

## GRAPPLING WITH ANXIETY

Guess which passage in the bible is the most highlighted in Kindle? Philippians 4:6-7

Why? Because it is talking about anxiety. Anxiety is when we wonder what if. It is worry about what might happen. Fear and anxiety are similar. But fear is what we experience when faced with an actual threat.

Anxiety is that sense of unease as we think about the future. That sense of trepidation. Anxiety keeps us awake at night. Anxiety sucks the joy and laughter out of life. Anxiety causes us our blood pressure to rise, our heads to get sore, and our stomachs to churn.

Anxiety is on the rise. Anxiety is epidemic among our teenagers. Christians are anxious and then feel even more anxious when they read verses like the one above.

We live in a world that has changed more in the last 30 years than the previous 300. We face a world that now operates faster than ever before thanks to technology. We face a world where climate change is creating extreme weather. We face the challenge of getting older. And on top of that we now have Covid. We are not sure if life will ever go back to normal. Any illusion that we are in control of life has been well and truly shattered.

Anxiety focuses on the problems and not solutions; it plays down the good, and magnifies the bad. It means we would rather stay in bed than get up.

I read a book by Max Lucado recently that suggested there are 4 instructions in these verses to help us discover peace. He breaks it down like this into a helpful little anagram.

<b>C</b> elebrate God's goodness	<i>in the Lord always</i>
<b>A</b> sk God for help	<i>present your requests to God</i>
<b>L</b> ease your concerns with him	<i>with thanksgiving</i>
<b>M</b> editate on good things.	<i>think about such things</i>

Spelling CALM. It is not a sin to be anxious. But we are not to live in a continual state of anxiety. There are keys here that can help us. It does require work on our part and it is not easy. For some people God's healing will involve counselling and medication. That's OK. Don't feel less than if that is the journey for you. But God does not want us to live in continual anxiety. He wants us to be free.

**Celebrate** *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again Rejoice.*

Paul wrote this in prison, having spent a lifetime being persecuted and beaten. He had a death sentence over him. He had churches that he had founded struggling with false apostles and teachers who wanted to take them over. It is not as if Paul lived some stress free life.

When we read this we think well, this is just not possible to be happy all the time. But this is not a feeling. This is a decision to focus on the character of God. What we believe about God will always precede our behaviour. Two aspects of God's character can help us.

God is sovereign. Much of our anxiety comes from the sense of life being out of control. When we feel in control of things, we feel calmer. Covid has stuffed this up. But our sense of control is actually an illusion. The more we strive to feel in control, the more stressed we become because we know there is so much we have no control over.

Rejoice in God's sovereignty. Prov 21:30. Dan 4:35 Heb 1:3 Verse after verse affirms God's sovereignty. There is no detail of the universe that is outside his sphere of influence.

God is a God of grace. We often beat ourselves up. We think about what we should have done, feel guilty for what we have done and feel inadequate. We continually dwell on our failures. These feelings of failure and guilt lead to anxiety. I am not good enough. I am not good enough for me, for my boss, for God. If we believe that everything rests on our performance, then we are going to feel anxiety.

Yet the core foundation of the gospel is the grace of God. God's approval is not dependant on our performance. My failures do not diminish God's love. Failure does not need to define us. Grace frees us from guilt and condemnation.

*Rejoice always.* That seems an insult in the middle of a divorce, or as we sit with a dying loved one, or as we face bankruptcy. And yet Paul says in all things work for good for those who love him, who have been called to his purposes. The story of Joseph in the OT is a classic example. Betrayed by his brothers, Sold into slavery, falsely accused of sexual assault, forgotten in prison, and yet Joseph says to his brothers. What you meant for evil, God used for good. There is no circumstance in your life, no matter how dark, that God is not at work. This is not to minimize the pain but only Christians can say in the face of these things "Yes but God...."

*Ask: Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

I have always found this a bit confusing having the word gentleness in there. The word really means someone who is level headed or calm. Opposite would be someone who panics at the sight of trouble. When you understand this it makes more sense. We are to be calm because God is sovereign and gracious. But he is also near. Continually we read in the OT God saying to people. Do not be afraid. I am with you. In the NT God sent Jesus whose names mean Emmanuel God with us. Jesus now sits at the right hand of



God interceding for us and he has given us the Holy Spirit to live in us.

