

Sermon 24: Philippians 4:6-7: Dealing with Anxiety

OUTLINE

Thinking about future certainties
Expressing present needs
Feeling promised peace

INTRODUCTION

The first year of Covid saw an increase in depression and anxiety by 25% worldwide.¹ We live in an age of mental health awareness and anxiety is one of those conditions we are seeing as an increasing problem. 'Anxiety is one of the most common mental health disorders in the U.S., according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Almost a third of adults will experience an anxiety disorder at some point during their lives. Occasional anxiety is normal, but for people with anxiety disorder, the anxiety does not go away and can get worse over time.'² If we had to ask why anxiety is increasing we would have a number of different responses. Some would want to co-opt the anxiety problem and make it serve their agenda. No doubt someone would want to say that anxiety is because of climate change; or someone would suggest that it is a side-effect of the Covid vaccine. Others will point to past underreporting; the impact of modern life with things like digital overstimulation; sleep deprivation; bad eating habits; unhealthy foods; the breakdown of community and social isolation; working indoors not outdoors, etc. It is not my job to rank those explanations and judge their legitimacy but rather to point you to the light the Bible sheds on this problem. The Bible teaches us that God made us in His image and to feel a peace like the peace He perpetually enjoys. But sin has entered our world separating us from God and has impacted on every area of life creating problems in every area including anxiety. If there are bodily realities or genetics that feed into anxiety we know that our bodies and minds and hormones all participate in the effects of the fall. If there are circumstantial factors that exacerbate our anxieties we know that the world has suffered the effects of the fall; there is a devil that is real; a sinful nature that we struggle with; and other sinners that we have to live with, as well as sickness and death. Anxiety, worry, care is part of the fallen human condition. Every one of us is prone to anxiety in one way or another because we are living in a broken world as broken people. We all have a breaking point. And depending on the mix of what we are and experience we can experience episodes of anxiety which are more intermittent or full blown anxiety disorder which is a daily experience with a hair trigger that cripples us.

So how do we deal with this anxiety? This is what Paul turns to next in Philippians 4:6-7, but the sentence you will notice begins in v5, 'The Lord is at hand; ⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' He Philippians had every reason to be anxious. They were facing open hostility because of their faith, facing intimidation and the temptation to be ashamed of their faith, 1:28. They were wrestling with

¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide> accessed 9/21/2023

² <https://health.ucdavis.edu/news/headlines/anxiety-disorders-will-affect-nearly-1-in-3-adults-heres-what-you-need-to-know/2023> accessed 9/21/2023

disappointment and discouragement as the apostle Paul, the founder of their church and an appointed apostle to the Gentile was not our triumphantly preaching the gospel but in prison and could possibly be executed. They were no doubt feeling frustrated and angry and helpless as they thought about the unfair persecution from the Jews that hounded Paul in every town; the bureaucratic heartless machine of Roman judicial process as Paul had to see out his appeal to Caesar. On top of this the peace of their own congregation had been disrupted by a feud between Euodia and Syntyche. Added to this their confidence in the gospel, and their acceptance with God was being challenged by false teachers, and not just any false teachers, Jewish one who knew the OT better than they did. We also know from 2 Cor. 8:2 that the Philippians church was suffering from what Paul calls 'extreme poverty' they were in the middle of an economic recession. This would have put all sorts of pressure on them to worry as they thought about their businesses, their homes, and their ability to provide for their families. Then add to that the daily cares we all have as we struggle against sin; deal with difficult family situations; constantly have our lives touched by the death of loved ones; health challenges, etc. Paul himself is no stranger to all of these problems and more. Yet he has something to say in how to deal with anxiety.

What I love about what he says, is that he says it before the age of medical advancement and anti-depressants and anti-anxiety meds. I praise God for these medicines and if you are someone who is overcome by these emotions, then praise God these medications exist to aid treating the symptoms. But here is something that all of us can do as believers which can help us deal with anxiety. There are three things we will be highlighting in the text. Thinking about future certainties; expressing our present needs to God in prayer; and discussing the peace of God.

