

Overcoming Anxiety

Philippians 4:6-9

What are you most anxious about in your life? What, if anything, is overwhelming your heart and mind? I want to ask you to write it down on the card that you were given. At the end of the message, I'm going to ask you to do what God is calling you to do with your anxiety.

Studies show that the number of individuals struggling with anxiety has increased significantly since the mid-twentieth century. And the group that has shown the highest rise in anxiety are young adults between 18-30 years of age.

Some of the causes for this rise in anxiety is social isolation, and the increase use of social media. Although social media can be used for good, it also portrays altered images and propagates deceitful ideologies that no one can live up to and which leads to various individual and social anxieties. <https://www.who.int>

Considering the rise of anxiety, let me ask you, does the bible teach that all forms of fear and anxiety are wrong, unhealthy, or sinful? Doesn't God's word repeatedly exhort us and admonish us not to fear or be anxious? I want to submit to you that there's a kind of fear and anxiety that is not only normal, but also rooted in love and maturity in Christ.

Although on the one hand, Paul exhorts believers in our text, "*do not be **anxious** about anything...*" (Philippians 4:6), he also personally testified to the troubled church of Corinth: "*But I am **afraid** that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ*" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Moreover, when writing to the Corinthians about the marks of a true apostle, after listing a number of hardships that he suffered in the ministry, he concludes: "*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my **anxiety** for all the churches*" (2 Corinthians 11:28).

So, the point is that because Paul loved and cared about the welfare of the Church, there were times when he **feared** that believers were being led astray. And he also had an ongoing deep concern that made him **restless** at times for the general welfare of all the churches that he was acquainted with. And keep in mind that he pointed to this **anxiety**, this deep concern, this restlessness that he had for the welfare of the church not as a weakness, but as evidence that he was called of God.

The many exhortations in the bible not to be afraid, and Paul highlighting his fear and anxiety as proof of the genuineness of his apostleship, might seem a bit confusing and even contradictory.

But what can help reconcile this apparent contradiction is that when the bible exhorts us not to fear, it's referring to fear that is based on false perceptions or that is paralyzing us and keeping us from taking constructive actions, from moving forward into God's plan for our lives.

It's important to emphasize here that not all fear or anxiety is wrong or sinful per se. And to think so is to add guilt on top of your anxiety. If your 13-year-old kid was supposed to be home from his friend's house at 5pm and at 10pm you haven't heard from him, you are going to get anxious. And that anxiousness is there to move you to act.

Moreover, when the bible exhorts us not to fear or be anxious, it's not implying that we should never be anxious. The many exhortations not to be afraid assumes that we will be. But although we will experience fear, we must not wallow in a state of anxiety or become paralyzed by it. Rather, we need to do something with it—something that will bring God's peace and power to bear in our lives and circumstances.

Main idea: Panic will turn to peace when worry turns to worship.

What does God's word say we should do with our anxiety so that it might be replaced with God's peace? In this message we are going to consider four road markers on the pathway to peace.

1. Pray the word of God

The road marker that we must come to at the start of our journey from anxiety to peace is **pray the word of God**. Before we consider this essential leg of the journey to peace, it's important that we get a little context. Right before Paul exhorts the church at Philippi to not be anxious about anything, he addressed two sisters in Christ who apparently were having a conflict.

In addition to exhorting them to agree with one another, he called on a trusted companion to help them work through their conflict. Moreover, he exhorted them to rejoice in the Lord, which required them to take their focus off their petty differences and refocus on the joyful things that unites them in Christ and promotes, among other things, openness to reason (Philippians 4:1-5).

I don't know about you, but when I'm involved in a conflict with another person, it can stress me out and cause me major anxiety. If someone is thinking negatively about me, because of a decision that I made, it can make me feel insecure, which is a form of fear and anxiety.

When I feel insecure because others are thinking negatively about me, in addition to anxiety, I may also feel anger. And if I'm not careful, these emotions will lead to actions that are counterproductive.

So, what do we do when we feel anxious or insecure about a conflict that we are having with another person or about circumstances in general that are beyond our control? Fear and anxiety, real or imagined, have a way of arresting our attention. Anxiety can give us tunnel vision where we become obsessed over the perceived problem.

