

*The title of my testimony is from the second verse of the song Amazing Grace:
"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear. And grace my fears relieved."*

I'm going to start with a bit of a Background

When I was a teenager - I had two of my immediate family members - both of my sister and my dad - had a bout with cancer. Now gratefully, they both recovered. Until something like that happens to you, I lived in the illusion that this sort of thing only happens to other people, but seeing how that's not true, suddenly there was a strong temptation to overcompensate by having an "always prepared" mentality. Outside of that, I was raised in a culture where your accomplishments were your identity and for me what that looked like was one stressful study night after the other for over a decade (as early as in grade 5 I was studying till bedtime every night), and very high self-expectations regardless of the toll on my mental health. Fast forwarding a few years, I certainly got what I wanted. I graduated finally and got my engineering job. Just to give you a sense of how we operate - our favourite words in engineering are "efficiency & safety margin", always planning ahead, designing the most perfect of solutions. Specifically for me I worked in H&S and QC - both are fields where you are literally thinking about worst-case scenario. Then there were COVID years where the prepper in me went full blast. So between all of that, I had subconsciously over the years **trained my instinct** to try to predict the future and control every possibility. Essentially to systemize every aspect of my life, having a checklist for including things that can't be checklisted (like being a wife, sister, daughter, etc) / **how do you have benchmarks for something like that?** - sometimes I even had a checklist of checklists. I treated life like school, divided neatly into subjects like a report card and did everything in my power to get an A in each (mind you an A would mean "good enough" not "above and beyond" because this gets overwhelming pretty quickly, there was a lot of cutting corners to meet all of these unrealistic self-expectations). Some of these line items would be backyard to table food including grains, what my wardrobe says about me (is it checking off all the boxes that I want to say about myself to the world?), same with my house, etc. **Essentially I was trying to design my life, and plan for the future to the point** I even would think about things like putting a risk management plan in place for events that are so far in the future they may never even happen. For example someday if and when I had a 10 year old boy and he got a cut (at the very earliest this would be 11 years from now) - whatever would I do? I hope you are starting to see the level of delusion that I was in, and how much this temporary fallen world that was never meant to be perfect had become my **treasure** (Mat. 6:19-20). This life was my everything, and everything needed to be perfect. But a temporal and fallen world and perfection go together like two negative magnetic poles.

Because holistic health is the whole message of this conference - it's important to ask where was I at spiritually. I had a rekindled growing interest in God because how can you not? How can you not notice His loving attention to detail in everything that is around you (e.g. I got a puppy in the winter and was worried about his paws in the snow and googled if he needs shoes. I ended up looking at these incredible blood capillary heat exchangers that were far more advanced than the expensive fancy heat exchangers I was installing as part of my job for government high-rise buildings), and seeing the value of Christian teachings in our lives like the power of forgiveness, and we were gravitating to traditional family values in an increasingly spiralling world with no source of objective morality tethering it. And so as a deconstructionist, my spiritual life was a hazy cocktail of remnants from childhood with new agey, new thoughty influences, pluralism, and was a magnet everything that was trendy like

false gospels, low Christology, etc. **Essentially I was too spiritual for the materialists but too modern for the traditional religious folks - found a happy medium where I was better than everyone else but didn't have to commit to anything that asked me to change either.**

A key area of life where I went over and above was disease prevention. I had become anxiously orthorexic - a health nut - controlling my and my husband's exposure to every possible toxin - (I drove my husband crazy) I am not talking about reducing energy drinks and processed sugar, I am talking about going above and beyond where risk vs reward starts to be questionable / like buying expensive organic cotton, banning bluetooth headphones in the home (a favourite of my husband), or even pinching my nose when I was using Sharpies. At one point, I was googling things like offgassing from socks - if you don't know what that is, that might not be a bad thing. With this obsessive desire for control of every minor detail came an unwelcome friend lurking in the background. You might have heard of him. His name was anxiety, and he would become a regular **houseguest**. When anxiety decided to come, it was always his way. Some days I would listen to junk TV to not listen to these anxious thoughts. Life became shaped around avoiding him like taking short trips (do something different / get out of the routine) but then guess what - your anxious thoughts follow you there too. Even t-shirts would become associated with previous anxious thoughts till I ran out of T-shirts.

