

Overcoming anxiety (3)

Please read Philippians 4 v 4-9 and pray;

God of peace, may your Word lead me into pathways of peace, hope and joy; may the Holy Spirit guide me as I seek to live in the peace and strength that are in Jesus Christ. Amen

As I write this sermon in early November, we are entering into the second national lockdown of 2020. Anxiety levels that were already high are set to be raised yet higher. The mental health of our nation will be tested again – especially as Christmas approaches. I sense for many that this could be a deeply upsetting time. Let's pray for those suffering unrelenting mental anguish, and who are near to breaking point. Lord, in your mercy, hear our cries.

Christians are not immune from anguish and anxiety and that is why we are considering this issue of how we face and seek to overcome it. Our Saviour, as we have already seen, taught his disciples about the way to overcome this recurring challenge (**Matthew 6:25-34**). Now we look at the teaching of the apostle Paul as we turn to one of the most famous bible passages which addresses anxiety (Philippians 4 v 4-9). John MacArthur the veteran American preacher, writer and Church leader describes this passage as "Paul's charter on how to avoid anxiety."

Paul's teaching is surely linked to Jesus's teaching in the gospel of Matthew, and I agree with those who see it as a kind of *practical commentary on Jesus' teaching*. Jesus emphasised the need to understand that his Father is also **our caring heavenly Father**, and that pursuing and prioritising God's righteousness and Kingdom will help us to experience in our hearts and circumstances his kingly rule of peace, righteousness and joy through the presence of His Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). Now Paul seeks to place before God's children in the Philippian Church the *major spiritual tool and resource* they/we have to combat anxiety – **the gift of prayer**.

Paul's teaching to a Church anxious about such things as membership disagreements and personality clashes (4:2), the threat of persecution (1:27-30) and the disruptive influence of false teaching (3:1-4) is concerned with *more than prayer* – but prayer, as Paul will show, is hugely effective in subduing anxious thoughts and feelings. Paul actually has a four-pronged attack against anxiety which includes;

- The right outlook – continual celebration and joy in the Lord. (4:4)
- The right praying – laced with thanksgiving. (4:6)
- The right thinking – wholly positive, healthy and pure. (4:8)
- The right practice – obedience to the Christlike apostolic teaching and example. (4:9)

All this results in the a most positive outcome – the supernatural guarded peace of God in hearts and minds (4:7) and the ongoing presence of the God of peace (4:9)

I want us to concentrate our thoughts on **prayer** today, the resource gift from God which can be used during *any anxiety*, at *any time* and in *any place* or situation, by *any* of God's children. No doubt Paul was using it in the prison from which he wrote this very letter (1:3-4, 9-11).

Let us then proceed into a consideration of Philippians 4 v 6 which reads;

*Do not be anxious about **anything**, but in **everything**, by prayer...*

Let's stop for a moment before venturing any further and ask the vital question, what is prayer? Firstly, and most importantly, prayer is not primarily about *words and thoughts shared with God*. Prayer is fundamentally about **actually entering into God's presence and rest, the presence of our heavenly Father**. We must understand this basic truth about prayer. Before sharing a single word with God, prayer involves "drawing near to God", enjoying "access to God's very own presence", "approaching the throne of grace with confidence."

Here are some Scriptures which speak about this understanding of prayer in *God's presence*.

*For through him (Jesus) we both (Jew and Gentile) **have access to the Father** by one Spirit.*

In him (Jesus) and through faith him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

These verses above are from Ephesians 2:18 & 3:12. Here are two more from Hebrews 4:16 & 10:19 ff.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

*Therefore, since we have confidence **to enter the Most Holy place** by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us **draw near to God** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith....*

Prayer is concerned with entering the infinitely glorious and holy, life-giving, love-filled **presence of God**. We actually, truly, experientially, enter God's great presence through Jesus and his blood and in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the gate or gateway to God's presence and throne of grace (John 10:7). The Spirit (living in us) is the motivator, helper and inspirer of prayer. There is a prayer quartet – you – and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The first thing to remember and rejoice in with "prayer" is our real access to our Father in heaven. This is where we are *entering ourselves* and where we are taking *our anxious thoughts and problems*. Before we even utter one word in prayer, there is perfect love, healing, light, hope and rest in God's presence which we can savour. Puritan Thomas Watson said of prayer;

Prayer is the soul breathing itself into the bosom of the Father.

When Jesus spoke about prayer, and about entering our room and closing the door to pray in quietness without interruptions (Matthew 6:6 ff), he was inviting disciples to spend time in *the bosom or heart of his Father and their Father*. *Entering into the heart of the Father's love*. This is the place of prayer and the place we take ourselves and our anxiety.

Secondly, once in the very presence of our Father, we can then offer prayers, petitions and requests, but we must do that **with thanksgiving** writes Paul. (see the emphasis in v 6)

All our praying must be laced through with thanksgiving – “giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:17). As you recall all the many blessings and the great love and faithfulness of God toward you, you will immediately begin to feel lifted up in spirit in God’s presence. Your anxious and burdened spirit will be lightened and lifted as you recall God’s goodness to you. Whenever I pray with an anxious person, I always invite them to consider the good things in their life and experience. To begin prayer with thanksgiving to God helps us move into a balanced perspective. No wonder the Psalmist encouraged us to **enter his gates with thanksgiving**. One writer refers to this as **the gratitude attitude**.

