

November 24, 2019
Jed Linder
“With Thanksgiving”
Philippians 4.4-7



SCRIPTURE

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

OPENING

Let us pray... *Gracious God, with great thanksgiving for all you provide, we lift up this time to you. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and speak your peace and joy directly to our hearts today. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

The holidays are upon us! And for many, this is a joyous time of year! A time for decorating, gifts, family, food, you know the drill... all the things that make us happy. Of course, for others this is a very anxious time of year. A time for decorating, gifts, family, food, you know the drill... all the things that make us anxious.

Even the church calendar is anxious! Last year we concluded with the season of PENTECOST, the longest season of the church, i.e., “ordinary time.” It takes place between Easter and Advent, yet has neither the glitz nor glamour of both. This is a period of time in which we live our daily lives together, led by the Spirit, and often focus on daily discipleship practices such as prayer.

Next week, we begin the new church year, year 2020, with the exciting season of ADVENT. This is a period of anticipation and remembrance: remembering where we have been, and anticipating the arrival of Jesus Christ. This is supposed to be a time of peace, love, and joy.

Finally, today is CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY. This feast concludes the church year with a recognition and celebration of Jesus Christ’s eternal kingship. This year, appropriately so, our celebration coincides with the holiday of Thanksgiving, thanking God for all God has done, particularly for God’s love poured out through Jesus Christ.

See what I mean? It is an anxious time of year. So much to do, so little time. And we haven’t even considered the typical, worry-producing, trials and traumas we face daily that really cranks the anxiety up. Fortunately, our scripture reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippian church is the perfect, spiritual medicine for just such anxiety.

I look at this short, 4-verse passage as the real sweet center of Paul’s letter. It’s like the cream in those delicious, cream puff pastries some people make this time of year. You bite through the buttery crust of the letter, and out comes this cool, sweet, and satisfying burst representing the theological and pastoral heart of everything Paul has been talking about to the Philippian congregation. Further, it just so happens that besides providing a needed remedy to life’s anxieties, this passage speaks pretty directly to our calendar’s period of change, making this passage a great transition from where we have been, to where we are today, and, finally, to where we are going. So, let’s get started by looking at where we have been.

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

For the last two Sundays, Jane has spoken on two separate types of prayer. The first is called “Discursive Prayer,” and this is a way of praying without any words. So, we might hold an image, a name, or a situation up in our heart and mind before God; we then sit with God in silence, allowing God’s presence to strengthen and encourage us. The second way of prayer Jane discussed is called “Intercessory Prayer.” This is a way of praying for others, a type of prayer that recognizes our interconnectedness. Intercessory prayer is a way for us to name and release our concerns for one another to God, placing them in God’s hands and moving forward with that confidence. I suggest that, for Paul, both of these types of prayer, and *praying generally*, are vital practices for a person or a people under pressure – such people as the Philippians to whom Paul is specifically addressing today’s passage.

Two thousand years ago, the Christians in the ancient city of Philippi were undergoing serious persecution. When a person back then would decide to follow the Way of Christ, their lives would change dramatically. All of a sudden, their neighbors would look at them suspiciously, and the government would see them as a possible threat because they followed an exclusive “lord” who was not Caesar. People would suffer economic and social oppression, and some would even end up losing their lives just to follow Jesus. [We as the church would do well to remember there are many Christians today that face similar persecution in different parts of the world!] Knowing all of this, Paul still writes to them, “Do not be anxious about anything.” This is a tough word from Paul, given what they are going through. How are they *not* supposed to be anxious about anything?

This is similarly a tough word for us today. How are *we* not supposed to be anxious about anything? We live in a society that is overwhelmed by anxiety. A society where we are constantly bombarded by advertisers warning us to either buy or beware. A society where news reporters and commentators fixate on anxiety-producing stories just to keep us glued to their 24-hour, news coverage. A society where social media demands we maintain a perfectly manicured image because we are always on show, and always under scrutiny. It is no wonder we are a bunch of head-cases here in America!

