

“Suppose a man falls among thieves, or wild beasts; is shipwrecked at sea by a sudden gale; is killed by a falling house or tree. Suppose another man wandering through the desert finds help in his straits; having been tossed by the waves, reaches harbour; miraculously escapes death by a finger’s breath. Carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ’s lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered will look further afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God’s secret plan. And concerning inanimate objects we ought to hold that, although each one has by its nature endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise by its own power except in so far as it is directed by God’s ever-present hand.” John Calvin

Through this short series of studies we have considered the providence of God from a number of different angles.

In Study 1 we saw that “The LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods, whatever the LORD pleases, he does, on heaven and on earth” from Psalm 135.

In Study 2 we saw that this is ultimately seen at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, where the Lord is seen to be in control over every last detail (even sin), to glorify Jesus Christ and to save his people.

In Study 3 we saw the comfort that this brings to us. Although we may not perfectly understand everything right now, we can know that God is working everything for our good - to conform us to the image of his son. The proof of that is the fact he gave up his Son for us.

In Study 4 we saw how the Lord is providentially in control of drawing people to him. We saw an example of that as Paul went to Philippi having been blocked from going into Asia.

In Study 5 we saw that the fact that the Lord is completely in control does not mean that we do nothing. We are called to act in faith and obedience. We could have seen this in numerous places in Scripture (Ruth, Daniel, Esther, Acts) but we saw it in a little incident in the life of Jonathan, Saul’s son.

Now, as we finish our series, we are going to leave with some very practical comfort. This passage will be very familiar to most of us, but that does not mean we don’t need to keep coming back to it - or that we always obey it!

LUKE 12:22-34

Jesus has just told a parable about someone who felt that he was in control of his world - the rich fool, who built bigger barns to store his crops, but whose life was taken by the Lord. Jesus is teaching his disciples and is telling this this is not the way to live, we are to recognise that God is in charge, and we are to focus on being “rich towards him” (vs 210).

Jesus is realistic and pastoral though. He knows that anxiety about life - and in particular what we need to live (food, clothing, and by implication money to buy what we need) - is common to all of us. So he reminds his disciples that he is in control and cares and will provide. We mustn't be like the rich fool who believed he was in control of this, for most of us that will lead to worry rather than complacency (as most of us aren't as wealthy as the rich fool!) He says “do not be anxious”. I think it's important to hear this both as a command, but also a comfort. The emphasis is just as much “you don't need to be anxious” as it as rebuke “do not be anxious”.

But how can we “not be anxious”? Jesus tells us why we worry. In verse 23 he tells us we worry because we forget what life is really about. Just like the rich fool, when we worry about food and clothing we are saying to ourselves “this is the important thing in the universe”. We are created for more than this.

In verse 24, and then in vs 27 and 28 Jesus also tells us that this kind of anxiety comes when we forget that God cares and provides for us. Worry is stupid because it is so unnecessary! We know and can see God's care for the birds in our garden. Unlike them, we are made in his image. If we belong to Christ, we have been redeemed. Don't doubt his love, and very real practical care!

This doesn't mean we don't fulfil our responsibilities. After all birds work to find their food (“the early bird catches the worm!”). But in that work, God is working and caring.

We are also tempted to anxiety because we wrongly think we are in control (vs 25-26). We can increase the length of our life by thinking! No one looks back of their life and says “I'm glad I missed that night's sleep”. God is always working and caring and acting, when we are resting. We are not in charge!

The real fight in the fight against anxiety is the fight to trust in Jesus as King, and to “seek” that kingdom (some translations “set our heart on”) not to set our heart on the things of this world. Vs 34 is revealing. Think about a horse race. I'm sure we don't bet, but if you put £20 on a horse at the Beverley

race course, where will your focus be when the race happens? On the horse you have put your treasure on! If it wins, you'll be happy. If it loses you'll be depressed. Jesus says, very practically, if we want to change the way we think, change what we do. Put our treasure (money, energy, anything we value) into following him. Then our hearts and minds will follow.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Be honest. When are you most likely to worry, and what are you most likely to worry about? What does that tell you about what you value, and what you fear?

What command does Jesus give us in verse 22? Do you think it is possible to obey this?

What do we forget about life, when we worry about "food and clothing" (our physical wellbeing, and by implication, our money) (see vs 23)?

What do we forget about God when we worry? (see vs 24 and vs 27-28)

What do we forget about worry and about ourselves, when we worry? (Vs 25-26)

Why, then, is being certain of all we have seen about God's providential love and rule so important in the fight against worry?

What are we "to seek" in our life? What are we "not to seek" (other translations say "set your heart on"). Why does what we seek/set our heart on makes the difference in whether we might worry - see verse 34?

What does it mean to "seek God's kingdom"?