

Steps to Spiritual Stability: Talk to God About Everything

Philippians 4:6-7

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*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas*

Good evening. Welcome to Sunday Evening Online. It's a joy to be with you again tonight, and what I'd like for us to do in just the few minutes we have for just an informal Bible study is to consider together the path to peace. We all want peace of heart and mind, and yet, it is so elusive in the world in which we live, and particularly in the circumstances we find ourselves in. I think we have to start by acknowledging the opposite of the peace that we want is anxiety and worry.

Worry is really a fascinating thing. I mean, worry really lives in an imaginary world. It's costly in time and energy. It's destructive of productivity in relationships, and it accomplishes absolutely nothing. As one person said, "It's like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it gets you absolutely nowhere." Edgar Howe wrote, "Some men storm imaginary Alps all their lives, and die in the foothills cursing difficulties which do not exist." The English word for *worry* comes from the German word *wuergen*, which means "to choke or to strangle." And that's really what worry does. Worry is essentially choking your mind, choking out the life and the truth. And sadly, we live in a culture that encourages worry. And we live in a global village that gives us plenty to worry about. You can check your news feed. You can look at all the news sites, and soon you're filled with plenty of reasons to worry. And that's before you add the regular concerns and pressures of this life, and now how coronavirus is affecting us in its fallout. So how in the middle of a world like the one in which we live can we avoid the onslaught of such worry and anxiety and even cultivate in the middle of it a thankful spirit? Well, Paul tells us how in Philippians chapter 4. I'd like for you to turn with me again to this wonderful chapter.

Notice, Philippians chapter 4 verse 1 begins this way: "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way, stand firm in the Lord, my beloved." Notice, Paul begins this chapter with the simple command "to stand firm." *To stand firm* means "to be stable, to remain steadfast." In ancient Greek, the word was often used of a soldier who remained at his post regardless of what happened. The Spirit's desire for you and for me is that we are spiritually stable. But how exactly does that happen? Well, notice verse 1 says, "stand firm in the Lord," and

it adds, “in this way.” You see the imperatives that follow explain what that way is, explain the path. The imperatives that follow verse 1 outline the path to spiritual stability. Specifically, as I pointed out to you in verses 2-9, Paul identifies six steps to spiritual stability. Last week, we examined just the first of them, and that is “Resolve to live in harmony with other Christians.” That’s the message of the first three verses.

Tonight, I want us to skip over several of the steps, and I want us to skip to verses 6 and 7 and the fourth step to spiritual stability. And it’s this. If you want to be spiritually stable, if you want to stay strong and steadfast in the middle of the war we find ourselves in, then you must do this: You must talk to God about everything. That’s really the message of these two verses. Look with me at verses 6 and 7 of our text:

Be anxious for nothing, 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, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is one of the Bible’s most profound statements about the role of prayer in the lives of believers. You’ll notice there are three parts to Paul’s directive here. First of all, there is the prohibition, then there is the prescription, and finally there is the promise. So, let’s look at each of those.

First of all, notice the prohibition. It’s very clear. Beginning in verse 6, “Be anxious for nothing.” “Be anxious for nothing.” The Greek word that’s translated *anxious* can refer to positive concerns. Concerns about things you should be concerned about: sin, for example, or the needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ. But this Greek word is often used, as it is here, not of positive concerns but rather of sinful concerns or of worry or anxiety. Those English words really capture the heart of this word as it’s used negatively: worry or anxiety. Here’s a question for you. How are we tempted in this way? What are the things that we are most likely to worry about? I was interested several years ago to come across a survey that was done where people answered that very question. And according to that survey, and it’s just one snapshot in time of one group of people, but I think it shows you something of how people worry: 28 percent of the people surveyed worried about money and finances. 17 percent worried about their job or their career. 14 percent worried about their marriage and issues in their marriage. 12 percent worried about their

relationships. 9 percent about their personal appearance or weight. 8 percent worried about family and children and those sorts of issues. 4 percent worried about their health. Today, of course, we could add the virus, the economy, the coming election, and on and on it goes. There are plenty of things for us to worry about. And sadly, worry isn't a sin that we really worry about, that we take too seriously. But notice, for Paul, this is an absolute prohibition. He says, "Be anxious" (or worry) "for nothing," (or about nothing). In other words, there are no exceptions. Every time we're anxious about anything, we are sinning against God. Why is that? Well, when we worry, or when we're anxious about our circumstances in our lives, we're in essence saying something like this, "God, I know that You have said that nothing happens outside of Your control and that You'll use everything for good, but I don't really believe that." Or, if I believe that "I'm just not completely confident You're going to be able to pull it off." Now, I know what you're thinking. If you struggle with worry, then you're thinking listen it's fine for Paul to say that, but in the real world this simply can't be done. I've tried, and I just can't stop worrying. Well, maybe you're using all the wrong ways to stop worrying.