I took just a quick look at some recent headlines just the other day:

HEADLINE: Depression and anxiety rates ‘alarmingly high’ among LGBTQ Southerners, survey says¹

HEADLINE: Terrified of Climate Change? You Might Have Eco-Anxiety²

HEADLINE: 39% of Americans More Anxious Today Than This Time Last Year³

...and, my personal favorite...

HEADLINE: Workplace 'Secret Santa' gift exchanges causing anxiety for millennials⁴

¹ Simone Jasper, “Depression and anxiety rates ‘alarmingly high’ among LGBTQ Southerners, survey says,” *Chicago Tribune*, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sns-tns-bc-med-depression-lgbtq-20191120-story.html>, accessed on November 21, 2019.

² Ciara Nugent, “Terrified of Climate Change? You Might Have Eco-Anxiety,” *Time.com*, <https://time.com/5735388/climate-change-eco-anxiety/>, accessed on November 21, 2019.

³ Jack Debiec, “39% of Americans More Anxious Today Than This Time Last Year,” *Michigan Health Lab*, <https://labblog.uofmhealth.org/body-work/39-of-americans-more-anxious-today-than-time-last-year>, accessed on November 21, 2019.

And, yes, that last one is a real headline.

Current statistics⁵ say that nearly 20% of Adults in the US, and 25% of teenagers, suffer from some sort of anxiety disorder. Nearly seven million adults suffer from Generalized Anxiety Disorder, with women twice as likely. Six million adults suffer from Panic Disorder, with women twice as likely. And 15 million adults suffer from Social Anxiety Disorder, and this one does not discriminate between sexes. These disorders can lead to depression, various physical illnesses, substance abuse, and even suicide.

So, with all of this, how can Paul expect us not to be “anxious about anything”? It’s in the very air we breathe here in 21st century America. Well, thankfully, Paul tells us how. Paul writes: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, *by prayer and petition*, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Have any of you ever had this experience? Has prayer relieved you of some anxiety you were dealing with? If not, you might try a different way of prayer called “praying through.”

Praying through is an older practice that used to be commonplace, but it is not talked about much today. Essentially, when you pray through, you pray until something happens. Now that does not necessarily mean your petition is answered right then and there, but you do come to a place of peace about it, even if it’s just temporary. You know that God has heard you; you know that God has it in God’s hands, and that God is at work on it.

This way of prayer can be quite demanding, it can be the opposite of the silent, contemplative, discursive prayer that Jane spoke on. Praying through is often a very emotional, loud, forceful, even physically taxing practice of prayer. We see a number of examples in the bible:

- 1) Hebrews describes Jesus as one who “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” (Hebrews 5:7, NRSV).
- 2) The Old Testament tells the story of Hannah who “was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly” (1 Samuel 1:10, NRSV). (She did this so often in the hopes God would answer her prayer that her priest thought she was a drunk!)
- 3) Finally, my favorite example comes from Jacob’s story in Genesis. On the eve of his meeting with Esau – a meeting where Jacob was sure he would be killed – Jacob prayed to God so forcefully that he is described as one who actually wrestled with God. Jacob wrestled with God all night, the experience even left him slightly disabled the rest of his life, and in the end, Jacob clung tightly to God, refusing to let go, saying, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:26, NRSV). And God did.

Praying through is a way to bring everything, no matter how impossible or trivial it may seem, before God. You pray until God takes that yoke from you, even if just for a bit. You pray until God blesses you.

I have had my own experience with this type of prayer, granted I did not have a name for it at the time. I was broken physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and I would come to God in

⁴ Jerrod Kingery, “Workplace 'Secret Santa' gift exchanges causing anxiety for millennials,” *ABC 13 News*, <https://wset.com/news/offbeat/report-workplace-secret-santa-gift-exchanges-causing-anxiety-for-millennials-11-27-2019>, accessed on November 21, 2019.

