

BE ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We live in stressful times. According to a world survey which the Gallup poll organization conducted a couple of years ago, we Americans are the most stressed people in the world. (*NY Times*, 4/25/2019) **“What really stood out for the U.S. is the increase in the negative experiences,”** said Julie Ray, Gallup’s managing editor for world news. **“This was kind of a surprise to us when we saw the numbers head in this direction.”**

This study was done before the corona virus pandemic struck. Since then stress levels have increased for Americans, as well as for other people around the world. An outfit called The American Institute of Stress cites studies that show that 33% of Americans report feeling extreme stress. Seventy-seven percent of people have stress that affects their physical health, and 73% of people have stress which impacts their mental health. (Recovery Village, 5/22/2022) Another organization called The Global Organization for Stress reports that 75% of Americans experienced mild to high stress levels in the past month.

The biggest sources of stress for Americans include the pandemic and its effects, the rising crime rate, the world situation--- especially the war in Ukraine, and the economic challenges in our country--- especially inflation. Then there are the normal stressors involving work and school and family relationships.

Pediatricians report that they have seen significant increases in mental health problems in young people. There was a 50% increase in suicide-related emergency department visits last year involving teenage girls. (healthychildren.org) Some kids were cooped up at home for almost two years because of the pandemic. They have seen a million parents and grandparents and other relatives die because of this disease.

Most psychologists recognize that there are benefits to a certain level of stress. Stress helps us to grow and mature. But too much stress causes lots of problems. *Time* magazine reported, **“Stress is now known to be a major contributor, either directly or indirectly, to coronary heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidental injuries, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide--- six of the leading causes of death in the United States. Stress also plays a role in aggravating such diverse conditions as multiple sclerosis, diabetes, genital herpes and even trench mouth.”** (6/6/1983)

On recent Sundays we have been considering one man whose life would have been ranked right at the top of the stress scales. He had experienced significant health challenges. He was never able to hold down a job in one place for very long. His finances were always shaky. He traveled a lot. He had a considerable number of

enemies. People were often looking to him to solve difficult problems. He didn't appear to have much family support. And he spent a fair amount of time behind bars.

Nevertheless, this likely candidate for burnout or mental health breakdown once wrote to his friends about the joy which he was experiencing in the midst of seemingly adverse circumstances. In v. 4 of #4 of his letter to the Philippians he encouraged these Christians, saying, **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”**

In #1 this apostle who was a prisoner in Rome said that he prayed with joy for the Philippians. He rejoiced that because of his imprisonment more people were spreading the gospel. In #2 he was joyful about the opportunities that he had to make sacrifices for Christ. At the beginning of #3 he wrote, **“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.”** Now again in v. 4 in the passage we are going to consider this morning he says, **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”**

I.

In the passage before us this morning Paul talks about two barriers to joy. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE FIRST BARRIER TO JOY) In v. 5 he makes reference to THE FIRST BARRIER TO JOY. We saw earlier in our study that Paul addressed other barriers to joy. He spoke about the challenge that comes from difficult circumstances, especially persecution. After that, he talked about legalism as a barrier to joy. Then he spoke about libertinism, this behavior exhibited by some who called themselves Christians who lived pretty wild lifestyles, showing little concern for Christian morality. Now in v. 5 he says, **“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.”**

Last week we saw in vv. 2 & 3 that there was a dispute, or a personality clash, between two women in the church at Philippi. This conflict was having a negative impact on the congregation as a whole, and it was adversely impacting the joy of all of the Christians in that church. So the barrier to joy in this context is DISUNITY. (I. THE FIRST BARRIER... DISUNITY)

This disunity, probably involving the division between these two leading women, was the background for Paul's admonition back in #2 v. 3. (PHILIPPIANS 2:2) There he wrote, **“...complete my joy by being of the same mind...”** This disunity was negatively affecting Paul's joy and the joy of the Philippian church. We saw last week from v. 3 that one practical remedy for this state of affairs is reconciliation. Paul called upon his companion, perhaps named Syzygus, to help solve the difficulties between Euodia and Syteche. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 5 the apostle describes the underlying attitude which is required to achieve reconciliation. Our translation uses the term “reasonableness.” The NASV translates it as “a forbearing spirit.” The original word was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the works of other Greek writers in reference to a god or a human ruler who possesses sovereignty but who chooses to display mildness or lenience in his dealings with people.

