JAIMIE ECKERT

Psalms for the Scrupulous

14 DAYS OF COMFORT FOR ANXIOUS BELIEVERS

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FOR ANXIOUS
BELIEVERS

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To confused, doubting souls who crave the
warm touch of our Savior's hand.

How to Use This Devotional

Dear friend, I'm glad to meet you within the pages of this short devotional. For the next two weeks, I'd like to join you each day in the sacred pages of Scripture. We'll be traveling back in time to a quiet hillside in ancient Judea, to a throne room of promise, to a gilded tabernacle. Here, the Psalms were written by David, Asaph, the Sons of Korah, and others. For thousands of years, doubt-filled, suffering believers have soaked up comfort from these words.

As you read through these short devotionals over the next two weeks, I would encourage you to do so with a spirit of release. OCD infuses you with a spirit of over-responsibility, but the message of the gospel is a message of how Jesus steps into our place and carries our burdens. I know you may be tempted by the obsessive "validity questions" and chronic doubts. You may feel that you need to fix this or fix that in order to be acceptable to God. Please try to come to God's Word *despite* such feelings.

The Psalms speak to you—yes, you! No matter how much doubt or sin or insincerity you think you have, recognize that God is the one who promises to fix all these things through Christ. Release your feelings of personal responsibility and come to the Word. Come, and allow it to speak comfort to your soul.

If you find yourself triggered by a certain element of the text, don't be discouraged. As you well know, exposing ourselves to uncomfortable ideas is an important part of overcoming OCD. Just like the little pinprick of a needle gives us pain while delivering life-saving medicine, so, too, will God's Word pierce us as a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). But it pierces only to heal. I trust that as you persevere, you will find healing in the words of these ancient poems.

I have chosen to emphasize the elements of hope and comfort that are found in the Psalms. I recognize that there are many other elements to the Christian life that deserve discussion, but I have had to limit myself in this very short work. It is my assumption that you are already connected with a Bible-believing church where these other important elements of Christian growth are being addressed. However, since the comforts and consolations of Scripture are our best medicine, I have emphasized these elements here.

The Bible was written over a span of 1,500 years by nearly 40 different authors. Each of its 66 books speak to very different times, places, and audiences. Anxious believers typically get "stuck" on the passages speaking to the impenitent and rebellious. However, I'd like to suggest that what you need to hear most is a message of comfort and courage.

Certainly, we all have messes in life. We all have things that need to be fixed and temptations that need to be resisted. But none of this is possible unless we have the courage to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). So which comes first—fixing ourselves up, or coming to Christ? The gospel message argues that our "coming" is before our "fixing." This is because fixing cannot happen apart from the grace of Christ.

That is why I hope to inspire you with a strong belief that you may come, and should come, and must come. I hope that as you read the psalms, you will be overwhelmed with a lovely view of God's character which will drown out doubt and fear.

So thank you—thank you for coming along with me on this journey through the beautiful book of psalms. I'll see you on day 1!

Jaimie Eckert

Psalm 37

Day 1

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord,

And He delights in his way.

Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down;

For the Lord upholds him with His hand.

Those of us with scrupulosity tend to see the world in very black-and-white terms. I'm either a good person or a bad person. I'm *always* ethical or I'm *never* doing the right thing. If I make one mistake, I leave God's favor forever. However, the Bible doesn't support such rigid dichotomies.

In Psalm 37, David writes about this so-called "good man." Perhaps when you hear the phrase "good man" (or "good woman"), you feel a sense of craving to be counted worthy of this title. Wouldn't it be wonderful to hear the glorious voice of Christ saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21)? To be called "good" feels so safe and cozy. Nothing bad can happen to us if we are "good."

But according to the text, the good man is not the rigidly perfect person that scrupulosity tries to imagine. Despite his general lifestyle being "delightful" to the Lord, this good man falls sometimes! He makes mistakes and even sins. But guess what? Even though he falls, "he shall not be utterly cast down." It's worthwhile to repeat what we all know—that there's a difference between *falling* down and *staying* down.

The real key difference for the good man is that he is upheld by God's hand. He allows God to work in his life, picking him up when he stumbles, progressing onward "from faith to faith" (Romans 1:17). Unlike the others, the truly good man does not rely on his own hand. He doesn't fold in half to gaze at his navel, hoping for some goodness to be produced from within himself. He is fully reliant on a power outside of and above himself, just as the sunflower takes everything it needs for growth from the sun and soil.

