



SHUT THE DOOR ON ANXIETY

Dealing with life's "What If's?"

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IS ANXIETY ALWAYS ROOTED IN REALITY?

Every day, as I drop my kids off to school, my mind skims the possibilities of things that could go wrong. Situations where my children could be emotionally wounded swirl about them. Academic pressures of a competitive world and social pressures of a permissive world envelop them. Physical dangers abound. If I let my mind wander down the corridors of “What if?” my thoughts would trap me in a cycle of fear and anxiety.

I’m no stranger to feeling anxious or fearful. I don’t share this resource with you as an expert, but as someone who is on a journey herself, as someone keen on discovering God’s answers to her everyday situations.

I hope that together we can make headway on shutting the door on our fears.

You may have already heard that some of those fears may be unfounded—studies show that 97 percent of what we worry about has no grounding in the reality that will eventually unfold. But, without a doubt, all of us face anxieties that are rooted in immutable fact.



But here's the awesome thing: our God knows those facts—and He understands our worries about them. He doesn't dismiss our anxieties as frivolous or inconsequential. In fact, His Word says that He sees our thoughts from afar. If He didn't value our thoughts and concerns, He wouldn't pay such tender attention to them, He wouldn't be attentive to our cries and He wouldn't time and again say to us in Scripture, "Do not fear." His thoughts toward us outnumber the grains of sand, He walks with us through paths teeming with troubles, and He is our ever-present Help in the midst of those troubles.

Today, I invite you to look at Scripture with me so that we can navigate our fears and find God-prescribed ways of dealing with them. Let's remember that we don't lack courage because we have fears. Faith doesn't mean an absence of fear. It's what we do with those fears that reveals our faith.

Together, let's learn from an individual who had every reason to fear. This was a person whose life was threatened many, many times. It wasn't make-believe, "I wonder if scenario A, B or C will happen to me" type of fear. It was staring-death-in-the-eyes type of trouble that merited a fearful response in him. And yet this man faced fearful situations head-on with God-given courage and wisdom.

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WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY?

I'm speaking of the apostle Paul who wrote much of the New Testament. He had been chased down by his enemies, he faced chronic health problems, he had been ship wrecked, he had experienced hunger and fatigue, he had been imprisoned and flogged.

While Paul was a human being like you and me, he faced those daunting trials without a hint of anxiety and with a faith far more resilient than what I can drum up. How did he do it?

Let's unpack some verses in Paul's letter to the Philippians and glean some takeaways for the fear-inducing situations we find ourselves in.

Our key passage today is, very likely, familiar, if you've been around church a bit. In fact, maybe it's so familiar that we tend to gloss over it and forget just how applicable it is to us today.

Here's what Paul writes in Philippians 4, verses 6 and 7:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

LET'S BREAK IT DOWN

1

HEAR GOD'S HEART

Paul probably had no idea about the types of fears the 21st century would hold. He had no inkling about online bullying that teenagers would face or of moms worrying over choking hazards or of the COVID-19 pandemic that would throw the world into panic. But his words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, hold true today because God speaks to His people for all times and all seasons through Scripture.

When God says “Do not be anxious,” I don’t believe He is simply writing off our anxiety with a resolute command. Instead, He speaks as a loving Father and as a Wonderful Counsellor. He is El Roi—the God who sees. He sees our situation and He sees our furrowed brow. His Word says that He collects our tears in a bottle. Those four words—Do not be anxious—stem from His Father heart.

He’s not saying, “Hey, hold it together already.” He’s saying, “I hold all things together so you don’t have to.”

He gently tells His children not to worry about “anything” - that includes situations where panic is a legitimate, natural response. But He doesn’t just stop at that.

He shows us a simple way to overcome the anxiety that can be crippling when we try to handle it ourselves.

2

TAKE YOUR CARES TO HIM

We are simply instructed to “present [our] requests to God.” He urges us to come to Him with our requests in every situation—not just when the going is good or when troubled times strike, but in *every* circumstance. Not that He doesn’t already know about our situations. Not that He functions as a divine vending machine to give us exactly what we ask within the timeframe that we specify. He tells us to present our requests to Him because, in communion with Him, He has the opportunity to flood our anxious hearts with an incomparable divine peace.

