September 12, 2021

Rick Myatt

WHEN THE SHARK IS CHARGING

1 Peter 5:7

As you all know, one of our favorite places in the world is Hawaii. But there is an unpleasant aspect of that tropical paradise. As I have mentioned before, it has a full complement of sharks in the ocean around those islands. We’ve had a few reminders of that in recent years. For example, we went to a spot where we loved to go snorkeling and we encountered something we’d never seen there before. New signs had been posted on the beach. They said, “Warning. Sharks may be present. Shark bites have occurred in this area.” Just to make sure you get the idea it included a picture of a shark swimming under the water. Yikes. We didn’t go snorkeling there. A few years after a woman was killed by a shark not far from a beach where we often swam.

I can assure you that the last time we did go snorkeling there a couple of years ago, my level of trepidation was higher than it used to be. I’m more aware than ever that sharks are there. As I was thinking about that I recalled a story John Avant told in his book, *Authentic Power*. He is an avid scuba diver. He said that divers actually *like* to see sharks because it is rare to spot them, and they almost never bother divers. It’s the word “almost” that would concern me. It only takes one encounter with a shark who decides that “almost” doesn’t apply to him, to ruin your whole day. Avant actually had an encounter with a shark. He was diving on a shipwreck in the Bahamas when he spotted a reef shark. He was delighted with the sighting, especially because reef sharks are usually no threat to humans. There’s another one of those squishy qualifiers. “Usually” is nice, but it doesn’t mean “never.” His feelings about that shark sighting changed when the shark suddenly turned toward him and lowered its fins in an attack mode, and began charging straight at him. Avant had a very unpleasant moment knowing he might be about to die in a horrible fashion. Just before reaching Avant the shark opened its jaws, then clamped down on a fish that was swimming in front of the frightened diver. Then the shark swam away. The shark hadn’t been charging him at all, Avant just happened to be behind the fish the shark wanted to get. I’m pretty sure if I ever had an experience like that I’d be done with diving for good. Also pretty sure I’d have made a mess of my wet suit.

An apparent threat is going to produce a spike of fear and anxiety. Unfortunately the sharks, the potential threats, are lurking out there in life, and as a result we experience anxiety. Today we are going to think about what Peter says about anxiety in 1 Peter 5:7.

ANXIETY IS A PROBLEM FOR ALL OF US

Peter tells us to cast all of our anxiety on God. That assumes that we have anxiety. You can’t cast on God something you don’t have. That we have anxiety is a reasonable assumption. With humans it is a given. In Philippians 4:6 Paul wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything.” The grammar suggests that Paul was likely either telling them to stop doing something that they were already doing or to not do something they were about to do. In other words, he was saying either “stop worrying about anything” or don’t do what you are prone to do, which is to worry. It is human to be anxious about many things.

In Matthew 6:34 Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow.” He said that because we all do worry about tomorrow. Worrying, being anxious, was the main theme from Matthew 6:25 to 34, a major junk of Jesus’ most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. He seemed to think it was a big deal.

What causes anxiety? Uncertainty is a big producer of anxiety. Stress is another cause of anxiety. Unfortunately, life is full of stress and uncertainty of all kinds. Since there is very little certainty anywhere in life there’s going to be lots of opportunity for anxiety.

As Laurie and I were preparing for our recent brief trip to the Seattle area we had been hearing horror stories about the rental car shortage. I read a couple of stories of people who had made reservations to rent cars, but when they went to pick up their car the rental company didn’t have any, despite the reservation. On our recent trip we absolutely needed a rental car, so we bit the bullet and made a reservation to pay a price that would have been quite reasonable if I was buying the car, but to rent it for a couple of days it was nothing short of robbery. The rental car people should be wearing masks not because of covid but because it’s what robbers do. The day before our trip I went online to make sure all was good with our trip. I got an unpleasant surprise. The rental company said they had no record of our reservation. I had the confirmation email with a confirmation number. But I carefully put in the confirmation number they had given. I did it several times and got the same response. They had no car for us. And they had no cars available to rent. Immediately I started getting anxious. What were the chances we would be able to get a car at that late date? I scrambled frantically. I tried several web sites and struck out. No cars available. Our of desperation I went to one company that I had checked a couple of months earlier and they said there were no cars. To my surprise, they had a car. Unfortunately, the price made the previous robbery look like a steal. But at least we had a car. But the anxiety was still there in the background. I still feared we might arrive and find they were out of cars. So during the day as we flew up to Seattle I ran scenarios. What will we do if? That anxiety was there in the background until we actually got a car.