The Bible is clear about the dangers of self-trust. There are stern warnings against the man who "trusts in man and makes flesh his strength" (Jeremiah 17:5). Ultimately it is a self-defeating process to look inward for strength. How can we be a "good" man (or woman)? First of all, it is by recognizing that we will stumble from time to time. We will make mistakes, and that does not mean we are damned. And secondly, when we do make mistakes, we allow God to uphold us with His hand rather than diving into a spiritual do-it-yourself attempt.

Dear friend, today's a new day. You might make some mistakes. You might even sin. But when you fall, remember that you will not be utterly cast down, because the Lord upholds you with His hand.

Psalm 97

Day 2

The Lord reigns; Let the earth rejoice;

Let the multitude of isles be glad!

Clouds and darkness surround Him;

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.

Do you ever get stuck on difficult spiritual questions? Do you go around and around in your mind, trying to explain the "tough stuff" about God? Part of this is probably from your OCD brain, which craves a sense of certainty more than others. But part of this is also an age-old struggle that believers have experienced from generation to generation.

From the very beginning of time, we've wanted to pry the lid off of omniscience and peer into the infinite fountain of divine knowledge. And God, in His wisdom, pushes the lid back down. When we come face to face with our limited human insight, we have two choices. One option is to kick and buck and insist on knowing the unknowable (which only gets us stuck in a loop of obsession and rumination). The second option is to respond like the faithful Israelites: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of the law" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

But what about those questions that seem *really* important to figure out? For example, the questions about who God really is, and why He does the things He does?

In Psalm 97, the psalmist paints a descriptive picture of God. He says that the Lord is surrounded by clouds and darkness. It is a dim, eerie image that seems to describe God as hidden—He does not reveal everything about Himself, and many times we feel that He is behind a dark veil. This image, taken by itself, could make it difficult for us to trust Him. But the psalmist goes on to add an important detail that makes God's hiddenness easy to accept: *righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.*

Just like earthly nations have constitutions that guide the actions of its people and leaders, God's throne is also established upon core principles which He does not circumvent: righteousness and justice. You may have the tendency to get stuck on difficult spiritual questions, but remember this: God will never break the principles of His own government. We may not understand all things now, but we can be sure that righteousness and justice are the guiding principles of divine decisions.

The next time you feel tempted to hop onto the obsessive merry-go-round about a question you've already hashed and rehashed many times before, try reminding yourself that it's okay to not figure this out. It's more than enough to recognize that whatever the answer is, God will surely make it right in the end.

Psalm 84

Day 3

How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...
For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
The Lord will give grace and glory;
No good thing will He withhold from those
who walk uprightly.
O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man who trusts in You!

Have you ever thought about your scrupulosity as a blessing?

Yes, I know the constant anxiety is difficult and can even prevent some people from functioning normally. But far too often, we lament our OCD so much that we may fail to see the blessings that can come out of trials.

Think of the famous hymn writer Fanny Crosby, for example. She wrote hymns that have soothed troubled souls and given us courage to grasp the hand of our loving Savior. Surely you've sang the words of her hymns, "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," To God Be the Glory," and "Blessed Assurance." But did you know that Fanny Crosby was blind? Her very first poem described her condition of blindness. She later wrote, "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me." Later biographers believe her blindness may have contributed to her excellent memory and ability to compose her lyrics entirely in her mind.

What about those of us with scrupulosity, then? Is there some redeeming quality of this disorder that allows us to know God more intimately? I would call your attention to the fact that scrupulosity keeps our minds nearly always upon some spiritual or moral theme. Scrupulous people are generally highly conscientious and deeply spiritual. Read the beautiful words of Psalm 84. Oh, nothing is better than to dwell in the house of God! My heart longs to be with Him! We've all felt that godly desire pulsing through our soul. And in times when (like everyone else) we fail to feel God's presence, we suffer more keenly than others.

As a person with scrupulosity, it's possible that you may experience longings for God and heaven more acutely than believers who do not have OCD. Sometimes these longings morph into anxiety, which is not good, but the longings themselves tie us to our heavenly Father. Constant spiritual longings can keep us from straying into the world. Yes, if Fanny Crosby could find a blessing in her blindness, surely we can find a blessing in our scrupulosity, too!

Today, try to see your obsessions as a way that your heart is reaching out for God with longing and desire. Surely, we need to learn how to extract the anxiety from the experience, but beneath the anxiety there's something beautiful: a constant orientation towards the Lord. And that's something we can call a "blessing."

