

## FROM ANXIETY TOWARD PEACE (Lessons for the Journey)

Philippians 4:4-9 - August 16, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

**Hell** is described as a place where people weep and gnash their teeth. The gnashing of teeth is what we now call grinding your teeth and it's often associated with pain, frustration, anxiety or stress. In the past year I've been grinding my teeth so much when I sleep, that I broke one tooth which had to be pulled and replaced with an implant, and now I've done it to a second tooth, and a third tooth is on the possible failure list. I got an expensive mouth guard to wear at night but I broke that too! At least my dentist is making a profit during this pandemic. On top of that I have had more than a few bouts of weeping. So if hell involves a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth then it sounds something like 2020. I'm kidding... mostly, but not really.

**I know I don't need to remind** you of the many challenging and weird things that have been going on for the past several months. In fact I've had people write me and say, *"Thank you for not always preaching about the pandemic or divisiveness in our nation - I need a break!"* So I don't want to belabor the point - but as I looked at Philippians 4 my eye was drawn two words, anxiety and peace - **anxiety and peace** - because I have too much of one and I want more of the other. Don't you? Don't you want less anxiety and more peace?

**Nothing robs us of joy more than worry and anxiety.** If anyone ever had an excuse for worrying it was Paul: he was in prison and was facing a likely execution, several people in the churches under his care were trying to cause trouble, one of his best helpers had to leave to take this letter away. But in the midst of all these problems he says, *"Don't worry about anything"* or *"Do not be anxious about anything."* In between he says, *"Pray about everything, and make sure your focus is in a positive direction."* I'll come back to those things, but first I want to assure you that you shouldn't immediately feel guilty or spiritually immature or weak if you're struggling with anxiety or worry - in 2020 or at any other time. It is a misreading of our text, and many others, to say that we should be completely immune to worry and anxiety. I think our text is really saying this, *"Whenever you're anxious or worried - as you're bound to be now and then - here is what you can do that will help move you in a better direction."*

**Here is one reason I think this is true.** In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 (funny since Chapter 11 is associated with bankruptcy), the Apostle Paul gives a long list of hardships and painful trials he had to endure. These were terrible things, which make what most of us face seem mild by comparison. These were things to make one declare bankruptcy over and over. But then this is Paul, the great Apostle who said, *"Rejoice!"* and *"Again I say rejoice!"* He also said, *"Don't be anxious about anything."* So surely, these things are not getting him down or causing him any anguish. But then in 11:28, he writes, *"And, apart from [these] other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."* What?! The Apostle Paul admits to having anxiety?! Yes! He is not immune or above it at all - and neither are any of us.

**Another reason** I think this is true is from the example of Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wept and wrestled in agony with the thought of going to the cross, and carrying our sin.

**The Bible says Jesus was sorrowful and troubled** - even in anguish to the point of sweating blood. That makes the gnashing of teeth seem a little less intense. Now, I've seen many people who think worry or anxiety are "sins" trying to dance around those scenes of agony and explain them away. They may be right but I think not. The more obvious answer is this, both Jesus and Paul experienced anxiety and it was not sin. However, it was also not good, and it's not a condition or place in which we ought to stay. So, both Jesus and Paul say, "*don't worry or be anxious.*" What I think they mean is this - don't settle for worry or anxiety or get stuck there - instead follow our example and it will get better.

**So worry and anxiety are clearly not good - right?** (*I for one am running out of back teeth!*). So what can we do about it? How do we combat this very common tendency? Paul tells us to combat worry and anxiety by **prayer** and by **focusing our minds** in a more positive direction.

**Paul says to pray about everything.** I pray every single day, but there's never a day when I have prayed too much or couldn't have prayed more. When times are especially hard or when we see ourselves falling into worry and anxiety is a clear sign that we ought to ramp up our prayers and turn our cares over to God. So in addition to seeing the dentist I need to pray more.

**It seems so simple,** but it so easy to miss this solution to our problem. As the old song "*Sweet Hour of Prayer*" says, "*Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.*" Do you see the wisdom here? I've heard it said that "*Worry is like wearing a groove in the snow or mud with your tires. The more you spin your tires the deeper and slicker the rut becomes.*" In other words, when you start to fret and get anxious and your wheels start spinning, it is time to stop and talk to the Lord. Prayer is a worshipful conversation with the Almighty who is willing and able to help.

**In Matthew 7:7-11 Jesus said,**

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

**In James 4, speaking about prayer, we read, "*you do not have because you do not ask.*"**

**Often times, God waits for us to ask in prayer before He intervenes on our behalf.** This isn't that hard to grasp if you have children. Often a parent wants to help but knows that a child needs to learn to do things on their own, or to realize they can't do it alone. Sometimes we want to help but we know that help might be seen as an infringement on their freedom. Sometimes our help is resented if it is given without solicitation. So, we stand back and we wait. We watch. But we are always ready and willing to help as soon as we are called upon. Deep down we're hoping that our children will ask for our help and we are delighted to give it. **God delights when His children ask for help and He responds according to His will for us.**

**Bruce Wilkinson** once shared a fable about a Mr. Jones who dies and goes to heaven,

Peter is waiting at the gates to give him a tour. Amid the splendor of golden streets, beautiful mansions, and choirs of angels that Peter shows to him, Mr. Jones notices an odd-looking building. He thinks it looks like an enormous warehouse, with no windows and one door. When he asks to see inside, Peter hesitates. "You really don't want to see what's in there," he tells the new arrival.

