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## THE ANSWER TO ANXIETY

Philippians 4:6-7

By

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Philippians Lesson 24

## The Answer To Anxiety Philippians 4:6-7

A family had put their Grandma on her first plane flight, but she hadn't been very confident about the experience of leaving the ground on this contraption. When they met her at the airport on her return, one of the family members kidded her by asking, "Well, did the plane hold you up okay?" She grudgingly replied, "Well, yes," and then quickly added, "But I never did put my full weight down on it!"

Many Christians are like that Grandma. The truth is, they're being sustained completely by God, but they're afraid to put their full weight down on Him. As a result, they're plagued by anxiety and aren't able to enjoy the flight.

Few of us are strangers to anxiety. It creeps in over big and little things, gnawing away at our insides. Someone graphically described anxiety as "a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained" (Arthur Roche, *Reader's Digest* [6/88], p. 64). We now often hear phrases like being "stressed out," or having "a panic attack." Although I disagree with their psychological approach to the problem, the Christian psychiatrists, Frank Minirth and Paul Meier, say that anxiety is the most common mental disorder they encounter at their network of clinics across our country (*Worry-Free Living* [Thomas Nelson], p. 17).

We often feel anxious about our *finances*: How can we make this month's bills? How will I be able to fix my aging car if it breaks down? What if I lose my job? How will we put the kids through college? How can we meet our medical bills? How will we ever save enough for retirement? What if the economy fails?

We feel anxious about our *health*, especially as we grow older: What if I get cancer or Alzheimer's? What if I'm disabled or have to go into a nursing home? If we're younger, we may have these same anxieties concerning our aging parents.

We're anxious about our *children*: Will they turn out okay? Will they avoid drugs and sexual immorality? Will they be safe in this crime-ridden world? Will they be able to get into college and then get a decent-paying job? Will they marry a godly person and have a happy home? What kind of world will their children have to live in?

The lists could go on and on. Maybe you're getting anxious just listening to me give different reasons for anxiety! Sometimes we can't identify any specific reason for our anxiety, but it's there, nagging away at our insides. If we don't learn to deal with it properly, it can cause all sorts of health problems, which in turn feed our anxiety!

To those who follow Him, Jesus promised, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27). He spoke those comforting words on the most difficult night He faced on this earth, the night before His crucifixion. Seven times in the New Testament our God is called either the God or Lord of peace. That peace can be the constant experience of every Christian, even in the midst of trials. In our text, Paul the prisoner tells us how:

To experience God's peace instead of anxiety,  
pray with thankfulness about every concern.

There are three key words in these verses that reveal the theme: *Anxious*; *prayer*; and, *peace*. Being *anxious* is the problem we are told to put off; *prayer* is the procedure we are told to practice; *peace* is the product we are promised by God.

1. We must put off anxiety which is sin.

"Be anxious for nothing." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear that anxiety stems from a lack of faith and from a wrong focus on the things of this world instead of on the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:25-34, especially verses 30 & 33). If we excuse our anxieties by saying, "Well, it's only human," or, "Anybody would feel anxious in this situation," we will not overcome it because we are not confronting the root cause of it, namely, our sin of not believing God and of not seeking first His kingdom and righteousness.

As I mentioned last week, our Christian witness to a lost world is one of Paul's main themes in Philippians. He wants Christians to have God's joy in every situation, not just so that they will be happy people, but so that they will be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ (see Phil. 2:14-18). In other words, we are to be seeking first God's kingdom, not our own happiness. If a non-Christian sees you as a believer weighed down with anxiety and care, he isn't going to be asking how he can have what you have! Anxiety and joy are mutually exclusive. So for the sake of our testimony of Jesus Christ, it is imperative that we learn to experience the peace of God, especially in the face of trials.

This means that when it comes to the matter of dealing with our anxiety, we must, at the outset, confront our motives for wanting to have peace. If our reason for wanting to be free from anxiety is so that we can live a peaceful, pleasant life, our focus is self-centered and therefore wrong. There are many people who come to Christ because they are anxious and they want the peace He offers. But if they do not confront the fact that they are living to please themselves rather than God, they will simply settle into a self-centered life where they "use God" for their own peace and comfort. Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it" (Mark 8:35). The peace Christ offers is the by-product of enthroning Christ as Lord and living for His kingdom.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus warns (Luke 8:14) that the seed which fell among the thorns represents those who have heard the gospel, "and as they go on their way, they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity." *Worries* is the noun related to the Greek verb *be anxious* in our text. The scary thing about Jesus' words is this: As I understand that parable, only one of the groups is truly saved, namely, those who bring forth fruit with perseverance. Those who profess to believe, but then get choked out by worries, riches, and pleasures, have never taken self off the throne of their lives and put Jesus and His kingdom on the throne. They are deceived into thinking that they are Christians, but the truth is, they are just living with the same focus the world has, namely, for personal pleasure and peace.

