

## Curing Anxiety Philippians 4:6-7

weary from sleep deprivation, but still they clung to branches because their very lives depended on it.

According to news reports, it was the worst flooding in 50 years. Torrential rains beat on the region for 4 days. A week later the coastline would be hammered by a tropical cyclone leaving thousands homeless. Over 45,000 people were rescued from trees or roof tops. One woman succumbed to the pangs of labor and gave birth to a baby girl while clinging desperately to life in a tree. The year was 2000; the location was Mozambique, Africa. Families were separated as they raced against the swelling tides of rushing water.

Samuel Naftal was one of those survivors. From a very unique perspective he recalls his experience, one that we should all take heed to. Samuel and I share the same calling. He too is a pastor. As he tells his story, he relates how during the crisis he was thankful to God for mosquitos. Yes, you heard right, thankful for mosquitos. Let me explain.

Sixteen people along with Pastor Naftal clung to the limbs of trees desperately holding on so that the rushing flood waters would not carry them off to become victims of the storm. While holding on to those branches Pastor Naftal began to preach. It wasn't because he had a captive audience. It wasn't to practice Sunday's sermon. Encouraged by the other tree huggers, they hoped his preaching would keep them alert and awake to their surroundings. Maybe we should have trees instead of chairs.

Imagine yourself in their shoes, clinging to a tree branch for dear life, listening to one sermon after another. And while you're listening a mattress floats by, and then a desk and a chair and dead cows and screen doors. For two days they clung tightly to this precarious life line. Then it happened. The mosquitos came. They came in swarms doing what mosquitos do – bite. Relentlessly they attacked the 17 people weary from their effort to stay alive,

Pastor Naftal would later relate how he thanked God for the mosquitos. Apparently it was the mosquitos and not his preaching that kept them awake. He noted that if it weren't for the mosquitos they would have certainly fallen asleep and into the rushing waters. They may have each wondered silently or out loud whether they would make it out alive. As the hours waxed on, their outlook may have become even more bleak and dismal: no food and no drinkable water. Each passing hour may have been one more fleeting hour of despair which came as rapidly as those flood waters. They were eventually able to climb down and wade to shore once the waters had receded.

**How about you? When was the last time you were able to give thanks for mosquitos?** I don't recall myself ever pausing to thank God for them. They're a nuisance. They interrupt an otherwise pleasant night watching a sunset or spoil an evening picnic on a warm summer night or the fishing trip that has been planned for weeks. And it doesn't end there when the event is over. There is the itching and the bleeding that follow when those bites are not left alone. I'm not sure I could or would respond like Pastor Naftal if my life were somehow spared by pesky mosquitos. I'm not sure I would look at their annoyance, even in a life and death situation, through the same lens as he did. Yet our passage for today is a call to give thanks, to give thanks rather than be anxious. I'm almost certain they were anxious for their lives and perhaps for many other things as well.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Paul's prison letter to the church in Philippi – **Philippians 4:6-7**. Thanksgiving is such a wonderful time of the year. President Lincoln proclaimed it an official national holiday in 1863. Of course we historically credit the first thanksgiving observation to those pilgrims who landed on the eastern shores of what would

become the United States. In the world they came from they were accustomed to regularly gathering together celebrating thanksgivings or days of prayer to God for any number of blessings from military victories to bountiful provisions. So it was fitting that they should carry this tradition, this celebration to the new world, to give God thanks for safely guiding them and for His provision. It was a celebration that lasted three days.

We have so much to be thankful to God for. Maybe you are in the practice of listing them as the song encourages us to count our blessings naming them one by one. We as Christians, of all people, should be most thankful. **But are we? Are we truly thankful? Are we always thankful? Are there any mosquitos in your life for which it is difficult to give thanks?**

I have just two things I want to say about this passage.

There is a practice to stop.

There is a practice to start.

## I. THERE IS A PRACTICE TO STOP

Here's the practice to stop. **"Do not be anxious about anything."** Read that with me: **"Do not be anxious about anything."** It's in the present imperative mood implying a command. The command is this: **"STOP being anxious."** Anxiety is a state of uneasiness. It can be about the uncertainties of the future. It can be a real or fantasized threatening event that can even impair physical or psychological functions like sweating, trembling, vomiting, lack of sleep or appetite. It is to be troubled or worried about something.

As Paul writes this we get the impression that the people in the Philippian church had a problem with being anxious. Stuff worried them. All kinds of things may have been floating down their river of life that caused them to be anxious and then there were the mosquitos, those pesky mosquitos.

