

Prayer – God’s Answer for Anxiety

Prayer - Ephesians

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...for this morning is Philippians four verses six and seven. But that is not where I want us to begin. So please open your Bibles to Matthew six.

We have just prayed by means of singing that God would open our eyes and our ears. Of course, what we mean by that is our spiritual eyes and our spiritual ears that we would see truth, hear truth and listen to truth.

It is possible to hear without listening. Every mother knows that as she tells her children things that she thought they heard and they did hear it, but they weren't listening. And so we need to have our ears opened and ready to listen this morning. I believe that God has a great deal to say to us today through his Word.

So let us not waste any time. Matthew 6:24.

Jesus said:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [or money].

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe

ourselves?’ For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.¹

Anxiety is an enormous problem in the United States. The mental health industry claims that 23 million Americans suffer from anxiety disorders or what they call panic attacks. One internet site I visited calls itself an online anxiety community. The following is from their introduction to the basics about anxiety.

“Phobias are in the category of ailments known as anxiety disorders which are, themselves, the most common mental health problem. It is estimated that up to 12 percent of adult Americans, perhaps 20 million people will suffer from a phobia during their lifetime. The good news is that researchers and therapists have developed treatment programs that bring about significant improvement and enable the vast majority of individuals to regain control of their lives.”

Now unfortunately, what the mental health industry calls good news and what they call treatment programs is the prescription of almost always some type of mood altering medication to relieve the symptoms of anxiety.

As someone who struggles with the sin of worry, let me share with you some of the observations that I have made over the years. And I don’t want to sound judgmental of anyone. I know how worry works.

But too many Christians have fallen prey to the world’s thinking when it comes to treating anxiety. And a far too common scenario is this. A person has what is called a panic attack which causes frightening effects upon their body and instead of calling their pastor or a faithful friend to come and pray with them, they rush to the emergency room at the local hospital. There they are quickly diagnosed and quickly labeled as having some kind of disorder and they are almost always medicated.

Now this scenario is not make believe. I personally know two Christians who checked themselves into hospitals because of these kinds of struggles only to have their Bibles confiscated from them and kept from them and immediately medicated.

One woman I know from years and years ago told me that she pleaded for days that the nurses would bring her a Bible that she could read and meditate on the Scriptures that she had memorized, the things that she had learned over the years and they refused to allow her access to the Word of God.

They said she was strange for wanting such a thing and that she was a religious fanatic.

¹ Matthew 6:25-24.

Unfortunately, in many of these cases the medication actually works in one sense. It works in the sense that it relieves the symptoms. It calms the person down, but it does not work in the sense that it ever gets to the heart of the issue. It never gets to the cause of the problem. Instead the errors in a person's thinking and the weaknesses in their faith are masked by these peace making drugs which too often have a negative and sometimes even harmful side effect.

Now the Bible is not unrealistic. The Bible deals with reality as it is. Anxiety is real and its negative effects on the human body are real.

Proverbs 12:25 indicates that anxiety can cause mental, emotional and physical distress. It says, "Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs it down, But a good word makes it glad."²

Any of us who wrestle with worry and anxiety know the toll that it can take upon our bodies and our minds.

Dr. Robert Smith writes in *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, quote, "People weighed down with anxiety and cares are much more likely to become ill and the recover time for them is much longer."

He then goes on to quote biblical counselor Jay Adams as saying this. "The effects of worry upon the inner man are serious. Literally one can worry himself sick. The picture is of one sinking down into the depths. Perhaps this is referring to the kind of fatigue that often accompanies those who worry."

Anxiety surely does cause physical problems. But that is exactly the point. It causes physical problems. But in and of itself it normally is not a physical problem. It is normally a problem of the heart, a problem of the mind, a problem of trust, a problem of rest that leads to problems in the body. Therefore to treat what is normally a non physical problem with medication, I believe, is to confuse the issue and to work against the very things that the Lord is wanting to do in our hearts through anxiety, through worry, through difficult circumstances that seem to trigger it.

I think it is important at this point that you understand that when the Bible acknowledges the problem of anxiety and its prominence in our lives, it also provides the solution. The solution is God dependent prayer.

