

Freedom

FINDING PEACE
IN ANXIOUS TIMES

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How to Use This Study Guide

FIVE PERSONAL OR SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS

SESSION 1: *From Fear to Love*

SESSION 2: *From Resentment to Gratitude*

SESSION 3: *From Grasping to Freedom*

SESSION 4: *From Anxiety to Peace*

SESSION 5: *From Life to Death*

This guide is designed to be used easily by individuals or by a group.

AS AN INDIVIDUAL Set aside some quiet time to read through each section of the guide. Underline or jot down (in the margins or in a journal) any thoughts that strike you as particularly important for you. Choose one or two of the suggested reflection questions and write down your thoughts.

AS A GROUP Whether you are meeting in person or over the internet, *feel free to adapt the following general guidelines to your specific setting and participants' needs.*

Gather » Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves.

Read » Ask the participants to read the material being covered before you gather (perhaps using the suggestions for individuals given above). Now, invite each member to share what struck them as most important in the text.

Discuss and pray » Encourage participants to choose a question or prompt from the text that speaks to them. Allow time for participants to share their responses with the group, and to pray about them, if desired.

Finish » At the end of each session, ask participants to share something they learned from the session. Close with prayer.

INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of high anxiety. So rapid are the changes of this modern era that we struggle to cope with both its pace and scope. In a globalized world we are exposed to more information than we can absorb and more distressing news than we can process. The means of human destruction now include nuclear, biological, and technological warfare. Increasingly violent natural disasters assail us, along with the prospect of cataclysmic climate change. For good measure, add in a disease pandemic, economic crisis, food insecurity, social unrest, political divisiveness, and wars abroad. It seems the perfect storm for stress that can quickly become overwhelming.

Anxiety in the face of fearful forces is nothing new. Jesus understood well the nature of human worry. He addressed anxiety in his Sermon on the Mount, urging the ordinary people of his day: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear” (Matthew 6:25). Some of us don’t worry much about such basic needs, but many in our world still do. Jesus might use different categories today, but his larger message would surely be consistent: Lift up your eyes to the Sustainer of all life in this world, from the smallest of creatures to the “crown of creation” in human beings. If God feeds the birds and clothes the lilies, why not trust the Creator to provide sustenance and protection for his most treasured creatures of all? The core of Jesus’ teaching on anxiety is an invitation to trust God. He reorients us from the nose-length focus of worry to the availability, generosity, and good will of our heavenly Provider.

From childhood, Henri Nouwen was fascinated by trapeze artists. He drew several lessons from watching these remarkable acrobats of the air. A lesson from the “flyers” is the importance of letting go of the security of the bar in order to soar. Another lesson is the central role of the catcher. Far less glamorous, the catcher’s role is nonetheless key to the beauty and wonder of a flyer’s performance. Flyers cannot leap, twist, or flip without

the steady, strong arms of the catcher ready at just the critical moment to catch them. Henri sees God as *our* catcher:

Trust is the basis of life. Without trust, no human being can live. Trapeze artists offer a beautiful image of this. Flyers have to trust their catchers. They can do the most spectacular doubles, triples, or quadruples, but what finally makes their performance spectacular are the catchers who are there for them at the right time in the right place....Let's trust the Great Catcher.¹

With God ready to meet our leaps, twists, and turns in life, we cannot be “dropped.” Our divine Catcher is completely trustworthy. This gives us freedom to fly.

In an age of high anxiety we are deeply susceptible to the dynamics of fear and suspicion, anger and resentment, a grasping need for control, and an obsession with avoiding pain and death. These common responses to anxiety rob us of our spiritual birthright of inner freedom and peace. The image of God as a steady-handed catcher can offer us both comfort and courage as we let go of our own security bars and “fly” into an uncharted future. In this booklet, we explore several ways of learning to trust the Great Catcher as we move from anxiety to peace and reclaim the great gift of our freedom in Christ.

HENRI NOUWEN was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into dozens of languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed on page 32, all of which are available at www.henrinouwen.org.

From Fear to Love

*“Many of us, if we are following Jesus at all, follow out of fear. But if we follow out of fear—fear of hell, of purgatory, of rejection, of not being acceptable—that is not following. Following Jesus cannot be a form of discipleship if it is out of fear. There is a lot of fear in us. Sometimes it overwhelms me how fearful we truly are....Jesus does not want us to follow him out of fear. He wants us to follow him out of love.”*²

THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE IS NOT HATE BUT FEAR. Fear is the source of hatred. The author of 1 John corroborates this point: “Perfect love casts out fear” (4:18). And along with fear, love surely casts out the negative emotions fear creates, including anger, envy, resentment, and hatred.

I would call our attention to two faces of fear: Fear of God, and fear of other people. Each is filled with distortion and healed only by love—love of God, and love of neighbor. The cure for the twin faces of fear is precisely what Jesus identifies as the Great Commandment and its natural corollary: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself (see Matthew 22:36-40).

In this chapter we will look at our fear of God. I do not mean fear in the sense of profound awe. When we read, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10), *fear* has the connotation of reverential awe in light of the transcendent majesty and power of the Creator. Divine reality is far beyond our comprehension. Such wonder places us in a posture of natural humility and reverence.

No, by fear of God I mean craven terror—like standing before a judge we know will condemn and sentence us to death for our misdeeds. This is an entirely different posture—one we glimpse in the following Bible verse, which commends cringing servility to escape punishment:

Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled (Psalm 2:11-12).

This Lord does not match the description God gives of himself to Moses on Mount Sinai: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). Indeed, the Lord of Psalm 2 sounds more like a cruel human potentate. Yet the Psalm 2 brand of fear has been fueled for hundreds of years by church teachings emphasizing the wrath of God and the hellfire of damnation. Generations of children have been deeply imprinted with guilt and shame as they imagined kneeling, or perhaps crumpling, at the feet of the Almighty.