And there is so much to be thankful for – a splendid array of blessings and benefits (Psalm 103:2 ff) which we must never forget, even if you are confined in a prison as Paul was. Those blessings which we must recall to mind include;

- Spiritual blessings – all that you have received through Christ your Saviour.
- Physical blessings – your bodies, your talents, senses and physical capabilities.
- Emotional blessings – all that brings you joy, love, peace, and emotional highs.
- Intellectual blessings – all that stretches and stimulates your mind and thinking.
- Material blessings – your food, clothing, shelter and valued personal possessions.
- Relational blessings – all your relationships, friendships, family and interactions.

This is why at our prayer meetings, I always recommend that we start with thanksgiving, and then after that, and only after that, we offer our petitions and requests (including all present anxieties and challenges) to God in prayer.

Thirdly, in the presence of our loving heavenly Father, with positive thanksgiving, we offer our anxiety, our burden to God. When Paul writes about **requests**, he is referring to **specific requests**. We are invited to share with our great God and Father *the specifics* of what it is that is burdening us at that time. God of course will be aware of these things already, for He knows all things, but He invites us to come into his presence, to lean upon Him, to unburden our hearts and minds before him, and to get everything off our chest.

We share with God what is specifically bothering us and causing our anxiety;

My job is under real threat.

My sister is seriously ill.

I have a lump in my breast.

I have fallen out with my best friend.

I spoke out of turn and deeply upset a member of my Church

I have been told by my doctor that I have terminal cancer.

Tell it as it is to **your heavenly Father**, who loves you and who has your life and circumstances and future in His mighty, ever-caring hands. We may even want to cry and sob in the presence of our Father. Share everything, every detail. Place it all in **His mighty, loving, compassionate and caring hands**. We know God’s hands are like this because the bible reveals this, and because we have clear proof in the human hands and touch of Jesus as seen in the gospels.

It is at this point, after thanksgiving and the open and honest unburdening of heart and mind, *that God begins to pour into our hearts and minds (our whole being) the wonders of his grace.* We now find and receive grace in our time of need – grace sufficient for our need (Hebrew 4:16, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:9). As we cast our burden upon our great Father, He in turn, lifts us up. Remember the song “You lift me up”? (**1 Peter 5: 6-7**)

Fourthly, you not only begin to sense God lifting you up “on eagles wings” (Isaiah 40:29-31 & Psalm 103:5), you start to receive what Paul gloriously describes as ***the peace OF GOD, which transcends ALL UNDERSTANDING, which will GUARD your hearts and minds IN CHRIST JESUS.*** What an amazing manifestation of his grace and mercy!

It would take me some considerable time to truly unpack the riches of this spiritual truth – but let me summarise Paul’s understanding of how God responds to one of his children’s prayer requests. God gives *his very own unique divine peace to his needy child as a gift, a peace that is impossible to rationally comprehend because it is supernatural.*

The God of peace (4:9 and Romans 16:20), ministers his peace to our troubled hearts and minds. As Jesus said to his disciples before his death; *this is peace of a different order, a different kingdom – not the peace of this world.* (John 14:27). This is *my peace.* This is divine peace and presence. *My peace I give you.* This is no doubt the peace which God gave to Paul and Silas after they had been stripped, beaten and thrown into jail; the peace which enabled them to sing hymns and songs of praise to God in the darkness of a filthy prison cell at midnight (Acts 16:23 ff). This peace and restfulness are *in* God alone and *from* God alone.

This peace that comes to us as we spend time in the Father’s presence and pray with thanksgiving, ***guards*** our heart and mind which have been filled with anxiety. The word Paul uses here is a military one; God places his peace *around* the heart and mind like a Roman sentry guard might be placed around a whole city such as Philippi which was a Roman colony; or like a sentry guard who might be stationed in front of the door of an important official. The peace that God gives is put on duty to guard the heart and mind of his child. God bestows his own peace that it might shield us! (Isaiah 26:3, Psalm 121 v 5-8) And this guarding and keeping of our hearts and minds in peace will be done and sealed through none other than ***CHRIST JESUS (end of v 7).*** Christ is our peace and keeps us in peace through our union with him (Ephesians 2:13-18). We are “in Christ Jesus” – therefore we are ***in*** the Prince of Peace – united to him forever. Eternally inseparable! (Romans 8: 35-39 and 1 Peter 5:14b)

In conclusion; in this world of troubles and ongoing anxieties, ***prayer is the gift*** that God graciously provides to overcome them. An anxious soul can be healed as it spends time in the heart of God’s loving presence, breathes out thanks and praise to God, offers specifics requests to the caring heavenly Father, and then receives a guarded peace than baffles explanation – but is in reality the peace of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. May we cherish this ***gift and weapon*** of prayer (Ephesians 6:18), and may we continually discover in times of real anxiety and trial – the divine peace which transcends all human understanding. Praise be to ***our*** compassionate Father, the God of all comfort and peace (2 Corinthians 1:3). **Amen.**