Don't be quick to write me off as unrealistic. Don't be quick to write me off as not understanding your situation. Do not be quick to shut your ears to what I am about to say because you think I don't understand your unique situation. I struggle with anxiety, sometimes in serious levels at serious levels.

Do you remember the children's song, *Why Worry?* I didn't learn it until I was an adult, because I didn't grow up in a Bible believing Church.

² Proverbs 12:25.

It goes... maybe some of you know it and you can sing it with me.

Why worry when you can pray?
Trust Jesus, he'll be your stay.
Don't be a doubting Thomas,
Rest fully on his promise,
Why, worry, worry, worry, worry,
When you can pray?

Wow. I know a song that you don't. I am amazed. I am amazed because many of you grew up in Bible teaching churches and you should have known that one. Well, I don't know if you should have known it. Maybe it just wasn't as popular as I thought it was.

But, you know, unfortunately the actions of too many of us looks more like why pray when you can worry? Right? I mean let's get real. That is really reality for a lot of us.

Well, Jesus identifies some causes of anxiety in the passage that I just read to you. Notice in verse 25 I want to just draw out for you three causes of anxiety before we dive into Philippians four.

I know, Suzanne, I know I made... note take difficult for you this morning, but that is your problem not mine. So you need to listen a little more closely today since you don't have blanks to fill in. In fact, yes you do. You have one big blank to fill in.

So there are three causes of anxiety from this passage that I just read to you. The first is false cares, false cares.

Notice Jesus says in 25, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear."³

Verse 31 he says, "Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?'"⁴

Why?

"For all these things the Gentiles,"⁵ that is a way of saying the worldly people, "eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."⁶

But, see, your heavenly Father knows you need all these things. In other words, false cares are problems that we dream up that do not really exist. In other words, if God has told us he will meet our needs, if he has promised to us that he will provide for our most basic needs, then worrying about them is a false care. It does not exist.

³ Matthew 6:25.

⁴ Matthew 6:31.

⁵ Matthew 6:32.

⁶ Ibid.

Now you know I am not saying just sit on your recliner and you kick up your feet and you don't work and you say, "Well, God said he would provide for all my needs." I am just going to sit here."

You know I am not saying that, because God provides through work.

But if we are being faithful as God has given us responsibilities and we have needs, then we need to trust that God will provide for those needs. To worry over them is to create a false care because God said he would provide.

Second cause of anxiety is a lack of faith.

Look at verse 30, a lack of faith.

"But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?"⁷

It is your lack of faith. And the lack of faith that Jesus confronted was our tendency to look at things only through earthly eyes and fail to rest in the promise of God.

He says, "Look at what God has done. Look at creation. Look at the flowers. Look at the trees. Look at the grass. Look at the birds." God takes care of them. Have faith.

And then, thirdly, worldly values, worldly values cause anxiety.

Verse 32.

"For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek."⁸

The unsaved people, the worldly people, they are seeking after these things.

"For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."⁹

Instead, verse 33, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these thing shall be added to you."¹⁰

In other words, get your priorities straight. Replace your worldly priorities with God centered priorities, eternal values. Get those things in line and what does Jesus say? Then all those other things in your life just fall into place.

⁷ Matthew 6:30.

⁸ Matthew 6:32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:33.

Much worry is caused by discontentment that stems from measuring our success by the material things that other people possess. Is that not true? Have you ever been guilty of discontentment in your heart after you have been at a gathering at someone's house that is twice the size of your house? And everything is new. There is not a nick to be fixed. There is no walls that even need to be painted. The cars in their garage are more expensive than your house. I mean and what happens? Your heart begins to feel like you are missing out on something.

And you might even say, "But, God, this is not fair. I am the one who loves you. I am the one who is serving you. How come they get it all?"

And that discontentment breeds worry and anxiety over stuff. That is all it is.

And Jesus confronted these wrong attitudes head on, because he knew that anxiety would drag his disciples down.

Now fasten your seatbelt, ok? I am about to say something that is incredibly unpopular and very politically incorrect even among Christians. And that is this, three words. Four words, sorry.

Worry is a sin.

Worry is a sin.