Why would there be any secrets in heaven? Jones wonders. What incredible surprise could be waiting for me in there? When the official tour is over he's still wondering, so he asks again to see inside the structure.

Finally Peter relents. When the apostle opens the door, Mr. Jones almost knocks him over in his haste to enter. It turns out that the enormous building is filled with row after row of shelves, floor to ceiling, each stacked neatly with white boxes tied in red ribbons.

"These boxes all have names on them," Mr. Jones muses along. Then turning to Peter he asks, "Do I have one?" "Yes, you do," Peter tries to guide Mr. Jones back outside. "Frankly," Peter says, "if I were you I'd leave now. . ." But Mr. Jones is already dashing toward the "J" aisle to find his box.

Peter follows, shaking his head. He catches up with Mr. Jones just as he is slipping the red ribbon off his box and popping the lid. Looking inside, Jones has a moment of instant recognition, and he lets out a deep sigh, just like the ones Peter has heard so many times before.

Because there in Mr. Jones's white box are all the blessings that God wanted to give to him while he was on earth - but Mr. Jones had simply never asked.

**We need to ask and be honest with God about what we believe we need.** As I've said many times, God always answers our prayers. However, sometimes the answer is "No" or "Not Yet" (and sometime the "Not Yet" means we have to wait until we get to heaven). It is hard when we ask for something that seems so right and good to us - or for our loved ones - and the answer is "No" or "Not yet." But even in those circumstances prayer helps to ease my anxiety, especially when I remind myself to trust God and to believe that God is wise and good and that God's plans and purposes include everything and everyone else extending into eternity.

**When we pray we must be confident that God alone knows what is best for us.** God alone has the perspective to see and consider of all the consequences and the interconnectedness of the universe that is playing out according to His grand plans and design. So we present our need - as we see it in our limited way - and then we trust God to respond according to His will which is often different than what we may think is best at that moment.

**When there is something broken in my house,** or my car, that is too big a job for me to do myself I call a mechanic or handyman or a technician. Even then, I am tempted to meddle. Often I'll say something like, "*Can't you just fix it like this or that...*" (trying to be cheap). The response is a look of astonishment that I could be so stupid, followed by a response such as, "*With all due respect, NO, it is better to do it this way because then you won't - flood your house, electrocute yourself, cause your car to explode, or the roof to cave in*" and so forth.

**When dealing with an expert you ought to trust the wisdom of the expert.** God is the expert we turn to in all things. We make a request and then we must trust in His wisdom. Once we learn to turn our troubles over to God - in faith - it leads us in the direction of greater **peace**.

**Listen to this promise again from our bible text.**

*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication [which means asking] with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the **peace** of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

**We are not told that all our problems will go away.** We aren't told that we will immediately understand the circumstances we are dealing with. We aren't even told that the problem will won't seem to get worse before it gets better. We are told that our anxiety will be replaced with peace. As we turn to God our worry gives way to faith, and anxiety gives way to confidence.

**The late Adam Clarke** was a British Methodist theologian and biblical scholar. In his commentary on Philippians he wrote,

This peace [which] passes all understanding; it is of a very different nature from all that can arise from human occurrences; it is a peace which Christ has purchased, and which God dispenses; it is felt by all the truly godly, but can be explained by none; it is communion with the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ, by the power and influence of the Holy Ghost.

How can we have [such] peace in the midst of the storms of life? What is it about turning to the Lord in worshipful, confident and grateful prayer that brings calm in the churning?

When we pray in this way we are reminding ourselves that our God is **capable**. When we remember what God is able to do it helps us to relax.

When we pray we remind ourselves of how **caring** God is. God knows our need and wants to help us with it. He is not indifferent. He is willing to help us when we ask for His help.

When we pray we remind ourselves of how **wise** God is. In our prayers we remember that God knows what He is doing. What God allows He allows for a reason.

**Now if you put these things all together you can see why peace comes.** Let's play this out. This might hit a little too close to home, but let's suppose you have recently had a medical test. You haven't felt well and you are concerned. No, you're not concerned, you're worried. You can't sleep as you anticipate the test and the results of the test. You recognize the anxiety building inside of you and you find a quiet place to spend some time with God. You don't just utter a quick prayer, you actually spend time with God talking about this situation. You confess your anxiety and your concerns. You ask God for help. You pour out your heart and tell God that you know He loves you and that you trust Him, and you keep telling Him this until you believe what you are saying. Suddenly you are reminded of several things,

- You're reminded that the God who loved you enough to send His Son for your salvation is not going to abandon you now

- You're reminded that God's wisdom is far superior to anything the world can generate and you realize that this crisis is an opportunity to grow and to demonstrate your trust.
- You're reminded of God's power. It is a power that can change circumstances or help us through the worst of circumstances.
- You're reminded that even if the worst case scenario comes true (like you are sick unto death) this life is not all there is. There is more to life than our earthly existence.

