

Dealing with Anxiety

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[0 : 0 0] four. We are drawing to a close, although Paul says quite a few big things in these verses that we can't rush too far ahead. I think I said to you it'll probably be the end of January. It might even creep into the first week in February, as I've planned this course. But we're coming to a good section. We're coming to good verses, well-known verses. So, I only want to read to you a few verses. I want to read just verse 4, Philippians 4, verse 4, and just taking us up to verse 7.

Last week, we looked at Euode and Syntyche. Paul encourages them to work their difficulties, differences out, and these gospel workers that had fallen away, but asking that this person will help come back. So, following on from that, he says in verse 4, 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 minds in Christ Jesus. We'll end our reading there. Such two, three massive verses that we're going to look at this evening. They're the most difficult to preach on. There's so much in these verses, but we'll try and unpick these verses and see how the Lord will encourage us in His Word. But let's just seek God's face as we stand. And be pleased to Philippians chapter 4, Philippians chapter 4, the verses we read earlier, as we study them together, as we seek to make sense and try and unpack these things.

Let's just ask for the Lord's help once again. Our loving Father, we come to you now with your Word open before us. Lord, we live in a fallen world, Lord, and the things of this world often affect us.

Lord, if we plotted our own life before you, Lord, it would go up and down, Lord. It would be peaks, and there would be troughs. There would be times of great exploits of faith, perhaps, and times, Lord, of fear and anxiety and doubting. Lord, such is the way in which we often live our lives.

But Father, your desire for us is that we are anxious about nothing. Lord, we remind ourselves of that great truth that you are the God who neither worries nor frets, but you are the God who is able to give us that peace that passes understanding. Help us, Father, to make some sense of this this evening. So, Father, lead us and guide us as we pray in our study together. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[2 : 5 6] We are coming to a very well-known portion in this letter in Philippians. Here are some images here. Perhaps this is you. Perhaps you have key rings with these verses on them. They're very familiar verses. Some folk maybe have these as their favorite verses that we're looking at. Be anxious for nothing.

You might have a wee fridge magnet with that on it. You might have a mug. You might have a necklace, t-shirt, or whatever. We have our favorite verses in the Bible, and I know a few folk where, maybe not so much here, I don't know your favorite verses here, where this has been favorite verses for some people, and they really enjoy this. About rejoicing always, a challenge and a comfort.

Rejoice always, and rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice. Verses that deal with anxiety. Do not be anxious about anything. And verses about peace, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and mind. It's an ideal picture of life, isn't it?

To go through life at peace, with no anxiety, rejoicing always. I wonder if you can say, that's me, pastor. That's me. You've summed me up. I'm always like that, always rejoicing, always at peace, anxious about nothing. The simple truth is, you and I know that's not always a lot.

It's not always our case. And despite the t-shirts, despite the mugs, despite the necklaces, we still worry. We don't always rejoice. And that is the truth of the matter, isn't it? We struggle in this area. And because we're anxious, and because we don't know the peace of God, we do not rejoice. And that is what we're looking at. How can we live like this? How can this be the reality of a life?

[4 : 49] It almost seems bonkers. It's almost as if Paul knows this, when he says, rejoice in the Lord always. And in case you missed it, I'll say again, rejoice in the Lord always. And it's quite something.

Now, what causes us stress? What causes us anxiety? Now, I'm sure if I asked you, what causes you stress? What causes—what are the causes of stress and anxiety? You would probably run off quite a few things. Life situations, relationships, your health, your boss, your workplace, your family, finances, or whatever, that these things cause you stress. But the simple truth is, none of those things cause you stress. There's really nothing in life that should cause us stress. The problem is not the thing itself. It is how we react to it. That is what causes the stress. So, in and of those things themselves, those are not the causes of stress. The causes of stress are when those things come—health, money, family, whatever it is—it is how we react to it that causes the stress. Here is an image coming up. Here is a piece of metal being put under strain and under stress. These two things, pull or squeeze or whatever, they usually pull and they try and snap this, and you get various graphs.

Now, if one wasn't held, the whole thing would just come away. There would be no stress on the metal. And that's a bit like you and I. A problem comes, and we're at the other end of it, and it's how we react to that. If we don't react well, we get under strain and under stress. Here is a graph of stress against strain. Stress is the force that's applied to a piece of metal or to you, a force that puts you under stress. Strain is the deformity that happens to that metal. So, here, I like this. I was bringing back some of my mechanics. I like the elastic limit. That's when you stretch something, and if you don't apply any more stress to it, it will go back to its shape.

