



19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

8<sup>th</sup> October 2023

## Finding freedom from Anxiety & Worry

### Main Verse:

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

### Intro |

If ever there has been a verse that has been filling my heart and mind over the past few weeks it has been Paul's words,

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

None of you need me to tell you, that worry and anxiety become almost second nature, when something doesn't go according to our plans, or when the lives of our loved ones turn in a direction that is fearful or troubling. Even though the feelings of worry and anxiety are so familiar to us all, I'd like us to take some time to look at what these words mean.

The Greek word Paul uses when he writes, 'do not be anxious' is *merimnate*. It is where we get our English word 'marinate'. And it's really easy to see the connection. When we are anxious, it is like we are allowing our thoughts to 'marinate in' or 'dwell on' a certain area of concern or problem.

Last week I used the illustration of our past hurts being like a maze. This week I'm going to use a fairly vivid illustration that arises from the definition of the word 'worry'. The word 'worry' comes from the Old English word *wrygan* which means to strangle or to seize by the throat. 'Anxiety' is a derivative of it. And, I'm sure you'll agree, worry can feel like you're trapped in a locked room, without adequate air, and the only window reveals an evil and fearful view of the future. You feel like you're suffocating and claustrophobic – with no way to escape.

When we find ourselves trapped by worrying thoughts, we'll become so concerned about the problem we're not free to think of anything else. We become consumed with feelings of uncertainty and fear.

I'm not the only one who has lost themselves in a cycle of imaginary conversations with people, rehearsing what I'd say, what they're likely to say, or visualising horrible accidents of my loved ones, when I haven't heard from them for a few hours. And for those of us who are prone to worry, we know that while worry takes an enormous amount of energy, it really doesn't get us anywhere, but only leaves us exhausted, and our stomachs tied up in knots.

Now, if I can just interject here.

Imagine you're in a world of worry, you're not sleeping, your distressed. You hear on the radio that familiar regé song by Bobby McFerrin: "la la la la ... Don't worry. Be Happy." Does it really help? Why not? Well, if I can be really blunt, it is because people in the world who don't know God, nor are familiar with who Jesus is, cannot genuinely say 'Don't worry. Be happy.' Because people in the world have everything to be worried about, and really should be anxious about their future. Think about it: Without God's influence and control over our lives, a person only has themselves, their friends, and the possibility of chance good fortune to rely on. So, no. The "Don't worry. Be happy" suggestion of the world, really doesn't have much substance.

However, when we delve into the Bible, we begin to understand why Paul (and not only Paul) takes worry so seriously, by urging us 'not to be anxious about anything.'

**Point 1 | Worry is the opposite of trusting in God. Actually, worry is faith in the devil's ability to kill, steal and destroy God's will from eventuating in our lives or the lives of our loved ones.**

When we begin to feel that we're oppressed by worrying thoughts, or a wave of anxiety washes over us we, as believers in God, need to recognise our freedom to make a decision. We must decide: Will we stay in the cycle of worry – continuing to believe in the devil's ability to disrupt, kill, steal, destroy or generally create havoc in our lives or the lives of our loved ones? Or will we make a decision to step into faith and trust in God?

Now, I'm aware that the world actually has a suggestion on what we are to do when we are worried and concerned about our present or future. The world tells us that we can 'let go', 'by releasing our negative thoughts', by 'breathing them out, and breathing in positive thoughts.' I'm sure you've all heard these suggestions.

However, this suggestion is foolishness! How can a person let go of their worries or concerns, or release their fears of an evil future, when there is no secure hope nor confidence that anything will change nor work out for the better? You can only really release and let go of your worries and concerns when you are prepared to entrust them to someone who can do something about them!

And that's why Paul tells us, "*... in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God*" (v6)

Prayer is so important. For when you pray, your attention turns to face God and in the process, you're reminded of the awesome power of God to change the situation. When we pray, our attention moves from the bigness of the problem, onto God's ability to sovereignly intervene and bring His divine will and way in and through the situation. We may not know how, nor may we know what exactly He'll do ... but through prayer we can have confidence that God is working His transforming power in our lives and the lives of our loved ones – bringing His perfect will to pass. However, we are told to pray a certain way – not just rehashing our worries to Him. We're told to pray *with thanksgiving*.

Worry and thanksgiving cannot coexist – they are like oil and water. Worry, will in fact, drive out your ability to give thanks, but on the other hand, giving thanks will drive out your worry.

**Point 2 | The opportunity to worry will remain while we live in this world. It will always be a decision: We have two choices, we can choose to worry, or we can choose to pray in faith.**

As long as we live in this world, we will have a constant opportunity to worry. For me, these past few weeks have given me plenty of opportunities to worry – and to stay worried. But I've also had the opportunity to decide to step into faith in God's ability to intervene in each situation and do His healing and transformative work.

When you begin to feel like the life is being sucked out of you, and a wave of anxiety is washing over you ... please recognise you have a choice. We can choose to stay in the claustrophobic worry room, and become limp with exhaustion, trapped in our thoughts, looking through the only window at the possible evils that could eventuate. Or, we can listen to the Spirit of God remind us of God's promise, (one that is relevant to our situation), and use God's promise as a key to unlock the door. Then we'll be free to take a step out of the claustrophobic worry room, into the fresh air, fragrant with hope and faith in God's power to transform our situation.

When we take a step into the fresh air of God's kingdom of faith, we then will experience the protection of God's peace. Look at God's promise: *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 4:7) So, when you give your burdens to the Lord, He'll replace our worries with something much greater: His peace that passes all human understanding.

**Application | Let us stay in the freedom faith brings, believing that God is in control of our situation, and is actively working to bring about His divine purposes in our lives.**

So, are you gripped by worries about your children or your grandchildren? Turn your eyes on God, pray God's promise concerning them, and receive God's peace. Are you anxious about test result from the doctor, or pains in your body that just won't go away? Turn your eyes on God, pray God's promise concerning them, and receive God's peace.

Remember, when you find yourself stuck in a claustrophobic room of worry and anxiety, the Spirit of God offers you the keys of God's powerful promises. It's up to you whether you take the key, unlock the door, and step through into God's freedom of faith and hope in Him.

*A prayer to end: Lord, we do not pray for a lighter load, but we do ask for stronger shoulders. Deliver us from worry that strangles us, from care that consumes us, and from anxiety that overwhelms us.*

*Help us to cast our cares on you, and then leave them there. Give us joyful hearts because we know you will carry our burdens so we don't have to.*

**Amen.**

## *A Devotional Journey through Philippians – Week 5*

If you really want to experience the joyful living that Jesus obtained for us, why not download a copy of the Philippians devotional! For the next six weeks we'll journey through Paul's letter and learn how to experience joyful living in a depressingly dying world.