Plot thickens

This problem came undeniably to the spotlight during my pregnancy which started in June 2023. Throughout my pregnancy, no symptom went ungoogled. I checked for signs of early labour every single day. I definitely overdid counting baby kicks. I prepared for "my perfect natural birth" trimesters in advance. Everything was going to be perfect (home birth, baby pops right out, breastfeeding takes right away - **after all c-sections are only for unhealthy moms!** - as you can see there's a lot of judgement in this kind of lifestyle which makes sense because your focus is you and your actions). My unspoken words to God were "You keep Your hands to yourself, I got this." There was zero margin for error, zero margin for God.

"But hold on God, can you come back here for a second because actually I do have a small job for you. Do you see this anxiety - yeah I need you to take it away." I gave God a well-defined job description, **He was not to touch anything else**. And when I was having anxious thoughts, I happened to have a born-again Christian friend who would send me verses upon verses of reassurances until we ran out of scripture! How many times is "do not fear" mentioned in the bible? It didn't matter. They leaked right through me. I remembered from childhood that in Matt 17:20; "if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move," I know it's a metaphor, but still you get a sense of the power that faith has. **All I could think was I have an open invitation to move mountains - so why do I feel stuck?** If I trust my husband (who's just human) to take care of me, why can't I trust my infallible God that I supposedly believe in?

I pleaded with God to draw me out of my vicious cycle attempting to trust, failing, feeling shame, asking to help my unbelief (Mark 9:24), but then not having belief that He would help my unbelief, more shame, and so on so forth. I was the person described in James 1:6-8, tossed by the waves with a wishy-washy faith. I waited and waited for the Lord, and it turned

out He had indeed heard my plea, I just didn't realize the plan was already in motion. He ended my vicious cycle, and with it the thousand other hells I lived in like the ones I described earlier (e.g. the perfectionism hell).

In March 2024, my husband and I had a beautiful baby girl, providentially named Grace. April 2024, almost exactly a year ago, Grace left us to reside permanently with her heavenly father. Ironically after 9 months of trying to control every possible contaminant I could be exposed to, Grace had already been developing well into her extremely rare genetic abnormality as of minute 1 of day 1 of conception. She drifted off to sleep for the last time by my side. No risk management plan I had in place was sufficient to stop that from happening.

Plot twist

The worst had happened, and it was worse than anything I ever come up with as a worst-case-scenarioist. I lost everything as far as I knew then. **As far as I knew** there was **literally** nothing left to anxiously control. And yet I was still having anxiety. When I asked my therapist this, she was confused why I thought anxiety would leave me. Anxiety was simply this annoying **house guest** who has moved in with me permanently who talks all day about how nobody likes me, and how I and everyone I love is going to get sick and die. Maybe I can try to do some yoga while he's still hurling paranoid what-if's at me. But at this point, I decided I wanted a more triumphant approach.

Diagnosing the problem

Kierkegaard, the Father of Existentialism, says "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom" - in my case, I think that's certainly true in the sense that freedom is that of the sheer volume of possibilities that the future could go - makes me dizzy just to think about it right now! So this had been my strategy; Step 1: choose anxiety to "be prepared" i.e. to preworry about things yet to happen and may or may not even happen. Step 2: being chosen, anxiety as a mindset can then proceed to stuff me full of things to worry about regardless of likelihood or even common sense sometimes. Choosing it was my preemptive defense mechanism, a way of life.

One technique in counselling that I think is great but was substantially more helpful for me when I started to see it with a biblical understanding - you would have noticed me use so far - it is called "**externalization**" - imagine it a separate identity from yourself, having conversation with you so you can more objectively assess what it's proposing. You can call it a name even like "Anxious Bella" or "Anxiety" with a capital A or even "Bob" if that helps. The bible tells us about this method, except the name it chose was the Devil. You can laugh at me but just hold on. I started to become more aware of the influence of enlightenment on us - the "spirit of the age" or the "prince of power of the air" (Eph 2:2). Eph 6:12 says "**For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.**" Good luck telling a past satanist that the devil is not real. Jesus Himself eluded to the devil as a person not as an abstract force. The Bible calls him a "**roaring lion looking for anyone he can devour**". (1 Peter 5:8). The Accuser (**Rev 10:12**). The Father of Lies (**John 8:44**) - you know, the one who lies to you about your range of control, and then accuses you/laughs at your failure when you fail for obvious reasons. The devil's most powerful weapon is the fact that we insist him to not exist, a pre-modern superstition that does not belong in our high-tech fancy world, a cartoon character in red tights and horns - and don't forget the pitchfork. If

you've read Screwtape you know what I'm talking about - you can't fight a battle you don't even realize you're in.

