

Peace, even when it seems impossible

Philippians 4:6-7

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On March 1st, there were 82 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Spain. Just ten days later, there were 2,174 confirmed cases. The Spanish Government is doing all they can, working round the clock to fight this virus and all the problems that come with it. All the schools in Madrid are closed. Most unnecessary activities have been canceled. We have decided to cancel Sunday church for everyone's good to wait until this situation calms down. Grocery stores are stressful and filled with long lines. In the days to come, we will be with our families nonstop, and for some of us, that is very hard to do. On top of that, some of us are sick with a cold or flu that is not the coronavirus, and we are nervous. The media does not help us to maintain calm as we are told about all the deaths and problems. What shall we do in a situation like this? Does God expect us not to be anxious in these times? How do we maintain peace in the face of such a difficult situation? God wants us to be people who have peace to share. But how can we do that? In light of this current situation, I want to share with you three biblical pieces of advice on how you can have peace even when it seems impossible. These are found in the letter of Paul to the Philippians 4:6-7. Let's read the verses:

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I believe we can find three very practical steps on how to have peace and hope when it seems impossible:

1. Recognize that worry is the problem.
2. Follow God's prescription for worry which is prayer.
3. Pray, and God will guard your hearts and minds with supernatural peace.

1. Recognize that worry is the problem

The Huffington Post reported in 2015: *"People were asked to track their worries over time, and the discovery that they made is that 85 percent of what subjects worried about never happened, and*

with the 15 percent that did happen, 79 percent of subjects discovered either they could handle the difficulty better than expected, or the difficulty taught them a lesson worth learning. This means that 97 percent of what you worry over is not much more than a fearful mind punishing you with exaggerations and misperceptions.”

The reason God says not to worry is that our anxiety is a sign we are doing a job that does not belong to us.

I heard a story about an executive in a corporate company that was a believer. He worked 75 hours a week and often just did not have time for his family. He was a good dad and a good husband, but he was very busy and very anxious. One day, he had a heart attack, and the Doctor came to his hospital room and began to speak to him. He told the man that if he kept up the pace that he was living at, he was going to die within a year. The man had not listened much to his doctors in the past, but with the threat of death, he made a new commitment. At the guidance of a counselor, he went home and wrote a letter to God. The letter was very simple, and it said this: *“Dear God, I resign from being in control of the universe. Yours truly, (signed the man’s name).”*

The Bible commands us, **“Do not be anxious about anything.”** I want you to think about that. You do not have the power to control the circumstances you are going through. Who has the power to control these crazy circumstances? The answer is God alone can be God. You are a terrible god. What we do that causes us so much stress and anxiety is that we want to be in control. We want God’s job. When there is an act of human disobedience to God, at the core of that decision is a determination to do God’s job for him. We want control. God wants our trust. We want to determine the outcome. God wants us to believe that he is who he says he is. We want to hide our weakness and inability. God wants us to come to him in our weakness. It is time to resign from having control. You cannot live in control and live without anxiety or worry.

There is a story of a woman who lived in constant fear that a thief would enter her house in the middle of the night and steal from her. Her husband installed an alarm. They purchased a dog. But nothing seemed to help her anxiety about a thief breaking in and stealing. For ten years, she had trouble sleeping at night. Then one night, the alarm went off, and the dog began to bark. The woman’s husband ran downstairs in time to see a thief run out his front door carrying a few things in his hand. They discovered he did not steal anything of value. After the police came, the woman looked over at her husband and said: “I am so glad that the thief did not steal anything of value.” The husband looked her in the face and replied: “That thief cost us an alarm, a dog, and he stole ten years of your sleep. He cost us far more than what he stole.”

The reason God says do not be anxious about anything is that fear, worry, and anxiety are thieves. They steal your rest. They steal your peace. They steal your trust. They steal your attention. They steal your money. Worry is a thief. God is calling on you not to be anxious during this time. I believe that anxiety, worry, and fear are the worst testimony we can give to our unbelieving neighbors. If they look at us and they see our panic and unhealthy anxiety, they will not want to have anything to do with Jesus. Some of you have been praying for months and even years to be able to testify to your lost neighbors and family members. To be able to do that, you need to demonstrate the supernatural peace of God to them at this time. I am not telling you to do something unwise. Some of you are high-risk medical patients. You do not need to be out. Some of you are elderly and already sick. Be wise and make wise decisions. For many of us, we need to be told the other side.

Why are you so worried and faithless? Don't you know that God brought you to Spain, planted you here for just this time? Be a person of faith and be a person of wisdom. So, we understand very clearly that worry is the problem. But what are we to do with our worries? That question leads us to the next point.