Now understand that when I say that I am indicting myself along with you because, as I have already confessed, worry is one of my habitual struggles.

But what is God's answer for anxiety? Well, our text answers that, Philippians four verses six and seven, verses that many of you have committed to memory and so this sermon will be a good development and explanation of what those verses mean. And hopefully the next time you recite them to yourself or to someone else they will mean a great deal more.

So the answer is in this text. And here God promises that his peace will take control of your heart and protect you from anxiety. There are two steps for dealing with anxiety in this... in these two verses. Two steps for dealing with anxiety.

Number one, worry about nothing. That is step one. Worry about nothing.

Verse six says, "Be anxious for nothing."¹¹

The word for "anxious" means to be anxious, to care for or to be worried. It is used in a good sense in 1 Corinthians seven about being concerned where Paul uses the word to encourage singles to consider staying single because he says unmarried people can be

¹¹ Philippians 4:6.

more free to be concerned about the things of the Lord. The word is used in a positive sense there.

It is also used in a negative sense. And, in fact, in Matthew six, the passage we looked at it is used five times in that passage always in a negative sense, having to do with worrying about food and money and clothes and houses and all that stuff.

Mark 10:41 the word is used because Martha was worried about all kinds of domestic details and as a result she ignored her guest.

In Mark 12:11 Jesus told the disciples not to be afraid. The word has to do with fear there, that they wouldn't know what to say when they were persecuted.

And Matthew 13:22 says that worry is an enemy of faith. It says, "And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word,"¹² choke. I mean, get the picture there, choke the word. It becomes unfruitful.

Worry is like these two big hands that grip themselves around our neck and they choke faith.

F B Meyer wrote, quote, "Worry chokes the life of faith. It does not help us to meet our difficulties so far from this it unsits us. For our mind is too flurried to think clearly and carefully.

So what should you worry about? Nothing.

But you say, "Paul, aren't you telling me to be an irresponsible person?"

No, I am not. Be responsible, but be responsible for what only you can be responsible for. Don't worry about what is not yours to take care of which is God's responsibility and other people's responsibility.

So "Be anxious for nothing,"¹³ Paul says.

That is step one in God's answer for anxiety. It is worry about nothing.

The second step is pray about everything. Worry about nothing. Pray about everything.

Look at verse six, the second part of the verse.

"But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."¹⁴

¹² Matthew 13:22.

¹³ Philippians 4:6.

So, Paul says, worry about nothing, pray about everything. He uses four different words here to describe what he means about... by saying pray about everything.

So let me give you four ways to pray about everything which is A, B, C and D.

First, invoke God as the one that you worship. That is found in the word prayer.

“But in everything by prayer...”¹⁵

That is invoking God, invoking the one who is able to do something, invoking the one whom you worship. So prayer is a lot to do with worship. Ok? The more you worship God the more you will pray. The more you worship your own man made idols, the less you will pray.

Psalm 27:7.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice, And be gracious to me and answer me. When Thou didst say, "Seek My face," my heart said to Thee, "Thy face, O LORD, I shall seek."¹⁶

So invoke God as the one that you worship. And this is what Jesus taught us in Matthew six verse nine when he said, “Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name.’”¹⁷

The word “hallowed” means set apart. It comes from ἅγιος (hag’-ee-os), the word for holy. It means to set apart as distinct. So invoke God as the one that you worship means to go to God and say, “Our Father who art in heaven, you are holy, you are distinct, you are my God and I worship you.” That is prayer.

It takes away the Santa Claus approach when you recognize who you are praying to.

The second way to pray about everything is cry out to him in your time of need. Not only invoke God as the one that you worship, but cry out to him in your time of need. This is found in the word “supplication.”

“But in everything by prayer and supplication.”¹⁸

Supplication is the word has to do with a need being present. In other words, supplication is provoked by the reality of a need. Ok? So God opens their eyes to a need in our lives

¹⁴ Philippians 4:6-7.

¹⁵ Philippians 4:6.

¹⁶ Psalm 27:7-8.

¹⁷ Matthew 6:9.

¹⁸ Philippians 4:6.

and we supplicate. We say, “God, this is my need. And it is not because he doesn’t know that already. It is because we need to tell him that we see what our needs are.”