Now that we have "an enemy" (Matt 13:39) and "it" has become a "he", what's the battle over? Afterall, you don't normally hear of war over the Sahara desert. The prize must have been precious, and it is me, my soul - to keep it as far as possible from the fullness of joy that is to be in Christ. His or "anxiety's" presence was not here to "prepare me" - **I was as unprepared as possibly can be when tragedy knocked on my door**. He was there to distract me from truth, enslave me, and to frankly humiliate me in front of every doctor, and ruin the short time I have with my loved ones.

So we have an enemy, we have a prize, okay so how do I win? We are commanded to resist him in James 4:7: "**Resist the devil and He will flee from you**" and in 1 Pet 5: 8-9: "**Be watchful.. Resist him standing firm in your faith knowing that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering**". But I couldn't. I couldn't fully unclench his grip of my soul. He was too ingrained in me as a way of life that I had allowed to go on for far too long (James 1:14 - "**But each person is tempted.. enticed by their own evil desires**" - I still have to take responsibility for leaving the garbage bin out all night without the lid on and the racoons getting in). This other verse comes when I think about some panic attacks I've had "**He who has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down without walls**" (Prov 25:28). Man that just hits home - you invite one worry in and others come and they're like "let's party" (it really is like a legion like the man in Mark 5:9).

Moving on to the good part - Salvation

And it was through Grace our baby girl, that I found the grace of all graces - the grace of Jesus Christ. Throughout this grief journey, I started to get to know Him better as He sat with me hours on end, in the **gloomy bleak trenches that are a mother's fresh grief** where nobody ever wants to look (Ps 69:20 - "**I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none**"). And He didn't require appointments or any payments, and was available 24/7. Ps 34:18 - "**God is near the brokenhearted... those crushed in spirit**", and I surely was crushed in spirit. All I had to hold on to that kept me sane was knowing that 1) someone had power over the gate of death, 2) someone's who's been through it, and that same person 3) could offer me an opportunity to make eternal investments when it was revealed to me how almost everything is on its way to inevitable perishment. **And He worked with what I had** (took my 5 loaves (Matt 14)). People are not always available when you need them, but guess who is.. I remember sitting for hours on the patio - thinking about these verses from childhood that started to come back that never sank in back then, and slowly these little revelations here and there were like tiny fireworks altogether forming a spectacular scene. Things like our existence (i.e. why we're here, what this whole life thing is about). Lines I've read before were coming to life right before me. Ps 30:5 - "**For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.**" Slowly, I started to let go, to surrender, one dream at a time, one idol at a time, one pinterest board at a time, and eventually every stance I held on to strongly that defined me, every relationship, and every fear. What started to become painfully clear to me that for years all I was looking for someone to save me from anxiety, **but I was not ready to be saved from who I was**. "It never crossed my mind that the [...] contact which I solicited [with God] should have any consequences beyond [...] *mere wish fulfilment*" (C.S. Lewis - Surprised by Joy). But before

welcoming the new houseguest into my heart who was gluing together the rubble that life had become (I liked Him - much better than my last houseguest), I first had to confront everything that I had allowed myself to become over my lifetime; a wasteland of cynicism, judgements, entitlements, self-pity, appearances, excuses, accusations, and fears. Treating God as a **single grain of sand** in the beach of idols I used to give myself an identity cost me a dear price. And with the press of a single reset button, every checklist and every perfected perfection I worshipped became obsolete in a single crashing halt. What comfort could my neatly organized Montessori toy shelves and 5-10 year life plan offer me now?

With GRIEF, the time for lukewarm faith and half-committed beliefs infested with new-age and new-thought influences is over. Hope based on a **resilient** worldview is a must - a consistent narrative from beginning to end. It had to come down to grief to finally swap the “kicking and screaming” child in me to one who is tearfully reconciling with their mom after hitting their brother. And thankfully, my contrite heart was an “acceptable sacrifice” to my Lord (Ps 51:17). With the waters of baptism, old Bella with her prideful delusions and what was practically atheism was washed away and I become a new man (**Eph 2:15**). And now it is no longer I who walk alone, for it is “**Christ** who lives in me” (**Gal 2:20**). The One residing in me now is not of the dust of the earth (1 Cor 15:47, John 3:31) tossed to and fro like us. Indeed I lost almost everything for a while, but in this He has pushed aside all else that I was leaning on to show me He is the only pillar I need. God is/was? enough. Enough to wrestle trauma. Enough to nurse grief. Enough to flatten anxiety. **And His Word is enough to soothe any ailment of the soul.**

