

Fear Not

Author Scarlet Hiltibidal will freely admit she is “afraid of all the things.” In fact, that’s the title of her most recent book.

But in the midst of a global pandemic, Hiltibidal made a surprising admission to *Charisma*: “I’m not that anxious right now—which is weird, because I feel like the whole world is freaking out.”

She says that not to suggest the world is not in disarray and turmoil right now, but that the same methods she learned for coping with everyday anxiety and fear have served her well in this moment.

“The things that I’ve done since I was 25, the things I learned I could do, are the same things I’m doing now,” Hiltibidal says.

In this interview, Hiltibidal shares the habits and practices she uses to calm fear and how Christians can show love and empathy to those who are battling anxiety.

Set Your Mind

Hiltibidal, who says she started struggling with anxiety as a young child following her parent’s divorce, says the most important step to overcoming fear in this moment is to set your mind on something bigger than the pandemic.

“Colossians 3:2 says to set your mind on things above, not on earthly things,” Hiltibidal says. “I mean, if I could just put all of how I fight my fear into a nutshell, that’s it. ... Our own bodies right now are reminding us that the world is broken; we don’t have to look at the news or even go outside to know that. But if we focus on those things, that’s where the panic comes. If we focus on the death, those things lead

to death. But if we focus on eternal life, which is available to us, and the fact that we can have joy and peace inside that aren't dictated by our circumstances, ... that's how Paul was able to write the stuff he was writing, going through all the horrible things he was going through."

One way to do that, Hiltibidal suggests, is to remember what other difficult seasons that God has brought you through.

"I do this all the time, because I forget," she says. "When I remember my encounters with the Lord—especially when He was answering a specific prayer or working something horrible together for my good—in the past, I try to meditate on those things."

Another way to focus on something more important is to simply stop focusing on yourself. Go out and love your neighbor or help somebody in the community. As businesses and communities begin to reopen, there will still be plenty of at-risk people who need aid. This can mean concrete acts of service or simply listening and empathizing with their fears.

"Love your neighbor," Hiltibidal says. "Maybe you're not in the spot of intense anxiety anymore. But this is hard for everybody, because we all know or love somebody who's lost a job or is sick or is so afraid of getting sick. Try to be sensitive. And keep your eyes on the cross."

Hiltibidal also notes that the best prescription for fear is prayer and reading Scripture.

"No matter where your anxiety is coming from, being in God's Word and prayer is the thing you should do," she says. "... In Hebrews, it says God's word is living and active. Jesus is alive, and He's in that book, and He can communicate with us through that book. So when we experience God, it helps us be able to shift our focus off of the things that are making us afraid, and onto the God who's worthy of healthy fear and awe."

Hiltibidal also recommends resisting the urge to isolate yourself.

“I’m definitely one of those people who tends to isolate when things aren’t good,” she says. “I don’t want people to see me when I’m not bright and shiny feeling, you know? But doing that is the worst. Because if you actually let people into your struggle, you’ll be encouraged, and God will use you to encourage them. ... Be intentional. If you’re part of some kind of Bible study and now they’re meeting online, go to it. I was sick for a few weeks ... and so I skipped some stuff when I was really, really sick, but it made me realize how easy it is right now to be isolated. So I would just say, digitally keep people in your life right now.”

Love Your Neighbor

For others, the challenge posed by this season is different. Some people do not naturally battle fear and anxiety in their personal lives, and the current coronavirus pandemic has not changed that. So how can those people show love and empathy for those in their lives who are afraid?

Pulling on the teachings of Pastor Tim Keller, Hiltibidal says it starts by understanding that fear and anxiety can manifest in a variety of different ways and expressions, and it’s important to listen to their concerns rather than assuming their experience is the same as your own.

“Even if you’re not an anxious person, I think every Christian in particular can understand a spiritual anxiety,” Hiltibidal says. “I think we all wrestle with that. You could reword that and say it’s the struggle to trust God. Maybe something happens in your life and you say, ‘God, why did You let that happen?’ It’s that feeling.”

That feeling is understood by many Christians, but unfortunately, Hiltibidal says many believers assume that all cases of fear and anxiety follow that template. As such, they

can respond with truisms like “Don’t be afraid,” “Have hope in God” or “Trust that He has a plan.”

“I think too many people take the approach that [spiritual anxiety] is the only source of anxiety,” Hiltibidal says. “[They reply with] these verses where Jesus says, ‘Be anxious for nothing.’ But there are all these other factors. ... If you are living in sin—outright, unrepentant sin—then taking a pill for anxiety is not going to help you. Your anxiety should lead to repentance. But for example, if you have a thyroid problem—I had my thyroid cut out last year—or if you have a brain chemical imbalance, and then someone says, ‘You’re not reading your Bible for enough hours a day,’ it’s going to be really frustrating when you’re on hour three of your Bible reading but your thyroid levels are still messed up and causing physical anxiety and you’re hyperventilating.”

Hiltibidal says another possible cause of anxiety can be living in isolation, since the Bible says man was created to live in community.

All the different kinds of anxiety can seem complicated and perhaps overwhelming to the believer who wants to know how best to help their friend or family member. But Hiltibidal says it’s actually very simple. To show love, just listen—and truly listen—to their fears, show them that they are understood, walk alongside them, and pray for compassion and understanding where you lack it.

“Be sensitive and understand that the anxious person isn’t wanting to feel that way,” Hiltibidal says. “... It’s hard to be empathetic if you don’t understand, but just pray for compassion. Understand that Jesus came to this earth and He was a perfect person, but even He felt fear. He sweat blood. He asked God if there was another way. Fear is a real thing, and it’s a hard thing for everyone. We’re all really complicated, messed-up people, so just have compassion and be with them in it, rather than trying to fix it.” {eo}

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