Therefore, when fear gets our attention, we must learn to turn our attention to God. Anxiety must become like an alarm in us that alerts us to pray, to look up to God, to turn our focus away from our problems and seek the face of God. This is what Paul clearly exhorted believers in conflict to do in Philippians 4:6. He writes:

“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.” Philippians 4:6-7

Notice, Paul doesn't just exhort these believers not to be anxious. He exhorts them to pray. And he doesn't just say pray, he says, pray about everything. Beloved, do you pray about everything?

A number of years ago, I heard one of my spiritual heroes say this about his prayer life and it stuck with me: “On average I don't pray for more than 20 minutes in one sitting. But, I never go without praying for more than 20 minutes.”

Many today think of prayer as something you do in the morning or at night. “I said my prayers, and now I'm good for the rest of the day.” When in fact a healthy prayer life is being in constant communication with God all throughout the day.

The main cause for why many Christians live with so much fear and anxiety is their neglect of the gift of prayer. Instead of prayer being our first resolve, too often it's our last resort.

Again, Paul doesn't just say, don't worry, everything is going to be alright. He said to pray about everything. Furthermore, he doesn't just say pray about everything. He gives us three words that describe how we can pray faithfully and effectively.

The first word he uses is **prayer**. This word prayer is a general word that speaks of more than bringing our requests before the Lord. “It carries the idea of adoration, devotion, and worship. Whenever we find ourselves worrying, our first reaction ought to be to get alone with God and worship Him.” Warren Wiersbe

When we worship, we recognize the worthiness and greatness of God. Excessive worry and anxiety are often the result of making our problems bigger than God. But when we go to God in worship, when we see Him rightly, we are reminded that God is bigger than our problems.

We are not defined by our circumstances or what others think of us. We are to be defined by what God thinks of us, by who we are in Christ. When we turn our attention to “who God is” and what He says about us, and give our cares to a God who cares for us, God’s word promises: *“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Philippians 4:7

The second word to describe how we ought to pray is **supplication**. This word speaks of an earnest and fervent sharing of our needs and problems to God. When we see God rightly, we will pray with frequency, fervency and faith.

Too often Christians utter half-hearted prayers to God. This will be the case if we are not fully aware of who we are praying too, namely a holy, all powerful, and loving God.

So when you pray, get in the habit of focusing first on God’s attributes revealed in His word. When you see His worth, you will see your need and pray with faith and fervency. Seek His face first and then Seek His hand.

Start your day praying with an open bible about the things that God is revealing to you about Himself and His will for your life. The scriptures exhort us to pray in the Spirit. And we pray in the Spirit when our prayers are shaped by the word of God who inspired the scriptures.

Prayer is more than one-way communication. God is ready to listen to us, but He’s more inclined to listen to us when we are listening to Him. And again, don’t just say your prayers in the morning and move on. Continue to seek God throughout the day knowing that He’s a God that is near not far away (Philippians 4:5b).

O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Thirdly, when describing how we ought to pray, Paul writes, *with thanksgiving*. In thanksgiving we express our gratitude for who God is and what He's done in our lives. Gratitude leads to joy and peace.

As the Psalmist exhorted the people of God: *"Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name"* (Psalms 100:4).

When we are thankful for what God has done in our lives we are reminded of God's faithfulness. Furthermore, through adoration, thanksgiving and praise, we become aware of His presence. And in His presence we find His joy and peace. Peace is not the absence of trouble; it's the presence of Jesus.

2. Ponder the wonders of God

Now the next marker on the pathway to peace is ponder the word of God. What we need most when we are anxious about a conflict or difficult circumstances, is a renewed perspective. Faulty thinking will lead to unhealthy emotions.

The prophets Isaiah said of the Lord: *"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you"* (Isaiah 26:3).

Often individuals who struggle with anxiety also report having negative thoughts that keep replaying in their heads. And they will tell you that no matter how hard they try, they can't stop the thoughts from playing over and over again.