But if you take it past that, it will be distorted in some ways. Here are other pieces of metal here. You'll look at aluminum and steel, and steel is stronger than aluminum, so it can cope with more stress. But the more strain, it eventually goes like this, and it snaps. That is the same curve for you and I. Here's another image. Hopefully, you'll be able to see this. But this is effort against performance. So, it's like everything else. The more effort you put into something, the more you're likely to achieve. You can perform something. You're no likely, the cup of coffee is not going to make itself. You need to put some effort in, but your performance goes up, and you produce something.

So, there's a certain amount of effort. So, there's a certain amount of stress in our life that's good. Not all stress is bad. So, you put the effort in, and your performance goes up. And really, you want to be at the top of the curve. That's when you're functioning maximum, the right amount of effort for the right amount of output. We're all different in this. And as you apply more effort, you don't want the curve to come back down, where from healthy stress, you become distressed.

[8 : 29] And your performance drops. You're putting in more effort, but you're not producing the same amount of output. And then, eventually, like the metal, you snap. You can have a breakdown.

You're putting all this effort in, and then your performance. And it would be interesting if the Lord shows each one of our graphs. Because some of us might not put a lot of effort in, and more performance goes away up. Some of us need to put a lot of effort in, and we don't achieve quite as much.

Some of us, if you just ask them the time, you can have a breakdown. It's too stressful. I can't cope with this. And really, you want to function on the first part of the curve. And your comfort zone is in the first half. So, it's good to know that we're all different. We all have a different shape of curve. But if we realize that, and you can try and work your way back. Stress is a cumulative thing.

It all just heaps and tops. So, if you can deal with the big areas, that's not so bad. There's no point in, usually, if you snap, you burn the toast, and you burst into tears. You're not upset because you burnt the toast. It's the last straw, really, and a culmination of things. So, you want to try and work your way back down the curve. So, this is just practical stuff. Here's another wee graph that somebody showed me a while ago. I found quite helpful. It was a Christian counselor, actually, showed the pastoral team at Charlotte Chapel this. Imagine there's urgency from not very urgent to something that's urgent. And from the bottom, anybody can do something, or only you can do it.

So, if something is very urgent, and only you can do it, you do it. That goes in the top right-hand corner. You do it. If only you can do it, and it needs to be done, you put whatever task in there.

[10 : 20] If it's urgent, and anybody can do it, you, what you might think that is, you delegate it. You delegate it. Give that to somebody else. You don't have to do it. Give it to somebody else.

But, if only you can do it, but it's not that important, you plan it. You basically think, well, I'll leave it just now, and I'll plan that, so I'll do it some other time. And if something's not urgent, and anybody can do it, you basically leave it. You just leave it. But some people cannot differentiate between these things. And that gives you stress. If you don't put the right thing, I'm fairly well organized, so I can usually multitask, but I can reprioritize throughout my day.

If something's urgent, and I have to do it, but if something else comes, I can move that to somewhere else, and I can put something in. So, these are just practical things. How do we cope? Here are, that's just some practical things, but how do we really cope with stress and anxiety in our life?

Not just practically. Here is the world's suggestions. Enjoy life. Breathe. Take it easy. Meditate. Relax. Go outside. We smiley face. Can you imagine if you're stressed, and somebody gives you a stick-up note with a smiley face on it? I question what good that's going to do. Maybe it'll do good for you. Maybe you just know somebody is showing an interest, and they're trying to cheer you up. Maybe I'm sure that that has a tonic. But this is as good as basically the world will get for you.

Take it easy. Just relax. Have a coffee. Do something you enjoy. There's some wisdom in that. But today, I want to look at what the Bible says about these things. How does Paul? Paul knows we're anxious. This implies this, that we are tempted to be anxious, to be stressed, to reach the point of breaking, whatever that is. He knows this. He knows that the temptation is not to rejoice. That's why he has to say it twice, because it just seems too crazy. Rejoice always in the Lord. So, he gives us—that's why these are gold dust, these verses. They really are, and I'll only scratch the surface of them. So, let's look at three things. First of all, when stress and anxiety come to us, come to God. It is as simple as that. Come to God. Verse 6 says this, Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by praying petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. It's as simple as that. Present your requests to God. We have a relationship with our loving Heavenly Father. And it's great that every morning, Lucille and I pray every morning before she goes out and I go into my study, and we pray. And we often begin by saying,

[13 : 15] Lord, we thank you for looking after us as we slept. We thank you that we walk into another day with you. We have a loving Heavenly Father. We can bring requests to Him at any time. We can talk to Him.

Present your requests. Well, we'll look at this in a few weeks' time. Supplication. We're still to look at that one. We've looked at adoration, confession of sin, thanksgiving. The Lord says right now, bring your requests. He knows the needs that we have. We have needs. Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. Because He cares. You don't have to care. He cares for you.