That same survey I referred to a moment ago, asked the same set of people the ways they tried to cope with their worrying, and their answers were interesting: 62 percent of them said they distracted themselves with other activities. 55 percent said they listen to music. 53 percent said they slept. 52 percent said they discussed it with a friend. 46 percent, they watched television—they immersed themselves in entertainment. 40 percent said they ate. 40 percent tried to talk themselves into a calmer state of mind. (Now, if you're doing the math and these percentages don't add up to 100 percent, that's because they could select multiple choices.) 39 percent said I just try to ignore it. 33 percent said they tried to sort of down play it with physical exercise. 27 percent said they fought with people in their lives. There's a strategy. 26 percent said they took some form of drugs. 22 percent said they went shopping—they bought themselves a present. 20 percent said they use alcohol. Those and, frankly, many other means of dealing with worry are ineffective and are not going to help you address this issue in your life because Scripture tells us specifically how to stop worrying. So, Paul follows up the prohibition in verse 6 with the prescription.

Notice what he says in verse 6: "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." In everything—that is in every detail and event of life.

Specifically, here he means everything that tempts you to anxiety, that causes you worry, everything that causes you to be anxious. In everything. Next, Paul uses two synonyms for prayer there in verse 6. The word *prayer* is a general word that simply means “petition” usually. The word *supplication* is also a word for “petition” but it stresses that this request is borne out of urgency, out of pressing need. So, he says when you find yourself in that place, when you find yourself anxious, then this is what you need to do. Here’s our responsibility: Let it be known to God. Now, you understand that doesn’t mean God doesn’t know. Jesus said in Matthew 6:8, “Your Father already knows what you need, before you ask Him.” So, this expression rather is kind of a colloquial one. Let God know what you need is kind of a way of saying just tell God, just let God know, just talk to God. You see, the cure for anxiety is simple: Talk to God. What are we to make known to God? Notice, he says, “your requests.” “Let your requests be made known to God.” You see, God isn’t hard to be entreated. I love the way Proverbs 15:8 puts it, “The prayer of the righteous, or of the upright, is His delight.” Did you know God delights in your prayer to Him? 1 Peter 5:7 says, “Cast all your anxiety on Him.” The picture is roll it on Him, cast it on Him, because He cares for you. I really appreciate the way D. A. Carson, as he’s dealing with some of the New Testament passages, puts this. He says this:

When was the last time you prayed explicitly and at length over the things that worry you, trouble you, plague you? Did you take them out and recount them to God, one by one, laying your burdens on Him? (He goes on to say.) Time, and time alone, and quiet before God, that is what we need.”

Our lives are so rushed that we begrudge a three-minute quiet time, and then we wonder where God is. You see, prayer, Paul wants us to know here, is the believer’s cure for worry and anxiety. In fact, let me put it bluntly. There’s no such thing as a chronic worrier with an exemplary prayer life. My father-in-law used to say, “If you can worry without ceasing, you can pray without ceasing.” In fact, he used to say, “Write out all the things you’re worried about. Just put *Worry List* at the top, and write out everything you’ve worried about and are worrying about. And then when you’re done with that list, go back to the top of that list and cross out *Worry List* and write *Prayer List*. That’s really what Paul’s telling us here.

Now, I know what you may be tempted to think. You may be tempted to think, Tom, that's simplistic. Listen, I've tried that, and it doesn't work. Well, it's interesting. Paul adds a brief prepositional phrase in this verse. And I'm convinced these two words are absolutely crucial. Notice what he says. He says, "But in everything by prayer and supplication **with thanksgiving** let your requests be made known to God." With thanksgiving. You see the emphasis of this verse is not on praying but praying with thanksgiving. Now why is that important? Because if you thank God before you know how He plans to answer your requests, what does it show? It shows you have confidence in God, confidence in His goodness, confidence in His wisdom, confidence in His sovereignty, and you are willing to submit to His way of answering that request. John MacArthur writes this. He says,

People become worried, anxious, and fearful because they do not trust. They fear that God is not wise enough, strong enough, or good enough to prevent disaster. Thankful prayer brings release from fear and worry because it affirms God's sovereign control over every circumstance, and that His purpose is the believer's good.

