

Living with God During Anxious Times

Philippians 4:6-7; Matthew 6:25-27

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Everywhere you look, anxiety is running high.

Anxiety is characterized by feelings of tension and worrying thoughts. Some people feel a sense of impending doom.

When people are anxious, some overeat. Others have no appetite at all. Others smoke or use alcohol or drugs. Some people feel stressed out, and some even have panic attacks. Have you ever had something on your mind that bothered you, and you just couldn't stop thinking about it? It seemed to consume your every waking minute.

Anxiety can be felt in various places in our body: headaches, a nervous stomach, eating disorders, increased blood pressure, or skin issues are a few ways anxiety affects our bodies.

Sometimes our anxieties are so high we can't sleep or we dream about the things that bother us.

Recently a nurse told me she kept having this reoccurring dream that she died, and I did her funeral at the Pendergrass Flea Market, but not many people came, not even her husband.

I didn't think to tell her the funeral must not have been on a weekend because there would have been thousands there. But I did tell her I thought she was having that dream because she was thinking a lot about death. She works in an ICU where there are COVID-19 patients and so she must be thinking about her own mortality.

We are social creatures.

We are often affected by the anxieties of others. That's why our leaders need to remain calm during a crisis.

Have you ever wondered how a crowd could turn into a stampede and stomp to death dozens of people? One person panics, then another, and another, until a crowd does the unthinkable.

If you go to the store not feeling anxious, only to get there and see all these people buying everything in unusually large quantities, you wonder, "What do these people know that I don't know. Did I miss something on the news? Should I be doing the same thing?"

Suddenly, YOU are anxious, and you feel that if you don't rush in and get your share, you will not be able to feed your family or take care of business if you know what I mean.

Purchasing all of those items in large quantities does not have to be rational, but it gives people a sense of control, releasing some of their pent-up anxiety.

In this time of abnormality, people are looking for something they can do to have a feeling that they are some are in control.

Guess what? We are not in control!

Our government can limit the number of immigrants coming into our country to get more control over our borders, but we have learned that can't keep out a virus that can hitch a ride on whomever it wishes.

Sure, there are things our leaders we can do and perhaps should have done to slow it down, but we are learning hard lessons that the most powerful nation on earth can be brought to our knees.

Our economy can be crippled in a matter of weeks.

There are things you and I can do every day to give our lives structure. On most days, the structure we give our days works very well.

We wake up each day thinking we are in control of our day. When our world is nice and tidy, and all the appliances are running, and the bills are paid, and everyone is healthy, and we have dinner plans with friends, and the children you teenagers are happily involved in school and sporting activities and we are going on vacation next month we think we are in control. But we are not. It's just an illusion.

In a moment, an accident can happen on your way home from work. The doctor can say the word "cancer" or "Alzheimer's." You can get a letter in the mail that says you didn't get into the college you wanted, or you might get a call or an email saying someone else was selected for the job you applied for.

Despite your best parenting efforts, your son or daughter might choose to disobey you and go down a road that leads to trouble in school or even with the law.

We are never in control.

We like to think we are, but we are not.

In a matter of minutes, our world can change, any day, any time. That has always been the case.

What is different right now is that everyone is realizing at the same time that we are not in control. Usually, this reality only occurs to a few people at the time while the rest of us go on living our lives and thinking we are in control, even when we are not.

But now, most people are thinking, "I could get sick. I might lose my job. The failing economy might affect me." For some, it already has. People are anxious.

A police officer told me last week that suicides are rising.

More people are getting to the edge, and they are not able to handle their anxiety in healthy ways.

But hold on—America has faced much worse than this. God has journeyed with people through much worse than this.

My grandmother didn't finish her senior year in high school because of the Great Depression.

There were rations during the Second World War as people sacrificed so everyone would have enough.

We've been through other wars, recessions, terrorist attacks.

In such times, can we live out a verse like:

Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Do not be **anxious** about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

Would you say that verse with me?

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made know to God."

Can we really live out a verse like this in these times that we are living?

Maybe it would be helpful if I told you a little about who wrote this verse and under what circumstances it was written.

The Apostle Paul wrote the letter of Philippians from prison in Rome. He also wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon from there as well.

Four of the books of our Bible come to us because Paul was imprisoned.

I know a lot of you have a case of cabin fever right now. Physical distancing is working on your emotions, and the walls of your house are beginning to feel like a prison.

Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel. As far as we know, he was never released. While he was there, he continued to live for Jesus. While he was there, he continued to reach out to churches he had established.

