

“From Anxiety to Peace”

Philippians 4:6-8, Ezekiel 36:26, 2 Corinthians 5:17

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Prayer for Understanding Holy Spirit thank you for giving us life. Guide us in truth, enlighten us and set our hearts ablaze so every moment of our lives can be illumined with your amazing grace, steadfast love and abundant life. Amen.

A reading from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians. **Philippians 4:6-8 NLT “Do not worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank God for all God has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. God’s peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear siblings, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”**

We are living in anxious times. One may be anxious from world events to the state of the church, from politics to personal challenges, from uncertainty to a damaged relationship. Change often creates anxiety. We live in a season of rapid change in most aspects of life.

Anxiety often divides, resulting in “I am right,” “you are wrong” thinking. Anxiety tells one to hunker down and be blind to possibilities. Anxiety diminishes personal health. Anxiety fosters fear, withdrawal, and hate. Anxiety likes nostalgia. Anxiety cripples one’s ability to listen, to explore, to imagine, to be curious, to discover loving solutions for all. Anxiety hampers good, positive change.

Being non-anxious promotes peace. The peace scripture is talking about is Shalom, well being, completeness, harmony, and abundant life. Being non-anxious is critical to progress in sports, work, relationships, community, organizations, and the church.

We need some stress, some conflict, to thrive, to change, to grow, to progress. Healthy stress and conflict is like gentle heat simmering food. Anxiety is destructive heat that scorches, burns, and destroys.

The Apostle Paul commands us, “Do not be anxious about anything.” Some translations state, “Do not worry about anything.” How do we live worry free and anxiety free? Pray, be thankful and think about the positive.

The entire letter of Philippians urges us to pray, be thankful, think about the positive and rejoice because of our relationship with Jesus. Our own positive thoughts, our own power is finite, limited. We often run into circumstances that we cannot control or navigate through on our own. When we find ourselves in these insurmountable predicaments, we are not to worry or be anxious, because we have a relationship with Jesus and God is love and God is all powerful and God will rescue us, redeem, perfect, and glorify us in God’s perfect timing, which often seems painfully slow to us.

Refuse to let fear, hatred, self-pity, anxiety dominate your thoughts through pray, thanksgiving, and thinking about God always being with you, God always loving you, God always loving to redeem everyone and everything. Strive to looking through the ugliness of life to the glory of God.

Paul’s advice is to be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything, thankful and think positive because God is with you. Paul survived several shipwrecks. He was not anxious, because he knew that the very worst that could happen would be his death which would mean he would enjoy a glorious resurrection with Jesus for eternity. Yet, he wanted to live so he was thinking about how he could swim to shore, what could he grasp onto that would float. So, the positive thinking is choosing not to dwell on the magnitude of the storm, not to imagine all the negative outcomes, instead to think about how one can

survive, how one can make it through. However, if every effort to live is engulfed by the ugly storm, Paul knew he still would be fine for ultimately he will be in heaven.

Paul wrote Philippians after acquiring a life of wisdom from enduring numerous shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments, betrayals, failures, mockings, loneliness, homelessness, hunger and persecutions. Paul says, "**Rejoice in the Lord always!**" Paul's not talking about superficial joy, denial joy, look on the bright side joy. Paul is talking about God's joy that undergirds everything. God's joy that gives us strength when everything falls apart. God's joy that holds us up when we cannot hold ourselves up. God's joy that carries us through when we cannot walk by ourselves. God's joy that is still there, deep down, when we are weeping. God's joy that assures us that in the midst of the dark that we will get through it, that some good can come out of it somehow. That God can bring us through the ugliness to the glory on the other side. Rejoice, Paul says. Rejoice, even in the midst of sorrow, struggle, and ugliness. Rejoice and God will give you peace in the midst of chaos, hope in the midst of despair, for God is with us and the future is bright and beautiful, even if we cannot see it from here.

Paul wrote that we should rejoice even when everything's going wrong, rejoice when you are in pain, rejoice when nothing makes sense, from a death row prison cell. Paul's strength comes from knowing God is with him, from the love of the Philippians, from knowing that love never ends, that the love Jesus shared and gave him, the love he shared and gave to others will be past on and on for love is eternal and always growing exponentially. Paul rejoices, even in the face of death for he knows nothing, not even death, can separate him from God's love. Paul knows that not even the ugliness of death can eclipse God's glory that awaits him on the other side. Paul knows that the Good News of Jesus will go on and on until everyone and everything is forgiven, redeemed, perfected, and glorified. Paul probably wrote with his face chapped with tears, with his heart breaking, to stand firm in the Lord. As his executioners were coming down the hall. Paul closed the letter: "**Finally, beloved, 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. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**"

Is the root of anxiety found in Jesus' words on the cross, "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" We fear there are aspects of us that are unlovable. We fear we are not good enough, doing enough. We fear that change will diminish our belonging. We fear our circumstances, so we worry and become anxious. We fear we will be abandoned, left in pain, forsaken.

Fredrick Buechner says "anxiety" in theological terms is "estrangement." It is a perceived distance from God, a perception that God has forsaken us and since this happened to Jesus, you can be almost certain it will happen to you, probably numerous times. God is always with you. God always loves you.