But although the cause of most of the anxiety is negative thoughts replaying in their heads, the key to overcoming anxiety is not merely to stop the anxious thoughts. We need to supplant wrong thinking with right thinking –about God, ourselves and others.

Even if there was a stop button that we can press to turn off the negative thinking, we must do more than that. We must change the station, put another CD in the player of our minds, or download a different song. We must replace wrong thinking with right thinking.

Secular counselors and psychologists have figured out what the scriptures have taught for centuries, namely that what we “think” will shape our feelings, desires and actions. Recognizing this, trained counselors and therapist and even well meaning Christians will tell you to “think happy thoughts” and get away from what is bringing you down. The formal terminology for this kind of treatment is called, “Cognitive Behavior Therapy” or CBT for short.

A therapist using CBT will teach a person to stop looking at the past and start focusing on their present. Through CBT they seek to help a person identify negative thoughts and teach them to replace them with positive thoughts, thereby changing a person’s negative emotions and behaviors.

But although “positive” thinking may cause a temporary change in emotion and behavior, it does not provide long-term, lasting results. In his excellent book, *The End of Anxiety*, Josh Weidmann explained:

“While CBT can look similar to biblical Christianity, let me be clear: CBT is not the same as biblical transformation through the only true change agent—our Savior Jesus Christ—and the power of the Gospel. While the Bible teaches the power of renewing our minds, we do so rooted not in mere positivity, but in biblical truth (Romans 12:1–12; Ephesians 4:22–24; Colossians 3:1–10).

The Bible tells us that biblical thinking will impact our feelings and actions (John 13:17; James 1:25; Proverbs 29:18). The goal of our thinking is to please God first. Ephesians 5:10 says, *“Try and discern what is pleasing to the Lord.”* When I change my thinking for Him, His Spirit will give me the power to either change my feelings or my perspective.”

Returning to our text, notice that after Paul’s exhortation to believers to pray about everything, believers who were experiencing threats from a pagan culture, while facing their own internal conflicts, Paul writes, *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is*

commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8).

As I noted earlier, Paul didn't just exhort the Philippians to press the stop button to the negative playlist on repeat in their heads. Many wish it was that easy. Instead, Paul exhorts the anxious believers to switch to a new and divine playlist.

Beloved, peace comes to our lives when we learn to rejoice and rest in the sufficiency of Christ and all that we are in Him. Concerning what it means to find our rest in Christ in the midst of a turbulent world, one commentator explained: “This doesn't mean doing nothing. It means ceasing the mind racing, heart pounding, stomach churning activities that keep us in a constant state of anxiety and edginess. Paul's concept of rest is to fix the heart and mind on [true, right and praise worthy] things.

Take a good look at Paul's sampling of things worth dwelling on in Philippians 4:8, and consider their alternatives. We are to think on:

- whatever is **true**, not false, untrustworthy, or imagined
- whatever is **honorable**, not shameful, twisted, or foolish
- whatever is **right**, not wrong, sinful, or rebellious
- whatever is **pure**, not tainted, coarse, or immoral
- whatever is **lovely**, not distorted, ugly, or offensive
- whatever is **commendable**, not gossipy, slanderous or sarcastic
- whatever is **excellent**, not inferior, wasteful, or flawed
- whatever is **worthy** of praise, not objectionable, insulting, or evil.”
Swindoll

It's important to note here that the battle to overcome anxiety, which is fed by negative thoughts, can be fierce. But this is not a battle that we fight alone. As we will see in a moment, when we set out to practice these principles, when we pray the word of God and ponder the wonders of God, the God of peace will be with us.

3. Participate with the wise of God

The third marker on the pathway to peace is to participate with the wise of God. Beloved, the battle to overcome anxiety is not one that God expects us to fight alone. Jesus died alone on a cross so that we never have to experience being alone.

