

## How Do I Overcome Anxiety?

Hear the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-34: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or stow away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

And then, if you will, turn to Philippians 4. Written from prison, the theme of this book is Rejoice! Did you know that? Here a man of God, his name is Paul, is in prison for the claims of the gospel, and he is writing to believers all over the world, specifically at Philippi, to rejoice. Kind of interesting, isn't it? That a man from prison would write about rejoicing? Listen to what he writes in Philippians 4:4-9:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

Wow! Two passages reveal for us six critical principles so that we can get this handle, a big handle, on dealing with anxiety – handling anxiety.

In fact, if you don't need it now, you're going to need it later, I promise you! In fact, I know quite a bit about anxiety. I was raised under the direction of a very anxious mother; a very anxious, loving, caring mother. As a single mom always worried about not having enough, even though she always had money in the bank, there was always a tension, always a real fear. And so, that fear affected my life as well.

In fact, I'll never forget I let my son Jonathan go and spend the weekend with her one time. That 5 year old came home glued to the weather channel going, "There may be tornadoes. We're living on the gulf coast; there could be hurricanes." I said, "Son, it's March." He said, "You never know. You never know." I want you to know that maybe you were raised up under that kind of environment - always anxious, always worried. And so, therefore, it is a double trouble for you. Where life has enough stress and problems as it is, if you learn to worry based upon maybe the sins of your parents and their sins of their grandfathers and mothers that passes down almost a learned behavior style, it is added

additionally on you to learn to break the cycle and to learn to be set free and to live your life with joy. You and I need to realize that

1. **I choose my own attitude.** That's very critical. Attitudes come by choice. Worry is an attitude. Jesus said don't worry about clothes or food or what you're going to wear or how God's going to take care of you. Don't worry. Worry is a choice. Here Paul is, following Jesus, and he's in prison and he is telling God's people, who ought to really be telling him, he's telling them instead, do not be anxious about anything. You see, worry is a choice. And we choose to do that. And what worry is, it's an attitude of fear. It's an attitude of fear that says, "I'm scared. I don't know what tomorrow holds. I don't know what today holds. I'm scared about what's going to happen tomorrow." Or "I'm scared about what's going to happen right here." It's an attitude that says, "I'm looking at the glass half empty."

You see, there's always a positive side to everything. That's very important. Before you open your mouth and verbalize one thing, or take out a pen to write down one thing to another person, think about what

kind of attitude you are portraying. You can always look at a very negative thing. You can go, “I don’t have any money.” What’s positive about that? Let me help you - “I don’t have to pay any income tax.” There’s always a positive side to a negative deal. “I don’t have enough clothes.” – you have more room in your closet for other things now. There’s always a flip side. “I don’t have a new car.” – “I don’t have a huge car payment.” Positive. There’s always a way to look at something in a real wonderful view. “I’m sick.” – “At least I’m not dead!” “I don’t have any hair.” – “I don’t have to spend any money on hair spray.” Think about that. There’s always a positive perspective on everything. And you and I, when we look at life and what goes on in our lives, we can choose to say, “Jesus, I am going to trust you for each and every thing, and my attitude will be an attitude of gratitude in the midst of all kinds of things, and I choose not to worry. And I choose, instead of being consumed with fear, I’m going to be consumed with trust and allow each and every scenario to create an expectancy in my life for you to intervene in my life, whatever you want to do.”

I love the words of Proverbs 15:15. It says this:

“All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.”

Let me tell you, that is so true. If your heart is full of joy, your days will be like a feast. But, if you allow the oppression that fear creates and problems will add to your life, it will be a difficult existence in your life. And it all comes by how you choose to view what's going on in your life and how you choose to view God. Do you think God really cares about you? Yeah, he does! And you and I need to understand that our attitude is coming from personal choice. You can listen to all the music in the world. You can listen to and watch all of the wonderful paintings and look at wonderful paintings and either you can say, “That is wonderful” or “I don't like it.” And if you live an entire life of “I don't like it” and “I don't like anybody” and “I don't like anything” and “Everything hurts me” and “I just don't like it”, then your life will be a judgment rather than a joy.

