

Battling Unbelief

Crossway Books by John Piper

All That Jesus Commanded

Battling Unbelief

Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian

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Desiring God

Don't Waste Your Life

Expository Exultation

Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die

Foundations for Lifelong Learning

Future Grace

God Is the Gospel

God's Passion for His Glory

A Godward Life

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A Peculiar Glory

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Spectacular Sins

Taste and See

Think

This Momentary Marriage

27 Servants of Sovereign Joy

What Is Saving Faith?

When I Don't Desire God

Why I Love the Apostle Paul

Battling Unbelief

Defeating Sin with Superior Pleasure

REVISED EDITION

John Piper

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To

Ruth Eulalia Piper (1918–1974)

May her memory be honored in the holiness of her heirs.

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Introduction

IN TO END ALL WARS, ERNEST GORDON tells the true story of a group of POWs working on the Burma Railway during World War II. The scene was made even more unforgettable because of the movie by the same title.

The day's work had ended; the tools were being counted, as usual. As the party was about to be dismissed, the Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing. He insisted that someone had stolen it to sell to the Thais. Striding up and down before the men, he ranted and denounced them for their wickedness, and most unforgivable of all their ingratitude to the Emperor. As he raved, he worked himself up into a paranoid fury. Screaming in broken English, he demanded that the guilty one step forward to take his punishment. No one moved; the guard's rage reached new heights of violence.

"All die! All die!" he shrieked.

To show that he meant what he said, he cocked his rifle, put it to his shoulder and looked down the sights, ready to fire at the first man at the end of them.

At that moment the Argyll [Highlander] stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention, and said calmly, "I did it."

The guard unleashed all his whipped-up hate; he kicked the helpless prisoner and beat him with his fists. Still the Argyll stood rigidly to attention, with the blood streaming down his face. His silence goaded the guard to an excessive rage. Seizing his rifle by the barrel, he lifted it high over his head and with a final howl, brought it down on the skull of the Argyll, who sank limply to the ground and did not move. Although it was perfectly clear that he was dead, the guard continued to beat him and stopped only when exhausted.

The men of the work detail picked up their comrade's body, shouldered their tools, and marched back to camp. When the tools were counted again at the guard-house, no shovel was missing.¹

The guard had miscounted. The young soldier who stepped forward had not stolen a shovel. He had given his life for his friends.

What Just Happened? Mere Devotion to Duty?

There is more than one way to commend this young man's sacrifice. One would be to say, "That is the kind of devotion to duty we need more of in this day of self-centeredness and cowardice." Another would be to say—this is the way I would say it—"That is the kind of love that *faith in future grace* releases. We need far more of that kind of love in this day of self-centeredness and cowardice."

These two ways of commending that sacrifice are not necessarily in conflict. But they might be. The first way speaks of a kind of "devotion to duty." The second speaks of the transforming power of faith in God's promises. In contrasting these two, we need to ask, "What kind of duty was it?" That is the crucial question. The external action does not tell the decisive story. What was going on

1 Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (Zondervan, 1963), 101–2.

in the heart—toward God and man? The Bible cautions us that people can sacrifice their lives but not love people or God: “If I give away all I have, and *if I deliver up my body to be burned*, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:3). When the apostle Paul says this, he means that there is a kind of “devotion to duty” that God does not honor. It gains nothing.

That may seem strange, since Jesus himself said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Yes, that is what great love does. It lays down its life. But whether that act is truly loving depends on what is going on in the heart, not just on the external action.

The Fruit of Faith in Future Grace

Another way to describe the young soldier’s sacrifice is to say that faith in future grace welled up in his heart and gave him the love and courage to give his life for his friends. He may have thought in a flash, *Jesus, you died for me. My sins are forgiven. I have eternal life. I love you. You are my greatest treasure. I am eager to be with you. My friends are not all ready to die. I am. To live is Christ and to die is gain. Here I come.* Perhaps he took fifteen seconds to remind himself of what Christ had done for him and what that meant for his future after death. Then, sustained by his faith in God’s promises, he stepped out and died. This is the fruit of faith in future grace.