And as Christians, we don't always do that, do we? We don't always talk to the Lord. We think our quiet time is just on our knees at a certain time for half an hour or whatever it is during the day, morning or night or whenever. And the thing is, we think we can cope. We think we can cope on our own.

We can sort it out ourselves. And that can often be pride. Sometimes we think, does God really care? Is He really interested in this one wee particular thing that I am going through? Perhaps it's too small to trouble God with. But Paul tells us in verse 6, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation. It's all encompassing. There's not a thing that we shouldn't be presenting before God. We're told to bring everything to Him. I wonder if you're in the habit of just chatting to God. I love that aspect of my relationship with the Lord, just talking to Him.

Lord, I'm anxious about this or what about that or just talk to Him. Not, Heavenly Father, we are coming before you today type of please and thank you type prayers. Just chat to Him. Talk to Him.

[15 : 08] Talk to Him throughout the day. Not just a set time for half an hour. I had my quiet time. I'm on to something. And I think that's where the problem lies. Because we don't, we can't diffuse the tension as it comes, working our way back down the curve. We just plod on and we think half an hour was enough to discharge when it really isn't. In other words, here are some, here are just some ways of putting things. If you want to be anxious about nothing, you must be prayerful about everything. If you want to be anxious about nothing, be prayerful about everything. If you're not praying about everything, you will be anxious about something. If you're not praying about everything, you'll be anxious about something. Talk to the Lord about everything before the nothings in your life become somethings.

Does that make sense? Yeah, it's just talk to the Lord. Just present your request. It's as simple as that. Linked to that is petitions by prayer and petitions, verse 4. What's the difference?

One of the commentators suggested that prayer, when Paul thinks of prayer, he's often talking about our prayer for others. And petitions is when we often petition the Lord for ourselves. I think you can probably swap either of those two things around. But it's basically, don't just tell him.

Ask him. Don't just say, Lord, I'm finding it hard. Ask him for something. Lord, I'd rather not feel like this. Lord, I have this particular thing. Don't just bring the problem before, but ask him how you might see the soul. Say, Lord, it would be great if this—we prayed for Lynn, which reminds me, I had to remind you, as I'm thinking of Lynn, that she's done so well. And because she has done so well, she's not going into the high dependency unit. She's going straight on to the ward. That is great answers to prayer. That is—many of us have been praying and thanking the Lord and much to thank the Lord for. And I'm sure that was her request. That's Alan's request. Lord, take her through surgery.

Bring her out. Bring her back home. May she be well. That is your request. Bring your request. Tell the Lord not only that you have an operation, but, Lord, can I have this? This is my request. You leave that with the Lord. Alongside this prayer and petition, Paul mentions, with thanksgiving. Now, I won't labor this. We mentioned this in great detail this morning. But it's good and proper that as children that we see God is—he's not just Santa Claus. Well, Lord, can I get this? Can I get that?

[17 : 52] Can I—we thank the Lord always. We are in the habit of bringing our requests but saying, Lord, can you give me this? I thank you for answers to prayer last week. I thank you for the way in which you provide. It gives us confidence when we come to him in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Carol Barth, a Swiss theologian, says this, to begin by praising God for the fact that in this situation, as it is, he is Almighty God. Such a beginning is the end of anxiety. It really is.

You begin by praising God, and suddenly you find that you're not quite as anxious because the God that you are praising, the God that you're thanking, is bigger than your problem. You're reminding yourself that he's done it in the past, and he can do it again. So, recall. Recall who God is. Recall what he has done. Thank him, as we were saying this morning, for the thorn, and not just for your roses. Lord, this is the thorn. I'm anxious about this. Thank him. Remind him that—remind yourself that he is still sovereign. He's allowed this to come into your life. His ways are not your ways. His ways are higher. So, thank the Lord for the past. Thank him for the present. Anticipate the future. Thank him, Lord. Thank him for the way in which he will lead. 1 Thessalonians 5, 18. You know the verse well.

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you. I remember sharing that with young folk. You want to know God's—Christians always want to know God's will. Guidance is a great topic for Christians. How do you know when the Lord's guiding? How do I know what God's will is? There is God's will. Give thanks in every situation. So, it's not always just to do how the Lord leads and guides and how he blesses. We are to thank God. God's will is that we thank him. We thank him in all circumstances. So, come to God with your petitions, with your requests. Tell him. Ask him. Thank him for who he is. Secondly, the peace of God. As a result of these things, often we know the peace of God.

