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“Lengthening Your Life”

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Matthew 6:24-34

“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” That question is as timely today as when Jesus posed it 2,000 years ago. Has worrying ever done anyone any good? One definition of worry is to “...torment oneself with disturbing thoughts, to feel unnecessary uneasiness or anxiety.”

I would like to know if worrying has ever done anyone any good, because I have given large amounts of time and energy to that particular pursuit. Fortunately, life is always more than willing to provide a cornucopia of things to worry about. There are all manner of things we could endlessly fret about if we had a mind to.

Jesus rhetorically asks if worrying can add even a single hour to our lives. Certainly he intended for his audience to answer with a resounding “No.” But if you’re at all analytical, you might well ask, “Who knows?”

If a woman is a worrier and dies at the age of 68 years, 114 days and 17 hours, who’s to say that without all that fretting, she would have lived to be only 68 years, 114 days and 16 hours? How can we possibly know? You can know by setting up a study using the scientific method, and just such a study has been done and was published in the December 2006 issue of the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* Medical Journal.

As far as we know, the researchers did not have Jesus’ point in mind — that worry cannot add even a single hour to one’s life — yet the study’s conclusion suggests that Jesus was right. Even more, it reveals a surprising flip side to that argument, suggesting that *not* being a chronic worrier can add not only an hour, but perhaps *years* to your lifespan.

This groundbreaking study began in the mid-60s when 7,000 students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a test that, among other things, measured participants’ tendency to be optimistic or pessimistic. Of that group, 1,630 were found by the test to be clearly pessimists and 923 to be clearly optimists. The rest fell somewhere in the middle. Over the next forty years, 476 of those who had taken the test died, from causes ranging from accident to illness to suicide to homicide.

By tracking and collating all of this information, researchers determined that *the*

pessimists had a significantly greater likelihood of dying sooner from any cause than did the optimists. As the report puts it, "... those who scored as pessimistic had decreased rates of longevity compared with optimistic individuals." It also said, "The current results replicate, in a non-medical sample, those of earlier studies which suggest that optimism is associated with increased survival."

Jesus knew what he was talking about, worrying isn't likely to add even an hour to your life; and if you stop worrying you'll live longer!

Of course, pessimism and worry are not entirely identical. Pessimism is the tendency to assume that most things ultimately drift toward negative outcomes. Worry, as opposed to pessimism, is a mental and emotional response of concern or even fear to vague or unspecified threats. To describe the difference another way, we could say that pessimism is an outlook about things in general and worry is a response to possibilities in particular.

Both states of mind are related to a lack of trust. Both cause a person to miss out on so much and to even create negative outcomes due to such expectations. Both are contrary to the sort of life Jesus calls us to live.

When Jesus posed this question, he went on to make clear that he was asking his followers to trust in God. He pointed to the birds that do not sow or reap, but are fed by God anyway. He pointed to the flowers that do not toil or spin, but are clothed by God anyway.

His words were directed to people who did have to sow, to reap, to toil and to spin to make their living, and he wasn't telling them to stop doing those tasks; he simply wanted them to understand that their lives were a lot more than the sum of their sowing, reaping, toiling, spinning.

Furthermore, Jesus tied trusting to the kingdom of God: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." That's a significant linkage because God's kingdom is the ultimate reason for optimism and hope. In the end, good triumphs over evil. In the end love conquers hate, and joy overcomes despair. If you are working to bring about God's kingdom —

and all who follow Jesus faithfully are — it's still possible that you might be pessimistic about human activity in the short run, but you've got every reason to

be optimistic about God's activity in the long run.

In fact, on another occasion, Jesus made that very point: "In this world you will have trouble. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"

So by bringing the kingdom of God into the discussion, Jesus reminds us that in the long haul, we who follow him have nothing whatsoever to worry about—not life, not death, not what happens after death. So it all makes logical sense to live this way, but that is easier said than done.

Besides, aren't there are some very valid reasons for us to worry?