Attitudes come by choice. You and I choose what we feel. In fact, if that's the only thing that you grab hold of this morning, it will be enough. It will be enough to carry you all the way through to understand how wonderful God is. Attitudes come by choice.

**2. My attitude not only effects me but others.** Paul would write, “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” Jesus is speaking this sermon to believers, those who would follow him. And he pinpoints them and nails them to the wall, and he is in essence saying, “Don’t worry about anything, because the issue is that when you begin to worry, it says that you don’t trust God in your life.” In fact, people look at you more than they look at the Bible. It’s been said, “You are the only Bible that anybody is ever going to read.”

Now, I have known a lot of believers in my life and I have known some that I say, “Boy, I want my kids to emulate.” But there are some people who really know scripture verses but who do not have the ability or have not transferred that into their life that I would hate for my children to emulate. Do you know what I’m talking about? Because you can know it in your head and you can know theology and you can know doctrine and you can know the Lord, but unless your lifestyle produces that which could be called joy and peace, your witness is tarnished. And that is very important for us to understand. And nothing like the squeezing of our life produces the witness that God wants to use in our lives. When you get squeezed, that’s when the real you comes

out. Do you know that? Not when things are going great, when you have a wonderful bonus or when your kids have a baby or when your friend gets married or when you get great grades. That's not when your witness comes out. It's when tough times hit your life, that's when your witness comes out.

And in the midst of anxiety and things to be anxious about, how you live your life in that midst is very, very important. You see, that's why Jesus wants us not to have a countenance of concern, but rather a life that is so focused on him that there is peace and joy in the midst of the storm. Do you know what worry is? Worry is being self-focused. All worry is selfishness, self-focus about me and how I feel right now. Worry is about as self-focused as you can get. It really is! And self-focused lives don't produce a desire for other people. It's all about me. It's all about what I think about me. Instead, God wants us to use our lives as a witness.

Let me tell you something, when you get squeezed, the real you comes out. And your witness and your testimony in the midst of what you walk through when people see that maybe you need to be worried about that, but when your life declares "Jesus, you are really real in my life and I'm going to trust

you in the midst of this storm”, people will listen to what you believe.

In fact, you may have a better time of sharing your faith in the midst of going through unbelievable stress than any other time. And how you handle it will pave the path for the words that you may share with your friends about how wonderful Jesus really is because they’re going to really believe you then. When things are going good and you say, “Jesus is real and I love Jesus”, they go, “Yeah, I guess you ought to.” But when you say, “Jesus is real” and you’re going through the fire, that’s when people believe you. Be very sensitive to your witness. There’s another thing I want to share with you and that is simply this:

**3. I need to always remember ‘God cares about me.’** Jesus said in Matthew, “Don’t you know that the Lord cares about you? He knows that you need these things.” And then he would go on to say in verse 33, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” Then Paul would write there in Philippians 4:5, “The Lord is near.”

You know, I think what worry really is, it’s a sense that “I’m all by myself and I’m going to be overpowered by what I’m going through.” That’s why, in the midst of stress and struggle and anxiety, we need to go

ahead and say, “Lord, I thank you that you’re here. You’re right here. Whether I feel you or not, I want to thank you that you are here.” And as you take that proactive step of seeking him and seeking his kingdom and what his kingdom is, it’s his rule in your life as you do that, you’re going to sense his presence and you and I need to claim his presence whether we feel him close or not.

Let me ask you a personal question. Do you feel God here right now? Now, I’m not asking you to answer out loud. But, do you feel that God is here right now? Maybe some of you do. Maybe some of you don’t. Now, does that mean he’s not here? If you don’t feel he’s not here, does that mean he’s not here? No. Do you know why he’s here? Because he said he’d be here. Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst. God inhabits the praises of his people. He’s here. He’s here! Now, whether you feel him here or not doesn’t mean anything. He’s still here. That’s why you just need to simply claim God’s presence and thank him that he is here.