The present

Now I know I have the spirit in me because I no longer require verses upon verses of reassurances (remember 10 paragraphs ago?). My favourite now is perhaps the shortest - “**be still, and know that I am God**” (Ps 46:10). And the Spirit that fills me now and each of you if you belong to Christ “**is not of fear but of power**” (2 Tim 1:7). So now, when the temptation to fall into a period of anxiety makes a faint appearance, the Spirit cries inside “**Abba, Father**” (Romans 8:15) and what that looks like is me saying; “**I am yours, save me!**” (**Ps 119:94**) to which He happily exclaims “**I am your salvation**” (**Ps 35:3**). It’s His job - He’s very good at it. And I shift my focus elsewhere and let Him handle it. I’ve successfully lifted up to him painful images, guilt, heartaches and fears like you wouldn’t believe. It may seem too good to be true but I am not wishing upon a star, I am not manifesting into a universe - I am asking someone I intimately know for help, who not only holds my future in His hands but even the stars in their place.

So am I saying that I am cured from anxiety? Well, is a smoker who hasn’t smoked in a year still a smoker? Probably depends on who you ask and on the person. But just because I am not a tall enough tree yet it doesn’t mean I don’t bear fruit (fruits of the spirit - Gal 3:22-23 esp joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, self-control and how all those tie to anxiety). I continue to reach down my roots deeper in Christ/the Word (**Col 2:7** when it talks about being rooted in Christ. And also John 15: “**I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing**”. John 5:30 “**By myself I can do nothing**” - if the Son says that about the Father, how much more should I be saying that. So as an ex-anxiety-addict (like a smoking addict), I continue to grow in the Word with a zero tolerance policy to anything of the flesh that have died with me in the

waters of baptism and I **"take every thought captive" (2 Cor 10:5)**. put to death daily (**Col 3:5**) if it doesn't belong in this temple (**1 Cor 15:31**) and put on Christ instead (**Rom 13:14**) like an armor (**Eph 6:11-18**) - I try to imagine this thick metal armor that's covering every inch of my body - anxiety cannot penetrate. I like how Jonny Ardavanis puts it (the author of Consider the Lilies) - aiming low would be "fix anxiety" (Phil 4:5 - **"Do not be anxious about anything"**). Aiming high would be to be filled with Spirit that there is no room for anxiety (second part of Phil 4:8 - **"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right... if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things"**).

So although I am not "cured" I have grown to better cohabitate with the unknown. I don't know about you but I am man. I have never successfully and will never read the future. And some of the greatest things in life I've come by were completely outside of my control like meeting my husband, and finding this church. I like how Paul Washer puts it, he says: ***"It's almost as though you're saying, 'God, I'm not going to have peace until You tell me what's going on.' And God doesn't work that way. You don't need to know what's going on if you know who He is."*** So I try to meditate on the character of God. Look at the sun. And know that your God is brighter than that. Look at the waves. And know that your God is mightier than them. ***"Look at the holes in His wrists and ask yourself if He really loves you"*** (Unknown). So here is my new 2-step strategy. Step 1: believe. Step 2: let that belief change everything. It is not sufficient to passively know there's a god out there, but I must dare to bank on His goodness, preferring to be proven wrong - which won't happen - than to carry on with the illusion that I can foresee things and "prepare myself".

Stumbling blocks - courtesy of the Accuser

Oh boy does the Accuser just love to sneak in there anytime I stumble and shame me ***"everyone else has joy but you, you're a bad kind of Christian. You've let God down again."*** To which I say **"what of it? I am weak but He is strong. His grace is sufficient for me" (2 Cor 12:9)**. Therefore I will boast all the more of my wrestle with anxiety so that **"Christ's power may rest on me"**. It's Like what John the Baptist said: **"He must become greater; I must become less"** (John 3:30) - so I try to picture that going on inside. Sometimes all I have is a little mustard seed, and I present it to the Lord, and ask him to help it grow (Matt 13:31-32) into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Another trap: It's easy to slip into doubt under the pretext of humility by telling myself "but I don't deserve anything from Him, so how can I be sure He won't smite me instead?", remember, me, that nobody is disagreeing with you. You are 100% worthy of a lot of "smiting" - frankly at least of a rate of once an hour. But it's simply not what's on the table. There's a difference between conviction from God and condemnation from the devil. By all means if there's something to repent of - I need to go ahead. But what I'm referring to here is an ambiguous general sense of "I'm not worthy" which is just a veil for distrust. 2. Similarly, a ringing thought throughout my pregnancy was "this was all too good to be true" as if the God was not both the Good and Truth itself with a capital T. Let's not forget that "while we were still sinners, Christ [literally] died for us" (Roman 5:8).-And there's others - over time I become better at spotting them.