We need to cultivate an awareness that God is with us. We are not alone. And because of that, we are instructed to bring our requests to God. About everything. Ask God specifically about every issue you face. When we are specific we also bring the issue into perspective. Ask God especially for what you need.

#### **Leaving things with God. *With thanksgiving.***

This little phrase Paul inserts into this passage. We are to bring our request and prayers with thanksgiving.

Anxiety says; If only this happens, if only I had that. If only this had not happened. Anxiety looks at what we do not have. Anxiety says we would be happy if we had something.

Gratitude looks at what we already have. You have already given me this. You have already blessed me. You have already answered that prayer. Gratitude looks at what God has already done.

Death can't rob us of joy. Jesus is greater than death. Failure can't rob us of joy. Jesus is greater than our worst failure. Betrayal can't rob us of joy. Jesus will never leave us. Sickness can rob us of joy. Jesus has said we have a future with no sickness. Disappointment can't rob us of joy. Our plans may fail but God's will not. What we have in Christ is greater than anything we don't have in this life. WE have a God who is crazy about us, we the Spirit of God within us.

Anxiety cannot live in a heart of gratitude. Paul said a few verses later. I have learnt the secret of contentment whatever the circumstances, if I have lots or nothing. At that point he had nothing – he was in prison. For I can do everything with the help of Christ.

Giving thanks is a way of leaving things with God because thanksgiving acknowledges all we have is from God. He is the source of every good thing.

M meditate on stuff that is good.

The challenge we have is not the challenge that you are anxious about. The challenge is what you think about the challenge you face. When we are anxious we think about all the maybe's and what if's. We think the worst case scenario. We wallow in self-pity and beat ourselves up.

Paul says actually we have to actively control what we think about. There are lots of things we have no control over. But we can control what we think about. The Devil wants to destroy us and he does it often from the inside out, by dropping all kinds of thoughts into our mind. He is the master of lies: No one will ever love me everyone is against me. Things will never get better. I'll never be happy.

We can look at this list and feel condemned. If we can manage to remember it at all. But the point is. What we focus on is important. Fill your thoughts with Scripture, with

worship songs. With anything that is good. One of my favorite if I am anxious is. If God cares for the sparrows, how much more will he care for you.

Focus on Christ. He is the ultimate expression of this list. John said. Remain in me and I will remain in you. That is take Jesus hand. If a Dad is out with his young son in a crowded place, he will say. Hang on to my hand. He doesn't give him detailed instructions of where to go. He doesn't say watch out for this or that. He just says. Hang on to me. As long as you hang on to me you will be OK. Our ultimate goal in life is not a great to do list. It is to hang on to Christ.

The promise is a peace beyond understanding. It is not something that we can manufacture. It is not dependent on us. It is a supernatural peace, not something we create.

Jesus experienced anxiety as he faced the cross. He understands. But there is a peace beyond ourselves we can experience as we choose to focus on him, as we choose to bring every detail of our lives to him and as we choose to focus on the good and not the chaos around us.

I don't want to leave you condemned if you are feeling anxious at the moment. I have experienced times of peace that seem well beyond myself. But I also continue to grapple with anxiety. I trust this little anagram CALM will help you. Celebrate God's goodness. Ask him specifically for what you need in your present situation. Leave the issues with him by giving thanks for what you already have, not what you don't have. And choose to think on only those thoughts that are positive and good.

My prayer is that each of us will experience the reality of God's peace more and more.

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#### **REFLECTION + DISCUSSION**

What things typically cause you anxiety? What are the signs you are anxious? What might others notice?

"Your anxiety decreases the more your understanding of your Father increases." Discuss this. What stops you believing that God is a good God who cares about every detail of our lives?

How could you be more specific in your prayers, rather than just being general?

What "if only's" have distracted you recently? What are some of "already have's" that you can give God thanks for?

Where does your mind tend to go in times of anxiety? How might you focus your thoughts on the good?

What does God's peace look and feel like? Have you experienced it? What changes to you need to make as a result of this message?



**CENTRAL BAPTIST**

LOVE GOD : LOVE OTHERS