I love what Paul would write in Romans 8:38,39:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

There is nothing that you can go through that God’s not going to be with you. In fact, one wise man once wrote: “There is nothing...no circumstance, no trouble, no testing that can ever touch me, until first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ right through to me. If it has come that far, it has come with great purpose, which I may not have understood at the moment. But, as I refuse to become panicky and I lift up my eyes to Him and accept it as coming from the throne of God for some great purpose of blessing to my own heart, no sorrow will ever disturb me, no trial will ever disarm me, no circumstance will cause me to fret...for I shall rest in the joy of what my Lord is!...”

Claim God’s presence. Maybe today you’re overpowered by anxiety and worry. You don’t know what to do. Then all you need to do is say, “Jesus, I want to thank you that you’re right here with me. And you’re going to take care of me the next step. In

fact, you're going to take care of me every step and I want to tell you I love you." That is the time that your life needs to be full of praise and honor to glorify him as you claim the Lord's presence. And music can help you do that. That's why I think little choruses and scripture verses that we memorize could be one of the most powerful things because you may not have room in your back pocket for a big fat Bible, but as you take God's word in music and in the memorized scripture, you can claim God's presence over and over and over again. And as you praise him and adore him and honor him, God's presence will become really real in your life. Let me give you another word. You want to handle anxiety?

#### **4. My worry is always related to my fear**

**level.** Now, sometimes there is a good indication to be worried about something. That doesn't mean worry is not denial. Let's say you have something that looks like a cancerous growth on your face. You go "Oh, I'm not going to worry about that. God's going to take care of me." God may give you enough sense to go to the doctor. You find out your cholesterol is upside down. "Oh, I'm not going to worry about that. Bring on the nachos." God may have given you enough sense to go to a doctor and get a prescription to help lower your cholesterol or your blood pressure or

something like that. There are some things that you and I need to deal with. Not go into denial. When you and I say, “Well, I’m not going to worry”, that’s not denial. That is allowing something to just eat at you so that your mind goes on the inside. .... Have you ever done that? You’ve had something that was so disturbing you, that’s all you could think about and it just kept you from even going to sleep. And you would say, “I’m not going to worry about it.” But boy it would come back up in your mind and your mind would go like a whirlwind over and over and over again, and you have dialogues about what you were going to say to somebody about something and how you were going to do it and how you were going to react and you’re trying to go to sleep. And you’re telling yourself, “I want to go to sleep”, but your mind’s going, “Let’s talk about this some more.”

Well, God wants us to learn how to dismantle unfounded fear and here’s how you do it.

- a. **Resist the panic.** Paul would write, “Do not be anxious about anything.” When you find your life getting ready to take over with the grips of fear, stop! Just say to yourself, “I’m not going there.” Resist the urge and the desire to go with the flow of

panic in your life. Don't go there. You have that choice mentally and emotionally and spiritually not to go there. Choose not to be anxious. How do you do that? How do you resist that panic? Here's how you do it:

- b. React with prayer.** Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all those things that you would be concerned about are going to be taken care of." He said that! Paul would say the very same thing in Philippians 4:6: "But in everything, you submit your requests to God." So instead of saying, "I'm not going to worry", come to the Father and say, "I'm not going to worry, Father, so right now I'm going to give all of this to you. I'm going to lay it on the altar. I'm going to back away." And when you are tempted to grab hold of it again, start praying again and say, "Father, I want to thank you that that situation that my mind wants to dwell on that you have control over it. I want to thank you, Father, that you're already in the midst of meeting that need in my life, of resolving that issue, of taking care of that problem. And I'm going to wait on you, Father, until you show me

the direction and show me what to do and how to handle it. I'm going to react in prayer and praise." That's exactly how you do it.