In the New Testament the word is used of Christians who are associated with a divine king and who are called upon to show a gracious lenience toward others. That was the kind of quality which Euodia and Synteche in Philippi were lacking. Paul appealed to this reasonableness, this forbearing spirit back in #2. (PHILIPPIANS 2:3) He wrote in v. 3, **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”**

Disunity can rob a church congregation and individual Christians of joy. The needed remedy is the development of a humble, reasonable, forbearing spirit that regards the interests of others above those of ourselves. What is needed is an attitude that is patient toward the weaknesses and foibles of others. Such an attitude will be inclined to give others the benefit of the doubt. It will be reflected in a willingness to forgive. (PROJECTOR OFF)

An additional motivation for us to pursue this reasonable spirit is the assertion that the Lord is near, or at hand. Paul could be talking about the theological truth that Jesus is close to all of us who are Christians. I suspect that what was primarily in his mind was the promise of Jesus that He would return to earth soon. The prospect of that return was intended to motivate Christians to be forbearing toward one another. The Lord has been gracious toward us. He humbled Himself by becoming a human being and dying a painful death to provide us with forgiveness of sins. He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve. Since He is the one who has graciously saved us and who holds us accountable, we need to be gracious toward others.

II.

THE SECOND BARRIER TO JOY is referenced in vv. 6-9. It is ANXIETY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE SECOND BARRIER TO JOY: ANXIETY) Paul spends the remainder of our passage addressing this challenge. He begins in v. 6 by admonishing his readers: **“...do not be anxious about anything.”** This is a broad and sweeping command. “Do not be anxious about anything.”

The Christians at Philippi may well have been anxious about Paul's circumstances in Rome; about disunity in their own congregation; about persecution from government, employers, family members, and friends; and about the general trials of life. The difficulty with which we are faced is determining the difference between legitimate concern and sinful, or unhealthy, anxiety. Obviously Paul was very concerned about the various churches which he had established throughout the Roman Empire and the Christians who were part of them. He was concerned about the lostness of his fellow Jews. He was concerned about the conflict involving Euodia and Synteche at Philippi. He had to have some concern about his coming trial.

The Greek word which Paul used for “anxiety” does not help us because it was used to describe both legitimate concern and sinful anxiety. Back in #2 v. 20 (PHILIPPIANS 2:20) Paul said that he was sending Timothy to Philippi because **“I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned--- same Greek word--- for your welfare.”**

In 1 Corinthians 12 v. 25 Paul wrote (1 CORINTHIANS 12:25) that the members of the body of Christ should “**have the same care for one another.**” The same Greek word is used there. In the vast majority of the times when this word is used in the New Testament, however, it has a negative connotation. It is describing a sinful, or unhealthy, anxiety.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus spoke about this kind of inappropriate anxiety and used the same term in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew #6 He was talking about preparation for the future--- about laying up treasures on earth rather than laying up treasures in heaven. He told His followers that they should not be anxious about what they would wear or eat or drink. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 6:27) He concluded with a question: “**And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?**” A few verses later He is recorded as saying (MATTHEW 6:34): “**Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.**”

This tells us something significant about inappropriate anxiety. Such anxiety involves a concern for the future, which by itself is not wrong. For the Scriptures in other places commend those who plan wisely for the future. Jesus Himself talked about the value of planning for the future and laying up treasures in heaven. The sinful part enters in when we are concerned about future things over which we have no control. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There are two realms of responsibility in the world. One is the realm of human responsibility. The other is the realm of divine responsibility. One the one hand there are certain things for which we human beings are responsible. We are responsible to obey God, to love our neighbor, to work hard, to be honest, to plan wisely for the future, etc.

On the other hand there are certain things that are beyond the realm of our control. Ultimately these things are in the hands of our sovereign God. They include matters like how other people are going to act, what the economy is going to do, whether my company is going to lay off employees, what is going to happen to my health--- we have some control over that, but certainly not total control--- whether I am going to be killed in a car accident, what kind of person my child is going to marry, etc.

Suppose that I work for Acme Company, and I am thinking about my job security. The area of my legitimate concern before God in regard to my job is my work performance. Am I competent in what I am doing? Am I working as hard as I can. Am I on time for work? Am I responsive to my supervisor? Am I a reasonably good Christian witness? Am I contributing what I can to the success of the company?

My legitimate concern changes to unhealthy anxiety when I try to take upon myself responsibilities that fall into God’s realm: What if the economy goes sour? What if supply chain problems from China cause my company to shut down? What if my boss is

prejudiced against Christians? What if the company decides to sell out to GE and downsizes the workforce? These are matters that are not within the realm of my control.

It seems to me that sinful anxiety occurs when we take God's responsibilities upon ourselves. We fall into doing this for one or both of the following reasons: First, we deny God's love for us. We may not do this consciously. But in becoming unhealthily anxious we are in effect saying, "God, I'm not sure that you are going to take care of me in this situation. I have doubts about your love for me. I am doubtful that all things are really going to work together for good in this situation." (Romans 8:28)

If we are not doubting the love of God for us, when we are unhealthily anxious, we are doubting the power of God. "God, you may care for me. But I am not sure that you are really going to be able to handle this situation. I am afraid that this one is going to be a little beyond your capabilities. So I am going to have to worry about this one." When we become anxious and worried in an inappropriate way, in a sinful way, in the way that Paul is telling us not to be anxious, we deny the goodness and/or the sovereignty of the God whom we profess to worship.