He says it is an issue of submission and dependence and worship.

Psalm 17:1. “Hear a just cause, O LORD, give heed to my cry; Give ear to my prayer.”¹⁹

Psalm 27:7. “Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice.”²⁰

Psalm 28:2. “Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to Thee for help, When I lift up my hands toward Thy holy sanctuary.”²¹

Psalm 39:12. “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry.”²²

And Jesus said we are to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”²³

And Jesus is clear, isn’t he? If you need food, pray for it. If you cannot pay your bills, pray for it. Pray for God’s provision and his wisdom to make whatever changes you might need to make, decisions that you need to make. But when you recognize the need, pray. That isn’t how we normally work, is it?

When we recognize the need and there is no way to supply it, what is the normal American way of handling the situation? Charge. Right? Charge. And many times I am as guilty as you are.

Jesus is clear. If you have a need, pray for it.

Thirdly, live in the atmosphere of gratitude. Live in the atmosphere of gratitude. He says that we ought to pray with thanksgiving, with thanksgiving. I like the way Gordon Fee says it and he writes, “Thanksgiving does not mean to say thank you in advance for gifts to be received, rather it is the absolutely basic posture of the believer and the proper context for petitioning God.”

In other words, we pray to God while being thankful, living in an atmosphere of thanksgiving. I think that is what the apostle Paul meant when he told the Thessalonian believers to pray without ceasing. He didn’t say, “I want all of you to quit your jobs, sell your homes and go live in a cave and pray 24 hours a day.”

That is not what he was saying. I know that because elsewhere in the passage he strongly rebukes people who won’t work for a living. But that is not what he is saying. He is

¹⁹ Psalm 17:1.

²⁰ Psalm 27:7.

²¹ Psalm 28:2.

²² Psalm 39:12.

²³ Matthew 6:11.

saying, “Live in the atmosphere of prayer. Make thanksgiving the posture of your life, prayer the posture of your life.”

And then, fourthly, make your specific requests known.

He says, “Let your requests be made known to God.”²⁴

And now, again, now because God doesn’t know them, because we need to make them known through prayer. We are the ones who need prayer. God doesn’t need prayer. We need prayer. This word for request only occurs to other times in the New Testament. In Luke 23:24 it is used when Pilate pronounced the demand of the people to release Barabbas, demand, strong request. And the other is 1 John 5:15 where following 14 which says, “And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”²⁵

John says this. “And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.”²⁶

So let the specific requests be known. Vocalize it. Verbalize it to God. You know, God knows our needs, but there are many times he is not going to meet our needs without prayer. And it is not that he can’t, it is just that he choose that many of the things that he will do will be in response to God dependent prayer.

It is not to say that he is no longer sovereign. He is absolutely sovereign. But in his sovereignty he has ordained that some things not happen until god’s people pray.

I told you this before. I think that some of the tears that I will shed in heaven, because I know there will be tears, because he will wipe them away, some of the tears that I shed in heaven will be the things that God would have done had I asked him.

Again, I am not saying that diminishes his sovereignty. I am just saying that in his sovereignty God has ordained that we be involved in the process of what he is doing. And many times that involvement is prayer.

So what then will be the result of this kind of prayer? Look at verse seven. This is incredible.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”²⁷

In other words, the peace of God will take control of your heart and force anxiety out. And it will keep new anxious thoughts from entering in. That is what Paul is saying.

²⁴ Philippians 4:6.

²⁵ 1 John 5:14.

²⁶ 1 John 5:15.

²⁷ Philippians 4:7.

This peace, then, has three characteristics, three characteristics to this peace. First it is indescribable calm. It is an indescribable calm.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension...”²⁸

It is indescribable. It is not understandable.

Jesus said in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”²⁹

Jesus offers an indescribable calm. And it is a frequent testimony of believers who pray when anxiety strikes that almost immediately there is this indescribable peace and calm that takes over their hearts and their mind.

Let me give you a personal illustration. This happened to me this week. For about 10 days I had been fighting anxiety about Katie’s upcoming cochlear implant surgery. And the more I thought about some well trusted doctor cutting into my infant daughter’s head and playing around with his tools in there, the more I was worried. And I prayed, but I still worried and I prayed some more and I still worried. And we know it is a good decision that we have made. It is in her best interest, but still I was anxious.