I can feel anxious over all manner of details in life. I can grow anxious about things that are much more serious than having a problem with a rental car on a trip. When one of our grandchildren has a health issue, which has happened several times, I get anxious. A couple of years ago I had to have a medical procedure that involved the word biopsy. Any time a doctor brings up the word biopsy there’s anxiety. I think about the future and our financial picture, and I get anxious.

The main command in verses 6-7 is actually to humble yourselves under the hand of God. In verse 7 the Greek word “cast” is actually a participle that is dependent on the main verb. So literally these verses instruct us to humble ourselves under the hand of God, casting our anxieties on the Lord. In other words, there is some anxiety that results from humbling ourselves under God’s hand.

Humbling ourselves under God’s hand means not competing with him as the sovereign, the center of all things. That includes accepting his sovereign plan for life. In other words, it means accepting God’s will and plan, which sometimes might not line up with the way we’d like things to go. Telling God we will accept whatever he wants can feel a little scary. It means letting go of the illusion that we have control over what happens to us. Not having control feels bad to us. It means uncertainty, and that, as I already mentioned, can introduce anxiety. Peter tells us to throw that anxiety on the Lord.

Years ago we were checking in for a flight at the airport and I was struggling mightily. I was lugging a heavy equipment bag that had all our recreational gear like tennis racquets, snorkel equipment, shoes, and so on, plus I had a carryon suitcase, plus a backpack and another small bag. I also had to handle my ID and my boarding pass. I felt like an overloaded pack mule. It felt like every moment I was on the verge of dropping everything and falling completely apart. Yeah, I was that guy, the one you look at and think, “Dude, why don’t you try packing a little lighter next time?” Of course it was very busy, tons of people were trying to get checked in for flights, so there were long lines and not nearly enough airline employees helping. As I finally neared the ticket counter an employee did an unusual thing. She stepped out from behind the counter, walked over to me and said, “Here, sir, let me help you.” She grabbed the equipment back and schlepped that heavy thing to the counter and hefted it onto the scale. It was a huge relief when that woman took that bag. I essentially threw it onto her. Peter tells us to throw our anxiety onto the Lord. Let him handle that heavy burden.

There’s a word in verse 7 that’s easy to skip over. It’s the word “all.” We are to give every bit of our anxiety to God. Every single thing, big or small, that we might worry about, be concerned about, get a little tense over, we are to give to God. He literally wants us to be carefree. Most of us would be happy if we could care less. Not be careless, as in reckless, but to just be less anxious. But God wants us to be anxiety free, to give him every single worry. One of those memorable moments in marital bliss happened for me on the first day of our honeymoon. We hadn’t been married even 24 hours. It was when I realized on the airplane on our way to Hawaii that I didn’t know where we were going. I had left the map to the condo where we would be staying in our apartment. I had no idea where the condo was or what it was called. All I knew was it was on Kauai and it had a Hawaiian sounding name. Oh, well, that narrows it down. I got very anxious. I pictured us completely clueless about where to go and not finding the place. We would be homeless on our first day of marriage. To my huge surprise and even greater relief, the Harrison family, who owned the condo and gave us a week in it as a wedding present, were at the Kauai airport to meet us when our plane landed. If they had told us they would be there to take care of us and get us where we needed to go, how anxious do you think I would have been? I would have been totally relaxed. That’s what God wants for us. He’s there to take care of it, so let him handle it. Well this is too trivial, such a small thing, too small for God to be bothered with. Is it a part of all? Yes. Then let him handle it. But this is too big. Is it a part of all? Yes. Then let him handle it.