Psalm 81

Day 4

I am the Lord your God,

Who brought you out of the land of Egypt;

Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.

I can still remember a question I raised during my teen years when scrupulosity had a hard-fisted control over me. My obsessive spirituality made me feel that pursuing truth came at the expense of peace and happiness. Was it worth it? "If you had to choose," I asked my friends and family, "would you rather have truth or happiness?"

My loved ones rushed to point out that truth and happiness are not mutually exclusive. They reminded me of the obvious fact that that truth leads to happiness. But for my scrupulous mind, this was not an obvious conclusion.

Truth was to follow God, taking up the cross. *Happiness* was to follow my own earthly desires. And these—I firmly believed—could not possibly coexist.

Perhaps this came from the constant internal static of my OCD brain, telling me that something was wrong with my relationship with God. If I couldn't think of a specific sin to confess, I'd feel compelled to sacrifice something I enjoyed. I always needed to be lowering myself or giving things up. In the process of self-abnegation, I neutralized Scripture's message of joy and fulfillment.

Unfortunately, this is a common thread among people with religious OCD. I can't tell you how many scrupulous clients and readers I've talked with who believe the Christian's life is supposed to be one of continual sacrifice and suffering. "Take up your cross daily," they quote from Luke 9:23, and in one sweeping motion negate hundreds of other verses about desire, joy, happiness, and fulfillment.

How about today's verse for meditation from Psalm 81:10? "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." Don't you just love that imagery of opening your mouth wide, like a baby bird in a nest, straining and squeaking for the mother bird to come and drop a worm inside? It's an invitation for us to have a certain attitude towards God—an attitude of expectation. An attitude that believes in God's goodness and generosity, not merely His needed discipline.

See, we like to pinhole God into one single category. Those of us with OCD tend to be black-and-white thinkers. This often means we have a hard time seeing complementary-but-different aspects of God's character. But the reality is that God's character is a rainbow of attributes. Selecting only one attribute to the neglect of others can be limiting and even damaging. For example, there is beauty in seeing God's sacrificial nature in giving His only-begotten Son. This element is to be mirrored in our own life of self-sacrifice—that is, we take up our own cross daily and are willing at any moment to give up our own desires. But that's not the *only* attribute of God. Another attribute is His extravagant generosity. "Open your mouth wide," He says, "and I will fill it."

Are you just as willing to be filled as you're willing to be emptied? People who don't have scrupulosity have the opposite problem, but *you* probably need to be reminded of God's desire for you to be filled with blessings. Throughout today, look for the many ways in which God, like a mother bird, is dropping generous goodness into your life.

Psalm 77

Day 5

"In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;

My hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing;

My soul refused to be comforted."

We all have those days—those really hardcore OCD days—when nothing seems to get us out of our obsessive blues. We can identify with the psalmist when he says, "My soul refused to be comforted." Sometimes, we can do all the right things to feel better, but it simply doesn't work.

I can remember a particularly difficult time in my journey with emotional health when my soul refused to be comforted for a really long time. It wasn't just hours or days or weeks. For *months* I struggled with a sense that God had abandoned me. In this dark tunnel of depression and spiritual hopelessness, I feared that I would never be happy again. I feared that I might even have a mental breakdown. When I opened my Bible to find comfort and connection with God, it was like licking the desert floor—it felt so dry it choked me.

It wouldn't have bothered me to read my Bible in such dryness if I had no sweet memories of being soothed and comforted by God's Word in the past. But digging deep and coming up empty made me feel like something was wrong with me, the so-called "believer." My doubts sent me into intense cycles of rumination which can only be described by the psalmist's words, "my soul refused to be comforted."

However, the beautiful part of this verse reminds us that the writer was still seeking. "In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; my hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing." Despite the fact that his weary, depressed soul wouldn't budge. Despite the bad feelings. Despite the mental chaos. He kept stretching out his hand to seek the Lord.

Something that is common to scrupulosity is a deep-seated fear that something is wrong with us and our spiritual experience. The chronic doubt of OCD edging into our religious life gives us a constant sense of unease and vigilance. There are two ways that people with scrupulosity respond: either they become hyper-engaged in their spiritual disciplines and rituals, or they avoid religion completely. These two responses are typical of what I like to call "engaged types" and "avoidant types."