Thinking about future certainties

V5b-6a, "The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything." We are in the closing section of Philippians where Paul is issuing a last list of things to do. He has called the Philippians to stand firm. How by rejoicing in the Lord; by letting their gentleness be known to all; and now not to be anxious about anything. Rejoice always; be gentle to everyone; and be anxious about nothing, sound easy? Paul recognizes that these commands are easy to say but not easy to do and adds motivations and actions to go with them. He prefaces the call to be anxious for nothing with a reminder of the return of the Lord. Pain and difficulty make our present problems loom large in our minds and block out how this story ends. The temptation for us when difficulties arise is to get stuck in a slough of despond; to become overwhelmed by the problems of the present. Paul brings in the eternal perspective to aid us. Now in modern techniques in handling anxieties there is something called the 3 3 3 rule. When you have a bout of anxiety come over you, you take your mind off the problem not allowing yourself to fixate and get into a tailspin by naming three things you see; three things you hear; and moving three parts of your body. This is a distraction method that can be helpful to those who get bogged down. But a distraction method is not what Paul is using here. He is reminding us of the eternal certainties that are true for every believer.

You can see how this helps. You begin to feel anxious because of controlling governments; because of corrupt bankers; because of increasing crime; because of education getting into the hands of those who want to brainwash your kids;

because of the rise of China; or Islam; or Leftism, or the decline of Christianity or the pervasive false teaching that seems to be taking over large parts of the church. But one day Jesus is coming again, this is not all there is, there will be a reckoning and a grand reversal. Or if you are burdened with health concerns. Your body is failing, one part at a time, things that once used to get better quickly when you were young don't heal. There is an increasing situation of pain, and uncertainty, and the irreversible realities of your situation set in, and the limitations of what medicine can really do set in. But one day Jesus is coming again, and we will receive new bodies. All the defeat we feel, all the vulnerability, will be swallowed up in the victory of Jesus over death at the resurrection of our bodies. This is not quackery on Paul's part but the very thing that he uses to comfort his own heart, 2 Cor. 4:16-18, 'So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.' Rom. 8:17-25, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'

Paul's command to be anxious for nothing reminds us of Christ's teaching in Matt. 6:25-34. Here Jesus commands His disciples to not be anxious about anything to do with their physical needs. V31-32, 'Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.' Jesus turns us from worrying about stuff to God as our good Father who cares for His creation never mind His children.

Expressing present needs

V6, 'do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' According to one government health website, 'Some ways to manage anxiety disorders include learning about anxiety, mindfulness, relaxation techniques, correct breathing techniques, dietary adjustments, exercise, learning to be assertive, building self-esteem, cognitive therapy, exposure therapy, structured problem solving, medication and support groups.'³ Because we are embodied souls who need encouragement and community to thrive these techniques can alleviate the symptoms of anxiety and help people get through the day. Paul points us to something deeper and more necessary and I think more helpful than these techniques—prayer.

³ <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/anxiety-treatment-options> accessed 9/21/2023

What is prayer? What is biblical prayer? There are billions of people sending out 'prayers' every day. This no doubt proves that we understand ourselves as spiritual creatures; that we recognize our creatureliness and dependence, but the bible teaches us that not everything that people call prayer is heard. Not everyone has the right to pray the Lord's Prayer 'Our Father who art in heaven.' Only those who have believed in Jesus are given the right to become the children of God, John 1:12-13. God hears every prayer because of His omniscience but He is not inclined to answer the prayers of those who are alienated from Him. He definitely does not look well upon those who pray to idols and false gods, idolatry is high treason against the true God. Paul is writing 'To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.' These saints, these Christian in Christ Jesus are told to pray concerning everything. Biblical prayer is God's people coming to God through God's Mediator, Jesus Christ. This coming to God can take many forms. Because He is our Father who loves us and we are His children we can come to God simply to talk to and be with Him; we come to adore and worship Him; we come to thank Him; we come to confess our sins; we come to bring our complaints and cares; we come with our requests. Paul uses 4 different words for prayer in these verses. Prayer is not communing with oneself; it is not sending out good thoughts and well wishes; but talking with God through Christ.

What is the difference between Christian prayer and some of the modern techniques for anxiety like mindfulness/ being present; or relaxation techniques? To an outside observer there may appear to be no difference; and from the point of view of physical benefits there may very well be a similar outcome. We know that prayer is not something used purely for its psychological or physical benefits, those are just added bonuses. We pray because we have a God who is powerful; who loves us; who cares for us when we are hurting; and who has told us to ask that we might receive what we need. Sadly we are seeing a godless praying that reduces prayer to technique and taking God out of prayer.