So, there's the prescription. The third part of Paul's directive to pray here (we've seen the prohibition and the prescription), the third part in verse 7 is the promise. Look at what he writes in verse 7, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Notice this is a promise not just for those who get what they ask, but rather it's a promise for all those who ask. And promise (notice how he puts it) is "the peace of God." You get the peace of God. Now, that could mean one of two things. It could mean you get an inner sense of peace that comes from God to you, that He's the source of. Another option is, I think, more likely here, and that is you get the peace which God Himself experiences. In other words, when you approach your problems like we're being admonished here—your worries, your anxieties—and you, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, the same peace and calm that characterizes God, the serenity in which He lives becomes yours. You and I are invited to share God's peace. And why do I say I think it's God's peace and not simply a peace that He gives? Because it's specifically described as that which surpasses all human comprehension. So, Paul goes on to say the very same peace that characterizes God Himself will "guard your hearts and your minds." The Greek word that is translated *guard* here is used in 2 Corinthians 11 of soldiers who were guarding the city of Damascus. So, Paul is saying, if you will talk to God about

the things that trouble you, and if you will thank Him in advance for whatever it is He decides to do, the peace of God will be like a garrison of soldiers guarding your heart and mind. Now why is that important? Because that's the source of the problem. Think about this with me for a moment. The source of your worry and anxiety is not your circumstances. Let me say that again. The source of your worry and anxiety is not your circumstances. It never comes from circumstances. How do I know that? Because two people can face exactly the same circumstance, and one of them can be anxious and the other not be anxious. The problem is, guess where? Not with our outer circumstances but with our minds, how we think, and with our hearts. That's where the problem is. Now these two words are similar, but slightly different in nuance. The heart is the center of the entire inner person. It's the center of you, who you are. It includes everything—your emotions and your thoughts and all of that. The mind is more specific. It's specifically where the thoughts are conceived. And so, I think the point here is God's peace will set a guard over your entire inner life—over your thinking, over your affections, over your emotions. This is the message of other texts as well. I mean, think about Psalm 55 verse 22. This is, I think, where Peter is borrowing in his wonderful text in 1 Peter 5. "Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken." Isaiah 26:3: "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You." You see the reason we pray with thanksgiving is to reflect and to grow in our real trust in God—to bring it to Him, to say I trust You, I'm asking You to act, but I'm giving You thanks because, however You choose to act, I believe it'll be good and right and wise. And that brings peace. "The steadfast of mind," Isaiah writes, "You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You." You see how amazing this promise here in Philippians 4 really is? If you will talk honestly with God about your worries, your anxieties—make a list. I found myself doing that this week as I was preparing and going back over this text which has been such an encouragement, such a comfort to me through the years. But the refresher reminded me, I needed to go back and think, "What are the issues? What are the issues right now in my life that I'm tempted to be anxious about, that I'm tempted to worry about, in any way, because I'm supposed to be anxious about nothing?" Make a list, and then bring those to God. "Let your requests be made known to God." Lay them out before Him. Ask Him to act. If you will talk honestly with God about your worries, and you'll do so with a thankful heart, then what Paul is promising here is that God will do something supernatural. He will enable you to enjoy the very

same kind of peace that He Himself enjoys regardless of what happens to you and regardless of how He responds to your request.

So, in light of what we have learned from this passage, let me give you my paraphrase of this wonderful passage, just different words capturing the meaning that we pulled out from our work through this passage. Here's how I would spell it out:

Stop worrying about anything, instead, in every detail and circumstance of life, by prayers and petitions, let God know what you want Him to do. But even as you tell Him what your desires are, tell Him you trust Him, and thank Him for answering in the way that's best for you, even if it's not exactly what you asked for.

If you'll do that, the peace that God Himself enjoys, the calm that characterizes the very person of God, will stand guard over your entire being. That my friends, is the path to peace.

Let's pray together. Our Father, forgive us for thinking that we can carry the burdens of our lives alone. Forgive us for thinking that we can sustain ourselves under the pressures and the troubles of this life. Forgive us for imagining that our anxiety, our worry, will somehow accomplish something, other than something destructive. Father, help us to follow this simple, straightforward command: To remind ourselves to think about to consider what it is in our lives that causes us to be anxious, that causes us to worry. Father, help us then to take each one of those things and to bring them before You, to make our requests, our supplications known to You, but to do so with thanksgiving, acknowledging that You know best, and giving You thanks for however you choose to act because we trust You. We trust Your character. We trust Your goodness. We trust Your wisdom. We trust Your sovereignty. And Father, thank You that You promise that if we would take the worries and anxieties of our lives and respond to them like this, You promise that You will guard our hearts and our minds with the very same peace that You Yourself enjoy. Lord, I pray that You help us to see this very simple and yet profound step to spiritual stability: To simply talk to You about everything that troubles us, leaving it with You, trusting You, thanking You, and waiting for You to act. Lord, give us obedient hearts and help us to trust and obey. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.