**Anxious Heart Conference**

Good [morning/evening], sisters, it is a joy to be with you this weekend. My name is Sarah, and I have been blessed to be a part of the community here at First Baptist since I was a child. As we open up this timely and much-needed discussion about anxiety, it’s my joy to share with you some of what the Lord has done in my life. This is my story, yes, but ultimately, it is His, and it is all for His glory and praise.

In my life, I’ve seen that it is possible to suffer from dark, intense, even debilitating anxiety while desiring to be faithful as a Christian. Personally, I am someone whose mind has been badly storm-tossed by chronic anxiety. I am someone who has faced deep depression, fear, and despair, and I am someone who has many times doubted the Lord’s sovereignty, goodness and faithfulness. But by the grace of God, I am also someone who the Lord, in His great kindness, has cared for and provided for at each and every moment. I am someone who has received renewed life and abundant grace through Jesus Christ. I am someone God has healed, and continues to heal, from anxiety.

Before sharing more, I think it’s important to define anxiety. It’s different than the occasional worry. It’s more than feeling nervous. Anxiety can be defined as an intense fear based on irrational thinking or untrue beliefs. Anxiety distorts our perception of reality and, in severe cases, can cause mental, spiritual, and physical collapse. It can be exacerbated by many things - unmet expectations, unrealistic goals, trauma, grief, prolonged stress, illness, and sin struggles - but it is ultimately rooted in our thoughts and beliefs. Anxiety assails our minds with fear about things that may or may not ever actually happen. Anxious thoughts usually begin with, “What if?” See if any of these sound familiar. What if I fail? What if I’m not sufficiently prepared for the future? What if no one actually likes me, and everyone abandons me? What if God calls me to do something I’m afraid of? What if my efforts never make a difference in anyone else’s life? What if I suffer heartbreak or betrayal? What if I experience illness or infertility? What if I never have a Godly marriage? What if my children don’t know Jesus? What if I’m not actually a Christian? What if all of my worst fears come true? What if?

Let me share with you, sisters, as one who has lived this: Hopefully, most of your worst fears will never actually happen. But even if they do, as several of mine did, God will always be faithful to you. He is the good King on His throne, who has promised to be near to the brokenhearted, and save those who are crushed in spirit. The Lord has taught me that personally experiencing His merciful care through times of suffering is actually better than having a happy little story where everything always works out just as we’d like it to.

Looking back, I have been prone to anxiety as long as I can remember. Even as a child, I lived most of my life with an unnamed fear whose object I couldn’t quite place. Though God brought me to salvation during my childhood, my faith was young and my understanding was limited. Unexpected changes in life, even minor ones, and the unknowns of the future caused me tension and fear. This fear led me to a desire to achieve perfection and control. I always wanted to have a plan. I always wanted to be prepared. In my unrealistic thinking, I subtly believed I needed to do something amazing to secure approval from God, and so I spent years anxiously praying about His “purpose” and “will” for my life, as if it were a great mystery to solve. Eventually, I arrived at the plan that I thought would be most pleasing to God. After college, I set off for the international mission field with much excitement. My anxiety, though still present, was manageable up to this point. In fact, I wouldn’t have even been able to accurately understand anxiety before this.

As many of you have experienced, sometimes our lives turn out quite differently than we expect. Beginning in 2016, I experienced a series of painful personal trials. Within just a few years, I lost each aspect of the plan for my life. I lost the dream of being a missionary. For years, I lost the dream of being a wife, mother, and homemaker. I lost the dream of being a high-performing individual. The grief of those years plummeted me into a dark depression that lasted nearly five years, and eventually I lost all sense of identity and the ability to function in daily life.

In this season, my anxiety eventually resulted in a complete inability to live as normal. For five consecutive years, I experienced physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual symptoms of anxiety. This looked like racing thoughts, chest pain, muscle tremors, dizziness, brain fog, insomnia, panic attacks, hyperventilation, and night terrors. On the worst days, I wished not to live any longer. My emotions ranged from intense fear, to sadness, to hurt, to anger, to numbness. My belief in God’s sovereignty and His goodness was shaken. In my confusion and pain, I couldn’t reconcile what I believed about God, with what I was experiencing. I could see no plan, no way forward. I didn’t have a category in my theology for mental and emotional suffering as a Christian.

My sisters, anxiety is a real issue that we can experience, even while trying to be faithful followers of Christ - perhaps especially so if we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to be high-functioning Christians and in practice operate from our limited strength rather than rest in Jesus’ perfect, finished work on our behalf. Yes, anxiety is a real problem, but there is good news - real problems have real solutions. Anxiety is not a death sentence, and you are not a failure or lesser Christian if you experience it. Rather, God lovingly plans and allows this type of trial because it is exactly what we need in order to learn to depend on Him, not ourselves. God taught me that the events of my life were His plan A, not plan B. The Lord allowed me to hit rock bottom, so to speak, so I could land upon Him, the solid and sure foundation upon which to rebuild my life.

During this painful season, my family reached out to the leaders of our church, and my healing process began. There are many helps and tools that have supported my recovery. The Scriptures teach us that the ultimate antidote to anxiety is trusting in the truth of God’s Word. The remedy for anxiety is, in one word, truth. The best definition I’ve heard for mental wellbeing is “an unwavering commitment to reality at all costs.” And the reality we desperately need is found in Scripture. True peace comes from trusting in the One who is unchanging - God - and believing His promises are actually true for us. Due to the severity of my condition, in order to even be able to receive the truth in a meaningful way, I needed immediate and comprehensive care - for my mind, body, and heart.