Paul has called us to meet persecution with gentleness and now meet anxiety with prayer. How does prayer help with anxiety? Firstly, knowing our God makes prayer useful against anxiety. You are not coming to a technique but a person. Knowing that He is powerful; that He is working all things out according to His good purposes; that there is no one who can stay His hand; that He does what He wills and no one can resist Him. Knowing that He is good, that He has a desire to prosper you as His child; He is for you and not against you. Knowing that He is gracious to us in Christ. Rom. 8:32, 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' Knowing that He is wise; can make no mistakes; cannot sin and does all things well. Remembering who God is when we come face to face with Him in prayer will help with the root of what makes us anxious. For some medications and techniques to get on top of established patterns of anxiety will also be helpful; but it is the lies that lie at the heart of our anxiety issues that prayer forces us to address when we think about who our God is. This was as true in the OT as the NT, Is. 26:3, 'You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.'

Secondly, please notice that Paul calls us to pray with supplications. In prayer you are a suppliant. You have needs and requests, and you are to bring them to God. He is the One who calls you to cast 'all your anxieties on Him because He cares for you' 1 Pet. 5:7. I love that verse. The word 'cast' is a strong word 'throwing.' We are to throw 'all' our anxieties, keep none for yourself. We are to

throw them 'on' Him, like a beast of burden, who will carry them for you. And He is willing because He cares for you.

Thirdly, we are to pray with thanksgiving. Positive psychology recognizes that religious people who give thanks to God are generally healthier.⁴ This is not merely a way to focus our thinking on positive things, and give ourselves a new perspective instead the old negative one we had. No, thanksgiving is a way to force us to recognize God's past, present and future working for us. There is a real God who is loving, wise and powerful who controls all the details of our lives. This thanksgiving extends even to the fact that God will cause good to result from bad. We are not necessarily able to see how it will work but know that He is able and will do it. That is why there are so many verses calling us to rejoice when trials arise. If anxiety is caused by how bad things are going, this reminder of God's wisdom and power to work good out of evil and to thank Him for what He can and will do through it is a balm for what makes us anxious.

Feeling promised peace

V7, 'And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' Prayer accomplishes many things. In prayer we partner with God to change the lives of others. But prayer also has an effect upon the person praying. It is this aspect of prayer that Paul focuses on as he tells us why prayer is how we deal with anxiety. Because when we pray we experience the peace of God. What is this peace? I have heard some Christians talking about praying until you have a peace that God will answer, that there is an experience of peace which comes as a guarantee that your prayer is heard and you can stop praying now. That is not what Paul is describing here. We know that this is a peace from God, Jesus promised us such peace before He departed, John 14:27, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.' But is this a peace that we have supernaturally, that suddenly descends upon us like a blanket that comforts us; or is it a peace that results from all the thoughts we think about God as we give thanks? I believe the answer is yes.

There will be times when we are overwhelmed and we go to God; times when hard things are happening to us and we need comfort, and in those times God give you a surprising calm and repose that seems out of character. Praise God for those times. We can experience this from time to time and it is a gift. But then there is the ability to not be anxious because we minister truth to ourselves so that we experience the peace of God. This is a peace we have from God which flows from our peace with God. Being His child we are at peace with Him, we are no longer enemies but family; He is for us and with us, and this gives true perspective to everything else. For example, you can be suffering some health issue; but you remember your inheritance; you remember that good God intends through our difficulties; you remember God's presence with you and His compassion towards you and a peace that transcends logic rises up acts as a guard over your hearts and minds. Death cannot kill; sickness is a temporary thing; we will be more than conquerors not only because these things will be absent in the New Creation but reversed never to happen again.

⁴ <https://positivepsychology.com/gratitude-appreciation/> accessed 9/21/2023

That word guard is a military word. The Philippians would be familiar with Roman soldiers protecting the city, this would make the average citizen feel safe and help them sleep at night. The peace that we receive from God does just this. We are told it garrisons our hearts and minds. Anxiety causes our hearts to fret and our minds to be filled with all sorts of problems. But the truth about God and how He is for us settles us and keeps our hearts from fretting; keeps our minds from running amuck. But notice again those precious words, 'in Christ Jesus.' This really is the key to prayer helping with anxiety. If we do not have Jesus Christ as our Savior we do not have God as our Father and for us, and then all the promises of God are not true for us, but rather the warnings of judgement. But if we are believers, if we are in Christ, then God loves us in His Son and hears our prayers as if it were Him praying. It is this in Christ reality which sets all Christian prayer apart from any prayers an unbeliever would pray.

So then, 'The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'