Although engaging intensely with our compulsions isn't the healthiest option (which we will talk about more on other days), avoidance isn't helpful, either. Avoiding our place of worship because we fear being triggered, or ceasing our prayer life altogether because praying makes us anxious isn't the answer to our scrupulosity. When we are in a desperate place in which our souls refuse to be comforted, the answer isn't to back away — we must keep stretching our hand out to God, trusting that He has a way to bring balance and calm back into our lives.

We don't need to figure out what's wrong or how He's going to do that. All we need to do today is keep stretching out our hand, trusting that He will grab ahold of it.

"I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand" (Isaiah 42:6).

Psalm 57

Day 6

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me!
For my soul trusts in You;
And in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge,
Until these calamities have passed by.
I will cry out to God Most High,
To God who performs all things for me.

Valerie was a young woman whose life had been miraculously spared from death as a young child. When she developed scrupulosity later in life, her obsessions centered around the idea that God had spared her for a purpose. She became intensely vigilant about being successful and doing something meaningful with her life. When she wasn't at the top of her class or when she made mistakes, it was a fatal blow that would send her into a spiral of anxiety.

Valerie's close encounter with death had ended well, but the traumatic experience still impacted her many years later. In particular, the spiritual interpretation of the event became a driver for her obsessive-compulsive cycles. It is not always the case, but fairly often those of us with scrupulosity have undergone spiritual traumas or have affixed a spiritual interpretation to other types of traumatic events. Then, like Valerie, we become obsessive about fulfilling the rigid requirements of that self-made spiritual task master.

Valerie's view of God was that He had spared her for a reason, and if she didn't live up to the impossibly high ideal she believed Him to have for her, He would remove His protection from her again. But what does the Bible say? In Psalm 57, we read that it is "God who performs all things for me." Wow! This is a huge leap away from scrupulosity's tendency to make us feel responsible for…well, everything.

This was an emphasis that Valerie needed in her life. She needed to recognize that God is not a task-master. He is not exacting strict performances. He does not watch for us to clock in and clock out. Instead, He invites us to let *Him* do awesome things in us. As it says in the New Testament, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). This was not a new idea in Paul's day. David wrote the same awe-inspiring sentiment when he said, "I will cry out to God Most High, to God who performs all things for me."

All of us with scrupulosity must come to the point where we recognize we are at the end of ourselves. This disorder gives us a hyperactive sense of responsibility, and, like Valerie, we feel pressured to constantly perform. But this pressure is not from God! Like a loving Father, He is saying, "here—let me handle that for you."

This passage makes me think of a little child who has tried and tried to tie her shoes but can't quite figure it out. Finally, she looks up to Daddy and cries out for help. Daddy has been watching, giving her the space to try on her own and recognize her need for help. When she cries out, he quickly stoops down, a smile on his face, and helps her tie her shoes. There is no condemnation, no judgment, no expectations. He knows her limitations better than she does.

With scrupulosity, we all must come to the place where we stretch out our shoelaces to God. All our obsessions, intrusive thoughts, and compulsive urges pressure us to "fix" ourselves, but God lovingly says, "here—let me handle that for you." Dear friend, why don't you let Him handle all your fears for you today?

Psalm 3

Day 7

But You, O Lord, are a shield for me,
My glory and the One who lifts up my head.

Humility is important, right? Absolutely! But far too often we go overboard with humility when we have religious OCD. Somehow, humility translates in our minds as "putting ourselves down."

As a university student, I was once working with a large Christian youth convention. Most of my work involved backstage logistics and organization, but on the largest day of the event, my team asked me to go on stage to share some exciting mission statistics. I immediately cowered. I imagined standing in front of 6,000 people, all spotlights on me.

I went to my colleague and told him there was no way I could do it. I didn't have a problem with public speaking—on the contrary, I knew I could speak well. But I feared becoming prideful.

"There are two ways of looking at humility," my colleague told me. "Humility is either putting yourself down, or putting Christ up."

I did go on stage that night, and I never forgot his advice. The true Christian path is not one of of debasement—rather, it is one of infinite development and growth. When we enter Christ's service as His disciples, He begins restoring the true dignity and worth of humankind in us. This restoration to the Edenic ideal will be fully completed in the New Jerusalem, but it is a path we begin walking the moment we vow ourselves to Christ. Some have interpreted the Christian life as one of self-demerit and self-condemnation. Perhaps we do this if we have a low view of Christ. We may feel the need to put ourselves lower than Christ so that the hierarchy is maintained. But when we see Him in His infinite greatness and glory, we know we may rise higher and higher still and never threaten His glorious status. In Psalm 3, David reflects that the Lord is the one who "lifts up" his head. God's aim is to lift us up, to restore, to dignify—not to cast us down.