The letter was the highest form of technology for communicating that existed in Paul's day.

After he wrote these letters to the churches, Paul gave the letter to a courier.

That person traveled by boat, he walked and perhaps rode over 600 miles to get from Rome to Macedonia to deliver Paul's letter to the people in these churches that he loved so much.

Imagine, one day, when this courier arrived with this letter and the news began to spread that news from Paul had come.

Then this verse is read: "Do not be **anxious** about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

They must have been encouraged to know that if Paul was living by these words, then they could live by them. The question is whether we can live by them?

Another way to read the first part of what Paul wrote is this: "Worry about nothing, pray about everything."

Is this possible? How can you not worry?

Someone once said that worry is like sitting in a rocking chair. You expend a lot of energy, but you don't go anywhere. Except, a lot of people find a rocking chair relaxing. Nothing about worrying is relaxing.

When Paul tells us not to worry, he is not telling us to be reckless fools. He is not telling us that we should wear our seat belts because we are not worried about being injured in a car crash or that we should not practice social distancing because we are not concerned about getting COVID-19.

Paul is telling us that we don't need to worry because should be praying. If we can take everything to God in prayer, then there is no need for us to worry.

Paul would have liked the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
And what a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer
Oh, what peace we often forfeit
Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer
(<https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/789>)

Talking to Jesus is one of the most humble things you can do.

When we talk to Jesus, we are saying to Jesus, I trust you. I may not understand what is happening. I certainly do not trust myself, but I believe you.

The Lord says to us, “I want you to trust me as the birds trust me.”

Jesus said, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” Matthew 6:25-27

If we take everything to God in prayer, if we ask God for what we need and, at the same time, thank God for what we have, God is going to take care of us.

Some of you might say, “Well, didn’t you say Paul never got out of prison?”

Yes, that is true. And some people never recover from COVID-19. Some of those people might be believers. Some people will lose their jobs. Some of those people might be believers.

So what’s the difference?

When we pray, God does not always promise that he will change our circumstances. When we pray, we discover that God does change us.

Sure, sometimes God does change the circumstances, but when the circumstances change, if we remain the same, is that a good thing?

But Jesus asked, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

If you are one of these worrying people, then the quality of your life is adversely affected.

Paul was in prison, but he didn’t spend his days worrying about when he was getting out or whether he would get out. He spent his time constructively. He maintained his faith in Jesus.

You don’t have any control over COVID-19. Sure, there are smart things we can do to hold down your risk of getting it. But we cannot change that it is here and among us.

So ask God to grant you the serenity to accept the things you cannot change.

Ask God to give you the courage to change the things you can. What can you change about your life that will help reduce the amount of worrying that you are doing right now?

What can you change?

Now we don't have control. But there are always some things we can do that can make a difference.

God takes care of the birds, but the birds are still out there looking for worms and building nests. They are not idle. Just because we self-quarantine ourselves, there are still many constructive things we can do.

Paul tells us that the most important thing we can do is to pray. Pray does make a difference, especially in the one who prays. Why don't we pray more?

Perhaps it's because we think prayer is not active enough. Maybe we believe that we must be doing something more. Perhaps we feel we must be more in control, and prayer is an admission that we are not and that we need help.

This morning if you are anxious, I'm going to suggest that you start praying.

You are forfeiting peace and needless pain because you are not praying.

If you are discouraged, you need to pray.

We are all facing trials and temptations.

We all need to pray.

I Peter 5:7 says, "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you" (NLT).

To do that, you have to talk to Jesus. You have to pray.

Would you pray with me right now?

As you pray, what is it that you want to ask God for this morning? What are your needs? What is it that you are thankful for today? As you pray to God, remember to be grateful for what you have, even in the midst of these difficult days? Confess to God what it is that worries you. Give those worries to God. Ask God to take those worries from you. Trust God to take care of you.

Lord God, it's challenging for us to enjoy today when we are worried about tomorrow. It's difficult for us to live in the moment when we are so anxious about what the day holds. God, remind us that you are already in the future, and you know what tomorrow holds. Help us not to worry. Help us to trust you for every one of our needs – financial, relational, physical, social, spiritual, and emotional.

We know that we may not always have all that we want because we are used to having so much, so help us to be satisfied with what we need.

Create within us generous hearts, so our eyes are also on the needs of others and use us to minister to those around so your love will shine through us.

As others see that we are calm within the storm, help us to witness to others, and share with them that our trust is in you.

Amen

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