

This past week, someone from our congregation posted a link to an article about anxiety. I found the title intriguing. “Anxiety is our new normal. Surrendering to it is not.”<sup>1</sup> The author, June Silny, coaches people with ADHD. She has it herself. She has survived several difficult events including hurricanes. But she notes a pandemic is different. She writes:

I’m now accustomed to managing my anxiety from hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, school shootings, and terrorist attacks. But those are isolated incidents. After sadness passes, I can separate myself from those events. Now, there is no escape from the cloud raining down anxiety upon us. This pandemic has taken my fears global.

Pandemics are not new, but never before has our society experienced anything like this. The range of emotions we feel is intense. Like traveling through the stages of grief, we experience denial, anger, bargaining, and sadness — all in an effort to psychologically and emotionally accept what is happening and figure out how we are going to get through it.<sup>2</sup>

She then walks through a number of helpful steps anyone can take to work through their anxiety. If you’re interested in reading the article, I will post a link to it on Facebook later today. But I found two pieces of her article particularly interesting. First, she encourages her readers to take on their anxiety. Most people don’t consciously choose to be anxious. It just happens in response to an event or information or our perception of something. But once we experience anxiety, we have a choice about how to respond. I like that she encourages others to take up the fight against anxiety.

The other piece I found interesting concerned her final step in taking on anxiety. She calls it “Get spiritual.”

Let’s face it: something universal is happening. Skip this one if it doesn’t talk to you, but for me, spirituality gets me through the toughest times. A spiritual mantra replaces my negative thought process. Prayer is a source of comfort and surrender. Calm is the result of surrendering to a Higher Power. Prayer allows me the time and space to question whether there is some global lesson I need to learn. Could this time improve my perspective on life? Could I use this struggle to become a better person? I know it’s hard to imagine, but could I — and the world somehow — transform this “new normal” into a better version of the old normal?<sup>3</sup>

I commend this author for reaching out to help others. And to bring up the question of spirituality in a culture that has become dominated by a material atheistic worldview. But as Christians, we can go to much more solid ground with our anxiety than a spiritual mantra or a nameless Higher Power. We can have a personal relationship with God who knows our name and anxieties.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.additudemag.com/how-to-calm-anxiety-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Today, we are going to learn how we can take on our anxiety in dependence upon God. The apostle Paul, who wrote today's passage, certainly had reasons for anxiety. He wrote from a Roman prison. You were never far from death in ancient prisons. You could be swept up in a governor's rage if some revolutionary killed a Roman soldier. The governor might respond by executing anyone in prison. Paul also writes to a church that had reason for anxiety. They experienced active opposition to their faith and those preaching a false gospel. So Paul and his recipients faced trouble which may have caused them anxiety. Yet as he concludes his letter, he encourages them with several commands that would help them and us to keep going no matter what comes.

He writes some very encouraging verse where we will learn how to take on our anxiety. So please find the little letter of Philippians in the New Testament. We will read chapter 4, verses 4-7, but will look carefully at 6 and 7.

### **Philippians 4:4-7**

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup>do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What is anxiety? One dictionary defines it like this; Painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated ill." A Bible commentator writes "The Hebrew word translated anxiety means "the emotional distress caused when something vital to your life is threatened." I would add that anxiety can happen when something we think is vital to our lives is threatened. I have never met anyone who says "I love being anxious. I so enjoy it when my chest tenses up with fear." But it happens.

### **How do we take on our anxiety in dependence upon God**

First, Paul says **Do not be anxious about anything . . .** But doesn't that seem unrealistic? What about those laid off from their jobs? What about small business owners whose business may not survive? What about an elderly parent or friend we know who has now been alone for 6 weeks? What about a loved one in ICU with COVID 19? What about struggles with mental health? Yet in writing this, Paul could have said, "Do not be anxious about most things"; He could have written exceptions from his own life experiences. He had gone through multiple life threatening situations. He writes in 2 Corinthians 11:23 that he experienced "multiple imprisonments, countless beatings, and testifies that he was often near death. Five times he received forty lashes less one. Three times he was beaten by rods. Once he was stoned and the mob only stopped because they thought he was

dead. Three times he was shipwrecked. He spent a day and night adrift on the open sea. He experienced danger from robbers, rivers, false brothers, opponents, wild animals and travel. So he might have written, “Don’t be anxious except when your life is threatened.”

Yet he still can write “do not be anxious about anything.” But this was not because he had such a strong spirit and an extraordinary measure of courage. He could proclaim this because of the one whom he turned to with his anxiety.

He turns to this ONE **By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving**. He learned to do this whenever facing tough situations. We may be free from all fretful care and feverish anxiety when we take all our distresses and problems to God in prayer. The word translated prayer means general prayer. Supplication is asking for help with some need. Thanksgiving recalls God’s goodness and mercy.

So we take the situation and our anxiety to God. We start talking to Him in prayer. We ask for His help in the situation. We ask with thanksgiving where we remember His help from times past. We thank Him for His presence now. We recognize Jesus’ willingness to identify with us by becoming one of us. We recall His great suffering so that we might have life. Such a process reminds us we’re not alone in this situation. God has not forgotten us. God is faithful. God has looked after our eternity. So if He has looked after that, then we can trust Him to look after today.