In chapter one based on what Paul says, we come to believe that they were worried about him. They heard he was in prison. They knew what prison could be like. What will happen to Paul? Paul told them not to worry about him because what had happened has helped advance the gospel. People were getting saved. For Paul to write what he did, they had other things that caused anxiety. He exhorts them not to be anxious about anything.

I suppose the kinds of things they were anxious about are very similar to the things we tend to be anxious about. Now the word anxious means to draw in different directions, they are things that cause us to be distracted, to have a double mind. So let me pause and ask this very simple question: **What causes you to be anxious?**

We could start off with admitting that sin, the consequences of sin and the guilt of sin are things that can make us anxious. We know we shouldn't but we do it anyway and then we wonder if we'll get caught, and if we get caught we wonder what might happen to us. Rightfully so we become anxious. Now the cure for this kind of anxiety is not to commit that sin in the first place. Then we won't have to reap the consequences or suffer from the guilt.

But there are things that are not sin that also cause us to be anxious. Anything, and I mean anything can cause anxiety. Let's have a little audience participation. Name some of them.

Let's start with health. The last doctor's visit was less than stellar. The BP is up a little, cholesterol is up a little, weight is up a little. So the doctor says you need to eat right and take some meds, but then you're anxious about whether the meds will interact negatively with other meds you're on.

You get a cough or you have a headache or your wrist hurts and the mind begins to do mental gymnastics thinking about all the possibilities of what might be wrong and you become anxious. The

cough could be pneumonia. The headache might be brain cancer or the sore wrist might be carpal tunnel.

Then we move on to our finances. The economy is running out of control. They're talking about raising taxes and having to pay for more health insurance, the stock market is plummeting while everything else costs more to buy. We become anxious about what's in the bank or in our retirement fund. We become anxious about if we will even be able to retire. We become anxious about the value of our home that continues to drop. We become anxious about our aging car or the home repairs that have been neglected because the money just isn't there.

We're anxious about how we look.

We're anxious about how we dress.

We're anxious about a test.

We're anxious about getting into college or getting into the right college.

We're anxious about starting a career.

We're anxious about whether that person or group will like me, about fitting in.

We're anxious about our family.

We're anxious about whether we'll stay employed.

All these things and so many more consume our thinking, occupy our time, exhaust our energy.

Take some time this week to get out a sheet of paper. Draw a line down the center. At the top of the left hand column put this title: THE THINGS I'M ANXIOUS ABOUT. Then list everything you tend to be anxious about, no matter how minor it might seem. You might need to get a bigger sheet of paper for your list, maybe a newsprint roll.

We can even be anxious about the list we just made.

Let me ask this question. **Why is it that the things which have the least value from an eternal perspective are the things we tend to be most anxious about?**

Back to the command: **"be anxious about nothing."** In what are we to be anxious about?

Nothing. Say that with me: **nothing**. Circle it or underline it in your Bible. Nothing means no thing, not anything, zip, zilch, zero.

It seems like impossible advice doesn't it. Don't be anxious about anything, Jesus taught the same thing during the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 6:25-34**. He tells them not to be anxious about what they will wear or what they will eat or about tomorrow. God knows what you need and He'll provide, so don't be anxious.

He then said the same thing in **Matthew 10** when he sent the disciples out. He warned they would stand before judges and magistrates on account of Him but take no thought about you will say. Translation: don't be anxious about it.

Now returning to our passage I want you to notice the end of the preceding verse, **verse 5**. Here's one reason not to be anxious. **"The Lord is near."** That's a verse to remember. Say that with me: **"The Lord is near."** So remember when you begin to have those moments when the cloud of anxiety start hover over you and to rain on your party that **"the Lord is near."** When I was a child I had nothing to be anxious about when my Dad was around. Even today I feel the same way. His presence alleviates anxiety.

The psalmist knew that when he penned the **23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm**. Reflecting back on years out in the open fields and hills tending sheep he thought about all the times when alone there was the propensity to be anxious about wandering sheep or finding food to sustain them or when wild animals lurked nearby waiting to pounce on its next meal of mutton. **"Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for (what?) Thou art with me."** Here's a Howieism: when there's cause to be anxious, don't be; God is with me. **Do you believe that? If so why be anxious?**

**So what are we to be anxious about?** Nothing.

I timed myself the other day reading these two verses. It took me 12 seconds to read. That's not a lot of time in the grand scheme of things. In about the time I can run a mile I can read that passage 33 times. Yet consider that while it takes just a few seconds to read it takes a lifetime to master. Some never get it right. It sounds so simple yet it is so difficult to live out. **So how do we conquer anxiety? How do we heed the command to stop being anxious?** Here's the scoop. The answer is found in the rest of the passage. This passage gives us a practice to start.