Why does God want us to be carefree? Why is not being anxious important? When God commands us to do something it is usually obvious why it is important. It’s easy to see why God would tell us don’t commit murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t lie or steal. All those things harm people. But being anxious doesn’t seem to be a moral or spiritual issue. It doesn’t hurt other people. So why does this matter to God?

First, because when we are anxious, we are not honoring God. We were having a family celebration for Carissa’s birthday by having a dinner at Michael and Carissa’s house. Laurie and I brought some of the food, including some cupcakes for dessert. I started to pick up the box of cupcakes, but Laurie said, “I will carry that, Rick.” You might think that was nice of her to offer to carry the burden so I didn’t have to. But in this case, that wasn’t quite her motivation. She did not say this, but I knew what was really going on. The cupcakes are rather delicate. She was thinking if she let Rick, the notorious and often clueless klutz, carry them, there was a non-zero chance that something bad was going to happen to them. In fact, odds were better than 50-50 that they would suffer some damage in the process. That kind of thing has happened many times. To put it bluntly, she didn’t trust me to carry the cupcakes. She has good reason for her reluctance. But you have to admit, that doesn’t especially honor me. When we are anxious over anything it is because we don’t really trust God with our future. We’re afraid he’s going to drop the cupcakes. That most certainly does not glorify him.

A second reason for God’s concern about our anxiety is that when we become anxious, worried or fearful, we are tempted to compromise. If we don’t trust God to handle the situations in our lives, then we will have to handle them ourselves in our own way. Invariably that is going to involve disobedience to God. When years passed after God promised Abraham and Sarah that he would give them a son and nothing happened, they grew anxious. They couldn’t wait forever. At some point for women the biological clock stops ticking, the baby boat sails forever. That time came came for Sarah. The boat had, indeed, sailed. It was too late. So they cooked up a scheme to have Abraham father a son through Sarah’s maid, Hagar. That was not God’s will, and the world still experiences major conflict because of that bad decision. At one point when King Saul was trying to kill David, things got so bad for David that he couldn’t believe that God could protect him. In other words, he got anxious. Unable to trust God he was sure it was up to him to watch out for himself. So he cooked up a scheme that involved lying to a priest named Ahimelek to convince him to help David. David got the help, but the result was that Ahimelek, his whole family and the entire town in which he lived was murdered by King Saul. When David didn’t cast his anxiety on the Lord he did things his way, he schemed and lied, and the result was horrific.

One final reason why God wants us to cast our anxiety on him is that he loves us. Because he loves us, he wants us to experience peace. We will never be at peace when we are anxious. We will never have fullness of life when we are in the grip of anxiety. Anxiety not only disrupts peace and fullness of life, it also does physical harm to us.

Dutch researchers found in a study that the subjects who were more optimistic and less anxious than others died at a rate more than 26% lower than those who worried more! A group of researchers in Sydney, Australia found that anxiety causes the release of a hormone that inhibits cells produced by the immune system. In other words, anxiety suppresses the immune system. What an irony for this pandemic season. Stressing about the virus makes us more susceptible to it!

Studies also show that anxiety causes an increase in cortisol, which causes us to store more fat in our belly. This is consistent with a recent study whose results were published in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry.* It showed that anxiety overcomes the positive effects of a healthy diet. Researchers found that anxiety is worse for your physical health than eating a diet loaded with saturated fats. Anxiety robs us of peace, can kill us, and even if it doesn’t, will make us sick and fat. God wants us to experience life, real life, his life, and anxiety blocks us from it.

WE CAN GIVE OUR ANXIETY TO THE LORD

Little Wesley and I were out for a walk. He loves to go on walks and explore. He also loves trucks. This particular day he was walking a few feet ahead of me when a big truck hauling some equipment came by. He was very interested in it, but as it went by the truck hit a bump and it made a really loud metal on metal bang as some of the equipment was jarred. It startled Wesley big time. His reaction was immediate. He turned and ran straight to Bapaw because he knew Bapaw loves him and would take care of him. That’s what Peter tells us to do. When you are startled, when you are frightened or stressed and you don’t know what’s happening, run to the Lord, because he will keep you safe.