Then **Let your requests be made known to God . . .** This means we must bring our concerns about the thing threatened to the Lord. Ask Him to protect it/us or for strength to go through what we have to go through. Or it means we bring our fears and worries to God – our “what ifs.” Or better yet we stop “what ifting?” Some wise person once said to me “what if” statements do an end around our confidence and faith. “What ifs” open the door to entertaining worst possible outcomes in our minds. We spend needless time and energy dealing with all possible scenarios. But instead of doing that, we need to bring our requests to God.

But this phrase, “let your requests be made known to God,” also raises a question for me. Why do we need to “let our requests be made known to God when He already knows what we need? In Jesus’ teaching on prayer he says “do not heap up empty phrases like the Gentiles for they think they will be heard by their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask – Matthew 6:7-8). So what is going on? I think we see here God’s respect for our choices and a test of our desires. Do we really want Him to get involved in our lives? Are we ready to admit our need for His help? Or do we just want Him to make everything normal

again so we can get on with doing life without Him? But if we sincerely and openly let our requests be made known to God, something amazing happens.

Up to this point, it's all been us – it's what we're doing to take on our anxiety in bringing it to God. But now in verse 7, we turn to what God does.

It starts with **the peace of God . . .** so this is not some general peace or calmness. It is not inward peace of soul that God provides. This expression occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It is the peace of God Himself. It is the tranquility of God's own eternal being, the peace that God himself has, the calm serenity that characterizes God's very nature.

This helps us make sense of the next phrase - **Which surpasses (transcends) all understanding.** So the peace that God experiences goes way beyond our understanding. It achieves far more than our planning or forward thinking could accomplish. It exceeds all that we could possibly anticipate. It rises above every human mind. It is able to produce exceedingly better results than any human strategy. It is far better at removing anxiety than any intellectual effort or power of reasoning.

What will this peace of God which surpasses understanding do? It **Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.** The word "guard" means to stand watch. Paul was under guard while he wrote this letter. The Philippians lived in a Roman colony where they saw guards posted for watch all the time. This peace of God will stand guard over our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The heart, in New Testament language referred to the center of their being not just the emotions. The mind referred to their thoughts. So this peace of God will stand guard over the places from which anxiety forms up in us.

This means that in bringing our anxiety to God, we're not just redirecting our thoughts or trying to calm ourselves down with deep breaths – even though such practices can help. This is an appeal to an external source – God Himself – to help us. He responds by giving us the gift of His own peace which will stand guard over our hearts and minds.

So that is how we take on our anxiety in dependence on God. We take any situation that causes anxiety and bring it before the Lord in prayer while thanking Him for who He is. Then once we've expressed it all, we receive from Him His peace to stand guard over our hearts and minds. Anxiety is replaced by God's peace.

Does this really help? Well I can only share how this has helped in my life. I need to do this almost every day when I step back and look at the world, ministry and life. Each week, questions arise in my mind like this:

Will I accurately preach this text? Will I give clear understanding to this passage? Will the people of SVBC remain faithful to the Lord amidst all the distractions, concerns and battles? How well protected are they against our enemy; the devil. Will we have enough money as a church to keep going? Will I have enough strength to keep ministering? Will I have enough wisdom to parent my kids? Will I have enough health to persevere? Will I be able to find the answers to hard questions?

Some weeks, I ask questions like, “How will I get everything done? Will I have the emotional strength to bear with the realities people share or go through in life? Will I have enough energy to empathize and sympathize with a bereaved family?”

Yet, when I pray and present my requests to God, often I experience His peace and relief. Nothing may change in my circumstances. But that reminder and realization that the Lord is with me and helping and active, it lowers my concerns. The Lord has sustained me now through 31 years of pastoral ministry. So you can take that for whatever its worth. But much more, take God’s Word for it preserved for us in this letter. Here is a promise from Him of His peace to help us with our anxiety. This is available for anyone who believes in Christ.

But I have one final word to say to anyone who might be watching who does not know Jesus Christ. One of the greatest anxieties we may experience concerns what happens after we die but, with Christ in our lives, we don’t even have to worry about that. He promises to walk with us through the valley of the shadow death to the other side with life in paradise with Him. But He will not force his way into your life. He invites you to come to Him and let Him shoulder the burdens of your life with you. And He has dealt with the greatest burden of our lives – our sin that separates us from God. We can lose that burden of guilt and unforgiven sin by trusting Christ and His work on the cross. It will cost you everything in the sense that you must give your allegiance to Him. But when we entrust our lives to Christ, God will immediately forgive us and place us in right standing with Him. We will not be alone again. So if you have never received Christ, He invites you today to come to Him.

Maybe you could pray something like this.

“Oh God, for my whole life,

I have tried to solve things on my own.

Or at least I thought I could solve everything on my own.

But recent events have proven much is beyond me.

I admit I am anxious or I need you.

But now I hear of your peace.

I need that peace.

I recognize it cost Jesus everything to buy it for me.

So I put the trust of my life upon Him and His death on the cross.

I give my allegiance to you.

Please give your peace to me.”

And God will give you new spiritual life. You will be born again and can bring everything to Him in prayer. So, if you prayed that please let me know so I can pray for and encourage you. Now, let us all with prayer and petition with thanksgiving present our requests to God. Then receive His peace.