

When Fear Gives Way to Joy: 4. Overcoming Anxiety

Philippians 4:4-9

May 17, 2020

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

If you've been online this week, or turned on the TV, read a newspaper or listened to the radio or a podcast, you know there is a lot going on. There is a lot to process. One could even say there is a lot to worry about. Have you found yourself worrying a little bit more than usual lately? I am not usually a worrier but in these past few weeks, it is really easy to allow my mind to wander to the what-ifs, the unknowns and ultimately to the worse case scenarios. This week in the news we've seen reports of people fighting over who was and who wasn't wearing a face mask? Do we really need to stay six feet away from others or is it 10 feet? Should we even be in the same room? How can businesses, schools, restaurants and churches reopen safely and quickly? And what happened to all the toilet paper? Hand sanitizer? Clorox wipes? Where's the beef? There is plenty to be worried about. And if we allow our minds to wander to worry, the path before us can loom large with huge mountains to cross, with dangerous obstacles to avoid and scary twists and turns to navigate. But with some intentionality, Paul says that we can talk ourselves off that worry ledge, sleep a little better at night and discover a life that is centered, not on worry and stress, but instead on the sovereignty and peace of God. Today, we will look at what Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi about overcoming worry.

In Acts 16, we learn that the church in Philippi was born when Paul visited a quiet place just outside the city and a woman named Lydia responded to the message of Jesus. But for Paul, it was a difficult beginning. Victimized by local anti-Semitism and charged with civil disobedience, Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, endured beatings and imprisonment. Over time, Paul made at least two other visits to Philippi, but the political and social climate did not improve. In fact, the church endured almost constant persecution by a community suspicious of anyone who did not pledge their first allegiance to Caesar and worship Caesar.

The Philippian believers and Paul enjoyed a very special relationship and so he wrote this letter to them from his prison cell in Rome. He wrote to them personal expressions of love and affection. He addressed the letter to people he knew by name. He knew their circumstances. He understood their struggles. He reminded them that faith in Jesus was their lifeline.

But the book of Philippians is often called "The Gospel of Joy" because in just four short chapters, Paul writes about rejoicing or joy 16 times, emphasizing the real joy of the Christian life that is our faith in Jesus. But Paul also knew about worry. Just listen to what had happened to Paul during his 30 some-odd-years in ministry and prior to this imprisonment. He had been given 39 lashes by the Jews on five different occasions. He'd been beaten with a rod three times; stoned once; shipwrecked three times. He'd been adrift at sea, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from his own people and from Gentiles; danger in the city, in the wilderness, and at sea. He'd been, hungry and thirsty, naked and cold. And he experienced anxiety for all the churches he had started. If anyone had reason to worry, it was Paul!

The Philippian Christians were also suffering and Paul knew it. He knew his presence personally would make a difference in whether the Christian faith would survive. But Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he resorted to writing this letter and the people of this church hung on every word, longing for some encouragement in the midst of a life experience that was not getting any better. They knew anxiety and worry. Sound familiar?

We all know about anxiety and that is not always a bad thing. We all have a built in, early warning system in our brains. It's that fight or flight response and it is a gift from God. We've talked about this before. It's centered in an area of our brains called the amygdala that is constantly at work taking in information sensing threats and dangers. When it senses a threat it goes off and sends out a warning by means of hormones that physiologically affect our bodies. Our pupils dilate, our hearts beat faster, our blood pressure increases, blood flow is restricted to certain parts of our bodies and redirected to our muscles and heart so that we can fight or flight. This is a good gift!

