to the uninvited wake-up call. Rather than tackle the task, suppose I had curled up in a fetal position and bemoaned my pathetic state. “The publisher expects too much! Every year another book. Every book complete with chapters. Why, not even Jesus could bear up under such stress. I’ll never meet the deadline.
When I don’t, the editorial staff will hate me and revoke my contract. Bookstores will learn of my missed deadline and will burn Lucado books in their parking lots. My wife will be humiliated, my children ostracized. I think I’ll have Jack Daniel’s for breakfast.”

See what happened? Legitimate concern morphed into toxic panic. I crossed a boundary line into the state of fret. No longer anticipating or preparing, I took up membership in the fraternity of Woe-Be-Me. Christ cautions us against this. Look at how one translation renders his words: “Therefore I tell you, stop being perpetually uneasy (anxious and worried) about your life” (Matt. 6:25 amp).

Jesus doesn’t condemn legitimate concern for responsibilities but rather the continuous mind-set that dismisses God’s presence. Destructive anxiety subtracts God from the future, faces uncertainties with no faith, tallies up the challenges of the day without entering God into the equation. Worry is the darkroom where negatives become glossy prints.

A friend saw an example of perpetual uneasiness in his six-year-old daughter. In her hurry to dress for school, she tied her shoelaces in a knot. She plopped down at the base of the stairs and lasered her thoughts on the tangled mess. The school bus was coming, and the minutes were ticking, and she gave no thought to the fact that her father was standing nearby, willing to help upon request. Her little hands began to shake, and tears began to drop. Finally, in an expression of total frustration, she dropped her forehead to her knees and sobbed.

That’s a child-sized portrait of destructive worry. A knot fixation to the point of anger and exasperation, oblivious to the presence of our Father, who stands nearby. My friend finally took it upon himself to come to his daughter’s aid.
Why didn’t she request her father’s help to start with? We could ask the same question of the disciples. They were one request away from help.

Jesus had taken them on a retreat. His heart was heavied by the news of the murder of John the Baptist, so he told his disciples, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31).

But then came the hungry crowd. Droves of people—fifteen, maybe twenty, thousand individuals—followed them. A multitude of misery and sickness who brought nothing but needs. Jesus treated the people with kindness. The disciples didn’t share his compassion. “That evening the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves’” (Matt. 14:15 nlt).

Whoops, somebody was a bit testy. The followers typically prefaced their comments with the respectful Lord. Not this time. Anxiety makes tyrants out of us. They issued a command, not a request: “Send them home so they can buy food for themselves.” Do they think we have the keys to Fort Knox? The disciples didn’t have the resources for such a mob.

Their disrespect didn’t perturb Jesus; he simply issued them an assignment: “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat” (v. 16). I’m imagining a few shoulder shrugs and rolled eyes, the disciples huddling and tallying their supplies. Peter likely led the discussion with a bark: “Let’s count the bread: one, two, three, four, five. I have five loaves. Andrew, you check me on this.” He does: “One, two, three, four, five . . . ”

Peter set aside the bread and inquired about the fish. Same routine, lower number. “Fish? Let me see. One, two, three . . . Change that. I counted one fish twice. Looks like the grand total of fish is two!”
The aggregate was declared. “We have here only five loaves and two fish” (v. 17). The descriptor only stands out. As if to say, “Our resources are hopelessly puny. There is nothing left but this wimpy lunch.” The fuel needle was on empty; the clock was on the last hour; the pantry was down to crumbs. Philip added a personal audit: “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” (John 6:7 NIV). The exclamation point was an exasperation point. “Your assignment is too great!”

How do you suppose Jesus felt about the basket inventory? Any chance he might have wanted them to include the rest of the possibilities? Involve all the options? Do you think he was hoping someone might count to eight?

“Well, let’s see. We have five loaves, two fish, and . . . Jesus!” Jesus Christ. The same Jesus who told us:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. (Luke 11:9 NIV)

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. (John 15:7 NIV)

Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24 NIV)

Standing next to the disciples was the solution to their problems . . . but they didn’t go to him. They stopped their count at seven and worried.

What about you? Are you counting to seven, or to eight?
Here are eight worry-stoppers to expand your tally:

1. **Pray, first.** Don’t pace up and down the floors of the waiting room; pray for a successful surgery. Don’t bemoan the collapse of an investment; ask God to help you. Don’t join the chorus of co-workers who complain about your boss; invite them to bow their heads with you and pray for him. Inoculate yourself inwardly to face your fears outwardly. “Casting the whole of your care [all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all] on Him . . .” (1 Peter 5:7 AMP).

2. **Easy, now.** Slow down. “Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him” (Ps. 37:7). Imitate the mother of Jesus at the wedding in Cana. The reception was out of wine, a huge social no-no in the days of Jesus. Mary could have blamed the host for poor planning or the guests for overdrinking, but she didn’t catastrophize. No therapy sessions or counseling. Instead, she took the shortage straight to Jesus. “When they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, ‘They have no wine’” (John 2:3). See how quickly you can do the same. Assess the problem. Take it to Jesus and state it clearly.

3. **Act on it.** Become a worry-slapper. Treat frets like mosquitoes. Do you procrastinate when a bloodsucking bug lights on your skin? “I’ll take care of it in a moment.” Of course you don’t! You give the critter the slap it deserves. Be equally decisive with anxiety. The moment a concern surfaces, deal with it. Don’t dwell on it. Head off worries before they get the best of you. Don’t waste an hour wondering what your boss thinks; ask her. Before you diagnose that mole as cancer, have it examined. Instead of assuming you’ll never get out of debt, consult an expert. Be a doer, not a stewer.

4. **Compile a worry list.** Over a period of days record your anxious
thoughts. Maintain a list of all the things that trouble you. Then review them. How many of them turned into a reality? You worried that the house would burn down. Did it? That your job would be outsourced. Was it?

5. **Evaluate your worry categories.** Your list will highlight themes of worry. You’ll detect recurring areas of preoccupation that may become obsessions: what people think of you, finances, global calamities, your appearance or performance. Pray specifically about them.

6. **Focus on today.** God meets daily needs daily. Not weekly or annually. He will give you what you need when it is needed. “Let us therefore boldly approach the throne of our gracious God, where we may receive mercy and in his grace find *timely* help” (Heb. 4:16 NEB). An ancient hymn expresses the heart this patient waiting creates.

   Not so in haste, my heart!
   Have faith in God, and wait;
   Although He linger long,
   He never comes too late.

   He never comes too late;
   He knoweth what is best;
   Vex not thyself in vain;
   Until He cometh, rest.

   Until He cometh, rest,
   Nor grudge the hours that roll;
   The feet that wait for God
   Are soonest at the goal.
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Are soonest at the goal
That is not gained with speed;
Then hold thee still, my heart,
For I shall wait His lead.1

7. Unleash a worry army. Share your feelings with a few loved ones. Ask them to pray with and for you. They’re more willing to help than you might imagine. Less worry on your part means more happiness on theirs.

8. Let God be enough. Jesus concludes his call to calmness with this challenge: “Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need” (Matt. 6:32–33 nlt).

Seek first the kingdom of wealth, and you’ll worry over every dollar. Seek first the kingdom of health, and you’ll sweat every blemish and bump. Seek first the kingdom of popularity, and you’ll relive every conflict. Seek first the kingdom of safety, and you’ll jump at every crack of the twig. But seek first his kingdom, and you will find it. On that, we can depend and never worry.


P-E-A-C-E-F-U-L.

(I’d better stop with that. It’s nearly 5:00 p.m.)