The difference between the sacrifice that comes from sheer devotion to duty and the sacrifice that comes from faith in God’s future grace is that the first highlights my strong resolve while the second highlights the glory of God’s grace. The aim of this book is to magnify the value of Christ by feeding faith in future grace and helping Christians battle the opposite—namely, unbelief in God’s promises that leads to Christ-dishonoring sin.

Where the Book Came From

The eight chapters that follow are taken from a much larger book titled, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*.² These are the application chapters, the ones that actually illustrate how faith in future grace severs the root of sin and sets free the stream of love. Our focus is on the very practical challenge of how to free ourselves from anxiety, pride, misplaced shame, impatience, covetousness, bitterness, despondency, and lust. My conviction is that unbelief in the promises of God—that is, “future grace”—is the root that sustains the life of these sins. Hence the title, *Battling Unbelief*.

It is a risk to publish these eight chapters without the twenty-three chapters that surround them and explain the foundations and implications found in *Future Grace*. But I think it is worth the risk. Many people move from application back to foundation rather than the reverse. So I am hopeful that discovering in this smaller book some of the ways that faith works to liberate us from sin will send many readers to the larger work for a deeper biblical understanding.

We Battle for Faith in Future Grace

“Battling unbelief” is another way of saying, “Living by faith in future grace.” The “unbelief” that I have in mind is the failure to trust the promises of God that sustain our radical obedience in the future. These promises refer to what God plans to do for us in the future, and that is what I mean by “future grace.” It is *grace* because it is good for us and totally undeserved. And it is *future* because it hasn’t happened to us yet, but it may in the next five seconds or in the next five thousand years.

2 John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Crossway, 2026), chap. 3, 6, 10, 13, 17, 21, 24, and 27.

INTRODUCTION

For the Christian, the promises of God are spectacular. They relate to our immediate future, before this minute is over, and to our eternal future:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life. (Ps. 23:6)

No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly. (Ps. 84:11)

I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isa. 41:10)

I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:20)

It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

For those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

Neither death nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38–39)

All things are yours . . . the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. (1 Cor. 3:21–23)

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:19)

These and hundreds more are there in the Bible to sustain our faith in God's future grace. The ultimate gift at the end of them all is God himself. Christ died not mainly to make things go well for us but to bring us to God:

I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you." (Ps. 16:2)

Whom have I in heaven but *you*?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides *you*.
(Ps. 73:25)

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing *Christ Jesus my Lord*. (Phil. 3:8)

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God*. (1 Pet. 3:18)

Jesus prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, *to see my glory*" (John 17:24). The final, best, highest, and most satisfying gift of future grace is seeing and savoring God himself.³

Learning to Fight Fire with Fire

Being satisfied with all that God promises to be for us in Jesus Christ is the essence of faith in future grace. Keep in mind that

³ This is the crucial point that I try to develop more fully in John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Crossway, 2005).

when I speak of faith in future grace or satisfaction in what God promises to be for us, I am assuming that an essential part of that faith and that satisfaction is embracing Christ as our sin-bearing substitute, whose perfect obedience to God is imputed to us through faith. In other words, faith in future grace embraces the *ground* of all the promises as well as the promises themselves. It treasures Christ as the one whose blood and righteousness provides the foundation for all future grace. *And* it treasures all that God now promises to be for us in Christ because of that foundational work. Whenever I speak of faith as being satisfied with all that God is for us in Jesus, I am including all this in that faith.

This faith is the power that severs the root of sin. Sin has power because of the promises it makes to us. It talks like this: “If you lie on your tax returns, you will have extra money to get what will make you happier.” “If you look at pornography, you will have a surge of pleasure that is better than the joys of a clear conscience.” “If you eat these cookies when no one is watching, it will soften your sense of woundedness and help you cope better than anything else just now.” No one sins out of duty. We sin because we believe the deceitful promises that sin makes. The Bible warns “that none of [us] may be hardened by the *deceitfulness* of sin” (Heb. 3:13). The promises of sin are lies.