Let me tell you something. Prayer is not just only asking God to do something. It is often thanking him that he has already done it. And that communication with him will give your mind and your emotions rest.

I like what Dr. Alexis Carrel said, who is a Nobel Prize winner. He said, "Prayer is...the most powerful form of energy that one can generate. The influence of prayer on the human mind and body is as demonstrable as that of secreting glands. Its results can be measured in terms of increased physical buoyancy, greater intellectual vigor, moral stamina, and a deeper understanding of the realities underlying human relationships... As a physician, I have seen men, after all other therapy had failed, lifted out of disease and melancholy by the severe effort of prayer. It is the only power in the world that seems to overcome the so-called laws of nature.

That's a physician, a Nobel Prize-winning physician that has said that. Prayer is real. Prayer works. That's not self-talk. It is God intervening in a situation and in our minds. And, by the way, he made us, he knows how

we function and there is something that happens. I don't understand it, I'm going to tell you pastors don't understand it, theologians don't understand it, physicians, psychologists don't understand it, but God understands it. The moment we begin to turn a situation over to him, he does something that only he can do and that is to really give peace. And that's the third thing you do to dismantle unfounded fear, you

**C. Rest in His peace.** And you say, "Lord Jesus, I am going to trust you right now that you're going to meet that need. And I'm going to rest knowing that you have control of my life and you are right here. And so, therefore, I'm going to rest in your peace."

Do you think the Father worries? Do you think the angels in heaven go around going, "What's going to happen next?" Do you think that anything that happens in your life shudders God and God goes, "I didn't know that was going to happen." No. God's peace comes when you are in God's presence. And if you and I will resist the panic and react in prayer, we can't help but rest in His peace. They all flow together. Let me give you another word and that is

**5. I choose where my mind dwells.** Now, this is not some new age principle of working yourself up into some kind of emotional euphoria. In fact, you choose to think what you're going to think, don't you? And you can either allow your mind to think and dwell upon things you have no control over, thinking that if you think them long enough you're going to finally have control over them and that is a lie and you know that, or you can choose to focus your mind on something else. So in the absence of that worry you have to put your mind on something else.

Now, why don't you look with me again there in Philippians 4:8. Here's what Paul writes again:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.”

Wow! In other words, focus your mind on those things that are true and noble and admirable. There's a little saying that maybe you learned growing up. Your mom probably taught it to you. If you know it, say it with me. “If you can't say anything good, then say nothing at all.” In other

words, focus. Your mom taught you, whether you were a Christian growing up or not, probably taught you, that if you can't focus on something good, just don't focus on anything at all. So, what Paul is saying instead was you choose to think about those things that are a blessing, those things that are good. You choose to focus your mind on those things that are true and noble and beautiful.

You see, most worried people are negative people. They are the kinds of people who write caustic letters to their friends. They do! They're the kinds of people who pick things all apart. They go shopping and instead of enjoying the experience of being with their friends they talk about and think about how rude somebody treated them rather than seeing that maybe that person who was working was so tense and irritable because they had been working day after day and hour after hour and having problems in their life, and they needed a word of encouragement instead of being talked about behind their back. You see, most worried people are negative, negative people. And you and I can make that choice and make that difference in our life when we say, "Jesus, I want to embrace positive things. Would you show me the things that are good? Help me be able to see it like you see it. Help me be able to look at the things

that happen in my life as blessings and as paths into your presence. Help me to see people in a different light and to see things that unnerve me as something that you're trying to change in me." Embrace positive thoughts. Think about what is pure. Find the good in the midst of what you're going through. Learn to laugh at that.