III.

(PROJECTOR ON--- III. INGREDIENTS FOR OVERCOMING THE SECOND BARRIER TO JOY) In vv. 6-9 Paul describes HOW TO OVERCOME THE SECOND BARRIER TO JOY. He does not pose the problem without also suggesting the solution. That solution seems to have three elements.

A.

First, in vv. 6 & 7 the apostle says that overcoming anxiety requires RIGHT PRAYING (III. INGREDIENTS... A. RIGHT PRAYING) "... **in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God** " Anything, no matter how small, that might be a subject for anxiety and worry is to be brought to the Lord in prayer.

Acts #16 describes the Apostle Paul's original visit to Philippi in what we know today as Greece. At one point there was a demon possessed slave girl who was following the Christian leaders around. Paul called upon God to remove this spirit. He did. The owner of the slave girl was upset. He got the civil authorities worked up. Paul was hauled before them, beaten, and thrown in jail. But in the midst of this anxiety-filled situation Paul and Silas were praying and singing. (ACTS 16:25) Chapter 16 v. 25 says, "**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...**" Suddenly there is an earthquake and the prison doors fall open. What follows is a witnessing opportunity with the jailer and his family.

The Apostle Peter had his own experiences with difficult situations which produced anxiety. In his first epistle in #5 v. 7 (1 PETER 5:7) he wrote, "...**casting all your anxieties on him [God], because he cares for you.**"

As we turn our attention to our Heavenly Father in prayer, we focus on who He is. We should be reminded about His divine characteristics. These include His power and His love. As we voice our petition about our matter of concern, we should have in mind God's ability to meet our need, and His desire to do whatever is best. Once we have voiced our concern to the Father, we can be freed from that anxiety, or at least our anxiety should be reduced. We trust that God out of His infinite love and power will deal with our situation appropriately. If and when those anxious feelings return, we pray again. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Right praying includes thanksgiving, as Paul reminds us in v. 5. In giving thanks we remember His previous blessings and answers to prayer and working in our lives. We are prompted to remember His past demonstrations of love and power. As we remember who He is and what He has done, we should have hope and confidence for the future, and we should have faith that God will take care of those matters which fall into His realm of responsibility. Our level of anxiety will hopefully decrease.

The result of placing our worries into God's hands is the experience of the peace of God, described in v. 7. That peace is a guard for our hearts and minds. The heart in the New Testament is a broad term which refers to the center of our intellect, our will, and our morality. The mind generally has a narrower reference. It is the place where our thoughts originate. God's peace, then, is like a squad of soldiers that protects our heart and mind from the enemy. The enemy is worry. Worry attacks us with doubts and fears. Anxiety tempts us to doubt God's love and God's power. But when we give our concerns to the Lord, God gives us a peace that protects us from those attacks.

Some of you remember the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings #6. The prophet of God and his helper found themselves one time trapped in a city of Israel with the much larger army of the enemy Syrians surrounding them. Elisha's servant became very upset. He experience great anxiety. He said to Elisha, "What are we going to do? This situation looks helpless. We are done for."

Elisha had more peace and confidence. But he turned to prayer, and he asked the Lord to open his assistant's eyes. Immediately the man's eyes were able to see all kinds of angelic creatures who were surrounding and defending the city. The Lord proceeded to deliver all of the Israelites from that situation. In a situation of stress they turned to prayer, got a better sense of the power and concern of God, and experienced peace as a result. We need to follow the same approach in situations of anxiety.

B.

To overcome anxiety we need to have right praying, and we also need to have RIGHT THINKING. (III. A. B. RIGHT THINKING) Look at v. 8: "**Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**" What we think about determines what we do and say and become. It is understandable that so many parents today are concerned about

what our young people are being taught in school, what is happening on social media, and the broader impact that our culture is having on our kids.

If we think that things are tough here, consider the tragic situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. *U. S. News and World Report* owner, publisher, and editor-in-chief Mortimer Zuckerman reports, **“...from the age of 3 their radical leadership incites [Palestinian children] to murder. The hate pervades the educational system, TV broadcasting, summer camps, children’s trading cards, movies, music, even games that make martyrdom a major theme. A Palestinian psychiatrist recently reported that over half the Palestinian children between the ages of 6 and 11 dream of becoming suicide bombers. And in this perverse and tragic pursuit, they are urged on by their prime minister, Haniyeh. ‘One of the signs of victory,’ he told a rally recently, ‘is the Palestinian mother who prepares her son to be a warrior and then receives the news of his death for the sake of Allah with cries of happiness.”** (*US News*, 11/13/2006) Talk about a perverted form of joy... But such is the power of what we think about, what is the focus of our thought life.