And at the same time for several weeks prior I had been convicted about James chapter five and that we had not been obedient to the call that James gives to us that when we are sick we should call for the elders of the church to pray over us and I had not done that and so I asked pastor Brad if he would please put together a group of men to come to our house and to pray over Katie.

And I had two reasons for making the request. One is because I wanted to be obedient to James chapter five. The second was because I was worried. And I confessed that to the men when they came that I was anxious about this. And that was last Thursday evening. And what then I gave no thought to and I did not realize until yesterday when I was working on this message that I had not had one anxious thought creep over me about that surgery since they were there at my house Thursday night, not one. There was just a peace that passes all understanding, a calm that I cannot describe.

And that calm is guarding my heart as anxious thoughts want to come back in it saying, “No, you are not allowed here anymore. Take a hike.”

It is an indescribable calm, this peace of God.

The second characteristic of this peace is that it protects emotional and mental stability. It protects emotional and mental stability.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ John 14:27.

It says that this peace shall guard your hearts and your minds. The word “guard” is a wonderful word. It is a military word. It refers to a garrison of soldiers on duty. Paul uses it in 2 Corinthians 11:32 when he says that there was this king in Damascus that was guarding the city in order to seize me. The city was surrounded by sentries.

So what Paul is saying is that when you pray in place of anxiety, when you pray what God does is he dispatches a whole garrison of soldiers that surround your heart and guard it and protect it from anxious thoughts and worries. It keeps them from disturbing your peace.

When I thought about that I thought about Isaiah 26:3.

“Thou wilt keep in perfect peace, Because he trusts in Thee.”³⁰

God will keep us in perfect peace when our mind is focused on him.

And then the third characteristic is that it uniquely belongs to believers. This peace of God uniquely belongs to believers. Notice verse seven.

“...shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”³¹

This kind of peace cannot be experienced by the unsaved. It is found only in Christ.

Let me say it another way. If you are not at peace with God, then you cannot experience the peace of God. See, being at peace with God means that you know if your heart that your sins have justly been dealt with on the cross of Calvary and you are trusting in Christ as your crucified and risen Lord and Savior. He is the one that has made peace with God for you. He is the one who is your one and only mediator. If you do not have peace with God, you cannot experience the peace of God. It is in Christ.

So as the believer abides in Christ, meditates on the truths of Christ and lets the word of Christ richly dwell within, then what happens? God’s peace forces anxiety out of our minds and our hearts and we do not need to be consumed with worry.

To say it another way, the believer in Christ possesses all the spiritual resources necessary for overcoming anxiety. God dependent prayer is the chief answer.

Listen to the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90 verse one.

“Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.”³²

Is the Lord your dwelling place? Is he where you rest? Is he where your trust is? And are you laying yourself out before him in prayer and letting him then send his peace to

³⁰ Isaiah 26:3.

³¹ Philippians 4:7.

³² Psalm 90:1.

force out all anxiety and to put guards around your heart that have your shields and your guns raised and they say to every anxious thought that tries to get in, “You are not allowed here. Do not disturb the peace.”

It is clear from our text. This cannot be experienced apart from prayer.

Let’s pray.

Father, we confess to you that your Word has opened our eyes to the reality that worry is sin, that for us to be caught up in anxiety is to be in a place where our full trust is not in you. Lord, I thank you for this wonderful passage of Scripture that has shed light upon our need to pray. And, Father, I ask that for these days that we commit to this special emphasis on prayer that we will truly cast all of our anxieties upon you because you care for us. You want us to do that through prayer. So, Lord, as we are obedient to your Word this week and worry about nothing and pray about everything, then, Lord, that you would fulfill your promise to send the peace of God to guard our hearts, to flood our hearts with a peace that is indescribable, a calmness, a trust, that your name will be glorified in and through our lives. Thank you for this provision that comes to us through Christ. I pray that each of us would evaluate our hearts before you in what our relationship is that we might know this peace that passes all understanding through Christ we pray. Amen.