Battling unbelief and fighting for faith in future grace means that we fight fire with fire. We counter the promises of sin with the superior promises of God. We take hold of some great promise God has made about our future and say to a particular sin, “Match that!” In this way, we do what Paul says in Romans 8:13: “By the Spirit . . . put to death the deeds of the body.” John Owen wrote a book on that verse and summed it up with “Be killing sin, or it

will be killing you.”⁴ We kill sinful deeds before they happen by cutting the root of their life: the lies of sin.

Doing this “by the Spirit” means that we trust in the power of the Spirit and then wield the “sword of the Spirit,” which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17). The “word of God” is at its core the gospel, then all that God has spoken in his revealed word. The gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection is not only the core but also the foundation of all the promises of God. That is the point of the logic of Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” “All things” that we need—the fulfillment of all God’s promises—are guaranteed by the Father’s not sparing his Son. Or to put it positively, all the promises of God are secured for us because God sent his Son to live and die to cancel our sins and become our righteousness. So when I say that we wield the word of God, the sword of the Spirit, what I mean is that we hold fast to this Christ-centered gospel truth with all its promises and bank on them in every situation. We sever the lifeline of sin by the power of a superior promise. Or to put it more positively, we release the stream of love by faith in future grace. We become loving people by trusting in the promises of God.

Jesus Loved Like This

The Bible says that Jesus endured the cross “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2). In other words, the greatest act of loving sacrifice that was ever performed was sustained by the confidence that God would bring Jesus through it into everlasting joy with a redeemed and worshipping people. That is the way our love is sustained as well.

⁴ John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 6 of *The Works of John Owen* (Banner of Truth, 1967), 9.

But there is a difference. Our willingness to endure the sacrifices of love “for the joy that was set before us” was purchased by Jesus’s willingness to do the same. His suffering covers our sins and sets us free to love. Our suffering in the path of love is based on his. His future joy came to him as his *right*. Ours comes to us as blood-bought *grace*. His suffering is not just a model; it is the ground of our hope. We are saved from sin and judgment by his suffering. Nevertheless, both his and ours are endured “for the joy that was set before us.” His joy was a future right. Ours is a future grace.

Therefore, without the death and resurrection of Jesus—that is, without *past* grace—we could expect no future grace. God’s future grace toward us was purchased and guaranteed by his past grace toward us in Jesus’s death and resurrection. As we have seen, Paul says this in one of the greatest verses in the Bible: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all [past grace], how will he not also with him graciously give us all things [future grace]?” (Rom. 8:32). Notice the glorious logic of heaven: *Because* God spared his Son no pain in saving us, *therefore* he will spare no omnipotent effort to give us all that we need forever. Absolutely certain future grace will come to those who trust Christ because God infallibly secured it in not sparing his Son.

We Battle as Victors

The very next verses say, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:33–34). This means that, because of Christ, God has justified us. Past tense. We are now already counted righteous in Christ. No one can bring a successful charge against us. Christ died for

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us and lives for us. Thus, we battle unbelief and sin as those who in Christ already have the decisive victory. We already have our standing in heaven by faith in Christ. Christ is our righteousness. Christ is our perfection. We pursue holiness not because we are not yet accepted by God but because we *are*. This is the way Paul puts it: “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil. 3:12).

So I invite you to engage with me in the battle against unbelief in the promises of God. I invite you to fight the fight of faith in future grace. And I invite you to rejoice: that we can fight this fight not as though it doesn't matter but knowing it does matter infinitely and that God is with us to the end.

Be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isa. 41:10)

*When I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.*

PSALM 56:3

Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.