The potential things that are objects of worry for us vary according to the individual. All of us may have concerns about national issues. All of us have personal trials that tempt us toward anxiety. Much of what we worry about never comes to pass. Much of what we worry about is minor stuff that in the eternal scheme of things probably does not have much significance. Some of what we worry about concerns things in the past about which we probably can do little. Perhaps it is only a minority of the things about which we worry that have validity. Right thinking means that we strive to leave those things to the Lord, after fulfilling whatever responsibility we have.

The primary thing which tempts me to anxiety currently is family health. As most of you know, my wife has a variety of health challenges. This week we met with a new holistic doctor who has a variety of ideas about how to help her. We actually met with him for 2 ½ hours on Wednesday. It was pretty amazing to have that kind of time with an MD. He has a variety of tests and supplements and dietary changes that he wants to implement, and dealing with all of that is almost overwhelming, and it poses a temptation toward anxiety.

To avoid anxiety we need to have right thinking. We need to set our minds on things that are excellent and praiseworthy. There are many positive thinking books and teachers who have recognized the value of this. Some of these resources may be edifying and helpful. Some of them would have us deny reality and engage in wishful or even magical thinking. Some of them fail to recognize that the most worthy subjects of thought are God and His Word.

One of the most helpful things that we can do to have right thinking and to avoid anxiety is to get into a regular habit of reading God’s Word. Some people give up on reading the Bible because it doesn’t give them the jolt of adrenalin which they hoped to receive. But the benefit that comes from reading the Bible is more like taking vitamins. People who

take vitamins do so because of the long term benefit which they expect to receive, not because they expect to get an immediate surge of energy.

C.

We can overcome anxiety by right praying, by right thinking, and, thirdly, by RIGHT ACTING. (III. A. B. C. RIGHT ACTING) In v. 9 Paul says, **“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”** When people become anxious and worried, they often become depressed. Many of us have had that experience. When we get depressed, we often stop doing the things that we should be doing.

The housework gets neglected. The family does not get our attention. We stay at home. The work at our job suffers. That makes matters worse, and we may become even more depressed. We focus on our inadequacies and shortcomings and failures and losses, and we can fall into a downward spiral.

Medical help is sometimes necessary. Medications may prove to be helpful. Psychologists also typically say that one thing which depressed and anxious people need to do is to get out and do things. Verse 9 has special reference to doing Christian activities. When a Christian is becoming overly concerned about something that is in the realm of God’s responsibility, he needs to pray, and he or she needs to put his mind on positive things. Beyond that Paul is telling the Philippian Christians that they should practice everything that they have been taught by Paul in words and by example.

Dr. David Larson was a senior government analyst and researcher for Uncle Sam for many years. One of the things which he discovered from studies that he did after he stopped working for the federal government was that people who go to church regularly-- right behavior, which also suggests the probability of right thinking and right praying--- tend to have less anxiety. He found that such people have “much lower blood pressure levels” than those who do not go to church regularly. This is also what he found: **“Our studies indicate, for example, that people with the potential for mental health problems improve or will be protected if they are religiously committed. Religion seems to reduce the potential of stress to turn into mental problems. People experiencing stress who are not religious have a much greater potential to experience mental health problems.”** (*Christianity Today*, 11/23/1992)

That is a general observation and not an absolute guarantee. There are godly Christians who by genetics, temperament, and/or difficult experiences struggle with depression and anxiety. There are soldiers who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan who are diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The condition is real, and the cure is not necessarily simple. But these Biblical principles cannot be anything but helpful in the process. (PROJECTOR OFF)

As Christians we really have no need to be anxious, in one sense. God has promised to care for us. If and when we die, we go to heaven. But there are some who do have good reason to worry. Jesus said, **“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the**

kingdom of heaven.” We may tend to think that death is the worst thing that could happen to us. For the Christian death simply means going to heaven. For the non-Christian it means an eternity spent in a place which the Bible calls a lake of fire. For those who are not born again death should be a cause of anxiety.

If that is your anxiety this morning, you can take care of it right now. You can be born again. You don't have to pay any money. You don't have to join any particular church. You don't have to walk down any aisle. You don't have to do any good works. Your only responsibility is to place your faith in Jesus as your Savior. The moment when you truly put your trust in the God-man who died for you on the cross, you will receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

Someone once said, **“If you look at yourself, you'll be depressed. If you look at your circumstances, you'll be distressed. If you look at your God, you'll be at rest.”** That is what right praying, right thinking and right acting are all about. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 26:3) The King James Version of Isaiah #26 v. 3 says, **“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed upon Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.”**

As we close now in prayer, let's look at God and be at rest. Think about the matter that is the greatest source of anxiety to you today and commit that issue to the God who loves us and has the power to deal with our situation.