Theologian John Carmody on his death bed wrote, "Well or ill, but especially ill, you are part of something much greater. You did not make yourself, and you cannot raise yourself. But what you cannot do, God can. All things are possible with God ... So, let nothing disturb you. The splendor in your death, as in your life, has yet to be revealed. In the morning thank God for it. In your evening, say, 'So be it.'"

The Apostle Paul urges us to be anxious in nothing through prayer. Prayer changes anxiety to peace. Prayer changes fear to love. Prayer changes dread to hope. Prayer changes division to community. Prayer changes gloom to joy. Prayer changes revenge to forgiveness. Prayer changes exclusion to belonging. Prayer changes all that diminishes life to all that enhances life.

"To pray is to change," says Richard Foster. "Prayer is the central avenue God uses to change us," In so saying, Foster answers the question about why we should pray when God already knows our needs. "We should pray because God uses prayer to change us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer."

Oswald Chambers said. "To say that 'prayer changes things' is not as close to the truth as saying, 'prayer changes me and then I change things.'" The center of the Bible is 150 prayers called psalms. As

you pray them. Examine the progression, the change, the tenacious perseverance of the one who prayed. Some of these prayers had numerous years of praying over and over the beginning lines of the psalm to journey to the ending lines of the psalm. Some of these psalms start with great anxiety, you can feel the inner turmoil as the psalmist prays, God changes them, to giving thanks, God changes them to hope, confident expectations in the glorious love of God to transform and resurrect everyone and everything. Some psalms begin with enemies attacking, bloodshed, atrocities, God changes them, to trust God's steadfast everlasting love that eventually always finds a way. Some psalms begin with guilt, regret, shame, God changes them, to certainty that they are forgiven and can start again. The prophet Ezekiel exclaims: **Ezekiel 36:26 NLT "I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart."**

There are numerous ways to pray, talking to God, listening to God, reading scripture, going for a walk, meditation, silence, art, observing nature. There are as many ways to pray as there are people. God celebrates you by welcoming your own unique way of prayer. Augustine said: "To sing is to pray twice." The Apostle Paul wrote. **2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"**

Philip Yancy points out. "Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (spouse, parent, teacher, coach, manager, God etc.) thinks you are. How would your life change if you truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for you, if you looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?"

Douglas Wood says. "We pray to change ourselves. Because it is when we change ourselves ... that the world is changed."

Do you have a decision to make? Pray. A form of prayer is practicing the discipline of wonder. Usually when choices are presented one quickly grabs one, often the most familiar choice and stops listening to the options. Often there are a myriad of additional options that could be explored. Resist the urge to quickly pick an option and then to advocate for that option. Carefully listen to all the options. Then let go of any preference to any one option and wonder. Keep asking, I wonder if this, then what would happen. Resist the urge to rank or categorize the options. Keep wondering. It is helpful to find a few people to join you in wondering. Talk about the options. Spend perhaps 5 minutes in silence journaling your wonderings then have each person share their wonderings. Let go of the desire to choose. Let come curiosity. Spend perhaps a minute in silence and then choose an option. Then discuss the chosen options.

Do you have a decision to make? Pray. A form of prayer is searching for the most excellent way of love. What option is the most loving option for the most people?

According to the Apostle Paul, the first step in making a decision is to be non-anxious so you can be fully present, listen, and be open to all the possibilities. The second step is to pray. Perceive the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The third step is to be thankful. The fourth step is to think about the positive. After the fourth step, are you at peace? If no peace, then repeat the process. Once you have peace, then this is likely a good positive change. It may be a challenging change, hard to implement, with two steps forward and one back. However if you continue to have inner peace, then it is likely God's will.

Be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything and thankful. God is with you. God loves you.

Last year, Pastor Amar Peterman wrote: "Change is not only possible, it is inevitable. Indeed, our country and those who reside in it are constantly shifting and changing. We are ever caught in liminal spaces: of devastation and building, of death and life, of grief and joy, of pessimism and hope, of death and new life, of what is and what might be. The collective spirit of America is a malleable energy that is impossible to contain. Framed another way, this decade has removed the illusion of permanence. The task at hand for people of faith is to draw from our traditions to steward this change—this social transformation—towards the redemptive possibilities of loving exceedingly, seeking justice, practicing

hospitality, and giving generously. In doing so, we might reimagine and create anew the means through which our communities join together across differences. This begins by telling good stories that can transparently name both the tensions and promise of a shared, common life. At their best, stories like these remind us that difference does not necessitate division. They can name where our experiences diverge while also binding us together through a shared vision of who we can be together. Stories remind us that, although we may be strangers, we are deeply connected—and connection is the seedbed for a robust, generative community. In the Christian tradition, change is rooted in our eternal, permanent God who wombs and breathes out beautiful things and, in return, compels us to join in this creative action. This is the mission set before the person of faith engaging in their community: to cultivate, create, and nurture a faithful, hopeful, and loving way of being alive that compels others to join in this way of life. ”

God desires for us to change from fear, hate, and timidity to love, generosity, and service. God is loving through us to transform our anxiety to peace. Be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything, thankful and think about the positive. God is with you. God loves you. Amen