He invites us to cast our burdens on Him because He cares for us. In that moment of presenting our requests before Him, there is a beautiful divine exchange: we trade our anxiety for His peace.

A peace that defies human understanding. A peace that doesn’t add up by the world’s balance sheets. A peace that envelops our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. I love that His peace also guards our minds because so much of the battle happens in our thoughts, doesn’t it? And then there’s that word which has no seeming connection with anxiety – “thanksgiving.”





DON'T FORGET THANKSGIVING

Paul tells his readers to pray with thanksgiving. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul again says to give thanks in all situations because that is God's will for us in Christ Jesus.

Is that even possible? Can we actually thank God as we anxiously wait in that sterile hospital room? Can we thank Him when we are plagued with worry about the future of our child with special needs? Can we thank Him when the whole world is in the grip of a debilitating and life-threatening pandemic? Can we thank Him through the storms of a difficult marriage? Isn't that an unrealistic instruction? Would God actually ask us to do something so counter-intuitive and even artificial to our anxious state of mind?

Yes, He would and, yes, He does, because our Creator knows exactly how we are wired and what we need.

Thanksgiving turns our eyes from our situation to our Saviour, from our overwhelming problems to His overwhelming love.

We don't give thanks because the situation merits it. We give thanks because of Who He is in our every situation and what He is doing in and through us when those unbearable trials descend on us.

He is the God of compassion. He is the God of healing. He is the Giver of good gifts. He is the God who has inscribed us in the palm of His hand, who hides us in the shelter of His wing, who rejoices over us with singing, who promises never to leave us, who gives to the free gift of eternal life, who promises peace in the midst of the storm... We can never fully wrap our minds around all that He is. The deeper we dig into Scripture, the more He reveals of Himself and the more we can thank Him for Who He is. Our thanksgiving flows from knowing Him and discovering more of Him who cannot ever be fully understood. Paul then gives us a game plan for ensuring that our thoughts don't keep drifting back to anxiety.

4

FRISK YOUR THOUGHTS

It's one of those verses you've probably learned in Sunday School, if you happen to have grown up in church.

“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.” (Philippians 4: 8)

When we find ourselves drifting back to familiar patterns of fear-filled thinking, let's check them against God's Word.

Imagine those thoughts that are untrue and ugly and ungodly as banned items at airport security. The bottle of shampoo or the pair of scissors or that Swiss Army knife that inadvertently found their way into our carry-on luggage. Those items will be confiscated and thrown in the trash just like some of our thoughts need to be frisked and thrown away.

Ask God to sieve those thoughts and fill your mind with uplifting thoughts that reflect your trust in a good, good Father.



A NOT-SO-LITTLE SECRET

Paul then lets his readers in on a little secret—the secret of his contentment. Here's what he says:

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4: 12)

Paul's secret was not a five-step formula for unlocking peace. He isn't launching a bestseller or selling online course. His secret was his relationship with Christ. Jesus is the answer.

Paul encountered some of the most dire situations a person could possibly face. Many times, he knew beforehand the risks he would be taking by going to a new destination to share the Word. But Paul was never anxious. In fact, he was “content in any and every situation” because his peace didn't come from his circumstances, his peace was found in Christ.

We each have a choice. We can choose to handle our anxieties on our own. Or we can choose to give them to the Lord, to be intentional about thanksgiving, and to allow Him to surround us with His peace in the middle of life's storms.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some of the things that make me fearful and anxious right now?

2. Which of the fears are rooted in reality and which of them are my thoughts spiralling or my imagination running amok?

3. Have I checked my fears against the checklist of Philippians 4:8?

4. Have I prayed about my situation? Have I persisted in prayer?

5. Have I thanked God for Who He is and what He may be doing in and through me in my current situation?



LEAN IN

Father God, I know that turbulence in life is inevitable. I'm not going to be immune from those harsh winds that delay and disturb and disrupt my journey. But I thank You that I get to take this journey with You right beside me. Thank you that I don't need to give in to anxiety because You know exactly the trajectory my life will take. You are in perfect control of every detail, including every storm. I need not fear. I only need present my requests before You, knowing that You hear, that You see, that You know and that You answer according to Your good, pleasing and perfect will. I know that I can lay my anxieties at Your feet. I know that I can exchange my panic for Your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.