I PETER 5:7 (RSV)

*Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?"
or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"
For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your
heavenly Father knows that you need them all.*

MATTHEW 6:31-32

Battling Anxiety

A Personal Triumph Through Future Grace

When I was in junior and senior high school, I could not speak in front of a group. I became so nervous that my voice would completely choke up. It was not the common butterflies that most people deal with. It was a horrible and humiliating disability. It brought immense anxiety into my life. I could not give oral book reports in school. I could not run for any class offices because I would have had to make campaign speeches. I could only give very short, several-word answers to the questions teachers would ask in class. In algebra class, I was ashamed of how my hands would shake when doing a problem on the blackboard. I could not lead on Sundays when our church gave the service over to the youth.

There were many tears. My mother struggled with me through it all, supporting me and encouraging me. We were sustained by God's grace, even though the "thorn" in my flesh was not removed. I managed to make it to college without any significant public speaking. But the battle with anxiety was intense. I knew that my

life would be incredibly limited if there was no breakthrough. And I suspected that I would not be able to get through college without public speaking. In fact, Wheaton College required a speech class, and it loomed in front of me like a horrible concrete barricade.

In all these years, the grace of God has driven me deeper into God in desperation rather than driving me away from God in anger. I thank God for that, with all my heart. Out of that maturing relationship came the sense that there just had to be a breakthrough.

One crucial opportunity came in Spanish class during my freshman year. All of us had to give a short speech in Spanish in front of the rest of the class. There was no way around it. I felt like this was a make-or-break situation. Even as I write about it now, I can't laugh. I memorized the speech cold. I thought that memorizing would mean that I wouldn't have to look down at my notes, possibly lose my place, and have one of those horrible, paralyzing pauses. I also arranged to speak from behind a large tree-stump lectern that I could hold onto so that my shaking might be better controlled. But the main thing I did was cry out to God and lay hold of his promises of future grace. Even now my eyes fill with tears as I recall walking back and forth on Wheaton's front campus, pleading with God for a breakthrough in my life.

I don't remember those moments of Spanish very clearly. I only remember that I made it through. Everyone knew I was nervous. There was that terrible silence—the kind that falls when people feel bad for you and don't know how to respond. But they didn't snicker, as so many kids had done in previous years. And the teacher was kind with his comments. But the most overwhelming thing was that I got through it. Later I poured out my thanks to God in the autumn sunshine. Even now I feel deep gratitude for the grace God gave me that day.

Perhaps the most decisive event of the breakthrough came over a year later. I was staying at the college for summer school. Chaplain Evan Welch invited me to pray in the summer school chapel. Several hundred students and faculty would be present. My first reaction was to immediately reject the idea. But before I could turn it down, something stopped me. I found myself asking, “How long does the prayer have to be?” He said it didn’t matter. It should just be from my heart.

Now this I had never even tried—to speak to God in front of hundreds of people. I amazed myself by saying that I would do it. This prayer, I believe, proved to be a decisive turning point in my life. For the first time, I made a vow to God. I said, “Lord, if you will bring me through this without letting my voice break, I will never again turn down a speaking opportunity for you out of anxiety.” That was 1966. The Lord answered with precious grace again, and to my knowledge, I have kept my vow.

There is more to the story as one future grace has been lavished on another. I do not presume to understand fully all the purposes of God in his timing. I would not want to relive my high-school years. The anxiety, the humiliation and shame, were so common, as to cast a pall over all those years. Hundreds of prayers went up, and what came down was not what I wanted at the time—the grace to endure. My interpretation now, thirty years later, is that God was keeping me back from excessive vanity and worldliness. He was causing me to ponder weighty things in solitude, while many others were breezily slipping into superficial patterns of life.

The Bible my parents gave me when I was fifteen is beside me right now on the table. It is well marked. The assurance of Matthew 6:32 is underlined in red: “Your heavenly Father knoweth

that ye have need of all these things” (KJV). Already in those early teen years, I was struggling to live by faith in future grace. The victories were modest, it seems. But, oh, how faithful and kind God has been.