When we encounter biblical commands to not worry, not be anxious, not be afraid the problem is, how am I supposed to do that? I’d love to not fear, but I am afraid. I’d love to not worry. But 10 seconds after we say, “Yes, that’s right, I’m not going to worry about this,” we find ourselves worried about it again. There is one huge reason why we don’t need to be anxious. It is right there in verse 7. It is because God cares for you.

**God is willing and eager to care for us**

Isaiah 49:15 quotes the Lord saying, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you.” How likely is it that a mother will forget a baby? It is highly unlikely. That bond between a mother and her child is one of the strongest things we know. But it is not impossible. There have been a few instances of terrible mothers abandoning their children. God says that might happen with human moms, but it will never happen with him. How much does a mom want to care for and protect her child? God has compassion for us and cares for us infinitely more than any mother.

Psalm 121:7-8 says, “The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” God is keeping watch over your life, over your coming and going, over everything that happens in your life, and he will never stop.

Ron Mehl was a pastor and writer, and a good, godly man. He wrote a number of books, but there was one with a title I loved. It was *God Works The Night Shift*. When we are asleep, God is still there watching over us. Ron Mehl testified to that reality and he wasn’t just spewing religious platitudes. He knew what it was to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He had leukemia. He had it for some time when he wrote that book. The disease eventually took his life, but he testified that the whole time God was watching over him and caring for him.

I love that image of God watching over us in the night. When I was a kid Jerry and I shared a bedroom. We always had the door to our room cracked open a little way. I needed it to be dark in our room to sleep, but I also had to see that there was a little bit of light on in the house. I needed to know that someone was awake. Someone who loved me was watching over me. I had a hard time sleeping if there was no one awake. It was too scary in the dark. I could only rest when someone was watching me. We can rest because God is watching over us night and day.

**God knows us individually**

In Matthew 10 Jesus talked about facing situations where we would easily be afraid. He told us not to be, then in verses 29-31 said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Hey, sparrows are more anonymous even than pelicans. Jesus said God knows every one of them and cares about them! You’re worth more than that. God knows us so well that he even knows the number of hairs on our head. Laurie cares about me intensely. What happens to me is of enormous concern to her. She’s aware of what is happening in my life at all times. But she doesn’t know how many hairs I have on my head, except that there aren’t enough of them. But God does.

Galatians 2:20 is a familiar verse to many. But there is a comment in that verse that is easy to overlook. Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Did you catch that last phrase? Jesus, the Son of God, loved me. Not us collectively. Me. He loved me. He gave himself for me. Yes, Jesus died for the world. But this verse says he died for me. God knows you and me, and when he says he cares for us he means for each one of us. He knows who we are and what is going on in our lives and it all matters to him. He cares about our wins and losses, our joys and our sorrows.

Psalm 139:1-4 says, “You have searched me, Lord and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.” God knows about everything you even think or do. He even knows it before you think it or do it.

**God is able to take care of us**

God’s individual concern for us and his watching over us wouldn’t be very helpful if he didn’t have the ability to actually help in the circumstances of our lives. We don’t see God or hear him literally speak physically, we don’t see miraculous evidence of his presence for the most part. That makes it easy to question whether God makes any difference at all in our world and in our lives.

The great news is God can and does care for us because he has the ability to do so. Jesus said in Matthew 19:26, “With God all things are possible.” Nothing is impossible for him. There is nothing that can stop him. The fact is that God is active and working in our world even at this moment.