2. Follow God's prescription for worry which is prayer

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

The key to dealing with our anxiety is not to ignore it, but to turn it into a prayer. Could you imagine if every concern or worry that came across your mind became a prayer? It is not unreasonable to believe that we can live without anxiety. It is true that some of us suffer from medical and biological problems that affect our anxiety. But God's answer it's still your answer. You cannot expect to take medication or see a psychiatrist and never pray. There are many passages in the Bible on prayer. Some of those passages speak to how God will change the circumstances because of our prayers. But this passage does not speak about changing the circumstances on the outside. It speaks about God's work of transforming our heart and mind, no matter what the circumstances are.

Let's look at the four words used to describe prayer. The first word is **Prayer**. We know that the apostle Paul is not using the word in a general sense. Prayer, in the general sense, just means talking to God. When the apostle Paul says, *"by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving"*, we know that he probably has in mind something specific with the term prayer. You wouldn't say by prayer and supplication if prayer and supplication were the exact same thing. Warren Wiersbe, the famous Pastor and Bible commentary author, says this about the word prayer:

"The word prayer (...) carries the idea of adoration, devotion, and worship. Whenever we find ourselves worrying, our first action ought to be to get alone with God and worship Him. Adoration is what is needed. We must see the greatness and majesty of God! We must realize that He is big enough to solve our problems."

That is very helpful to me. If you think about it, it is impossible to worship God and to worry about something at the same time. May I suggest something for your family? Take time, especially if you're feeling worried and stressed, to sing some of your favorite worship songs.

My mother-in-law, as some of you know, has a ministry in the largest urban slum in Central America. She has started many schools for children of the slums and shared the gospel with many of the poorest people in her country. In 2007, we entered into one of the most dangerous sections of the slum with a mission team. We wanted to go and see if there was interest in a school in this very dangerous area. I will never forget what happened. There were young guys between 15 and 25 years old standing on the wall. My mom-in-law said to be careful, because they were all armed with handguns. Of all the times to be worried or anxious, this seemed like the right time. But there was a woman with us who taught me a great lesson that day. Without notice, she just began to sing a very intimate and deep worship song to the Lord as we were walking towards the men. It was amazing the power that the worship song had to drive out all fear. It was as if we were beginning to see God himself march in front of us. Today there is a school in that area.

Here in Spain, we are coming upon another dangerous time, and I encourage you to worship God. Worship him in the face of the hardest circumstances, and you will experience the peace of God.

The second word for prayer that appears in the text is supplication. **Supplication** has the idea of sharing your needs from your heart. Supplication is not a weak, hypocritical mumbling of prayers to God. Supplication is crying out to God. It is genuine and even passionate. If you are going to experience this peace of God, you are going to have to get past half-hearted mumbling prayers. It is better to say three sentences to God from a genuine heart than 100 without connecting to him.

The third word that appears in the text is thanksgiving. **Thanksgiving** moves into a different dimension of prayer. As you think through all of the circumstances you are facing, try to see the good that is happening even though the time is difficult. There's always something good that is happening. I think it is interesting that this passage is so filled with a heart of joy and thankfulness to God. Verse 4 tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. Verse 8 speaks of thinking on things that are pure and noble and honorable and lovely. If you are going to overcome your worry and anxiety in this time, you are going need to concentrate on giving thanks, to focus on the good in the bad, and to rejoice in the Lord always.

Can I suggest to you that you do two things? Make a list of all of the things you are thankful for as a family or person. You might be surprised by how many things you have to be thankful for. Second, do not watch the news all day? Pick a time in the day that you can see the news and pray after watching or reading it. The media makes money off of advertising. Sometimes the more dramatic the news, the more viewers and the more ratings. I do not believe that everyone is attempting to deceive us, but I do believe it is necessary to have caution.

The last word on prayer is **Request**. It just means the thing you are asking for. The important thing to notice about "request" is not the word request, but the way the apostle says it: **"Let your requests be made known to God."** There's another part of the Bible that shares a similar idea. It is 1 Peter 5:6-7:

"⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

Listen carefully to the word of God. The way that you humble yourself under the mighty hand of God is by casting your anxieties on him. A person who does not make the requests known to God and does not cast their anxieties on God is a person who does not humble themselves before God. Some of you who are watching this might struggle to find the desire to pray. Many times, I feel I do not need to pray. I believe that somehow, I can do this. That is obviously not true. Can I encourage you? Not only would it be good for you to cast your personal anxieties on God, but you also need to listen to the worries of others and sit down with them to pray about these things. Listen to your friends or your spouse when they mention their worries. Stop and pray with them. Model what it is to cast your cares, worries, and anxieties on God. Remember, he cares for you. It is his job to care for all things, and it is your job to pray about all things. So what will happen if we pray?

3. Pray, and God will guard your hearts and minds with supernatural peace

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

There are at least two kinds of peace. There is a peace that comes from understanding. This kind of peace we might see when our child is sick and we carry them to the Doctor, only to discover that it is not a big problem. We might have been worried before, but now that we understand that the sickness is not bad, we have peace. This peace comes from understanding.