The Associates of Anxiety

In the decades that followed, I have learned much more about the fight against anxiety. I have learned, for instance, that anxiety is a condition of the heart that gives rise to many other sinful states of mind. Think for a moment how many different sinful actions and attitudes come from anxiety. Anxiety about finances can give rise to coveting, greed, hoarding, and stealing. Anxiety about succeeding at some task can make you irritable, abrupt, and surly. Anxiety about relationships can make you withdrawn, indifferent, and uncaring about other people. Anxiety about how someone will respond to you can make you cover over the truth and lie about things. So if anxiety could be conquered, a mortal blow would be struck to many other sins.

The Root of Anxiety

I have also learned something about the *root* of anxiety and the ax that can sever it. One of the most important texts has been the one I underlined when I was fifteen—the whole section of Matthew 6:25–34. Four times in this passage Jesus says that his disciples should not be anxious:

Do not be anxious about your life. (6:25)

Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? (6:27)

Do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” (6:31)

Do not be anxious about tomorrow. (6:34)

Anxiety is clearly the theme of this text. It explicitly identifies the root of anxiety: “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little *faith*?” (6:30). In other words, Jesus says that the root of anxiety is inadequate faith in our Father’s future grace. As unbelief gets the upper hand in our hearts, one of the effects is anxiety. The root cause of anxiety is a failure to trust all that God has promised to be for us in Jesus.

I can think of two kinds of disturbed responses to this truth. Let me tell you what they are and then give a biblical response to each of them before we look more closely at the battle against the unbelief of anxiety.

Is This Good News?

One response goes something like this: “This is not good news! In fact, it is very discouraging to learn that what I thought was a mere struggle with an anxious disposition is rather a far deeper struggle with whether I trust God.” My response to this is to agree but then to disagree. Suppose you had been having pain in your stomach and had been struggling with medicines and diets of all kinds to no avail. And then suppose that your doctor tells you, after a routine visit, that you have cancer in your small intestine. Would that be good news? You would say no, emphatically! And I would agree.

But let me ask the question another way: Suppose the doctor discovered the cancer while it is still treatable, and that indeed it

can be very successfully treated? Would you be glad? You would say yes, you would be very glad that the doctor found the real problem. Again, I would agree. So finding out that you have cancer is not good news. It's bad news. But, in another sense, it is good to find out because knowing what is really wrong is good, especially when the problem can be treated successfully.

That's what it's like to learn that the real problem behind anxiety is unbelief in the promises of God's future grace. In a sense, it's not good news because unbelief is a very serious cancer. But in another sense, it is good news because knowing what is really wrong is good, especially because unbelief can be treated so successfully by our Great Physician. He is able to work in wonderfully healing ways when we cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

So I want to stress that finding out the connection between our anxiety and our unbelief is, in fact, very good news; it is the only way to focus our fight on the real cause of our sin and to get the victory that God can give us through the therapy of his word and his Spirit. When Paul says, "Fight the *good* fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12), he calls it "good" because the fight is focused exactly on the right cancer: unbelief.

How Can I Have Any Assurance at All?

There is another possible response to the truth that our anxiety is rooted in our failure to live by faith in future grace. It goes like this: "I have to deal with feelings of anxiety almost every day, so I feel like my faith in God's grace must be totally inadequate. I wonder if I can have any assurance of being saved at all."

My response to this concern is a little different. Suppose you are in a car race and your enemy, who doesn't want you to finish the

race, throws mud on your windshield. The fact that you temporarily lose sight of your goal and start to swerve does not mean that you are going to quit the race. And it certainly does not mean that you are on the wrong racetrack. Otherwise, the enemy wouldn't have bothered you at all. What it means is that you should turn on your windshield wipers and use your windshield washer.