First of all, the things most of us worry about are natural. Most of us don't live our days in anxiety over the next tsunami or when nuclear war will end life on earth. Most of our concerns are over valid issues like "Will I get a good report from the doctor?" or "Will my kids be happy and successful?" or "Will I outlive my money for retirement?" Everyone worries about things like this. We can't love someone without worrying about threats to his or her well-being. We cannot be sensitive persons without occasional concern that we haven't done all we should. We cannot listen to the news without some uneasiness about the direction this world appears to be going. That's normal

Secondly, there are times when worry can actually be a good thing. Normal worry causes us to take preventative measures against potential problems and even energizes us to make some significant and constructive changes in the way we live. If you are worried enough about lung cancer you will stop smoking, if you are worried enough about global warming you will drive less. Worry can be a motivating factor to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Third, worry is not always rational or logical—it can be instinctual. We cannot neatly compartmentalize anxiety and then talk ourselves out of it. Some worry tends to occur despite logical reasoning, for it's based more in our emotions than our thinking. And so it chatters at us, saying, "*This* may not work out, *that* could fall short, *so and so* may slip up, I may have not anticipated every contingency, whatever can go wrong probably will." Our minds keep processing those thoughts over and over, building up dread against our better judgement. It comes from the gut, not always the brain. Did you know there have been several dozen documented cases of spontaneous human combustion?

People actually can catch on fire for no apparent reason. Did you know that every year many people are electrocuted by hair dryers? Or that lightning strikes the

earth 6000 times a minute and kills hundreds of people every year? So many things to worry about that are beyond the power of logic to diminish.

So we've got very good reasons to worry. And yet, by rationalizing worry it is easy to miss the heart of what Jesus is talking about. His main point is this: Strive first for the kingdom of God and everything else will fall into place.

“Strive” means to exert a lot of energy and effort toward a goal. So, far from simply saying we should sit back and wait for the eventual coming of God's kingdom as an antidote to daily worry, Jesus is saying we should actively work for the spread of the kingdom. And as we do, some of the things we fret about are going to become non-issues because we've got more important things to think about.

Having more important things to think about is always the best antidote for worry. When you hear that you have cancer, suddenly everything else immediately falls into perspective. When you learn that a child is in serious trouble, you no longer care so much what others think of you. I wish we could ask those people who have died, those we are remembering today on Memorial Sunday, what they would have done differently if given the chance to live their lives over again. I would guess that without exception every one of them would have said that if they had it to do over again they would have worried less and laughed more, stressed less and enjoyed themselves more. They would have kept the big picture in mind, and not focused upon things that ultimately do not matter all that much.

Dr. Edward Hallowell is a child and adult psychologist who taught at Harvard for more than 20 years and is now writing books. Back in the 1990s, he was the one who brought Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to the public's awareness, but he's also made a study of worry, which is the subject of one of his books.

Writing about worry a few years ago for *Psychology Today* magazine, he said: “Talk to God when you feel worried.... Brain scans and EEG monitors show beneficial changes in the brain during meditation and prayer. The changes correlate with most of our measures of improved health, *including longevity* and reduced incidence of illness.”

Hallowell revealed that he is a practicing Christian, and so in an interview with *Psychology Today*, the interviewer asked him if that admission was a risk for someone of renown in the psychiatric community. He acknowledged that it was a

risk insofar as some people might dismiss him, but he added that he often advised patients to develop a spiritual life and, therefore, felt it was important to acknowledge his own. And he said that spirituality is a “very powerful part of longevity and good health.” He concluded, “In my case, a relationship with God is something which makes sense of my life in ways that nothing else can.”

Jesus was right, you cannot add a minute to your lifespan by worrying. Even though worry is natural, can be motivational and is even occasionally beneficial. It still won't add to your life. But you can add to both the length and quality to your life when you align yourself with the divine purpose that we find in God. When you seek first God's reality and God's longing for this world, you find ultimate meaning that this world can never give. And that, more than anything else, brings serenity in this life and a powerful promise for the life to come. May God help us to seek God first, so that everything else in our lives will fall into it's proper place. Amen.