The problem arises when that system goes awry and the amygdala unnecessarily sends out these signals that set off our warning system, creating panic attacks and a sense of overwhelming dread. When that happens, our hearts beat fast, our palms sweat, ears throb, and we feel a great sense of worry and fear. Approximately 40 million Americans (18% of the population) suffer some form of anxiety disorder, which is any anxiety that persists to the point that it interferes with one's life. We are the most anxious nation in the world and under our current pandemic conditions, most of us are experiencing more and more anxious moments. I know I am. Take last night for instance. I went to bed with full intentions of going to sleep but my brain had a different idea. It kept reviewing the words of this message. Were they the right words? Helpful words? Had I listened close enough for God's voice when writing this message? Consequently, I didn't get much sleep last night. There seems to be a theme in my life because for a while now, I have had this recurring nightmare but it seems to be happening more and more frequently these days. Maybe a lot of pastors have this dream. It is my turn to deliver the message in worship and I have nothing prepared. The worship service has started. You all are gathering and greeting one another. The music has begun and I am scurrying about in the lobby and in my office trying to think of something of value, something meaningful to share with you. All I can think of is my mentor, Norman's words that I should always be ready to put in a good word for Jesus the Christ every day. Norman will be so disappointed in me. When I wake up my heart is racing, my chest feels heavy and I am panicked. If this persists to the point where it regularly disrupts my sleep, I'll discuss it with my spiritual director. And if needed, I'll seek out a therapist and perhaps, if recommended by a therapist, I'll consider the help of medications. These are some helpful, therapeutic approaches to managing worry.

Our word for worry comes from the German word, *wurgen*, which means *to choke off*. Like a weed in our gardens, if left unattended, worry will choke off all of the good things that have been planted in our life. Worry chokes off the peace that God places within you. Paul says, "Don't worry." That is so much easier said than done. When we are bombarded with news stories of crime, violence, injustice, a virus running amuck, it is our natural human tendency to worry. Paul is urging us, regardless of circumstances, not to worry about anything. This is an especially poignant message given Paul's imprisonment when he wrote it. He goes on.... "*And the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.*" I want that! I bet you want that. Who doesn't want that? But how do we get that? There is scriptural answer to that question.

According to Paul, that peace, that freedom from worry, comes only through prayer. And there is no more of an appealing invitation to prayer in all the Bible than these comforting words from Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Nothing is more needed today than this rest of body, mind and spirit. Prayer has a positive impact on our physical well-being. It influences our state of mind, which, in turn, influences our "state of body". It reduces our anxiety, elevates our depressed mood, lowers our blood pressure, slows our heart rate, stabilizes our sleep patterns and

improves functions like digestion and breathing. In his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster writes: "If only we could slip over into a life free from strain and anxiety and hurry!" Prayer can do that. Prayer is our lifeline to God. It is the spiritual transfusion that can heal. It is the spiritual solution to earthly problems.

A Friday night trip to the ER signaled the beginning of his final day for 93 year old, Messiah member, Bob Whitman. After several tests, he was told he had an aortic aneurysm and that even heroic measures would not be able to save his life. So with his priorities set and his wife of 42 years, Dar by his side, Bob said, "I've lived a happy life and I'm ready to go." Over the next few hours, his children gathered and phone calls to the grandchildren were made. Alert to the very end, Bob was able to express his unconditional love one more time for his family. Because of Bob's faith in God, he wasn't worried. He was able to look forward with hope. He knew who he was and Whose he was. Even the hospital chaplain commented on how Bob's faith in God and his quiet, strong confidence had brought her a sense of peace. So how do we achieve that same peace that Bob had? He was able to do it because he had a relationship, through prayer, with Jesus. He believed in Jesus and in the resurrection of Jesus. He believed that in Jesus' resurrection God conquered death, sin, and hate once and for all. Bob and Paul knew no matter how bad things got, when the end came, they were going to be okay. And that is why they were able to say, and why we are able to say, "the worst thing is never the last thing." Christ has risen from the grave and we don't have to worry. In his book, *Anxious for Nothing; Finding Calm in a Chaotic World*, pastor and author, Max Lucado offers these four steps for finding calm, using the acronym C.A.L.M.

C: Celebrate God's goodness. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." Turn your attention away from the problem, and for a few minutes be intentional and celebrate God. It does us no good to persevere on our troubles. The more we stare at them, the bigger they get. Yet, the more you look at God, the quicker the problems get reduced to their proper size. Psalm 121 says, "From where does my help come from? It comes from the Lord."

