

# LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing  
encounter with God's Word*

# ANXIETY

*God's presence meets us in our struggles,  
guiding us from anxious striving to deep trust.*

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NavPress



Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers



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*Anxiety: A Bible Study on Finding Peace in God's Presence*

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# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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## Objectives

The topical guides in the LifeChange series of Bible studies cover important topics from the Bible. Although the LifeChange guides vary with the topics they explore, they share some common goals:

1. to help readers grasp what key passages in the Bible say about the topic;
2. to provide readers with explanatory notes, word definitions, historical background, and cross-references so that the only other reference they need is the Bible;
3. to teach readers how to let God's Word transform them into Christ's image;
4. to provide small groups with a tool that will enhance group discussion of each passage and topic; and
5. to write each session so that advance preparation for group members is strongly encouraged but not required.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take forty-five minutes to complete.

## Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of anxiety. The key to interpretation for each part of this study is content (what is the referenced passage *about*?), and the key to context is purpose (what is the author's *aim* for the passage as it relates to the overall topic?). The individual lessons of the study each explore a person from Scripture who experienced some kind of anxiety and offer corresponding passages from the Bible that point us to God's compassion and invitations in the midst of it.

## Kinds of Questions

Bible study provides different lenses and perspectives through which to engage the Scripture: observe (what does the passage *say*?), interpret (what does the passage *mean*?), and apply (how does this truth *affect* my life?). Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, *Lord, what do You want me to see here?*, *Father, why is this true?*, and *Lord, how does this apply to my life?*

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you remember what you’re learning.

## Study Aids

Throughout the guide, there are study aids that provide background information on the passage, insights from commentaries, and word studies. These aids are included in the guide to help you interpret the Bible without needing to use outside resources. Still, if you’re interested in exploring further, the full resources are listed in the endnotes.

## Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the English Standard Version of the Bible (esv). Other versions cited are the Christian Standard Bible (csb), the King James Version (kjv), *The Message* (msg), the New International Version (niv), and the New Living Translation (nlt).

Use any translation you like for study—or preferably more than one. Ideally you would have on hand a good modern translation, such as the New International Version, the English Standard Version, the New Living Translation, or the Christian Standard Bible. It can also be helpful to consult a thought-for-thought translation, such as *The Message*.

## Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11, niv). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes each day just to think about what the

passage might mean in your life. Recite it to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to the passage as often as you can during the day for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

## For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows for the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other-sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and workplace Bible studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per meeting. This guide is formatted so you will be able to discuss each of the questions at length. Be sure to make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all the background and discussion questions to be covered. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray for one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another resist temptation, assure each other that each person's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. If you wish, you can spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons and discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow your time of sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down what others have shared, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about what they shared at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Taking notes during discussion will help you remember to follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and have clarity on an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating.

Some best practices for groups:

1. If possible, come to the group discussion prepared. The more each group member knows about the passage and the questions being asked, the better your discussion will be.
2. Realize that the group leader will not be teaching from the passage but instead will be facilitating your discussion. Therefore, it is important for each group member to participate so that everyone can contribute to what you learn as a group.
3. Try to stick to the passage covered in the session and the specific questions in the study guide.

4. Listen attentively to the other members of the group when they are sharing their thoughts about the passage. Also realize that most of the questions are open-ended, allowing for more than one answer.
5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion—especially if you are the leader. Allow time for everyone to share their thoughts and ideas.
6. As mentioned previously, throughout the session are study aids that provide background information on the passage, insights from commentaries, and word studies. Reading these aloud during the meeting is optional and up to the discussion leader. However, each member can refer to these insights if they found them helpful in understanding the passage.

## A Note on Topical Studies

LifeChange guides offer robust and thoughtful engagement with God's Word. The book-centric guides focus on a step-by-step walk through that particular book of the Bible. The topical studies use Scripture to help you engage more deeply with God's Word and its implications for your life.