Reflection

When God says "don't be anxious" He's not exactly offering friendly advice. When it comes from our Lord it is a loving commandment. At this point, I should technically fear **more breaking God's heart over and over again** by not trusting Him than whatever it is I am scared of in the future, He's already shown me He would be with me. This is where the second part of that phrase from Amazing Grace comes in: It's not only that "*grace my fears relieved*" but also "*'t'was grace that taught my heart to fear*" - fear the right thing, "**Fear of the Lord [truly] is the beginning of wisdom**" (Pro 9:10). Boy did it take me a long time to see that but man the bad decisions I avoided! The bible repeatedly shows us His longsuffering but His firm rebukes too. My relationship with God (it's improving but it) is like this - Imagine a good father, berated daily for how he's not good enough and that his teenager knows better. **So the question that begs to be asked** here is why can't I trust God? I believe it is because in trust there is a vulnerability, a letting go. **We choose to reason ourselves instead of choosing Reason Himself**. In other words, it's pride! The mother of every sin. The front door of the colonial dollhouse. The same original sin thousands of years later. I try to imagine myself in front of that tree in the Garden of Eden (in Gen 3). When anxious thoughts come knocking on my door, I have 2 options. Option 1) "I don't know why God doesn't want me to see the future, Mr Serpent, and I don't need to know why. I am Eve. My God is God. I'm going to let Him do the God thing - He's been really good to me so far. But thank you for your insight" Option 2) "Hmm you bring up a very interesting point", and the longer that Eve listened to the serpent make his case, the harder it is to remember the only rule that was ever given to them (if it wasn't for them there would be no Leviticus and we would have been perfectly able to boil a goat in its mother's milk!). And you can trace God's faithfulness throughout the entire bible - the theme of trust/faith - all the way from Abraham till Revelations. **And frankly you can just keep on going and looking at how Christ has always preserved His Church** - His beautiful bride. God's answer to Adam & Eve's predicament can perhaps be best summarized by the most famous verse in the bible - John 3:16 "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son**". Jesus is the Reason/Word/Logos (John 1). We always say "put your trust in Jesus", which is consenting to receive the undoing of Option 2 that we continue to affirm.

Conclusion

So my two cents to you all today as some random new Christian **you just met** who has walked both with anxiety and with Christ is to test yourselves to see if you're of the faith (2 Cor 13:5) first - don't be like me, a hazy cocktail of spirituality like I was. But if you are, then let the knowledge of who God is challenge you, offend you, raise you up and amaze you (Ps 139:23 - "**Search me, O God, and know my heart: Test me, and know my anxious thoughts**"). Review your life and see how loved you've always been. How often you're fed, how often you're led (Ps 23:6). Your story is very thoughtfully pre-stitched together for you (Ps 139:16). **I stand in front of you here today, a mother who lost her own child proclaiming to you that God is good**. So whatever is plaguing, you can walk on water like Peter in Matthew 14:22-33, i.e. float on God's goodness. Even if you fall, He will hold you fast. Realize control and anxiety walk hand in hand on a road paved with pride, and it takes practice of humility to raise up concerns to the Sovereign God as Phil 4:6 says "**by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God**", instead of putting new wine in old wineskins (Luke 5:37-39) (i.e. backsliding into old habits after being reborn). And also one fun thing is that you can couple prudence with a simple prayer to God to cover your gaps with grace (2 Cor 12:9 comes back to mind again!)

"He gave me no assurance. No fixed land. Always one must throw oneself into the wave"
(C.S Lewis, *Perelandra*) - **the only certainty you are promised is the character of God.**

Prayer

Lord, my heart sometimes feels like the stormy seas of Galilee which only You can calm (Mark 4:35-41). You are the comfort of comforts. The peace You give surpasses human understanding (Phil 4:7, Proverbs 3:5-6). You are the antidote to anxiety. It's not something You do or something You provide, it's just who You are. You are the answer to questions. You are the journey and the destination. You are the Father of beauty. Your light never dims. Everything in the long run loses its spark and its soothing power, but You never cease to heal, comfort, or amaze us. You are the steady lighthouse I know will always find no matter how thick the fog. Whether or not I reach it quickly is sometimes hindered because of who I am but the lighthouse remains there on the shore waiting for me, leading me home, reminding me of greatness that surpasses any circumstance. When I fly on an airplane and look down at my problems, now so small, similarly, your greatness diminishes my towering pains and worries into little legos. And Lord, if I insist on only surrendering 98% of me to you, then please come and snatch the last 2%.