The apostle Paul wrote a similar idea to the church in Colosse. He warned them against following manmade traditions and commandments, telling them that "these things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:23). Notice, it can "appear" wise to impose manmade religious restrictions on ourselves, push ourselves down with false humility, and even neglect the body—but these things are of no value when it comes to the actual process of sanctification.

God never asked us to push ourselves down. He never asked for this "false humility." Instead, He wants to "lift up our head" and restore us to our true dignity. When we recognize that it is God who is our glory, and not we ourselves, there is no danger of us becoming prideful.

Let's not listen to those scrupulous thoughts that tell us to push ourselves down. Let's not avoid doing great things because we fear becoming prideful. Let us look upon Christ, who is our glory and the lifter up of our heads.

Psalm 131

Day 8

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty.
Neither do I concern myself with great matters,
Nor with things too profound for me.
Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with his mother;
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.

Just a week after I learned about my scrupulosity, I talked with a pastor who knew a bit about it. He told me that Psalm 131 is the OCD chapter, and I ought to study it until I understood how and why.

When I sat down with my Bible and read Psalm 131, I was stumped. What could it possibly mean for OCD? I spent several days wrestling with the passage until the answer finally dawned upon me, becoming a pivotal passage in my recovery. Let me share with you the hope that this psalm spoke into my own journey.

David begins the psalm with humility. He refutes a haughty heart, lofty eyes, great matters, and profound things. But there is a hint in the passage that he has not always been this way. He says, "Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul." Notice that he does not say "I have always been calm, quiet, and humble." No—he can refute the lofty eyes and addiction to great matters because he has gone through an experience of calming himself from these grand pursuits.

David had, at some point, been stuck on "great matters" and "things too profound" for him. This is so similar to religious OCD. We crave answers that we can never have in this life. We try to peer through the curtain into eternity. In a way, our hunger for all-knowing omniscience is a way that we try to play God.

Have you ever gone round and round in your head, trying to figure out if you'll be saved or not? Yep—that's one of those "great matters." Have you lost sleep over fine points of doctrine, insisting that you "must" know the answer? Maybe it's one of those "things too profound" for you.

But I get it—it really *feels* like we need to know! David understood that, also. The metaphor he uses to describe how he "calmed and quieted his soul" is that of a weaned child with his mother.

Keep in mind that in ancient Israel, children were probably weaned much later than they are today, perhaps at the age of three or four. My best friend weaned her son at age three. It was a tough process for the little guy. He felt very dependent on the connection with his mother, and when she withheld the breast from him, he felt like he was missing something quite necessary for life.

Sometimes he would get upset. Sometimes he would cry. But in the process of being weaned, he learned to do without something he *thought* he needs but no longer does.

This is what we must experience in our recovery from religious OCD. We *think* we need these answers, but we don't. We can step away from our addictive search for certainty by cultivating deep-seated trust in God rather than in our own ability to figure things out. When we get to the point of letting go of what we *think* we need, we'll be able to say with David, "Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul."

Psalm 4

Day 9

I will both lie down in peace, and sleep;
For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

I love sleeping. It's one of my favorite activities! Some people with OCD struggle with insomnia, but not me. Actually, when I was in the worst pit of depression, generalized anxiety, and OCD, I used to sleep 10 or more hours per night. It was a time I could "check out" of my anxiety. Now, of course I wouldn't recommend oversleeping as a good response to our mental health struggles. Nevertheless, many of us find solace in sleeping, and there is a lesson in that.

"I will both lie down in peace, and sleep," David writes, "For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

"Sleep" is something incredible. For one-third of our day, we release our control over everything. We aren't controlling the events around us. We aren't compulsively engaging in rituals that are meant to protect us. And if you listen to some of the sounds that come from sleeping people, you know that we aren't even controlling our own bodies!

Every day, we willingly enter a state of altered consciousness where we release control. Amazing! During the day, we consciously fight against letting go of our scrupulous concerns. But when nighttime arrives and our eyelids begin to drag, we *do* let go—at least for a few hours. And guess what? When we wake up, we are still alive. We are still okay. The things we feared haven't happened, even in our most vulnerable, unresponsive bodily state.

Bedtime is a great reminder that God is the one who makes us dwell safely. Every day for our whole lives, we've already been practicing something wherein we release personal control. That's exactly what we need to do to get better from our OCD, and you're already doing it!

