

Unshakable Hope | A Devotional for GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder)

■ by Melissa Doogan, MA, Licensed Professional Counselor



We live during difficult times in an unstable world with plenty of fodder to feed our fears, worries and anxieties. Elections, foreign affairs, war, an unstable economy, disease, not to mention broken relationships have many people on-edge as they listen to the news on their commutes and check the internet for the latest updates on world affairs. How are we as Christians to cope with such imminent and at times scary realities? What are we to do when our minds seem to reel uncontrollably with anxiety over financial, medical or interpersonal difficulties? What can we do when we become overwhelmed by anxiety?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR), a person with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), “finds it difficult to keep worrisome thoughts from interfering with attention to tasks at hand and has difficulty stopping the worry” (2000, p. 473). They experience symptoms such as, “restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge, being easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbance” (DSM-TR-IV, 2000, p. 476). For some people these compounded thoughts cause such extreme stress that they begin to negatively affect how they function at their jobs, in relationships, and even their health (DSM-TR-IV, 2000, p. 475).

As Christians we live with a special tension in this world. We are sojourners passing through a broken and fallen space that does not leave us unaffected. But there is hope. As the apostle Peter reminded the Christians living throughout the Roman Empire in his second epistle: through Christ God has equipped every one of us with the tools we need to think, live, and act in such a way that honors God (2 Pet 1:3, NIV). But how? Let’s take a look at one specific verse that addresses both our thoughts and actions in troubling times:

Now, the context before this verse is very important. C.S. Lewis once said, “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this”. Admittedly, it is easy to become so wrapped up in the worries of this life that it hinders our ability to live out our faith in light of our eternal home: Heaven. Peter reminded his audience of the future destination that is untouchable by the depravity of this world; and the protection that God provides his own even in the midst of experiencing very difficult times and circumstances (vv. 3-6, NIV).

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. 1 Peter 1:13 (NIV)

“These”, he points out, “have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine...” (1 Pet 1:7, NIV). One of the beautiful truths of God’s intimate interaction with our lives is that He does not waste an opportunity for His purposes of redemption (Rom 8:28, NIV). Our darkest moments can become those in which His light shines the brightest and His truth is revealed in startling beauty. It fashions in us a faith that is unyielding.

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But what does this look like practically? How does this make its way into our minds and actions, or into our jobs and relationships? What can we do? Paul gives 3 commands: 1) “prepare your mind for action”; 2) “be self-controlled”; 3) “set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet 1:3, NIV).

The first command addresses the mind. As noted earlier, a person struggling with GAD often struggles routinely with anxious thoughts. So, what kind of strategy can we use to combat these? In the New American Commentary on 1, 2 Peter and Jude, Thomas R. Schreiner (2003) explains, “Hope will not become a reality without disciplined thinking. Thinking in a new way does not happen automatically; it requires effort, concentration and intentionality” (p. 78). In other words, the mind must be trained to think correctly. Replacing unhealthy thoughts with healthy thoughts is essential. Philippians 4:6-8 tells us to fight anxiety by honestly presenting it to God and focusing on being thankful. Paul then goes on to list the characteristics of healthy thoughts: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (NIV). Practices such as meditating on Scripture and prayer are good disciplines to help refocus the mind, bring peace, and “set your minds on things above” (Col 3:2, NIV).

The second command follows the natural progression from our thoughts to our actions. As Christians we can rejoice in the fact that we have an unending and divine source of power available to us in the Holy Spirit who enables us to be self-disciplined rather than fearful (2 Tim 1:7, NIV). We have the ability in Christ to take control of our faculties and to live in freedom. We also have the Bible as the authoritative instruction manual for learning how to live practically in relationship to God and people (1 Tim 3:16). Finally, there is the important relationship between believers in which we sharpen and encourage one another through: the local church body, discipleship and mentoring, bible studies and small groups, accountability & prayer partners, adult and youth ministries, Christian counseling and support groups, etc. (Prov 27:17, Heb 1:12,13). For those with GAD these are important resources of both knowledge and support that will help reduce anxiety.



Melissa Doogan sees clients in our Frankfort and Orland Park locations.

The third command “set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” encompasses the first two. Ultimately our anxieties will be quelled when we learn to rest in the truth that God is in control of our personal situations. A great example of this is found in Mark 4:35-41. In the midst of the terrible storm Jesus asked his terrified disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Matt 4:40). Jesus was not being insensitive. He was making the point that He is present and in control of every quark of Creation. The more we practice training our thoughts to focus on Him, and filling our lives with healthy self-control and support, the easier it will be to take one step at a time and let tomorrow worry about itself (Matt. 6:34).

GAD is a very real issue for many people. However, by looking forward to the unshakable hope of Heaven, with a willingness to do the work to discipline the mind and actions, and a humble reliance upon God to finish the good work that He has begun in us, those who struggle with Generalized Anxiety Disorder can find peace (Phil 1:6).

For more about Heaven, Melissa recommends Randy Alcorn’s books: “In Light of Eternity”, and “Heaven”.

Christian counseling is a good place to find tools, resources, and support for those struggling with GAD. The therapists of Chicago Christian Counseling Center are here to help you; simply call to make an appointment.

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www.chicagochristiancounseling.org
800 | 361 6880 or info@chicagochristiancounseling.org

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