When anxiety strikes and blurs our vision of God's glory and the greatness of the future that he has planned for us, this does not mean that we are faithless or that we will not make it to heaven. It means that our faith is being attacked. At first blow, our belief in God's promises may sputter and swerve. But whether we stay on track and make it to the finish line depends on setting in motion a process of resistance by grace—whether we fight back against the unbelief of anxiety. Will we turn on the windshield wipers, and will we use our windshield washer?

Psalm 56:3 says, "When I am afraid, / I put my trust in you." Notice that it does not say, "I never struggle with fear." Fear strikes, and the battle begins. So the Bible does not assume that true believers will have no anxieties. Instead, the Bible tells us how to fight when they strike. For example, 1 Peter 5:7 says to cast "all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." It does *not* say, "You will never feel any anxieties." It says that when you have them, cast them on God. When the mud splatters your windshield and you temporarily lose sight of the road and start to swerve in anxiety, turn on your wipers and squirt your windshield washer fluid.

So my response to the person who has to deal with feelings of anxiety every day is to say, "That's more or less normal." At least it has been for me, ever since my teenage years. The issue is how do we fight them?

The Two Great Faith Builders

The answer to that question is that we fight anxieties by fighting *against* unbelief and fighting *for* faith in future grace. And the way you fight this “good fight” is by meditating on God’s assurances of future grace and by asking for the help of his Spirit. The windshield wipers are the promises of God that clear away the mud of unbelief, and the windshield washer fluid is the help of the Holy Spirit. The battle to be freed from sin is “by the *Spirit*” (Rom. 15:16; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2) and by “the truth” (John 17:17, 19): the work of the Spirit and the word of truth—especially the foundational truth of the gospel that guarantees all the promises of God. These are the great faith builders.

Without the softening work of the Holy Spirit, the wipers of the word just scrape over the blinding clumps of unbelief. Both are necessary—the Spirit and the word. We read the promises of God, and we pray for the help of his Spirit. And as the windshield clears so that we can see the welfare that God has planned for us (Jer. 29:11), so our faith grows stronger and the swerving of anxiety smooths out.

Seven Promises of Future Grace Against Anxiety

How does this actually work in practice? Here in Matthew 6, we have an example of anxiety about food and clothing. Even in America with its extensive welfare system, anxiety over finances and housing can be intense. But Jesus says that this stems from inadequate faith in our Father’s promise of future grace: “O you of *little faith*” (6:30). And so this paragraph has at least seven promises designed by Jesus to help us fight the good fight against unbelief and be free from anxiety.

Promise 1

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matt. 6:25)

This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God does the greater, then doing the lesser is all the more sure. In this verse, the greater thing is that God has given each of us life and a body. These are vastly more complex and difficult to maintain than mere physical provisions. Yet God has done all of it. Therefore, how much more easily can God provide you with food and clothing. Moreover, no matter what happens, God will raise your body someday and preserve your life for eternal fellowship with him.

Promise 2

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matt. 6:26)

If God is willing and able to feed such insignificant creatures as birds, which cannot do anything to bring their food into being—as humans can by farming—then he will certainly provide what you need, because you are worth a lot more than birds.

Promise 3

And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? (Matt. 6:27–28)

This is a promise of sorts—the simple promise of reality: Anxiety will not do you any good. It’s not the main argument, but sometimes we just have to get tough with ourselves and say, “Soul, this fretting is absolutely useless. You are not only messing up your own day but a lot of other people’s as well. Leave it with God and get on with your work.” Anxiety accomplishes nothing worthwhile.

Promise 4

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (Matt. 6:28–30)

Compared to the flowers of the field, you are a much higher priority for God because you will live forever and can thus bring him eternal praise. Nevertheless, God has such an overflow of creative energy and care that he lavishes it on flowers that last only a matter of days. So he will certainly take that same energy and creative skill and use it to care for his children who will live forever.

Promise 5

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. (Matt. 6:31–32)

Do not think that God is ignorant of your needs. He knows all of them. And he is your “heavenly Father.” He does not look on

indifferently from a distance. He cares. He will act to supply your needs when the time is best.

