

Anxiety, Sacrifice, and the Worshipper

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When believers come together for Sunday worship, several words flood the mind regarding what worship is. This is not surprising because as students of the Bible know, the New Testament (written in Greek), the guidebook for Christian living and proper worshipping, uses several different words for worship. Some of the words that come to mind include service, adoration, devotion, obedience, and praise.

Another word comes to mind, which is descriptive of the process of worship itself. That word is sacrifice. The Bible says, “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Her. 13:15, NKJV). Both the Old and New Testaments speak of worshippers as offering sacrifices to God as worship. Under the Old Testament, believers would make literal offerings, such as animal sacrifices, in keeping with the prescribed levitical expectations, as a form of praising God. The New Testament similarly teaches that we sacrifice our wants and desires to worship God according to His will (Jn. 4:24).

There is a different kind of sacrifice that many Christians make every time they go to worship. It is not just a sacrifice of the heart and obedient acts. For these believers, the sacrifice is related to a significant mental health disorder.

Believers are not immune to mental health disorders. Sadly, many Christians go untreated because of the stigma placed on mental health illnesses. Among some believers, the misguided and dangerous words like “increase your faith and pray more” add to the problem. Imagine telling someone with coronary disease, diabetes, or cancer to pray more, and you’ll be healed. Prayer, while significant for those who suffer any illness (physical or mental), prayer void of help seems incongruent with God’s way. Yes, medicine, physicians, and counselors all played essential roles in the Bible to help those dealing with physical and mental illnesses.

One category of mental illness that makes worshipping a tremendous challenge is anxiety disorders. I’m not talking about a bit of anxiety or the controllable anxiety that Jesus referred to in his sermon (Mt. 6). I am talking about what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM-5) refers to as “excessive fear and anxiety and related behavioral disturbances.” The DSM-5 refers to fear as the “emotional response to real or perceived imminent threat, whereas anxiety is the anticipation of future threat.”

There are numerous anxiety disorders. They include separation anxiety, selective mutism, specific phobia, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety disorder. While each condition is different, their commonality is that each disturbance “causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, academic, occupational, or other important

areas of functioning” (DSM-5). Anxious distress and impairment are undoubtedly true with going to worship on Sunday.

For the believer with generalized anxiety disorder, going to worship calls for the sacrifice of their uncontrollable worry. For the agoraphobic Christian whose unbelieving spouse refuses to go to Sunday worship, the sacrifice is being outside the home alone and being in a crowd. For the believer with panic disorder, the sacrifice includes the fear of losing physical control and “going crazy.” The Christian with social anxiety sacrifices the extreme fear of conversation, meeting people, or being watched. Sometimes, the anxiety is so overwhelming that the best they can do at times is worship alone at home. This is much like the physically disabled Christian in the nursing home that wants nothing more than to overcome their physical ailments to be “back in church” on Sunday.

If the mental health illness of anxiety does not challenge you, try to put yourself in the shoes of those who experience anxiety. Imagine your greatest fear. Now, multiply it times 1,000. It weighs on you daily and most of the day. You find it nearly impossible to function, and it challenges your work and relationships. Now imagine having all of this on your mind while trying to worship. Perhaps you have a glimpse into how some believers offer incredible sacrifices to God in worship.

Be observant, be compassionate, only judge righteously—which you cannot do unless you know the facts, be supportive, and advocate for help for those struggling with mental illness. Be consistent when it comes to caring for the sick. More people battle mental illness than cancer, diabetes, and heart disease combined. We care for these. Let’s care for all!

Suppose you are experiencing a clinical level of anxiety. Seek help. Many mental health disorders are more treatable than some physical illnesses. You do NOT have to do life alone. You do NOT have to endure your illness alone. You CAN experience greater life satisfaction.