A: Ask God for help. "Let your requests be made known to God." Lucado says, fear can trigger despair or prayer. Choose wisely. In Matthew 7:7 Jesus tells us to, "Ask, and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened for you." There is no uncertainty in that promise. No mights, perhaps or possibly. So when worries knock on your door, ask! Engage in specific prayer.

L: Leave your concerns with God. "Guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." It's like when our car acts up. Maybe you've tried to fix it yourself but had no luck so you took it to a specialist. You explain the problem and then you leave it with the specialist to be fixed. Our relationship with God is equally as simple. God does not need our help. Say this line with me, "I have no control over this virus and I hereby resign as the ruler of the universe." Then replace your anxious thoughts with grateful ones. Gratitude keeps us focused on the present and looking forward. That leads us to the fourth action.

M: Meditate on good things. "*Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* Don't allow anxious, negative thoughts take over your mind. You cannot control the circumstances of your life but you can control what you think of them.

Celebrate God's goodness. Ask God for help. Leave your concerns with God. Meditate on good things.

A new day awaits you, my friends. A new season where you can worry less and trust more. A season with reduced fear and enhanced faith. Can you imagine a life where you are worried about nothing? God can. And with God's help, you can live that life.

As I close today with prayer, I invite you to close your eyes and then repeat this prayer after me. Let this become your personal prayer today. God, I am thankful that you are constantly at work in my life. You are my help in difficult times, my strength in times of weakness, my guide when I feel lost and alone. I know that through Your Son, Jesus Christ, You have the power to transform my life, to mend my broken relationships, to bring strength to the weary and hope to the broken hearted. So with prayers of thanksgiving, I leave my worries and my burdens, my hopes and dreams with you, knowing that you are the Lord of my life and the hope of the world. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 17, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Merciful God, we see the serenity, the peace and the graciousness that were hallmarks of the apostle Paul's life, and we know that they are gifts from you. In contrast, we know all too well the anxiety, fear, and uncertainty that relentlessly drive us to worry, depression and exhaustion. This is not how you intended us to live. Grant us the renewal, restoration and rest that come from fully trusting you. Amen.

Monday, May 18

Scripture: Psalm 56:3-4, 10-11

Whenever I'm afraid, I put my trust in you—in God, whose word I praise. I trust in God; I won't be afraid. What can mere flesh do to me?

God: whose word I praise. The LORD: whose word I praise. I trust in God; I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?

Observation: In 1933 a deep economic depression gripped the United States. In his inaugural address, new President Franklin Roosevelt said, "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." President Roosevelt was, knowingly or not, following a Biblical tradition. The expression of deep trust in God is found in Psalm 56. Trusting in God's unfailing love, the psalmist, Jesus and the apostle Paul all asked, "What can anyone do to me?"

Application: When we read the question, "What can anyone do to me?" our first (frightening) thought may be, "People could do plenty to me." Only as we look below life's surface does the psalmist's question make more sense. What bad, perhaps even malicious, obstacles has God's presence helped you survive, or even turned to a good purpose? How does that affect your ability to trust God moving forward?

Prayer: Lord God, I want to learn to live with the same kind of trust the psalmist expressed. Teach me each day how to put my trust in you whenever I am afraid. Amen.

Tuesday, May 19

Scripture: Isaiah 41:8-10, 13

But you, Israel my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, offspring of Abraham, whom I love, you whom I took from the ends of the earth and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You

are my servant; I chose you and didn't reject you": Don't fear, because I am with you; don't be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will surely help you; I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.

I am the LORD your God, who grasps your strong hand, who says to you, Don't fear; I will help you.

Observation: Through Isaiah the prophet, God pledged to strengthen and help any descendant of Abraham willing to join in God's redemptive mission for the world. Later, the apostle Paul, who counted on God's strength for his life mission, extended Isaiah's promise to all Christ followers. "If you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants," he wrote (Galatians 3:29).