## II. THERE IS A PRACTICE TO START

Back to the passage and follow with me, **v. 6-7**.

Paul inserts a little three letter word, a conjunction that contrasts what he just said. It's another command, something to do. That little three letter word "but" is a relational word, a word of connection linking one word or phrase to another. We could just as easily insert the word instead.

**"Don't be anxious about anything instead pray..."** Stop doing one thing and replace it with another.

The answer as Paul suggests is prayer, not just any prayer. Paul states that we should be anxious about nothing, but that we should pray about everything. Everyone say that with me: **pray about everything**. Everything means just that every thing or all things. **Remember that page of paper I want you to take out at home and with a line drawn down the center?** At the top of the right hand column write this title THE THINGS I'LL PRAY ABOUT. Or if you like just cross out the other heading – THE THINGS I'M ANXIOUS ABOUT, and replace it with the new title because all the things you were anxious about should now be the same things you pray about.

Our prayer of thanksgiving becomes the power that helps to extinguish the flames of anxiety. It does not mean that we take the advice of Timon the meerkat or Pumbaa the warthog and have no worries and live carefree so that whatever happens, happens. All those things are still a concern for us, but we have relinquished them over to the one who can take care of them for us. Peter said it best **"Casting all your care on Him for He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)**

I used to think of that verse in terms of fishing. You're out in the boat with your tackle box and fishing pole, you bait your hook and then you cast the hook out. Eventually you have to reel it back in and cast it off again, maybe in another direction – toward that big splash you just saw. But that's not what it means. Let me illustrate it with a personal story. **When I was much younger, a teenager, with hair, I was doing what teenage boys like to do, test the strength of my throwing arm. One day I was out throwing rocks. I'd picked up a rock about the size of a golf ball and threw it up into the air as far and as hard as I could. I picked up another rock and gave it a toss, and then another. I could throw pretty high. I picked up the next rock and gave it a heave like no other. I watched its ascent and then I watched gravity take over and pull the rock back to earth. That's what they do. Now when you throw a rock you have no way of retrieving it after it has left your hand. Could I get a witness? I quickly projected where that rock was going to land and I could do nothing about it. Let's just say that the top of Dad's van sported a large dimple.**

When Peter invites us to cast our care on the Lord, adding Paul's admonition to do so in prayer, it means to give it to Him and let go, don't take it back, don't retrieve it or try to reel it back in. Anxiety is keeping something because I think I can handle it better than God, BUT, God wants us to give it to Him. **In Kittel's dictionary of Greek words we read that "to cast one's care on God does not mean to think of Him as the One who**

guarantees one's wishes, but to see in Him the One who knows what we need better than we do ourselves. These exhortations to prayer are thus designed to give absolute freedom from care as anxiety."

Who made the earth and created all that is in it? Who spun the planets in their orbit? Who positioned the stars in the heavens and then named them all? Is this not the same one to whom we can cast our cares, our anxieties? Who is able to take those cares and keep us from being anxious?

He does so through our prayer. Now prayer in this sense used by Paul is a term that speaks about our approaching God in a manner or act of worship. We recognize that it is God and God alone who can help us through this event or circumstance that would otherwise cause anxiety. J. Vernon McGee notes that "prayer rests on faith and faith on the word of God." Prayer to God as an act of worship identifies God not only as the one who can answer our requests, but more importantly acknowledges that He is the supreme, sovereign God. It places God in proper perspective. Because of who He is, our big problems are no problem to Him.

In those moments when we stand at the fork in the road, one way leading to anxiety, the other way leading to peace Paul says take the next step in prayer and leave it with God and so get His peace. Instead of worry, worship through an act of prayer.

Then notice as well that we are called not only to pray about everything, having a time of communing with God, we are also to bring our supplications or petitions to God. These are the specific things that are on our mind. They're the things that we might be on the verge of being anxious about.

A pastor one night lay awake pondering some heavy concerns that were on his heart, things that were causing him to be anxious. He tossed and turned well into the night unable to sleep because of how much they weighed on his mind. Finally he prayed

giving them to God and said that there was no use for both of them to stay up all night worrying about them, so he gave them to God, rolled over and fell asleep.

Supplications are a specific request always addressed to God, a specific prayer in a concrete situation. God wants us to name the request.