The Ten Commandments are a powerful list of how to live a happy, harmonious life. Perhaps you've already thought about how peaceful the world would be if nobody ever murdered, cheated on their spouse, lied, or stole. Did you know that the fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment, also shows us how to experience the good life? In the fourth commandment, God actually tells us to rest every week. Wow! I'll bet your supervisor at work isn't urging you to take more breaks—but that's how God is! He wants us to stop, slow down, and rest.

The beauty of the Sabbath concept is that we are consistently stopping our own works to let God handle things. We rest to remember *His* works, *His* provision, *His* hand of safety. Daily sleep and weekly Sabbath remind us of the same thing: it's okay to let go.

The next time you slip into your cozy bed, think about your sleep habits. If you've released control of body and mind every night for so many years—and God has protected you all this time—what if you release control over the outcomes you're obsessively trying to create?

Psalm 16

Day 10

I have set the Lord always before me;
Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved.

One of the most distressing symptoms of religious OCD is intrusive thoughts—particularly blasphemous thoughts. Many people have the idea that thinking awful thoughts against God will damn them forever. They spend hours trying to figure out if they really meant to think the thought. They will even shout or make physical efforts to avoid allowing that thought in their minds.

If you have ever struggled with blasphemous thoughts, I'd like to recommend Psalm 16:8 for you. "I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved." This is relational language. David rejoices that he has security (that is, he will not be moved) because of his proximity to God. They are close to each other, and it is that relationship that gives him safety, not his own actions.

Think of all the crazy things David did in his own life! You'd think if anyone deserved final punishment, it would be this guy. He raped, lied, murdered, and didn't even bat an eye when his son Amnon turned into a rapist himself. What a crazy guy, this David.

And yet in humility he could admit that God was still with him. See, David didn't extract his sense of safety from his own list of righteous deeds. In actuality, his own checklist looked pretty awful. But what gave him a sense of security was the fact that he kept coming back to God. He never lost that connection and commitment.

People who suffer from the blasphemous thoughts of religious OCD always come circling back. They curse God unwillingly—the product of an OCD brain—and then they repent. There's calmness for a little while, and then the intrusive thoughts start back up again. It's a vicious cycle, but a predictable one. The typical interpretation goes like this: "I cursed God, therefore I've committed the unpardonable sin, therefore I'm lost forever." This couldn't be further from the truth.

You aren't saved because you have all the right thoughts. You're saved because you're committed to Jesus Christ, to live in relationship with Him as the branch abides in the vine (John 15). Weird thoughts will come and go. We'll make mistakes. We'll hurt people unintentionally. We'll even sin along the path to sanctification (as much as I wish sanctification was an instantaneous zap to perfection, it isn't).

But let's remember, like Psalm 16 tells us, that our security comes from our relationship to Christ. It's not a feeling, it's a choice. Sometimes it's a cold, hard choice, devoid of euphoria. We choose to reach our hand through the darkness and hang our souls on Christ's merits. As we do this, we can be assured that no matter what our thoughts or feelings tell us, we will indeed never be moved.

Psalm 18

Day 11

In my distress I called upon the Lord,
And cried out to my God;
He heard my voice from His temple,
And my cry came before Him, even to His ears.
Then the earth shook and trembled;
The foundations of the hills also quaked
and were shaken,
Because He was angry.
Smoke went up from His nostrils,
And devouring fire from His mouth;
Coals were kindled by it.
He bowed the heavens also, and came down
With darkness under His feet...
He sent from above, He took me;
He drew me out of many waters.
He delivered me from my strong enemy,
From those who hated me,
For they were too strong for me.

As someone who suffers from scrupulosity, I'll bet you've had your moments where you feel like God is angry at you. But how often do you feel like God is angry *for* you?

There's a big difference between being angry *at* and being angry *for*. When we see injustice, pain, and oppression, there's something in us that rises up to protest. Our deepest protective urges push us into action. We yearn to help the other, and our anger is kindled against the oppressor.

You may have heard that President Abraham Lincoln was an animal lover. His friends recall how he would go out of his way to rescue a baby bird fallen from its nest or a piglet caught in the mud. But one particularly memorable story from his childhood retells how he saw his fellow schoolboys torturing a poor turtle. They were putting hot coals on its back to see how fast they could make it scramble. The little turtle was obviously scared, in pain, and unable to defend itself.