Application: Through the prophet, God offered freedom from fear, and strength and help for our spiritual journey. What are some of the main ways that you go about accessing the promised strength and help? This period when we are mostly at home and maintaining physical distancing could be a kind of spiritual restart to establish a spiritual practice to connect with God's power.

Prayer: Lord God, I wish all the bad in our world would just go away right now—but it won't. But you promise that you can and will ultimately make it all come out right. Give me courage to do my part in working with you. Amen.

Wednesday, May 20

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-27

"Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?"

Observation: Today's passage may feel radical at first, utterly against simple common sense. That must have been even more of a challenge for Jesus' first hearers. Jesus' audience would have been ordinary peasant people who had to worry about their next meal all the time, yet Jesus tells them not to worry about anything. He asks them instead to view the world with new eyes, in order to see all around them evidence of God's care and provision.

Application: Worry generally focuses our energy and attention either on the past ("I wish...") or on the future ("What if..."). Jesus called us into the present, the only "time" we can directly affect and use to meet with God. Practice pausing your worries and concerns, and sensing God's presence with you. Keep doing this (whether you call it "meditating," "going to your 'happy place'" or some other name you choose) until you are able to 'be' with God anytime, day or night—in the present moment.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep learning how to live a life in which my energy can focus on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.

Thursday, May 21

Scripture: John 14:25-27

"I have spoken these things to you while I am with you. The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you. "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Don't be troubled or afraid."

Observation: Describing Jesus' last night before the cross, John wrote the ominous words, "When Judas took the bread, he left immediately. And it was night" (John 13:30). But the darkness didn't overcome Jesus, the light of the world. With evil people plotting and Easter's light only visible by faith, Jesus told his followers that he was leaving them his peace. His peace rested on the Holy Spirit's presence with them, "not as the world gives." If they could grasp it firmly, they could find Jesus' peace even at times of great fear.

Application: In his commentary on the Gospel of John, William Barclay wrote, "The peace which the world offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble and from refusing to face things. The peace which Jesus offers us is the peace of conquest. No experience of life can ever take it from us and no sorrow, no danger, no suffering can ever make it less. It is independent of outward circumstances." In what ways have you experienced the difference between the peace Jesus gives and the types of peace the world offers?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for offering me a peace that isn't temporary, that nothing can take away from me. Now please help me to live into that peace more each day. Amen.

Friday, May 22

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Observation: Once again, we return to this passage from Paul's letter. We surely understand peace, don't we? His statement that God's peace "exceeds all understanding" may make more sense when we remember that he sent this letter from a dank, dreary Roman prison cell. Even there, he had God's peace. And he shared a key he'd found for living in God's peace: to take anything that might worry him and give it to God in prayer.

Application: Paul advised, "Don't be anxious about anything." Almost as if he heard us saying, "How?" he added, "rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks" (verse 6). What are some things that trigger ugly, anxiety-producing thoughts in you? How can you incorporate Paul's wisdom about taking those things to God in prayer more fully into your daily life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to turn my worries into prayers. I lay before you all the things that worry me today, and I open my heart to your gifts of peace and contentment. Amen.

Saturday, May 23

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:6-10

Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you.

Observation: Early Christians faced hostility, ostracism and often persecution. They might be beaten, imprisoned or even executed. Peter wrote a stirring call to those people. As they lived in conditions guaranteed to make people anxious, he urged them to bring all their anxieties to God in trusting prayer. Peter and those early Christians looked beyond the boundaries of this life. They trusted that all earthly struggles are only "for a little while," while God's restoration of us to the kind of life humans are meant to live is an eternal reality.

Application: What does it mean for you to cast all your anxiety on God? In what ways have you learned to trust that God cares for you? In what parts of life, if any, is it still hard for you to trust that? Read John 21:15-19 to see why Peter could say with such confidence that God will restore you, and make you steadfast, strong and firm. Are there failures from which you want God to restore you? Are there areas in which you wish to be more steadfast or strong? Ask God in prayer to work with you to make restoration and strength a reality for you.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep me clear-headed, keep me alert. Let me use those qualities to let you carry my anxieties, rather than trying to carry them myself. Amen.