

Pray

Reading

These are the words of God:

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. 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.
(Philippians 4:4–7)

Intro

We struggle with prayer, don't we? We struggle to do it consistently. We struggle to do it without feeling distracted. We struggle to do it, frankly, without at times feeling bored.

And what's fascinating about this passage in Philippians is that Paul seems to connect our prayerlessness with our anxiety.

Could it be that the reason many of us struggle with anxiety is because many of us struggle with prayer?

What should we do?

Well I have three headings, three points for us to consider:

The Object Of Prayer
The Outline Of Prayer
The Outcome Of Prayer

So, firstly, Paul says: in the battle against anxiety, remember the object of your prayer.

1. The Object Of Prayer

Who are we addressing our prayers TO?

Look at the end of verse 6:

6 ...let your requests be made known to God.
(Philippians 4:6)

Paul is referring there to God the Father.

When you look at Paul's prayers across all of his letters, the object of his prayers is the Father. And, of course, that's how Jesus himself taught us to pray in Matthew chapter 6: "Our Father..."

Now, that's not to say if you don't specifically address God the Father in your prayers, your prayer won't get through. The early church leader, Stephen, as he was being martyred, prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit", and he was undoubtedly heard.

So addressing our prayers to the Father isn't some kind of magic formula.

But it IS the way Jesus taught us to pray. Because it reminds us who we are speaking to: a heavenly Father

who cares for us infinitely more than an earthly father cares for his beloved child. Which is to say, a very great deal. And that makes a huge difference to our anxiety.

Long before I became a father myself, an old friend of mine warned me about it. There I was, he said, hanging out with friends, playing computer games, going to work, not really caring about anything that much.

And then, he said, I was standing in the hospital, and my little girl was handed to me, and right away I knew I'd take a bullet for her. It was overwhelming, he said.

Fast forward a decade or so to the Advent hospital in Daytona, Florida.

I was handed my first-born daughter, and sure enough, I cried so hard with joy I seriously thought I was about to drop her. Which wouldn't have been the greatest of starts for either of us.

There she was, her head in the crook of my elbow... how can you feel so strongly about someone you've never met before? And yet at the same time, you feel as if you've always known them.

Of course, I was on my emotional guard when daughter number 2 arrived, and yet there it was again - exactly the same emotion. I had experienced love before, but nothing like the love a FATHER has for his child.

In Islam, there are 99 names for Allah. He is described as “mighty”. He is described as “most holy”. But he is never described as “Father.”

By comparison, listen to Romans 8:15:

[Y]ou have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:15)

Abba is the Aramaic word for “Father”. It’s the word Jesus uses when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Abba, Father, [he says] all things are possible for you...”

Perhaps you’ve seen that famous photo of JFK sitting behind his desk in the oval office at the White House in October 1963.

The most powerful man in the world. What do you think a person had to do to gain access to that room for a private audience with the President? You certainly couldn’t just

turn up and barge in. And good luck trying to get an appointment.

But in the photo, sitting at his feet under the desk, playing happily, is his little boy, JFK Jnr.

His three year old son enjoyed the kind of access, the kind of intimacy that the most powerful people in the world could only dream of. Why? Because the President was his FATHER.

If you are a Christian, you have that kind of access to God. Do you make use of it? That you can call God “Abba, Father”, is astonishing.

It’s embarrassing to admit, but it can be so easy to say the words “Heavenly Father” in a lazy or even mechanical way, without thinking about how extraordinary that is.

My most embarrassing moment as a human being - and there’ve been many, as you can imagine - came towards the end of last year.

Before meals, the Cooper family are in the habit of taking each other’s hands, closing our eyes, bowing our heads,

and I say a short prayer of thanks, “Heavenly Father, thank you for this food.”

Now, the thing you need to know is that we have a number of Google devices in our home. And I was feeling very tired as I began to pray. So we took each other’s hands, we bowed our heads solemnly, we closed our eyes, and Daddy, who is supposed to be a pastor, accidentally began the prayer by saying: “Hey Google...”

If you only take one thing away from this sermon, I hope it’s this: do not confuse God with Google. Don’t tell God to switch your lights on for you. And don’t praise Google for your dinner.