It is not the kind of peace that the apostle Paul is describing here in verse seven. The Apostle Paul says, ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.”*** This kind of peace is supernatural. Imagine that same little girl is sick again, you take her to the Doctor, and they do not know what is causing the sickness. There is no understanding, so there can be no peace that comes from understanding. But there is another way. God is promising us that when we pray with faith, there is a supernatural peace that has no need of understanding. It is a peace that comes from trusting and believing in God.

Paul, who writes this letter, was in prison in Rome. He was guarded day and night. He understands what it is to guard something. And he uses the same word to describe the effects of the supernatural peace of God. God’s peace that passes understanding is a spiritual bodyguard. What are the two things God’s peace will guard? Paul says it ***“will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** The heart would probably have been more of the place where our emotions and feelings are. Some of you today are desperately in need that your emotions would be guarded from worry and anxiety in the days to come. But there are others of you today that are in need that your mind, the area where you are thinking, would be guarded in the days to come. This supernatural peace of God is capable of being enough for our emotions and our thoughts. If you were a person who understands and lives in prayer, I do not need to convince you of the power of prayer. But for some of you today, I just want to pray through 3 of the greatest worries you might be having in Spain right now.

A prayer for people worried about all of the school and family changes

Oh God, there’s so many people here who are worried about all of the changes that are coming because of this virus. Some people hearing this now have children at home that they didn’t have before. Help them to learn how to parent and how to care for their children at this difficult time. Some are trying to make difficult decisions about whether to go or stay here. Would you please give them supernatural guidance? Some people are worried about whether they will be able to graduate or not. Would you please give them peace, that no matter what happens you will take care of them? Oh God, we just cry out to you. We do not know how to deal with these things. We are small and powerless. They are too big and too complicated for us. I pray, Father, that you would receive these worries and concerns. We pass them to you, and we ask you to deal with them. God, by faith, we believe that you were going to solve every issue that comes up or give us the wisdom to make the right decisions. Give us guidance on what to do. Help us to submit to you. Help us to remember your word and hide it in our heart. God, I thank you that you are working all things together for our good and your glory. I thank you that you are purifying our faith. I thank you that you were using these

worries to call us to you. I thank you that you were giving us an opportunity to witness to our neighbors who have never been open to prayer or to the word of God.

A prayer for people worried about provision during this time

Oh God, some people who are hearing this have already lost their job. Others could very well lose their job in a few days, or at least have to go home for a while. I pray for them all, God, that you would grant supernatural peace. As it says in Isaiah 26:3, *“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”* Help us to keep our minds on you. Do not let us be discouraged by what our eyes see or our ears hear. Help us to remember that you feed the birds and clothe the lilies. Help us to be like the birds who are not worried about anything. I pray for those who are afraid that they will run out of money or food. Help them to depend on you each and every day to provide for them. I pray that during this time, they would see the greatest miracles they have ever seen in their lives. I pray that this difficult time would be the time that we see your power and presence. I pray that as the people go crazy at the supermarkets, that we would have absolutely everything we need to be healthy and to have food, medicine and to be able to pay our bills. God, your timing is not our timing, but I do pray that you would come. I pray that you would forgive those who have been deaf to you and the things you were calling them to do. May you use this time and trial to bring them to yourself.

A prayer for people worried about health and the healthcare system

Oh God, we are watching all of the difficulty that the Spanish Government is having in caring for the sick. Some of us are very weak. We are in desperate need of your protection and your help at this time. Some of us would definitely have difficulty surviving if we caught the virus, but I pray we would not see with our eyes or hear with our ears. Help us to believe and trust that you have every hair on our head counted and that you have the exact day we are to depart this world. I pray that we would be at peace with your sovereign hand and your sovereign decisions. Oh God, we thank you that you have done the biggest and the greatest things on the cross to bring us to your house forever. No one can take away the future, or the peace, or the hope that we have in you. Because you live, we also shall live. Because you rose from the dead, we shall also rise from the dead. Because you defeated sickness and death on the cross, no matter whether now or in eternity we shall also defeat sickness and death.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

1. What do you think of the greatest worries, fears, or anxieties you were having at this time?
2. In what ways do you struggle to be in control of your life and your circumstances?
3. Can you give an example of how worrying has robbed a person of peace, rest, or hope?
4. Paul was in prison, awaiting a trial that would eventually lead to his execution. How did he say that we should deal with the worries and anxieties? How can we have the peace that passes understanding?

5. How can worship or adoration combat worry, fear, or anxiety? What worshiper adoration songs do you really enjoy? If you do not know, go find a song.
6. What do you have to be thankful for at this time? Could you focus just a few minutes giving thanks to God?
7. Would you take a few minutes to think about the things that are worrying you the most, and spend some time praying or even writing out a prayer about that?