# INTRODUCTION

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## Anxiety

ASK TWENTY-FIVE PEOPLE about their personal experience with anxiety, and you will likely receive twenty-five different answers. This has the potential to be beautiful: It points to a creative God and the unique ways He made us. But it can also be deeply frustrating to struggle to find common ground with others who experience anxiety. Anxiety isn't easily placed in a tidy box or prescribed a cure for. It is messy, difficult, and confusing. And it has a leading role in our culture: In a recent Household Pulse Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau, approximately one-third of adults surveyed reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression.<sup>1</sup>

In its most basic form, anxiety is the presence of worry. Feeling powerless unravels our fears. When our panic feels out of control or when our thoughts cannot stop spiraling, our bodies and actions reveal pent-up, hidden stresses. We are created by a sovereign God and given freedom by Him. However, as humans living in a broken world, we will be tempted to grasp for control instead of depending on God. Anxiety forms in us when we push back against the act of surrender. As beings who are created by a sovereign God *and* given freedom, we walk in a daily tension. In our human nature, we desire to pursue independence. But in our redeemed nature, our hearts are called to surrender to humility.

“Normal” anxiety—which often feels anything but normal—occurs when there is a specific stressful situation or problem in one’s life. The anxious feelings will last through the process of finding a resolution to that situation. When anxiety creeps up unexpectedly, feels hard to control, and lasts for a longer time, it may be due to an anxiety disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Anxiety is often placed in the category of mental health, but it can be misunderstood as only a physical ailment, where panic attacks send you to the hospital questioning your life. Anxiety can look big and scary, and it can feel like an actual elephant is sitting on your chest. And it can also look like a sleepless night, an angry outburst in the parking lot, or your leg tapping uncontrollably in the school car line.

The world tends to focus on symptoms and quick fixes. Humans are tempted to grasp at anything that eases the lack of control or bitterness we experience. It

is only through deep work (and sometimes outside help), however, that anxiety can move from being an enemy to being a friend. This deep work invites us to ask hard questions about ourselves to find the root that is producing branches of fear in our everyday lives.

Whether you or a loved one has wrestled with anxiety, this study is meant to meet you where you are. It holds six stories of people in the Bible who also understood the timeless fear of anxious experiences. From Martha and her desire for control to Jesus sweating blood in Gethsemane to Peter trying to overcome his own fear, people in the Bible show us how peace and anxiety can coexist with the power and presence of Jesus.

With a lot of patience and surrender, we can learn together that although anxiety is rooted in fear, it is not something to be feared in and of itself. It is a beautiful open door to a deeper relationship with Jesus, and it is an intimate place to feel His presence. Knowing that Jesus Himself experienced anxiety, we can accept the invitation to confidently walk in His footsteps through the struggle, praising our good God, from whom all blessings flow.

# MARTHA AND ANXIOUS CONTROL

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Luke 10:38-42

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED to be seen so badly that the worst parts of you have come out toward the least-deserving people? Maybe you've studied for eight hours for a final exam, fighting the sleep that called your name, only to get the same grade as your roommate, who didn't study. As a result, you take your anger out on them the next time you see them. Or maybe you and your spouse are arguing about who is more tired that day or who did more chores that week and you go to sleep fighting. Maybe, like Martha, you go out of your way to make sure you are seen for your actions because you'll feel inadequate if you don't. But in doing so, you make snide remarks to anyone who gets in your way or messes up your plans.

Martha is most known for her frustration and her focus on hospitality. She's never the person women (or men) want to be like. Her tunnel vision was bent toward serving, responding, and doing. Though sermons about this Scripture passage tend to focus on her sister, Mary, let's expend some empathy for Martha. As likely the oldest sibling of Mary and Lazarus,<sup>1</sup> she held on to more responsibility than they did in her household. It's safe to assume she craved depth and connection but came off as stressed and controlling instead. She carried the weight of welcoming guests into her home and managing their experiences and expectations.

Martha's identity proved to be rooted in pleasing: She yearned for Jesus to perceive her as "enough" by the appearance of her home and the quality of the meal she prepared. This desire to control people and situations is a familiar one.