J I Packer said, “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means he does not understand Christianity very well at all.”

Is that how you think of God? As a tender Father who sings over YOU as you might sing tenderly over your little ones as they fall asleep? We are tempted to think otherwise, but that is who He is.

Majestic, yes. Transcendent, yes. Fearsome in His power, yes. But to you, beloved in Christ, he's never less than a doting, protective and devoted Father. He loves you as dearly as he loves his own Son.

And it's not just that you pray to your Father. You are also praying to Almighty God.

We pray to a Father who is sovereignly in command of the entire universe, and everything beyond it. To borrow someone else's line, there are no "rogue molecules" which act apart from the Father's say-so.

Jesus said there is not even a sparrow which falls to the ground apart from the foreordaining of your Father. And as Jesus says, you are worth much more to your Father than sparrows.

To know that fact is the deepest protection against anxiety. Nothing can touch you that has not first come through your Father's hands.

Now I know, some resist this idea of the Father's complete control over all our circumstances. But once you deny that reality, what is there left to say to the dear sister with a

stage 4 cancer diagnosis, or the parents whose child has died?

What can we say?

All we can say is something like this: “Although God loves you, he didn’t see this coming.” “Although God loves you, he was powerless to STOP this bad thing from happening to you, even though He wanted to.”

For those of us who mourn, for those of us who are anxious, a God who is not really in control of the world, or is too slow to react to it, is no comfort at all.

Not only is he no help to us in our troubles, he would also be no help to us in our prayers.

I’ve prayed for years for dearly loved friends who do not know Jesus, and I’m sure you have too. Now if God cannot sovereignly overrule to open their eyes to the beauty of Christ, if God cannot influence people in any way because the sovereignty of THEIR free will must be respected at all costs, then why bother praying to the Father at all?

As one theologian puts it: “ALL Christians believe in divine sovereignty. On our feet we may have arguments about it, but on our knees we are all agreed.”

Prayer only makes sense if the object of our prayers has the power to answer them.

And He does.

In the battle against anxiety, that’s the first thing I need to know: The OBJECT of my prayer is my loving and all-powerful Father.

Secondly, in the battle against anxiety, remember the OUTLINE of prayer.

2. The Outline Of Prayer

What should we do when we're anxious about anything?
Look at what Paul says in Verse 6:

6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

Paul is not saying, "just stop being anxious! Stop it!". Paul is saying, REPLACE your anxiety with something better. Namely, prayer.

One theologian put it like this: "The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything."

Health, marriage, finances, relationships, exams - In everything, let your requests be made known to God.

First Peter 5:7 says: "[cast] ALL your anxieties on HIM, because he cares for you."

But in saying that, I want us to notice something about the way PAUL prays for the Philippians in their anxiety.

The circumstances of first century Christians were much worse and more pressing than ours typically are. Disease, death, and persecution on every side. Their circumstances, objectively speaking, were terrible. And yet Paul never prays that their circumstances would change.

What DOES he pray for instead, over and over again, in all his letters? He prays that Christians would KNOW God better. Remember what he prays in Philippians chapter 1:

9 ...it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment...
(Philippians 1:9)

It's not wrong to pray for physical health, or that bills would be paid, or for guidance in a relationship, or whatever is making us anxious. But how often in our anxiety do we pray that we would know God better?

If we ask God merely to take away whatever is making us anxious in the moment, that doesn't actually deal with the root of our anxiety.

But if on the other hand we ask God to give us eyes to see the dimensions of his love and Fatherly care for us, if we ask God to give us the power to grasp all the riches we

now have in Christ, then we're better equipped to deal with whatever is causing our PRESENT anxiety, AND whatever may cause us anxiety in future.

So for Paul, what is MOST needful for us is not that our sources of anxiety would be taken away, but rather that we would come to know a God who is more powerful than anything we might be anxious about.

Now, here's a question. Jesus says in Matthew 6 that our Father knows what we need BEFORE we ask him.

So why should we tell him all our anxieties, if He already knows what they are?

Partly because in doing so, we are reminding ourselves that our loving Father has the power and the DESIRE to work all things for our good. In other words, prayer doesn't change God's character, but it DOES change ours.