Even after exposure to teaching on the love of God, many who grew up with images of divine wrath continue to harbor a deep fear of God. They cannot bring themselves to trust that God really accepts them, no matter how much they repent. I once knew a young woman who had worked herself into a state of emotional and spiritual terror. She was convinced she had committed “the unpardonable sin” against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). While it seemed clear to me this was far from the case, nothing I said could convince her otherwise. Fear can keep believers in a state of childish passivity in relation to God—a state in which authentic spiritual growth is impossible. This kind of fear imprisons us in paralysis, depriving us of the interior freedom that is our spiritual birthright and that forms the ground of our maturation in Christ.

Even if we didn’t grow up listening to sermons that frightened us with threats of a punishing God, or parents who tried to keep our behavior in line by assuring us that the heavenly Big Brother was watching our every move, we may still suffer pangs of anxiety about God. I have a wonderful picture of Jesus’ face in my prayer room. The closer I draw to it, the more I can see the immense, quiet love in his beautiful eyes. But when I stand at a distance, the face looks somber and stern to me. When I am feeling guilty about my many failures in living faithfully or loving consistently, I tend to avoid looking at this face. My inner conflicts surface in a habit of distanc-

ing myself from the very presence that could heal me, if I would only draw close enough to see again the tenderness in those eyes. My guilty feelings bring to light my anxiety about God's judgment. This is only a milder form, along a spectrum, of our fear of God.

Any such fear, says Nouwen, is a world apart from what God wants for us. God *loves* us without limit, and wants us to love him freely in response. "Don't be afraid," say the angels to Zechariah, to Mary at the Annunciation, to Joseph when he learns of Mary's pregnancy, to the women at Jesus' tomb after his resurrection. Do not fear the wonder of God, the visitation of angelic beings from a realm inspiring awe. God's messengers bring glad tidings of heaven's good will toward all humankind. God is communicating great love! Only a complete assurance of God's love for us can dissolve our fear of God. "Fear is not of God," writes Henri. "The love of God is the perfect love that breaks through the boundaries of our fear."³

Henri is uncompromising in his insistence that God's love is unconditional. Much of his own anguished spiritual journey revolved around hearing clearly what he calls "the inner voice of love." Here is one of his most powerful descriptions of the voice of love that transforms us:

Do not run away from me. Come back to me—not once, not twice, but always again. You are my child. How can you ever doubt that I will embrace you again, hold you against my breast, kiss you and let my hands run through your hair? I am your God—the God of mercy and compassion, the God of pardon and love, the God of tenderness and care. Please do not say that I have given up on you...that there is no way back. It is not true. I so much want you to be with me....Do not judge yourself. Do not condemn yourself. Do not reject yourself. Let my love touch the deepest, most hidden corners of your heart and reveal to you your own beauty, a beauty that you have lost sight of, but which will become visible to you again in the light of my mercy.⁴

This, assures Henri, is the voice Jesus wants us to hear—the voice Jesus came to acquaint us with through his own life, death, and resurrection. The God revealed to us in Jesus is one who loves with generosity far beyond our deserving. We cannot earn such love; we can only receive it with gratitude and loving response. Fear is a prison from which God’s love frees us. As Henri tells us:

You will discover that the more love you take in and hold on to, the less fearful you will become. You will speak more simply, more directly, and more freely about what is important to you, without fear of other people’s reactions.⁵

Along with Henri, we can learn to listen well and deeply to the liberating voice of Love. It is Love that catches us when we fall into destructive and self-defeating fear. We can trust the Great Catcher!

For Reflection

1. In what ways have you been afraid of God over your lifetime? What has fed that fear?
2. How have you discovered God’s love as an antidote to your fears? What nurtures your confidence in God’s love for you?
3. What practices most help you to listen for the inner voice of love? What does that voice whisper to your heart’s ear? How does its message free you?

For Action

Take ten minutes to rest quietly in God’s presence. Ask the Spirit to help you receive the limitless, healing love of God more deeply. Let yourself soak in that love and allow it to nurture your heart. Then let the Spirit direct you to someone who needs to receive the same quality of love from you.

From Resentment to Gratitude

“Resentment is cold anger....The greatest difficulty with resentment is that it’s very hidden and interior as opposed to being overt. It has the potential to present itself as holiness and that makes it even more pernicious. Resentment resides in the very depths of our hearts...while we are mostly unaware of its presence. Whereas we might imagine that we are faithful and good, we may in fact be very lost in a much deeper way than someone who is overtly acting out.”⁶

HENRI NOUWEN SPENT YEARS REFLECTING ON THE PARABLE THAT WE KNOW AS “THE PRODIGAL SON” (Luke 15:11-32). Nouwen called this parable “The Story of Two Sons and Their Father.” Jesus tells it as one of three parables in response to the Pharisees’ and scribes’ grumbling because Jesus “welcomed sinners and ate with them” (Luke 15:2). Each of the three parables points to how God searches and waits for those who are lost. The third and longest parable describes the father with his two sons. Here is my loose paraphrase of the story with a bit of commentary:

The younger son asks for and takes his share of the father’s inheritance before his father’s death, a way of saying in effect, “I wish you were dead.” He then goes abroad to waste his wealth on frivolous and riotous living. When he ends up destitute in a famine, he is reduced to feeding pigs. This defiles the young man in the eyes of his Jewish kin, who consider swine unclean. But since he is starving, the boy decides to return home where he knows that his father’s servants at least get enough food. He doesn’t expect to be welcomed as a son; he merely hopes his father will accept a well-rehearsed repentance speech and allow him to become one of the ser-