Notice what is to accompany our prayer, what must be joined with our petitions. There is to be thanksgiving. Too often I pray and neglect giving thanks until or unless the prayer has been answered. Thanksgiving is the outward expression of an inward feeling or emotion. That inward feeling is gratitude. As I come to God in worship through prayer, my grasp of who God is fills me with a sense of awe and reverence that overwhelms me as I recall who it is I am addressing with my petitions and that feeling of gratitude wells up within in me so that I respond with an outward expression of thanksgiving. "God I don't know what you're going to do in this thing I'm petitioning you for, but I'm giving You thanks." Because of who He is and what He has done for me there is an obligation to give Him thanks, thanks not just for the blessings and good things that happen to me, but even for the pesky things, the things that would otherwise cause me to be anxious, those mosquitos of life.

Paul would tell the Thessalonians (I Thes. 5:18) to give thanks in everything, because it's God's will for you. Give thanks even for those mosquito events in life that God has allowed so that we in turn look to God and give Him praise, give Him thanks.

If we wonder sometimes why our prayers are not answered, maybe it's because there is a general lack of thanksgiving.

Turn to **Psalm 34:1-8** and notice the thanksgiving that is laced through the prayer of David in the things that might have caused anxiety.

Paul tells us not to be anxious, but instead pray with thanksgiving. The word “with” is an inclusive preposition that means alongside of. There must be thanksgiving included in prayer. When we pray about the things that would otherwise cause anxiety, thank God for His power; thank God for His promises; thank God for His presence; and thank God for His peace.

That is the result of a heart that has come to God with his cares. When we pray with thanksgiving the Lord settles our otherwise anxious heart with His peace. It’s a peace the world doesn’t know and can’t give. Oh, we attempt to quell the rising tide of anxiety with more things or changing positions or any number of solutions, but they are only temporary, they won’t last and they can’t satisfy. Only the peace of God lasts. His is the only peace that will keep us calm in the worst of life’s storms. When the flood waters around continue to rise only He can settle our whole being. That’s what the apostle meant when he stated that this peace would guard our heart and mind. Our whole being is at rest, guarded by God’s peace that surrounds us.

The word guard is a military term used for sentinels stationed at the gates to protect the city. They stood on guard so that those inside the city walls could go about their business without worry. God’s peace becomes an indescribable, impenetrable barrier between us and the anxieties that would wish to conquer us.

**Isaiah 26:3 “You will guard him and keep him in perfect and constant peace whose mind [both its inclination and its character] is stayed on You, because he commits himself to You, leans on You, and hopes confidently in You.”** Amplified

Such trust in the Lord breeds further trust and greater peace. It’s a peace that Joseph knew in the cell of an Egyptian prison. That peace wasn’t because Joseph knew he was innocent of the trumped up charges, it was because he knew God was there and in control. It’s the peace David knew standing before a giant who had superior skill and weapons even though he had

deadly aim with his sling. He had peace because God was there and in control.

It’s the peace Daniel knew in the den of hungry lions; it’s the peace Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew when they stood before an angry king; it’s the peace you and I can know when we come to Him with every one of the things that could and would make us anxious if not for that promise that the Lord is near; if not for the promise that when we bring our requests to Him with thanksgiving, His peace will settle our hearts, calm our spirits, give us inner tranquility that goes far beyond our comprehension or understanding. It’s something that is difficult to describe yet so very real. The only source of this peace is God and it’s available through Christ.

**Romans 5:1 says “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** He’s the one who made this peace possible. If we belong to Christ, this peace is available to us.

**Gordon Fee has said that “peace comes because prayer is a matter of trust.”** It’s put the same way in **Proverbs 3:5-6 “trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path.”** Peace is implied here when we trust God.

Anxiety can lead a person to a life of regret. Being anxious about something, anything, can stall our momentum, it can keep us in spiritual gridlock, incapable of moving, of doing anything for fear that something might happen if we do. We can fill our life day by day, moment by moment exhausted, weakened by its icy grip that slowly and systematically saps our strength so that anything and everything causes us to be anxious. Or we can live in the freedom that comes by worrying about nothing but instead praying about everything, with thanksgiving, so that God’s peace shelters us in any storm we encounter in life.

We truly have much to be thankful for. **Are you ready to give God those things that have caused you to be anxious?** He’s ready and very capable of taking them and in their place blanket us with His peace. **Do you know that peace today?** You can, it’s only a prayer away, and oh, be thankful, even for mosquitos.