Prayer reminds us that He is in control, not us, and that awareness begins to free us of our worries.

I love what Michael Reeves says on this point. He says, "If you want to be anxious today, pretend you're in control."

Because THAT is the root of our anxiety isn't it? The belief that WE are the ones in control, that we must control all the things in just the right way, at just the right time, in just the right place. Otherwise bad things will happen.

But the very act of prayer itself reminds you: No, my loving FATHER is in control. Otherwise, why am I down here on my knees asking Him for things?

You are not the air traffic controller of the universe. You don't have to frantically run around, desperately trying to keep things from crashing into each other. Of course we're anxious if that's how we see our lives. But that's not the universe you live in, if you're in Christ.

When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to say to our Father, "YOUR kingdom come". Or "YOUR will be done."

What are you saying when you say that? You're reminding yourself: Father, YOU are King. You're in total control of the universe. And I want YOUR will to be done. Why?

Because YOU know what is right and best for me. I don't even know what I should be asking you for - but you do. You always give me whatever I WOULD have asked for, had I known all that YOU know.

And you never give me anything that would harm me, even if I plead with you for it. So - yes! - YOUR will be done. Not mine!

The Puritan Thomas Watson, in his book All Things For Good, says of our prayer requests: "If it is good for us, we shall have it; if it is not good for us, then the withholding of it is good."

And so, having prayed, I can lay my head on the pillow, and sleep well. Because He's my Father, He's got this, and He's got ME.

When we pray, there's another crucial ingredient: we're to pray with thanksgiving. Verse 6:

6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

We're to THANK God not because God has a fragile ego. It's not because HE needs reminding how great He is.

It's because WE need reminding how great He is.

We so easily forget all He is, all He has done, all He IS doing, and all He will do for us. So we're to pray with thanksgiving.

Thank Him for life, breath, food, friends. And that's before we even start thanking him for Christ, through whom we have forgiveness and joy and security and purpose, and the certain hope that our best days are ahead of us.

Remember how Paul began Philippians: thanking God for their partnership in the gospel.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,
always in every prayer of mine for you all making
my prayer with joy... (Philippians 1:3-4)

You might say, well Paul, how can I pray with thanksgiving with all that is happening to me? You don't know what's going on in my life.

I think Paul would say: with all that is happening to you, that is the most URGENT time to pray with thanksgiving.

If we can begin to give thanks, even falteringly, joy can be kindled in the darkest places. Because prayer changes us.

One last thing to say on the outline of our prayers. Sometimes we feel as if we don't know how to speak to God.

So here's a question: when you were a child, how did you learn to speak? You learned to speak by hearing your parents speak.

In the same way, prayer is a response to hearing God's word.

So for example, you open up Philippians, and you read: "do not be anxious about anything..."

How do you turn that into prayer? In any number of ways, but you might pray, for example, "Father, thank you that I can talk to you about anything and everything that makes me anxious. Thank you that you care for me, that you listen, that you hear. Here's what I feel anxious about..."

So prayer isn't complicated. It's a response to what God has already said to you in his word. Maybe one of the reasons we find prayer difficult is because we often try to do it with our Bibles shut.

So we've seen the object of prayer, and the outline of prayer. Lastly, what is the outcome of prayer?

3. The Outcome Of Prayer

You see the outcome in verse 7:

...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

The outcome of prayer is “the peace of God” “guarding [our] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”?

What exactly is this “peace of God”? Is this an “experience”? A “feeling”? Or is it a theological reality?

I think the answer is “yes”.

Yes, “the peace of God” is a theological reality. We are now at peace with God through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. He is the Prince of Peace. His Kingdom is a Kingdom of peace.

Before Christ paid for our entry into that Kingdom, we were not at peace with God. We were at war with Him, with nothing to look forward to except condemnation and hell.

But we who were once far off have been brought near to God by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2:14 says that “Christ Himself IS our peace”. And this is why Paul begins all his letters by reminding us: “Grace to you AND PEACE from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So yes, when Paul refers here to “the peace of God”, it is a reference to that theological reality.

And yet. “The peace of God” is more than mere theology.