⁵ Taken from the *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*, “Facts & Statistics” page, <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>, accessed on November 21, 2019.

prayer. I would raise my voice with tears in my eyes, and yell out “It’s not supposed to be like this!” I’d lament what I’d lost, and I cry out to God to answer me. I would pray until finally I’d had enough; until finally I’d come to a place of peace. I’d be worn out, my life would not all be fixed, but I was, for a moment, at peace. After a while of praying like this, my pray time would begin to change. On the difficult days I’d pray through, while on the easier days, I spend my time sitting silently with God, trusting that God was on it. Now understand, this was not me pushing God out of some divine reluctance, *forcing* God to take action. It was actually pushing me. It was pushing me to better align myself with God’s plans, and finding peace, comfort, and encouragement in God’s presence. It was opening up my limited vision to new, and greater possibilities. It was strengthening my trust that God was working for my betterment and that things would not remain as they were at that time.

Now all of this raises a key question for us to consider: Who is the God am I praying to? Who is the God I trust with my problems and to take care of me? Scientific studies have actually found that prayer does lessen anxiety, but it is dependent upon one’s answer to this question. Is God a loving, protective, nurturing god who care about us, and who provides generously without prejudice? Or is God an angry, vengeful, and distant god who cares little for what happens to people and who is not worth praying to? For the latter group, prayer does not decrease anxiety; in fact it often has the opposite effect. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that our society’s anxiety is rising exponentially at the same time more and more people are rejecting God?

For the former group though, prayer has been found to lessen anxiety, and, of course, for Paul, there is not question that this is the type of God to whom we pray. For Paul, God is a righteous god (1:11) who is consummately gracious (Phil. 1:2), compassionate (Phil. 1:8), and loving (Phil. 2:1-4). God is one who helps us through our lives (Phil. 1:19; 2:27), and in whom we can find peace, because God is a “God of Peace” (Phil. 4:9). This is the kind of God you want to pray to. This is the kind of God you want always nearby. This is the kind of God who, in prayer and petition, “*with thanksgiving*,” you can always come to “in every situation.” This is now a good transition into the second part of Paul’s remedy to anxiety, his exhortation to practice giving thanks.

WITH THANKSGIVING

Paul is reminding us here that our prayers are not supposed to be only checklists of all the things we want; our prayers are also supposed to express our gratitude for what we have and for what God has already done. In fact, we are to ground our prayers in thanksgiving. It’s like Maya Angelou’s quote: “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer.”⁶

But Paul is also talking about more than just saying a prayer of thanks. It’s more than simply a, “rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub.” It is an actual disposition of gratitude. In other words, it’s making gratitude a part of who we are and how we live.

Christian author and speaker Diana Butler Bass has recently written a book on the power of gratitude called *Grateful: The Subversive Practice of Giving Thanks*. In it, she draws together a lot of the contemporary, scientific evidence that supports the importance of what Paul is saying here. For instance, living gratefully has actually been found to improve physical health leading to less

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/115604-let-gratitude-be-the-pillow-upon-which-you-kneel-to>

stress, a healthier heart, lower rates of depression, less brain degeneration in seniors, lower blood pressure, lower rates of suicide, and even better sleep.

Doctors are also beginning to pick up on these trends. Bass shares a story of a man approaching her after one of her lectures and claiming that he just saw his cardiologist who suggested three things he must do to better take care of his heart: 1) eat healthier, 2) exercise more, and 3) keep a gratitude journal.

Some doctors today are even arguing that gratitude actually makes anxiety neurologically *impossible*. In his book *What Happy People Know*, psychologist Dr. Dan Baker argues that, “During active appreciation,” i.e., gratitude, the “threatening messages” coming from the fear center of your brain, and the “anxious instincts of your brainstem,” both get cut off from taking over your thought processes. Baker claims, “It is a fact of neurology that the brain cannot be in a state of appreciation and a state of fear at the same time. The two states may alternate, but are mutually exclusive.”⁷

What’s more, living gratefully can improve the way we live with one another. Gratitude gives us a stronger self-worth, and blocks toxic emotions such as envy, resentment, and regret, which can poison our lives and relationships. Gratitude also creates stronger social ties in our communities and our churches.⁸ All together, this practice can prove invaluable, especially in a society that has politicians, media figures, and advertisers playing off these negative types of emotions to gain votes, ratings, and sales.