In relation to Philippians 4:6 this means that what we have here is not just a simple formula, "If you're anxious, try prayer; it works." Rather, it means, "If you're anxious, examine either your *lack of faith* in the living God, who has promised to supply the basic needs of His children." Or, "Examine your *focus*, whether you're living for Christ and His kingdom or for yourself." Whatever the root cause, anxiety is sin that must be confessed to God and put off.

Before we leave this point, let me clarify that Paul is not encouraging a careless, carefree, irresponsible attitude toward people or problems. I've seen Christians swing from anxiety to either apathy or inaction, claiming that they're obeying the command not to be anxious. But Christians should care deeply about people and their problems and should work hard to resolve problems. As members of the same body, we are to have mutual concern for one another (1 Cor. 12:25). Paul mentions the concern that he bears daily for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28). He tells the Philippians that Timothy is genuinely concerned for their welfare (Phil. 2:20). In each of these verses, the word *concern* is the same as the Greek word for *anxious*, but clearly it is not sinful anxiety but proper concern. It is proper to be concerned about our future welfare to the extent that we take responsibility to plan and save for future needs (Prov. 6:6-11).

But proper concern turns to sinful anxiety when we lack faith in God's role as the Sovereign Lord and provider, and when we put self at the center instead of God's kingdom and righteousness. So the first step in dealing with anxiety is to examine whether it is due to lack of faith or to a wrong focus on self. Confess the sin to God and yield to Him.

2. We must practice prayer with thankfulness about every concern.

Paul mentions four Greek words for prayer which overlap in meaning and yet are helpful to distinguish: Prayer, supplication, thanksgiving, and requests.

*\*Prayer--*a general word for prayer, always used with reference to God, with the nuance of reverence. When Paul says to make our requests known "to God," the Greek word means "face to face

with God," to come directly before Him. This means that when we pray, we must stop to remember that we are coming into the very presence of the holy God, where even the holy angels cover their faces and cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:3). Yes, He welcomes us into His presence as a father welcomes his children. Through our High Priest, the Lord Jesus, God invites us to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). But we must remember that it is to the throne of the universe, to the Sovereign, Eternal God that we come.

This means, of course, that we must always examine our hearts and confess and forsake all sin when we come to God in prayer. The psalmist says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear" my prayers (Ps. 66:18). But we also have the assurance that if we confess our sins, the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cleanse us (1 John 1:7, 9).

Please notice that the believer is told to come directly to God in prayer. Christ is our mediator, our High Priest. The Holy Spirit who dwells in every believer prompts and moves us as we pray, interceding for us (Rom. 8:26-27). Thus prayer is a personal drawing near to the Triune God. But we should not pray to Mary or any of the so-called "saints." We do not need to go through any human priest. As believers, we all are priests before God, able to draw near directly to Him in effectual prayer.

*\*Supplications*--This word gives prominence to the sense of need and also looks at specific requests. Sometimes people ask, "Why pray, since God already knows what we need?" John Calvin has some of the most profound and practical words on prayer that I have ever read (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Eerdmans], ed. by John McNeill, III:XX). He points out that whatever we need and lack is to be found "in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide" (III:XX:1). It is through prayer "that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father" (III:XX:2). Prayer is not so much for God's sake as for ours. It shows us our total need for God Himself, and not just for certain temporal benefits. It casts us in dependence on Him, so that we will "seek, love, and serve Him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to Him as to a

sacred anchor." It purifies our desires, since we must bring them to God Himself. It prepares us to receive thankfully what He gives, being reminded that it comes from His hand. It helps us to meditate on His kindness as we delight in what He has given. It confirms to us our own weakness and God's great providence and faithfulness in meeting our needs (Calvin develops these points in III:XX:3).

This means that our supplications must be in line with God's will and purpose. In the Lord's Prayer, we learn that the first focus of our prayers should be on God's kingdom and righteousness, and only secondarily on our personal needs (Matt. 6:9-13).

*\*Thanksgiving--*When you're anxious, presumably you're in a situation that gives some cause for anxiety! At such times, thankfulness is not automatic or spontaneous. You have to do it deliberately by faith. Thanksgiving in a time of trials reflects three things: (1) *Remembrance of God's supply in the past.* You think back over His faithfulness to you up to this point and realize that His mercies have sustained you. He has been with you in every trial. He never abandons or forsakes His children, even if we face persecution or death for His sake.

(2) *Submission to God's sovereignty in the present.* To thank God in the midst of a crisis or trial is to say, "Lord, I don't understand, but I submit to Your sovereign purpose in this situation. I trust that You know what You're doing and will work it together for good." We are not just to thank God when we feel like it, but also when we don't feel like it (1 Thess. 5:18).