Many of us are pretty good at theology. We experience something, and we look at our experience through the lens of theology. That’s how we make sense of it. We theologize our experience. But have you ever experienced your theology?

Good doctrine is essential. It is non-negotiable. But have we really understood it, if it leaves us emotionally unmoved?

Listen to what the Apostle Peter says:

8 Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory... (1 Peter 1:8)

Sounds like more than “dry doctrine” doesn’t it? Tim Keller, in his book on prayer, speaks of being convicted by this verse. He says:

I had to marvel that Peter... could address all his readers like this. He didn’t say, ‘Well, some of you with an advanced spirituality have begun to get periods of high joy in prayer. Hope the rest of you catch up.’ No, he assumed that an experience of sometimes overwhelming joy in prayer was normal.”

He goes on to say, “We are not called to choose between a Christian life based on truth and doctrine OR a life filled with spiritual power and experience. They go together. I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch out to look for ‘something more’, for experience. Rather, I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology.”

What Paul describes as “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding” is meant to be experienced. To be felt, in your inmost being. Paul explicitly tells us that “the peace of God... surpasses all understanding”. In

other words, this kind of peace cannot be understood merely by our intellectual faculties.

In Ephesians chapter 3 verse 19, Paul prays that they would...

...know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge... (Ephesians 3:19)

But how can you KNOW something if it SURPASSES knowledge? Answer: By experiencing it. You can't put it into words, but you know it, because you've experienced it.

Now, it's important to say that our feelings, our experiences, do not determine whether or not things are true. God's forgiveness of our sin is real and true whether or not we feel the joy of that.

One of my dear Christian friends is autistic. He's an author and speaker, and most of the time - as a result of his autism - he says he doesn't feel what other Christians feel. He doesn't typically EXPERIENCE emotional highs. But, ironically, he has an incredible gift for helping people experience the wonder of the gospel.

I get it, some of us are wired differently, but generally speaking, good news affects us emotionally, doesn't it?

When we pray consistently to the Father, with thanksgiving, our experience of anxiety begins to be replaced by an experience of peace.

And when we are prayed FOR, it can bring us an experience of peace too, can't it? Especially when we're prayed for by an older and wiser saint.

I remember in 1992, I'd only been a Christian a few months, I'd got a Summer job selling books door to door in Tennessee, and I soon learned that I was the world's worst salesman. I had two months to go in this job, and I couldn't bear the thought of it. I just wanted to go home.

So I was sitting there in this hotel room in Nashville, and as I was feeling all this anxiety, the housekeeper came in to clean my room.

And we got talking, and I guess she must have sensed my anxiety, because she started to pray out loud for me. I still remember it thirty years on, because she put into words things I as a young Christian didn't know how to express, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of Christ's love, and a sense of peace, that all would be well.

Now, if that's how it feels to be prayed for by an older, wiser saint, how would you feel if you were prayed for by Jesus Christ Himself?

Isn't that exactly what He's doing for you, right now, at this very moment? Isn't He, at this moment, perfectly putting into words all your anxieties, as he stands at the right hand of the Father? Isn't He, right now, asking your Father to give you the peace that surpasses all understanding, and the assurance that all will be well? He is!

In Philippians 4 verse 5, Paul reminds us "The Lord is at hand".

Now that could be a reminder that the Lord is coming soon to make everything right.

But it is also a reference to the fact that Jesus is WITH you now, by His Spirit. And Christ's Spirit is interceding for you, right now, speaking to the Father on YOUR behalf, speaking with words that are beyond your ability to articulate. Romans 8:26:

...we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. (Romans 8:26)

He sees you in your sadness and your struggles, he perfectly prays against all your anxieties, and then he gently tells you that He is with you, that your Father is in control of all things, that the bad will turn out for good, and the best is yet to come.

And if you DON'T feel or experience anything when you pray, what would the Lord have you do? Pray. Pray that you would know your Father better, pray that you would experience His peace, which surpasses all understanding.

Why don't we do that now? Let's pray.

I'm going to pray the prayer in Romans 15, and in Ephesians 3. Which is to say, I'm going to pray for us as God Himself prays for us, because these prayers come from the word of God:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13)

I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:14–21)