I think I told you this story one time, but it's really good. I'm going to tell it to you again and if you haven't heard it, well, you need to hear this. I was trying to teach my very first church where I was pastor about how to find the positive in the midst of negative experiences. And it was a Wednesday nighttime and so I just said, "Can you share with me as a church family some instance that has happened in your week this week, something that has happened that you can see the positive in your life?" I mean, I heard a couple of wonderful things left and right and then Billie Newman spoke. Billie said, "Pastor, can I say something?" She had never spoken, she is very quiet. And she said, "I just thought of one. Last night we had a water leak, an explosion in our bathroom. My toilet exploded!" Everybody started laughing, "Your toilet exploded?" She said, "There was water everywhere. It totally ruined the bathroom. It ripped up the floor, the vinyl, everything. It ruined the cabinets, it ruined the sheetrock, it was

terrible!” Everybody was looking, “Well, how can you find something good about that?” She looked and she smiled and said, “I’ve been wanting to redecorate that bathroom for a long time!”

Let me tell you something, you and I can take even the most difficult thing and look at it and go, “Hey! I can use that.” Let me tell you something, I know what I’m talking about. God can allow you to go through unbelievable things that you can turn. I look at how I was raised. I look at growing up in a broken home and I can either focus on “Oh, poor me. I didn’t have a dad all the time at home” or I can look at it and go, “You know what? God prepared me and has used that for me to minister to an entire nation to where divorce and single family homes seems to be more common than abnormal.” Either I can look at things that happen physically in my life and say, “Well, that prevents me” or I can say, “Lord, maybe you’re trying to limit me.”

I look back several years ago. Thirteen years ago I broke my leg, about this time of year, dramatically. It kept me from ever snow skiing. But I have to tell you, I love to do too many things. I used to love to snow ski, fish and golf and hunt and all kinds of stuff. And I started thinking, “You know, I don’t like skiing that much anyway. That

just limits me so I can focus in on those other three things I like.” And you and I can either say, “Man, that ruins my life” or “There’s some good stuff out of that.” Embrace the positive thoughts. Ask God to give you his mentality. Jesus said your Father knows you need those things. And last of all, I would share with you

**6. Emulate the right example.** Verse 9. Paul writes something very strong, doesn’t he? He said: “Whatever you’ve seen in me or heard in me or received in me, you emulate.” Those are strong words. Do you know what? He’s right. You and I need models of the Christian life. We are in a desperate situation in our country. We don’t have heroes like we used to have heroes. I mean, most of the heroes now are on video games. A lot of the heroes that we used to look at now have been replaced by people who have no moral value whatsoever. And we’re upside down in our country. But you and I can choose the right models, especially when it comes to anxiety. Find somebody that has a positive attitude and who enjoys their life and enjoys the Lord and hang around them. Stop hanging around negative, downer people. I mean, that’s the truth. Stop trying to emulate or agree and to get their approval.

Now I don't know if there's any negative people in your life. But if you hang around them long enough, do you know what? You're going to be just like them. Misery loves a crowd and it's never large enough. Choose to find somebody in your life that you can emulate and that you would want your kids to be like. Look for those individuals. That's what Paul said, "Follow my example." That is so very important. Otherwise, you will do damage to your emotional health, your spiritual health, and to your family. Worry, anxiety will rip you up. Do you know what? There are a lot of things to be worried about. You can name them every step of the way or you can smile and say, "Don't worry, be happy!" Do you know why? Because God cares about you. I found a wonderful little verse in the midst of verse 9. And then it still runs like a silver thread through Matthew 6: "And the God of peace will be with you." That's one of the descriptions of God - peace. What's peace? That's not the absence of problems. That's tranquility in the midst of the storm. The God of peace will be with you.

You know, I want that for my life, don't you? I don't know what tomorrow holds. I don't know who will be President. I don't know what the courts will do. I don't know what the economy will do, do you? I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow in

my life physically or whatever, but God does and I want whatever God wants because the God of peace wants to be with me and he wants to be with you so that what he has you can have.

Now, let me ask you a question. Do you have any peace in your life? Do you have any peace or are you just all jumbled up, wrinkled, rumpled, all wadded up? God wants your life to be at peace regardless of what storm you walk through. And do you know how that happens? When you come to Him. Because where he is, there's peace, and he wants that for his children. He does. Do you want that? You can have it.