I think this hit me afresh as I was studying this again this week. It's not just that you will have peace. I think that was prominent in my mind. You pray and you'll have peace. You will have the peace of God. It was that that just came out. It's not just any peace. It's God's own peace. It really is quite something. It's not something when Paul says it's God's own peace that transcends all understanding, that it's just not something you can't figure out. It's a peace that you have that you can't explain. It makes no sense to others. You try and explain. You're going in for the surgery.

[20 : 51] Why are you so at peace? Why are you not stressed? Why are you not anxious? When you have the peace of God, that's what it does for you. It's really quite something. One of the commentators says this, Paul seems here to be referring to the tranquility of God's own eternal being, the peace that God has in himself, a calm serenity that characterizes God's very nature, and that the grateful, trusting Christians are welcome to share. God doesn't get anxious. He doesn't get troubled. He doesn't fret.

He doesn't get depressed. He's not afraid. And we have the Holy Spirit within us, so it's possible for us to live in the same way, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, regardless of circumstances.

There was a wee illustration I remember many years ago that's always struck me. The wee illustration was this. It was about a ship at sea and the waves. It was a storm. The waves were battering. The ship was tossed to and fro, and the passengers were holding on for grim life. They had no idea what was happening. They feared that they might be destroyed, and it's usually in those cases, you're waiting on a tannoy announcement telling you, this is what's happening. Don't worry. Everything's mean. And the fact that you're not told anything in the midst of this storm makes it ten times worse.

And somebody said, I'll go. I'll go to the bridge and see what happens. So he fights his way up, and he's grabbing the ropes, and the waves are coming, threatening to knock him over, and he goes into the bridge. And he stays there for a minute or two, and then comes back out. And he says to the people when he goes back, it's okay. Everything is okay. Do you know what comes next? I've seen the captain's face. That's what he says. He doesn't get an explanation. He's not told. The captain's steering the ship. He's not stressed. He's just all in a day's work. He is fine. And that was all I needed to see.

He saw the captain's face. He's calm. Our God's face is calm. It's always calm. He's not got big frown lines. He doesn't worry. He's not stressed. He's not depressed or anxious. And that is what God promises us. If only we will talk to him, petition him, trust him, leave our petitions before him, reminding ourselves he's a God who's good to be unkind, too good, too wise to make mistakes.

[23 : 35] He doesn't make mistakes. He's a good God. He's never out to harm us. So whatever waves are coming our way, however painful the thorn is, only when we reaffirm these things in ourself do we know the peace of God. And we are told that this is in Christ. He will guard our hearts and minds in Christ.

And this has to do with, in many ways, our walk with the Lord. We can quench the Holy Spirit. But as we—you remember Psalm 91, where it talks about, he who dwells in the shadow of the Almighty will rest in the—as he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the mighty. I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust. It's as you dwell in his presence. Don't be surprised if you don't know the peace of God, if you're following that book I mentioned a while ago, the five-minute quiet time. Don't be surprised if your peace only lasts for five minutes as well. But as you dwell in his presence, as you remain there, as you just enjoy recalling the Lord, that's where the peace will come. It's almost as if you're like these electric cars, you're plugging yourself into him. And as you're there, you're recharging, as you read, as you pray, as you talk, as you converse with him. It's at some such times we come aware of the filling of the Holy Spirit and not quenching him, reading his word, this calm assurance.

I mentioned a Scottish minister this morning, another one I'm going to quote from just now, a hymn writer, Horatius Boner, a well-known godly man as well, a Scottish preacher. He says this, I stand upon the mount of God with sunlight in my soul. I see the storms and veils beneath.

I hear the thunders roll, but I am calm with thee, my God, beneath these glorious skies, and to the height on which I stand, no storms or clouds can rise. Oh, this is life. Oh, this is joy.

My God, to find thee so, thy face to see, thy voice to hear, and all thy love to know. Good sound words.

[26 : 00] God's dwelling in the presence of God, walking with him, seeing his face, feeling his nearness. And although Paul doesn't mention this here, that is very much related to obedience as well. We can quench the Spirit. We need to be careful of this. And Paul will remind us of this two verses later in Philippians 4, when he says this, whatever you have learned and received and heard from me and seen in me. Put that into practice, and the peace of God will be with you. Don't expect to know the peace of God. If you're praying all the time, but living in disobedience, the Lord would want you to be anxious about that. He would say, John, you're coming for peace. You really need to be anxious.

You're not walking with me as you should. Put these things into practice. Then the peace of God will be yours. We'll be looking at that in a few weeks' time. But as a result of this peace, he says, Paul says, we will have safe hearts. He will guard our hearts. The word guard is a military term, to garrison, to protect. We'll have new desires. Our hearts will be single for the Lord. The peace of God changes our hearts. We will also have safe minds. We'll guard our minds. Most of our problems are always to do with our minds. We have a thinking disorder. When we think wrongly about God, about our situation, we panic. Oh, my situation's too big. God is too small. We're not thinking as we should.