(3) *Trust in God's sufficiency for the future.* A thankful heart rests upon the all-sufficient God, knowing that even though we don't see how He is going to do it, He will meet our every need as we cast ourselves on Him. I love Jeremiah 32:17, especially when I think about its context. Jeremiah was shut up in prison. Nebuchadnezzar was besieging Jerusalem which was about to fall (32:2). In that situation, the Lord told Jeremiah to do something that everyone would have thought was crazy, to buy a field from his uncle. Anybody knows you don't sink your money into real estate when a country is about to fall to a foreign tyrant. But God wanted to show His people that "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32:15). Then Jeremiah prays, "Ah Lord

God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You" (32:17). Jeremiah was trusting in God's sufficiency for the future.

When I first came to this church we had some difficult problems to resolve. We had a crucial meeting, where things could have gone either for my leadership or against me. I spent the day fasting and praying, but as I walked up the sidewalk from my car, I felt anxious. I was reciting Philippians 4:6 when the two little words, "with thanksgiving" jumped out at me, and the Lord reminded me that I had failed to give thanks for this difficult situation. I paused and said, "Thank You, Lord, even for these trials," and immediately I was flooded with His peace. He worked in that meeting in obvious ways.

*\*Requests--*This word overlaps with supplications, emphasizing the specific, definite nature of our petitions to the Lord. So often our prayers are so vague and general that we couldn't know whether God had answered them or not. This is the word used where Jesus tells us, "Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7). He goes on to illustrate the point by saying that if a boy asks his father for a loaf of bread, the dad won't give him a stone. If he asks for a fish to eat, the dad won't give him a snake. Jesus concludes, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matt. 7:11). Ask the Father, and if it's for your good, He will give it!

Sometimes we fail to ask because something seems too trivial or small to trouble God about. But if it's big enough to make me anxious, it's certainly big enough to ask God about. A woman once asked the British Bible teacher, G. Campbell Morgan, "Do you think we should pray about the little things in our lives, or just the big things?" He retorted, "Madam, can you think of *anything* in your life that is *big* to God?" So whenever you're anxious, come to God in reverent, humble, specific, thankful prayer. The result:

3. We are promised God's incomparable peace when we pray.

“The peace of God which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). This is not some psychological peace gained through coping techniques. The Christian psychiatrists I mentioned earlier give all sorts of “common sense” and psychological methods (alongside the “spiritual”) that you can use to alleviate your anxiety, including picking a phrase (any phrase will do, they say) and repeating it over and over (p. 110-111)! This is just thinly disguised Transcendental Meditation!

No, what Paul is talking about is the peace that comes from the God who is never subject to anxiety because He is the sovereign, omnipotent Creator and Lord of the universe. Nothing takes Him by surprise or makes Him bite His nails, wondering how it will turn out. This is the peace that Jesus promised, “not as the world gives.” It is humanly not explainable. But, praise God, it is *real*, and every child of God has known it and has known that it comes from God alone, not from psychological insights.

Note that this peace stands guard like a sentry over our inner person, our hearts (the comprehensive term for our whole person) and minds (specifically, our thoughts which threaten to trouble us) *in Christ Jesus*. We are in intimate, permanent union with Him, and to get to us, anxiety must go through Christ Jesus! So what God promises isn't just a quick fix, where prayer is a technique that will bring you calm until you get through the crisis. Paul is talking about an ongoing, deepening, intimate relationship with the God of peace, where you seek to please Him with all your thoughts, words, and deeds. In a time of trial, you draw near to the God of peace, you focus on His grace to you in Christ Jesus, you pour out your heart to Him, and the result is, His peace stands guard over your heart and mind.

## Conclusion

A little over a year ago, I learned that a woman who led the music ministry when I first began to pastor almost 20 years ago had been stricken with three malignant brain tumors. She and her husband are maybe ten years older than I am. I wrote to her and she wrote back and told how her husband, who has worked all his life in construction, now has such bad arthritis in his hip that he can no longer work. She said how the doctors had warned them to do

anything they really wanted to do, because her time may be short. Her final paragraph said, "The peace the Lord gave me while I was in the hospital is far beyond understanding. Everything is in His control--especially the timing of our life. He said that His grace is sufficient and I found that to be so true. His strength is made perfect in weakness." She is now in the Lord's presence, free from this mortal body.

Do you know God's peace in the midst of situations that the world gets anxious about? If not, examine yourself: Is your faith in Him and your focus on His kingdom, rather than on selfish pursuits? Have you drawn near to God in reverent, specific, thankful prayer? You can put your full weight down on Him, and He will bear you up and give you His indescribable peace. It makes the flight so much more enjoyable!

### Discussion Questions

1. How can we know when legitimate concern crosses the line into sinful anxiety?
2. Is it wrong for a Christian to take tranquilizers or sleeping pills to calm nervousness or anxiety? Is this any different than taking aspirin for a headache?
3. What is the difference between using prayer as a technique and prayer as a whole way of life?
4. Can God guide us in His will by withholding or granting His peace? Cite Scripture to support your answer.

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