Lincoln could have walked away, but that's not what welled up from his character. Instead, he got angry. He fiercely scolded the boys and made them let the turtle go. Lincoln's anger was a direct response to injustice and pain. He wasn't angry *at* the turtle, he was angry *for* the turtle.

Psalm 18 gives a similar picture of the way God relates to us in our pain. When our cry of pain comes to His ears, He gets angry for us. He stands up. The mountains shake. Smoke starts coming out of His nose and fire out of His mouth. It's all metaphorical language, but it expresses the depth of His fury when evil touches the apple of His eye—us.

Have you ever seen those military recruitment billboards where a uniformed soldier is pulling a damsel in distress out of danger's way? These kinds of ads appeal to these same wellsprings of justice, protectiveness, and power that we see in God's character. We are, after all, made in the image of God. Whether we call it "heroism" or a "mother's protectiveness," we all know what it's like to protect and defend. We know what it's like to get angry when we see news reports of faraway massacres or hometown rapes. We get upset because deep down, our spirits bear the fingerprints of God. We are fashioned in His likeness.

And He is the first one to get angry at our pain. He is the true Hero, the true Deliverer, bending down from heaven to draw us out of many waters.

Scrupulosity might make you feel like God is angry at you. Dear friend, God is angry, but not at you. He's angry at evil. He's angry at Satan, at sin, at mental health illnesses. His heart is so full of protective urges that He's got smoke coming out of His nose. Today, wrap yourself in the knowledge of His protection and let Him be your Hero for OCD.

Psalm 19

Day 12

Who can understand his errors?
Cleanse me from secret faults.

John's thoughts had gotten so bad that he could barely leave the house. If only he lived in an all-male society! He was terrified of seeing a woman on the street or in a store. No matter how much he tried to control his thoughts, something lustful would always pop into his mind. The fear of sinning kept John locked in anxious anticipation, dreading the moment he needed to leave his home.

Why am I like this? John asked himself over and over. *I'm happily married. I don't want to be like this. I reject these thoughts! I'm not cherishing them—am I?* His uncertainty wouldn't let him rest, and for years he compulsively avoided women and anywhere a woman might appear. If he accidentally saw a woman and noticed something about her—or, heaven forbid, made physical contact by bumping into her—he would return home and crumple to his knees in anxious prayer. Did he accidentally sin? Oh, God—! He would pray fervently for hours, just to make sure.

John got stuck in in religious OCD because of his faulty belief that he was responsible for the process of sanctification. Psalm 19 poses the question, "who can understand his errors?" The obvious answer is "no one." If "no one has seen God at any time" (1 John 4:12), and sanctification is the experience of being made like God, we're all aiming for a target that is only partially visible. This is why John wrote, "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

The sanctification process is mysterious and relational. Our role is to "abide in the vine" (John 15) while Christ works in us in ways we can't fully comprehend. He gives us new values, new desires, new tastes and distastes. Our role is not to cleanse ourselves from our secret faults—indeed, we cannot even identify what is faulty. We cannot understand our own errors. That is why our only role is to abide in Christ, while divine mystery operates quietly beneath the surface. It is a work wholly of God and not of human effort.

Dr. Ian Osborne's book, *Can Christianity Cure Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*, is a book I always recommend for the scrupulous. Dr. Osborne essentially couches the Apostle Paul's concept of "righteousness by faith" in psychological language. His "Trust Therapy" is the gospel under a different name. He teaches his obsessive-compulsive clients to turn over responsibility to God to do the things that we cannot do for ourselves.

One of those things, according to Psalm 19, is our sin analysis. We do a poor job of figuring out our own faults. While the lazy Christian might be tempted to excuse his secret faults, the scrupulous person is apt to see a fault where there is none. Either way, we can't hope for accuracy. The only solution is to return to a relational model of sanctification, where we abide in Christ and turn over responsibility to Him.

Today, do you believe that Christ can fix your errors—even your secret ones that you aren't aware of? Trust in Him. Turn over responsibility. Let go of spiritual control. He will gladly take the wheel and cleanse you from your secret faults.

Psalm 22

Day 13

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?
Why are You so far from helping Me,
And from the words of My groaning?

These are the words Jesus cried out on the cross. It was not a new exclamation of anguish. Hundreds of years before, He had inspired David to write a psalm foreshadowing the terrors of Calvary. The words He cried out before breathing His last— "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" —were a line that every Hebrew would have known. For hundreds of years, the Israelites had taken comfort from this psalm. Whether in battle, in captivity, or in personal tragedy, the words of Psalm 22 provided a reminder that sometimes, God feels distant in our suffering.