Bible teacher Jennie Allen writes, "When Jesus walked the earth, story after story of His ministry confirmed how He cared about each person He came across. He cared about their mind. He cared about their body. He cared about their soul. He even cared about their emotions."<sup>73</sup>

In the story we'll read, we also see Martha's sister sitting at the feet of Jesus. This was a formal posture in the first century, reserved for recognized disciples. And people didn't include women or invite them into this posture—until Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Martha, already anxious about her home, seems to be tempted to control her sister's behavior with Rabbi Jesus as well. This is a big day with a special guest, and it is her time to shine. But Martha's anxiety gives her a narrow perspective, and she begins acting out of her lack of control over the situation. She trusts her need to please and perfect instead of trusting what Jesus can offer her. Tightening her grip on the home, Martha complains to Jesus about her sister's inattention to what seems most important and fails to see the presence of Jesus before her.

But Jesus gives her another chance. And instead of rolling His eyes and whispering judgmental comments with Mary in the corner, Jesus makes eye contact with Martha, gently says her name, and invites her into His presence of peace.

1. Read Luke 10:38-42. What do you think would make Martha's list of worries?

2. How did Martha's worries differ from her sister's?

3. What are three things that would currently make your list of worries?

"Breathing a prayer to God is a simple way of using your body to engage your mind on the Word of God. Whispering the words of Scripture as you are breathing in and out, slowly and deeply, over and over, can help you to 'abide' in Christ (John 15:4, 5, 9).<sup>14</sup>

Practice: Try this breath prayer based on Psalm 23:1.

Breathe in: *The Lord is my shepherd.*

Breathe out: *I have everything that I need.*

4. In Martha's culture, maintaining and running a home was the epitome of a woman's identity. Keeping this in mind, what can we conclude about Martha's actions and heart?

5. In what situations do you, like Martha, tend to try to alleviate your anxiety by taking control? How have you resonated with Martha's worry over hosting others or caring for your family members?

6. Read Luke 10:39 once more. What is Mary doing?

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7. Since women weren't yet invited to sit at the feet of rabbis in the first century, what additional fears might Mary's actions have raised for Martha underneath her controlling behavior?

"What Martha was doing was providing hospitality and welcome, and this was vitally important in the culture of the time. In first-century Palestine, hospitality was (and still is) about allowing the guest to share the sacredness of the family space. The women's role was (and still is in many households) to do the cooking and food preparation. Martha was doing just what was expected of her.

"What was unexpected was what Mary was doing.

"It was very unusual for Jewish Palestinian women to join male guests before they are done with all the food preparation. And even more unusual for a woman to be sitting amongst the men in the posture of a disciple."<sup>15</sup>

8. What was Jesus' posture toward Martha? What were his words to her? Why were these significant for her anxiety and her desire for control?

"It is easy to look at all we do and to criticize those who don't seem to do as much. But Martha's real problem wasn't Mary; it was Martha. She had become distracted and had taken her eyes off Jesus.

"Martha's frustration is typical of those who diligently serve with good intent, but forget to *also* sit at Jesus' feet."<sup>6</sup>

9. Consider whether you've ever met someone like Martha. If so, what has been your posture toward them? If not, how do you imagine you might respond to them?

10. When have you experienced Jesus' redirection of your gaze and the calming presence of His peace when you've been focused on controlling good things but missing the best thing? Did you notice a shift in your anxiety and desire to control?

The phenomenon of encountering our smallness is called unselfing. Author Hannah Brencher explains, "Unselfing is what happens when we turn away from ourselves and look outward. Our bodies react in pretty miraculous ways. Our nervous system calms down, and there's a release of oxytocin—the chemical that stirs up feelings of love and trust within us. We feel more connected to others. Our worries hush. Our mental chatter grows quieter. We become less self-absorbed."<sup>77</sup>

## Your Response

We could focus on many things today, but only one is needed. How do the following verses address your tendency to grasp for control? Which passage meets you most where you are today?

Matthew 6:25-34

Luke 21:33-34

## Philippians 4:6-7

## For Further Study

We meet Martha again in John 11. Take time to read John 11:17-32. How has Martha grown here? How is her inner anxiety and desire for control displaying itself?