The corona virus pandemic raised the anxiety level extremely high for most people. How bad will this get? Could I get this and die from it? Will it take people I love? What is all this going to do to the economy? Are we destined for a pandemic driven depression? For me, anxiety popped up over some very real possibilities in our family. Toby was and still is on the front line of treating this disease, and there are many stories of doctor’s dying from it. The first doctor in China who blew the whistle on Covid died from it. Would Toby get sick from this thing because he had to deal with it first hand? The airline industry almost totally shut down. Would Michael lose his job? Anna had a job marketing tours to Israel, and her company completely shut down too. Would she lose her job? She and Toby needed that income to pay the mortgage on their house. If she lost her job would they have to default on their mortgage, which would have impacted Laurie and me because we were co-signers on that mortgage? When Michael didn’t lose his job he was assigned to fly out of a different base. He was assigned to New York, which was a nightmare for them. Would that be a permanent change? When Toby was finishing his residency, paradoxically because hospitals lost many millions of dollars in the pandemic they froze hiring, so residents have not been able to find jobs. Would Toby be unable, of all things, to get a job? These and many other concerns assailed me, and caused anxiety.

Laurie and I prayed about all of these very real concerns. We cast our anxiety on the Lord. We’re not all the way through this pandemic, sadly. But things are better. Looking back I find it amazing to see what has happened. Toby never got covid, even though he was as thoroughly exposed to it as you could be. Michael never lost his job. Anna never lost her job, even though at points she was the only employee remaining on her company’s payroll. Michael was only assigned to New York for about a month, and then was reassigned to LA. He is flying a new aircraft that has put him in a better seniority position. And Toby has gotten a job at a hospital that if he wants to he could actually ride his bike to. It is astounding to see how God has cared for our family.

I looked back over my specific prayer requests over the past few years. There have been a lot of them. There have been some amazing answers to prayer, but there hasn’t been anything miraculous. But what astounds me is this: out of those hundreds of prayers 93.4% of them have been answered positively by God. There are some that still await an answer one way or another. But only 6.6% of those that have been answered have received a no answer. That record is a powerful reminder that God is at work in our world, even when it is not obvious or overt. It is a reminder that we can cast our anxiety on him. We can humble ourselves under his hand, let him handle our fears and worries, and be at peace.

Does this mean that nothing hard or painful will ever happen to us, that nothing we fear will ever occur? No, it doesn’t mean that. Peter clearly did not mean that his first century readers would never have anything difficult happen to them. He has made it clear that the fiery ordeal they were enduring was not unexpected, and that it would likely continue. So knowing that God cared for them clearly meant something other than, “He cares so much that he will protect you from any painful hardship.”

Experience confirms that all of us are going to face hard, painful even grievous times in life. Jesus said in this life we will have troubles. We see verses like James 1:1 that tell us to consider it all joy when we encounter trials. That means we are going to encounter them. It is going to happen.

Well if that’s the case, then what good is it knowing that God cares for us? How does that help us with anxiety? This summer Toby and Anna worked with Ella on swimming. They had a number of sessions at our neighborhood pool. Ella likes our pool because she can stand up in the shallow end, so she is confident swimming in it. If she feels like she can’t swim anymore she knows she can just put her feet on the bottom and stand up. Swimming isn’t scary there. Ah, but the deep end is another matter. She can’t stand up there, so she wants to stay away from it. But her mom and dad want her to get used to swimming there so that she can be safe in deeper water. So I watched as Toby would take Ella to the deep end. There was often drama, much emotion, for Ella was afraid of it and didn’t want to go there. But Toby would say, “I will be right with you. I will not let anything bad happen to you. Trust me.” Toby would never, ever let anything bad happen to her, and he didn’t. I knew that. Ella sort of knew that, but it was hard for her to trust it. But it was necessary for her to learn how to swim and be confident in the water.

To be free of anxiety we will need to have as the goal of life something other than making sure life is as painless and pleasurable as possible. If that is our goal, we condemn ourselves to two negative results. First, we will never be at peace because there will always be threats to our pain free existence. We will see the reason for that next week in the next verse. We will always be on edge fearing that next thing that is going to spoil our placid life. There will always be sharks charging at us. Second, we will end up with frustration and lack of faith, because there is so much we cannot control. Bad things are going to happen to us and no matter what we do we won’t be able to stop it all. We can put our anxiety on God because he cares for us and will do something crucial for us *other than making sure we never have pain or difficulty*.