Isn’t all of this remarkable? Science is just now catching up to something Paul was suggesting 2,000 years ago! Paul was way ahead of the curve, knowing that gratitude actually changes lives, and changes communities. Paul was so confident in this fact that he opened up all his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving – except for that one church he was *really* mad at in Galatia – and by doing so, he re-framed everything they’re dealing with. He gives these churches a lens of gratitude through which to view their struggles as well as their triumphs.

Now, before I continue, let me make a note here: Paul is not simply telling the Philippians “to eat their peas and carrots because there are starving children in Africa.” In other words, Paul is not minimizing their suffering and oppression, telling them to happily accept their *unjust* lot in life. Indeed, this was what the ancient system of patronage *was* doing back then, providing a system of control for the powerful based upon “gratitude.” Basically, the rulers and upper classes would claim they were protecting the people through military control, and thus they are owed the people’s gratitude and obedience. “Grace” came from the powerful, but it cost people something. The people were expected to respond by paying taxes and tributes, and by not rebelling against the system. This kept the poor and weak constantly in debt, and the powerful constantly in charge.

Paul, on the other hand, is calling for gratitude as a way of responding to a God whose grace is completely free; whose grace requires no *quid pro quo*. We simply live and pray gratefully while trusting in God to continue to provide abundantly. There is no special favor or payment expected in return. This is a transformative gratitude. And by praying out of this transformative gratitude, we are brought out from a state of anxiety into a place of *peace and joy*... and isn’t that

⁷ Dan Baker and Cameron Stauth, *What Happy People Know: How the New Science of Happiness Can Change Your Life for the Better* (New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2004) p. 81.

⁸ See the work of Dr. Robert A. Emmons, also the article “Gratitude is good medicine,” *UC Davis Health*, https://health.ucdavis.edu/medicalcenter/features/2015-2016/11/20151125_gratitude.html, accessed on November 21, 2019.

what the holiday season ahead is all about? Well, if it's not, it is supposed to be. It's supposed to be like the end of the Christmas movies we watch, and the Hallmark channel, where the small-town toy factory is always saved, and the two people always fall in love! Of course, it doesn't always turn out like that...

A CYCLE FOR LIFE

It's supposed to be a time of peace on earth and good will to one another; it's NOT supposed to be a time of mass shootings and partisan bickering.

It's supposed to be a time of sharing a meal with one another, and thanking God for what we have; it's NOT supposed to be a time standing in line during Thanksgiving Day, focused only on the things we don't have.

It's supposed to be a time of one more win for the Nebraska football team; it's NOT supposed to be the final game of the season...

Other than that final pair of course, one way we can bring back the peace and joy that is supposed to characterize this season is by following Paul's instruction, and practicing prayer *with* thanksgiving. Paul recognizes the ties here to peace and joy and has referenced it more than once in his letters (cf. Colossians 3:15). Thanksgiving often leads to joy – a robust, unwavering joy that you have when you accept God's grace and care. Likewise, prayer often leads to peace. And peace, here, is not just an absence of conflict, but a wholeness of life, a true *shalom* – a contentment that things are going to be all right one way or another.

So, you see what happens here? You come to God in prayer with thanksgiving, and you reap a harvest of peace and joy – two gifts freely given by God. Then, in response, you come to God in prayer and thanksgiving all the more! It becomes a life-bringing cycle, changing both the way we live, and the way we live with one another. And what a promise for a new year! Healthier, more contented lives and relationships marked by peace and joy. Is there a better way to be a church? Is there a better way to witness to the love of Christ this season than by radiating peace and joy to those around us?

Of course, this doesn't mean everything is always okay. But, it does mean that difficulties don't have to *define* who we are. Our worries and anxieties don't have to *define* who we are. And lest you think all of this is just Paul being naïve, practicing some Pollyanna-style faith, let me remind you that Paul is writing all of this from a prison cell! So these are not just good ideas in theory, these are practices that are actually sustaining Paul in even the most brutal contexts! So that even under the threat of death, Paul can confidently proclaim:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ... And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray... *Gracious God, what a gift prayer is; what a gift gratitude is; what a gift you are! Thank you for your awesome generosity and your love. Thank you for Jesus Christ the king. Thank you for this church, and thank you for the New Year ahead. In Jesus' name, amen.*