Essentially, I needed a complete reset. By God’s grace, and with a lot of help from our pastors, family, and trusted friends, I began to rebuild my life from the ground up, on the solid foundation of truth. Under the counsel of our pastors, I took time off work to attend Christian counseling. I established a simple but consistent daily routine. I limited commitments to create margin in my schedule. I began to exercise regularly and eat a more nutritious diet. I learned how to identify my emotions (fear, anger, sadness) and process them in a healthy way. In addition, I learned how to use grounding techniques to engage the five senses in moments of heightened anxiety in order to break the cycle of vicious thoughts. Due to the severity of my condition, I did also utilize prescription medications under professional guidance for a time. This supported me through the early, acute phases of anxiety.

As I grew more steady, I learned how to gently but firmly challenge my irrational fears with truth found in God’s Word and to bring those fears into the light. Scripture tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Quite literally, we have the ability to create new pathways in our brains by replacing untrue thoughts with true ones. Every single untrue thought we have, can be replaced with reality found in Scripture. The counselors who assisted me taught me that it is actually possible to fully rewire unhelpful thinking patterns in 3-5 years. This was true for me.

I began to keep a simple gratitude journal, because it’s impossible to be anxious and thankful in the same moment. In addition, enjoying the beauty God provides us in His created world helped me see and appreciate God’s care and designs. Spending time in nature, and listening to beautiful music, were also helpful in lifting my gaze to God, the source of beauty and goodness.

As my mind and body began to heal, over time, my heart did too. I slowly became able to think again, and began to meditate on the attributes of God, and His promises to His people. The Lord brought me back to the simple, beautiful truths of the Gospel - that my standing before God is entirely by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ - not my ability to achieve or perform in a certain way. As a Christian, God was already fully pleased with me, just because I am His child. And if God could meet my greatest need - salvation - He could be trusted to provide for every one of my lesser needs.

Another help was repeating a simple prayer to God while breathing deeply, “Father (inhale), I belong to You (exhale).” I began to learn that, if I know how to be anxious, I also know how to mediate on what is true. Instead of flooding my mind with worry, I learned to flood myself with truth - that God is good, and He gives perfect peace to those who fix their minds on Him. In counseling, I learned how to take control of my thoughts, rather than be controlled by them. Also, instead of spiraling into obsessive thinking over the “what if” questions, I learned how to create a practical plan should my fears come true.  Over time, I’ve learned experientially, deep-down, that God is both good and holy. Because He is holy, He can do no wrong. Therefore, He can do no wrong to me, and I can trust Him in everything He does. Everything that He allowed into my life, and everything He withheld from it, was meant for His glory and my good, even if I never saw the whole picture. Studying the books of Job, Lamentations, and 1 Peter brought much comfort as well.

Nearly every day during those years, my dad told me, “Better days are ahead.” And just a handful of years later, I can tell you, he was right. Today, my life has been restored to better than before. I have experienced tremendous healing. God has given me deep joy and trust in Him. He has given me assurance of salvation. He has put a song in my heart and brought light to my countenance, a smile to my face and laughter to my lips. Are there still hard days? Yes, sometimes. Do I still experience moments of anxiety? Yes, on occasion. But God has graciously equipped me with effective tools I can use in moments of need. The hard days are much fewer, and much less intense. God has done more for me than I could have ever imagined possible. He has healed my anxiety, yes - but more importantly, He has shown me Himself.

Sisters, if you are suffering from anxiety, I encourage you first to seek help from a pastor, trusted friend, or Christian counselor, so that you can identify the source of your anxiety and create a plan to recover. Second, I encourage you even today to reframe those “What if” questions of anxiety. What if, in God’s great love and care for you, He allows you to suffer for a just little while, so that you can be made like your Savior, Jesus? What if Jesus’ warm compassion is most drawn out by just the thing you are afraid to face - your lack of control over life’s circumstances? What if He allows you to be weak and fragile, so you can see your deep need of Him? What if all of your plans fail, and all your dreams collapse, and you find Christ that much more sweet and precious at the end? What if God can actually be trusted to meet every one of your needs? What if He really does forgive you and declare you His daughter? What if He has created you to deeply enjoy Him, and has allowed you to be part of His great story of redemption? What if God has planned something immensely more beautiful for your life than you could have ever imagined?

How blessed are we when we lose the lesser things in which we put our confidence, for then we realize that Jesus is all we really need - indeed, all we ever really had.

You see, sister, if you are a Christian, God knows exactly what you need in order to be made more like His Son. He will often test us in the areas most dear to our hearts - marriage, motherhood, ministry - so that our faith can be tested as gold purified through fire and proven genuine. As our pastors have long taught, times of testing are not for Him to find out if our faith is genuine, but for us to be certain that we are His, fully and forever. Every single trial that we experience passes through the hand of a good, sovereign God before it ever enters our life. And He has provided many means of grace and help for us along the way.

This has been God’s mighty work in my little story. Sister, please believe me when I say, if the Lord can heal me, He can heal you, too. You are in a church family that cares really, really well for broken and hurting women. This is a safe place with safe pastors, and I encourage you to lean into this church family if you are suffering from anxiety. So much hope and healing and joy are possible once you bring your story into the light. If you allow it, the truth will heal and remake your mind and heart as you travel through this life and on to Glory. Thank you.