Promise 6

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt. 6:33)

If you will give yourself to his cause in the world rather than fretting about your private material needs, then he will make sure that you have all you need to do his will and give him glory. This is similar to the promise of Romans 8:32: “Will [God] not also with [Christ] graciously give us all things?”¹

Promise 7

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matt. 6:34)

God will see to it that you are not tested in any given day more than you can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). He will work for you, so that “as your days, so shall your strength be” (Deut. 33:25). Every day will have no more trouble than you can bear, and every day will have mercies sufficient for that day’s stress (Lam. 3:22–23).

“My God Will Supply Every Need”

Paul learned these lessons from Jesus and applied them to the battle against anxiety in the church at Philippi. In Philippians 4:6 he says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and

¹ For an explanation of what “all things” means, see John Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Crossway, 2026), chap. 8.

supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” And then in 4:19 he gives the liberating promise of future grace, just as Jesus did: “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” If we live by faith in this promise of future grace, it will be very hard for anxiety to survive. God’s “riches in glory” are inexhaustible. He really means for us not to worry about our future.

When I Am Anxious

We should follow the pattern of Jesus and Paul. We should battle the unbelief of anxiety with the promises of future grace. When I am anxious about some risky new venture or meeting, I battle unbelief with one of my most often-used promises, Isaiah 41:10. The day I left to spend three years in Germany, my father called me long distance and gave me this promise over the telephone. For three years I must have quoted it to myself five hundred times to get me through periods of tremendous stress:

Fear not, for I am with you;
 be not dismayed, for I am your God;
 I will strengthen you, I will help you,
 I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

When the motor of my mind is in neutral, the hum of the gears is the sound of Isaiah 41:10.

When I am anxious about my ministry being useless and empty, I fight unbelief with the promise of Isaiah 55:11:

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
 it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

When I am anxious about being too weak to do my work, I battle unbelief with the promise of Christ: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

When I am anxious about decisions I have to make about the future, I battle unbelief with the promise,

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (Ps. 32:8)

When I am anxious about facing opponents, I battle unbelief with the promise, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

When I am anxious about the welfare of those I love, I battle unbelief with the promise that if I, being evil, “know how to give good gifts to [my] children, how much more will [my] Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). And I fight to maintain my spiritual equilibrium with the reminder that everyone “who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for [Christ’s] sake . . . will . . . receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29–30).

When I am anxious about being sick, I battle unbelief with the promise,

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him out of them all. (Ps. 34:19)

And I take this promise with trembling: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3–5).

When I am anxious about getting old, I battle unbelief with the promise,

Even to your old age I am he,
 and to gray hairs I will carry you.
 I have made, and I will bear;
 I will carry and will save. (Isa. 46:4)

When I am anxious about dying, I battle unbelief with the promise that “none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom. 14:7–9).

When I am anxious that I may shipwreck my faith and fall away from God, I battle unbelief with the promises, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6) and, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

This is the way of life that I am still learning as I conclude my eighth decade. I write this book in the hope and with the prayer that you will join me: Let us make war not with other people but with our own unbelief. It is the root of anxiety, which, in turn, is the root of so many other sins. So let us turn on our windshield

wipers and use the washer fluid and keep our eyes fixed on the precious and very great promises of God. Take up the Bible, ask the Holy Spirit for help, lay the promises up in your heart, and fight the good fight—to *live by faith in future grace*.

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

JEREMIAH 9:23–24

The pleasure of pride is like the pleasure of scratching. If there is an itch one does want to scratch; but it is much nicer to have neither the itch nor the scratch. As long as we have the itch of self-regard we shall want the pleasure of self-approval; but the happiest moments are those when we forget our precious selves and have neither but have everything else (God, our fellow humans, animals, the garden and the sky) instead.

C. S. LEWIS

Humble yourselves . . . under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.

I PETER 5:6