God guarantees that we will be able to stand because he will be with us, will care for us, will make sure that we don’t face so much that it overwhelms us, will give us the strength to stand and will comfort us along the way, will bring good out of all that happens. Like Toby having a good end in mind for Ella, one that is for her good, God has good in mind for us. His goal is that we be holy, that we bring glory to him, that we further his kingdom, and that we be filled with his joy, hope, peace and love, and the things he allows in our lives help that to happen.

APPLICATION

How can we care less? Here are a few practical things we can all do to help us cast anxiety on the Lord.

ALWAYS REMEMBER THE CROSS

Romans 8:32 is a hugely important verse. It was a pivotal verse in Laurie’s life. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave himself up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

The God of grace went to the extreme of the cross to save us. That was an inconceivable and immeasurable sacrifice. Do you think after that he doesn’t care? Do you think he’s going to set you adrift and say “Good luck, you’re on your own”? The cross shouts to us that God cares about us and will never abandon us.

FOCUS ON GOD’S CHARACTER

Remember the illustration of Ella learning to swim in the deep end of the pool. This week Ella kind of freaked out. There was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. It was quite dramatic. But Toby kept telling her, “I’m right here. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you.” The drama happened because she was so spooked by the perceived threat of the deep end that she didn’t think clearly about what it meant to have daddy right there. There wasn’t a nanosecond when she was in danger, because Toby would take care of her. He loves her, he’s her daddy, and he will always protect her. What will help us is focusing on the character of God. He loves us, he is good, he is ever present, he is powerful, he wants only our good. The more we focus on who he is and on his presence rather than getting locked in on the threat, the more calm we can be.

GIVE UP CONTROL

We have the curiously persistent notion that we know what is best for ourselves and we can get what is best if we just grip a little harder. What we’re actually doing is trying to wrest control of the world and of our lives from God, because we don’t trust him. We’re not humbling ourselves under God’s hand. Have you been on the Millennium Falcon ride at Disneyland? You go on the ride in groups of 6. Everyone in the group has a job, either pilot, gunner or engineer. I was an engineer. I found out if you’re an engineer, you’re just along for the ride. They have you pushing buttons, but you’re not really accomplishing anything. The 2 pilots up front are where the action is. They control what the spacecraft does. Imagine that while on that ride I decided that the pilots were fouling the ride up, so I got out of my seat and went up and tried to take over control of the ride from the pilots. That’s what we tend to do when we get anxious. We are trying to wrest control from God. All that happens when we do that is we seriously escalate our own anxiety as well as everyone else’s, and we make a mess of the ride. Peace only comes when we let God fly the spacecraft.

GIVE THANKS

It is almost impossible to be busy giving thanks to God for the good he has done and is doing and be anxious at the same time. It’s kind of a binary deal. You can do one or the other, but not both at the same time. Have you considered lately how much you have to be thankful for? I was at the grocery store recently and went on the toilet paper aisle. Do you recall what that was like in the late spring of last year? You’d go on that aisle and the shelves would be stripped bare. There wouldn’t be one roll left, and you’d think, “Let’s see, we have 8 rolls at home. How long will they last?” It got so bad Laurie jumped on what she thought was a deal she found on the Internet. About 2 months later the weirdest toilet paper we’ve ever seen showed up at our house, having been shipped all the way from China. It was our own, unique, covid toilet paper. I’ll bet it was made in Wuhan. We’ve never used it. I am thankful that I can go to the toilet paper aisle with no concern whatsoever. In fact, I can even get the good stuff, Charmin Ultrasoft. I mention this because every day of our lives we are inundated with grace and God’s provision for us. We are alive, we have food to eat, clean water to drink, places to live, people who love us, and we are loved by God. The more we major on thanking him for the countless good things he gives us every moment of our lives, the less anxious we will be.