When we leave things with the Lord, we put our minds at ease. When we trust him, you know this yourself, when your situation doesn't change one iota, but you've had a good quiet time, a good time before the Lord. You've found your heart becoming warmed. You've recalled the blessings in the past, and God just draws close to you, and quite often, not always, but he gives you that calm assurance, and your mind is changed. Your heart is changed. You have this joy, this peace that you never knew before. And when you do this, you become more gentle. Look at verse 5. It seems a strange thing to say in the middle of all this, let your gentleness be evident to all. He's mentioned somebody that's rejoicing, but somebody then who's gentle. When somebody's anxious, they are not known for their gentleness. It's not the case, is it? They are a bull in a china shop. They can be angry. They can be aggressive. They're on their way down the curve. They're not producing as they should. It doesn't take much to snap. They snap at people. They get angry. When you're anxious and stressed, you're not gentle. But when you have this peace, when you know what it means to rejoice in the Lord, you are gentle. In a moment or two, we're going to sing, Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways. Here are some of the words that we'll sing. Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our striving cease. Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace. Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm. Let sense be dumb. Let flesh retire. Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire. O still, small voice of calm. We need this. We need this.

And not only that, we have help. Look at verse 5. Let your gentleness be evident to all the Lord is near. Commentators disagree on what this means, the Lord is near. Some commentators see this as a warning. The Lord's coming is near. I don't think that's the case. I think it just means encouragement. The Lord is near. The Lord is near to us. He's there to help us. So, then, dealing with anxiety, come to God in prayer. Speak to Him. Tell Him. Talk to Him about everything. Bring your petitions, your requests, your supplications before Him. Then the peace of God, when you leave it with Him, He will guard your hearts and minds. You will have a new disposition, one of gentleness.

Then, if you know these two, and you do these two, you're more likely to know the joy of the Lord. So, number three, the joy of God. Rejoice in the Lord always. The whole letter of Philippians is one of joy. It's not like Galatians. Galatians is heavy duty. It's just scolding. Corinthians, some of the passages in Corinthians that are very scolding. Philippians is a joyful letter. Paul is full of joy all the way through us. He's known, perhaps, as the apostle of joy. John was known as the apostle of love. Paul is known for his joy. You remember when Paul and Silas are in prison? They are singing hymns, praising God while they're in jail. And remember, when he's writing Philippians here, he's not in a chalet in France with a glass of chardonnay and just living the dream with the sun in his back and a croissant. He's in prison, and he's saying, rejoice in the Lord always. Again,

[31 : 32] I say rejoice. He knows the reality of this. He's no doubt bringing all his requests in prison. And even there, he's able to know the joy. He's not given to self-pity. You don't detect that in any of his letters. But he says, rejoice in the Lord. We had reasons for this this morning, didn't we?

All those verses about in Christ Jesus, adoption, choosing, fellowship, everything. All the good things that we have are in the Lord. That is why he doesn't just say rejoice always. Again, I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoice in the Lord. We have much to rejoice in him.

Psalms 40. He lifted me out of a slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.

Peter says, though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. That should be us as Christians. There is so much to thank the Lord for. Temporal blessings, spiritual blessings.

It doesn't need to be singing loud, rejoicing. It might be just that inner peace. You may be here, and your face might look like a bulldog chewing a wasp, but in your heart, there's this joy.

[33 : 05] There's this peace. You think, well, I might look miserable, but I'm content. I know the joy of the Lord. It's very, very possible. Romans 15. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, and may you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We should never—circumstances should never dictate our joy and our anxieties. That's why James says, consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Right at the very start of his letter. What a way to open a letter. Consider it pure joy. How does that work? Well, these are the verses that help us know something of this. Rejoice always. He says it twice. Almost scenes. Unbelievable. We need to move from the t-shirts and the mugs and the key rings to know the reality of these verses. Only as we put them into practice, maybe even this week, you've got much to thank the Lord for. There was much for you to think on this morning. There's much for us to put into practice, even this evening, even tomorrow morning, as you have determined to have that quality time with the Lord. Walk with him. Let Enoch walk with him through life. Talk to him. He walks with me. He talks with me along life's narrow way. That is the reality of the Christian. Then we'll know something of the peace of the Lord, and with that peace we will know the joy of the Lord, and with that joy we will know what it means to rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say it, rejoice. Let's stand, shall we? And we'll sing.