**So as a result of this time of prayer you are now able to find some peace.** You still want the test results to show that there is no problem. You still want everything to be the way that is the most comfortable for you. But you know that even if it doesn't turn out that way, God has good things in store for you. God knows what He is doing. God can handle it, so let it go.

**I've met some folks who live like this more than I do.** They face disease, death and all kinds of difficult circumstances not with a sense of resignation but with a sense of peace and confidence. These people say, *"There is nothing more I can do, but God will do what's best for me and I will trust Him."* This kind of person lives without fear. They may even joke in a midst of a crisis. They may even face death joyfully and with hopeful expectation for what comes next. They do all this because their focus is on the Lord and not their circumstances, and the thing that most often helps them in that focus is the time they have spent in **prayer**.

**There are a couple of other points I want to quickly make about having a positive focus.**

**Our text says, "thank [God] for all He has done."** This is a reminder about having a proper focus or sense of perspective. In tough times, we should be creative, and look around more closely so we can count our many blessings. We should also look back to remember all the ways that God has blessed us in the past, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. If God has so generously provided for you in the past, and in the present, don't you think He is able and willing to provide for you in the future?

**When we are in the midst of difficult circumstances it is very important to take time to express our gratitude and appreciation to God for His many blessings.**

**Often this is a healing thing in itself.** If we begin to think about what God has done for us it often makes those things we're worrying about seem unimportant, or at least not so severe. We need to take time to count our blessings and to praise God for His concern and care over us.

**Verse 8 goes on to say, "Finally, brothers and sisters, 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."**

**Those things are the promises found in God's word and the truth revealed in Christ.**

**I like the phrase - *fix your thoughts* - found in the NLT.** It makes me think of navigators who say, “*I’ve got a fix on our position, or on our target, or our destination.*” It is a matter of knowing where you’re going, and of making a choice to go there. What we fix or focus our minds on is very important if we want to move toward more peace and joy in our lives.

**We can always choose to focus only on what we lack.** We can focus on our failures. We can assume the worst motives in others. We can imagine doom and gloom in our immediate and/or long-term future. But if such thoughts preoccupy our minds our anxiety will increase.

**The Bible speaks often about where our thoughts are focused.** Listen to a few examples...

- 1 Peter 1:13 -says, “So **think clearly** and exercise self-control. Look forward to the special blessings that will come to you at the return of Jesus Christ.”
- Isaiah 26:3 - “*You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose **thoughts** are fixed on you!*”
- Romans 12:2 - “*Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing **the way you think** [or, by renewing your mind]. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.*”

**I believe the human mind is always looking for a focus** - to give us a sense of direction. The question is - what will be that focus? We get to choose. Paul says we should fix our minds on things that are honoring and pleasing to God. In other words we should look up!

**But Paul doesn’t say,** “*From now on I don’t want you to think any bad or negative thoughts.*” Instead he says I want you to think good thoughts. Please indulge me by trying an experiment. Close your eyes and concentrate... just for a moment picture in your mind an Elephant on the plains of Africa. Picture this clearly in your mind. Do you see that Elephant there?

**Now stop thinking about that Elephant. It is a bad Elephant.** You should no longer have any thoughts of that Elephant in your mind... I don’t know about you - but I can still see it.

*(Open eyes)* **I think it’s hard to just push something out of my mind.** I believe it works better when I replace an image or idea with something else. For example if you picture a giraffe in your mind for long enough - eventually you won’t be thinking about the Elephant but you will see the Giraffe instead.

**So we should focus our mind** on things that good and worthy of praise. Think on things that are true, and noble, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Think about things that lift you up and point you to God instead of things that bring you down.

**William James said:** “*The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind.*”

**The thoughts in your mind are more important than the things in your life.** I am not just talking about the *“power of positive thinking.”* I think there is real power in choosing to focus more on the positive than the negative. But what if you are simply deluding yourself? What if you only engaged in wishful thinking? What if you are just burying your head in the sand? We need something more than positive thinking. We need timeless and objective truth from above.

**We need to stand with assurance on the promises of God.**

**The book of Hebrews says,**

*“Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot [yet] see.”* Hebrews 11:1.

**People of faith trust God with their future.** We know God will provide all He has promised.

**We cannot do anything to change most of the circumstances of life** - but we can do something about our attitudes toward them.

**When our attitudes are right** - when our focus is on God - when we look up instead of down - and we follow as God leads - then no mountain is too high, no valley is too deep, and no challenge is too great that we can't face it with the Lord's strength - and keep moving up.

**For us who are in Christ,** I am certain that our best days are not behind us. If we are moving onward and upward growing closer and closer to the Lord - then the best is yet to be.