Now, as Jesus felt the weight of the sins of the world pressing down upon Him, as He felt the Father's presence fading away, the full impact of these words finally found fulfillment. Jesus was alone. Truly alone. The first human being to ever be fully separated from the presence of the Father's love.

In our struggle with religious OCD, we may often feel that God has forsaken us. It is not only about our struggle with figuring out what is or isn't sin. It is more than our intense doubts. It's a deep, palpable feeling of abandonment. And for many of us, this feeling is utterly terrifying. If God has forsaken us, what hope is left?

When we struggle with a sense of divine abandonment, it is helpful to read the rest of the psalm. Perhaps Jesus did not have time to recite the entire psalm, but without a doubt the words were inscribed in His heart. He cried out the first verse— "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" But He knew what His Father would do. "You have answered Me," the psalm continues. "For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard."

There's a story from Spain about a father and son who had become estranged. The son thought surely his father never wanted to see him again. He wouldn't return home because of his fear that his father would reject him. His father, on the other hand, was desperate for his boy to come home, but he couldn't find him. In a desperate attempt to establish contact, the father published an ad in the Madrid newspaper. It read, "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father."

When the father went to the newspaper office at noon on Saturday, he found 800 Pacos, all looking for love and acceptance from their fathers.

All of us begin our lives in estrangement from our heavenly Father. We struggle with feelings of abandonment, rejection, judgment, and anger. What we may not realize, however, is that our Father is constantly seeking to bridge the gap and bring us home. Our feelings of abandonment are just that — feelings.

If we could right now open a celestial newspaper—perhaps *The New Jerusalem Post*—we would certainly read a notice with your name inside. "My dear child, I love you. I haven't forsaken you, even though it feels that way. Keep trusting, and I'll meet you on the sea of glass very soon. Your Father."

Psalm 77

Day 14

Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary;
Who is so great a God as our God?

The Israelites are setting up camp for the night. Orderly rows of tents are arranged in twelve sections, each family beneath the banner and emblem of their tribe (Numbers 2:2). At the very center of the vast expanse of tents is a much larger one—a tall, majestic tent, surrounded by a courtyard. Above this tent, a rolling pillar of fire is burning.

It is the tabernacle.

This is the traveling worship structure that God instructed Moses to build. It is filled with gold, acacia wood, precious dyed linen with fine embroidery work, bronze, silver, and costly incense. There is the outer courtyard, where the lamb is sacrificed each day (Exodus 29:38-39). Inside the first room of the sanctuary, the Holy Place, is the table of holy bread, the seven-branched candlestick, and the altar of incense. Then, passing through the veil into the Most Holy Place, there is the ark of the covenant, above which sits the shekinah glory—a visible glimmer of God's presence with Israel (Exodus 25:22).

It is here, between the golden pillars and fluttering linen walls, that God chooses to live with His people. "Let them make me a sanctuary," He said, "that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). How is it that God dwells here? This sanctuary, impressive as it may be, is infinitely humbler than the glories of heaven. Even King Solomon, when he built the glittering, mammoth temple in Jerusalem, could only exclaim, "Will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!" (1 Chronicles 6:18)

Psalm 77 looks with awe upon the presence of God among His people. "Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary!" In what way does the sanctuary teach us about "God's way?" It is a monument to His urge to be present in our lives. In the yearly rounds of sacrifices and festivals is a kindergarten model of how He will remove sin from our hearts so that He can dwell with us forever. Despite our failures and weaknesses, the sanctuary is a place where we can come to bask in His presence, a place to find safety in His redemptive works for us.

This is God's "way." He is not a distant clockmaker God, peering down with vague disappointment on our struggles. His heart wells up with longing to be with us in our mess. He comes down in the dusty wilderness, yearning to "dwell among us."

The sun is setting now, and the children of Israel are beginning to yawn as they turn in for the night. You curl up inside your tent, your family gathered all around. Peering through the tent flap, you can see the sanctuary in the distance. The pillar of fire burns brightly above the mercy seat, visible in every corner of the camp. Its presence reassures you. *Yahweh is here. He is among us. We are safe.*

Isn't this the same reassurance that soothes the heart of the scrupulous? In our anxiety, we press ourselves to reach a state where we feel "good enough" for God to be with us. *But He is already with us.* This is His "way." His earthward urge, finally manifested in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is still the way He operates.

There is nothing you need to do today to persuade Him to be present. He is already here.

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Psalms for the Scrupulous

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