The God of peace not only promises to be with us in this fight, but He works through other wise brothers and sisters in Christ to bring His peace to our lives. “While anxiety is deeply personal, it cannot be fought by ourselves. We must find the help we need through Christ in community, biblical counseling, and the Body of Christ to find inner peace.” Josh Weidmann

Notice that before Paul urged the believers to practice these anxiety crushing principles he laid out, he writes: *“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”* Philippians 4:9

Keep in mind that when Paul wrote about the pathway to peace, which he experienced, he had many enemies. Additionally, he was sitting in prison in Rome under the threat of execution. What did Paul do while he was in prison? He did what he taught the Philippians to do. In fact, years earlier when he was imprisoned in Philippi, we read in Acts 16:25: *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,”* (Acts 16:25).

Paul knew the peace of God in dark times because when fear threatened to fill his heart, he turned his attention to God in praise and worship. Paul knew that fear will turn to faith when worry turns to worship.

Paul lived what he preached. And if you recall, when God opened the prison doors in response to his faith, the Philippian Jailer would later come to saving faith in Christ, along with his whole household.

The Philippians knew firsthand the kind of man that Paul was. They knew that he wasn't exhorting them to do what he himself had never practiced. Rather, he wanted them to learn not only from his teaching but from his personal example.

Beloved, God does not call us to overcome anxiety in isolation. Although overcoming anxiety necessitates that we cultivate a close relationship with God, he uses others that are close to Him to strengthen us in the faith. And He wants to use you to do the same.

When you give your life to Christ, not only do you enter into a relationship with your Savior, but you also become part of God's New Covenant community. The Church is not a place you visit on Sundays; it's a New Covenant community that believers belong to where the God of peace dwells.

As Josh Weidmann observed: "The New Testament uses the phrase 'one another' fifty-nine times. While our walk with God has an individual component to it, God intended for us to do life together. It is impossible for a Christian to experience true life in Christ without maintaining a vital connection to the Church." We need each other.

4. Practice the wisdom of God

The final marker on the pathway to peace is practice the wisdom of God. Having challenged the church to learn from his teaching and example for overcoming anxiety, Paul concludes: *practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*" Philippians 4:9

We've been taught the way of peace. The question now is, will we walk in it? Or will we choose a different path?

I'm convinced that many believers today are struggling with anxiety, because although they heard and received the truth, they're not putting it into practice (Isaiah 59:8).

As I noted earlier, the battle to overcome anxiety, which is fed by negative thoughts, can be fierce. But this is not a battle that we fight alone. When we set out to practice what we've heard, and received from the Lord, when we pray the word of God, ponder the wonders of God, participate with the wise of God and practice the wisdom of God,

the God of peace will be with us, He will help us and make Himself known.

It's important to note that the pathway to peace is not merely steps that we take. It's not a formula. The pathway to peace is Jesus. And He's not just the way to peace. He is the Prince of Peace. He is our peace (Isaiah 9:6; Philip 4:7; Eph. 2:14; John 14:27).

To know the peace of God in your life, Jesus must dwell in your heart. He comes to dwell in us, when we are reconciled to God by placing our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord who died on a cross so that we might receive forgiveness of sins.

Conclusion

When Jesus dwells in your heart, His peace will overflow in your life as you allow Him, the Prince of Peace, to rule in your heart. Paul said in Colossians 3:15, *“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts...”*

I want to submit to you that at the bottom of all the layers of anxiety in our hearts, is a longing for more of Jesus. What place does Jesus have in your heart and life? Many want the peace of Jesus without the rule of Jesus. Give Jesus the throne of your heart and you will know His securing peace, which will guard your heart and mind.

The Anxiety Box

Earlier you were handed a card. I asked everyone to write down whatever has been overwhelming your heart and mind. What does God want you to do with the care of your heart? He wants you to pray—to give the care of your heart to Him and trust Him to carry it. Bring it to God in prayer and leave it with Him.

As you pray, I want to also invite everyone to come forward while we sing our final song, and place your card in this box. This action is our declaration that we are surrendering those written-down fears, anxieties, and worries to the Lord and humbly asking for His help.

As you place your card in the box, remember that the God who made you is holding that burden for you so you can find joy and peace in your pain. And as you entrust your burden to Him, ask Jesus, the Prince of peace, to rule in your heart. Tell Him, “my life belongs to you Jesus. Have your way in me.”