

Title: Antidote for Anxiety

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [1 Peter 5:7](#)

Text: [Philippians 4:4-7](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



It is a low-grade fear, there, but sometimes, not so much. But it never completely disappears. You feel on edge. You feel a sense of dread, a foreboding that something is coming but you aren't certain when. You just know that it is a matter of time because trouble is on the way. You don't sleep well, laugh as much, and you are tired

and depressed. When others seem joyful, energetic, happy, you think, "Haven't you heard the news, don't you understand what's going on? Are you clueless?"

It has a name; anxiety and it is a growing pandemic. In the last year, it has increased among Americans by 62% and we were already the most stressed-out, anxious nation in the world, spending over 2 billion on anxiety-reducing drugs. Over 300 billion in medical bills and lost productivity annually are due to stress-related illness. Then comes 2020 and anxiety explodes. A survey just three weeks ago found that

- 80% are anxious about keeping themselves and their families safe,
- 76% are worried about race relationships,
- 75% are apprehensive about catching Covid-19,
- 73% are fearful about gun violence, and
- 72% are anxious about the presidential election.¹

That was last month and now, the pandemic is surging, the election conflict is unresolved, and the holidays are upon us. It caused one member to say, "I don't know how I can be up for Thanksgiving." I had a quick answer. "You have to be up for Thanksgiving. It's the only way to survive because thanksgiving is the antidote for anxiety."

We see this throughout scripture but nowhere is it more powerfully presented than in Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi where he writes, "Do not be anxious about anything." He didn't say, "Be less anxious, or be anxious only when your team is playing. or be anxious only during extreme

stress. He said, "Do not be anxious about anything." Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero.

Wow. I don't think I know anyone right now who isn't anxious. When it comes to Paul's challenge, we are all failing. Paul would remind us that anxiety is not a sin. It's an emotion, an unavoidable reality of living life, particularly modern life. How we choose to manage the inevitability of anxiety is key. Fortunately, Paul gives us a recipe on how to cook up the antidote, three key suggestions found in five Hall of Fame verses from Philippians. It's made it into the hall of fame because it is highlighted more than any other verse, more than John 3:16 or Psalm 23 in the Kindle edition of the Bible. It is number one because people need Paul's counsel.

Paul's antidote for anxiety begins by calling upon the Lord. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Philippians 4:4) "Rejoice *in the Lord.*" This verse is a call, not to a feeling, but to a decision, deeply rooted in the confidence that God exists, that God is in control, and that God is good. The apostle held firm to this belief. It helped him manage whatever anxiety he was experiencing in his current circumstances.²

Paul writes this letter in 57 AD while in prison at Caesarea, held for two years while awaiting extradition to Rome and a hearing before Nero. In the custody of the Praetorian Guard, and witnessing to Caesar's household, he was making inroads among them and the Roman soldiers. But ahead of him was a difficult journey by ship to Rome and a contentious meeting with Nero. He was worn out, 60 years old, stooped, and scarred. He received thirty-nine lashes on five different occasions. He was beaten with rods on three. He was once left for dead. He has been imprisoned, deserted by friends and coworkers, and has endured shipwrecks, storms, and starvation. He is probably half-blind, squinting just to read. He must have known that his trial before Nero would not go well because Nero liked to inflame his supporters by killing believers. His future is as gloomy as his jail cell. He has every reason to be anxious. But he can rejoice in the Lord. He can give thanks that God. Amidst these conflicts, Paul calls upon God as the first step to manage the stress and anxiety he was dealing with.³

I stood on our driveway this week and had a conversation with a deeply faithful painter. He attends another church across town. Over the years, I've chatted with him about his faith. He said, "Randy, I'm struggling with the issue of sovereignty." Of course, he is. Of course, we are. Anxiety is often the consequence of perceived chaos. If we sense we are victims of unseen, turbulent, random forces, we are troubled. Anxiety always increases as perceived control diminishes. The reality is, we are never really in control.

We just think we are and we need to relinquish that idea. You can't run the world, but you can trust God to. ⁴

This is the message behind Paul's admonition to "rejoice in the Lord." Peace is within reach, not for lack of problems, but because of the presence of a sovereign Lord. Rather than rehearse the chaos of the world, the many challenges that we are facing in 2020, ruminating over and over again about what's going on, rejoice in the Lord as Paul did. Trust that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. (Romans 8:28a) Trust and "Rejoice *in the Lord*." When you do, you discover that the Lord is near. It's the first ingredient of the antidote to anxiety.

The second is to ask for help. "...by prayer and petition...present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Let God know what makes you anxious, what makes you afraid. Be specific. Why? A specific prayer is honest and of all things, prayer needs to be honest. Too often, we fall into the trap of making prayer largely worship and adoration of God, something prayer is and must be. Prayer is first and foremost humbly bowing before God. As supplicants, we make no demands. We do not have the right to demand things from God. But we can and should offer humble requests. A request is exactly that—a specific petition. We tell God exactly what we want. We pray the particulars of our problems or need. It is honest and it makes it real.

Jesus modeled this type of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was anxious about what was before him. Afraid, he bowed on bended knee and presented a specific request to God. "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." He didn't place the petition before God as a demand. But rather, it was a request, quickly adding, "yet not my will, but yours be done." Petition and requests before God reflect an honest acknowledgment of what you are anxious about. They are not demands for action.

Naming our anxieties is an important step in managing our fears and concerns. Too often, the low-grade fear of anxiety is ill-defined and vague. It grows unchecked without borders. It can and will become larger than life. Paul senses and knows what therapists and counselors today offer. If we can distill the challenge into a phrase, we bring it down to size. It becomes more manageable and not as threatening. Specific petitions and requests allow us to name and claim what is making us feel anxious.

And then, we give it to God; or, as Peter says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Casting is an intentional act to relocate an object, like the crowd that took clothes off their backs and spread them in the path of Christ. Let this "throwing" be your first response to bad news. As you sense anxiety welling up inside you, cast it in the

direction of Christ. Do so specifically and immediately. Take it, as if you could physically hold it and cast it, give it over. Then as the anxiety surfaces during the day, you can remind yourself that you have already given the challenge to God earlier. You can be grateful, not fretful. Prayer counters anxiety because it changes your focus from concern about the threat to comfort and support: fewer anxious thoughts, more prayer-filled thoughts, done with thanksgiving. The final ingredient of Paul's vaccine, the antidote for anxiety. Thanksgiving may well be the most essential ingredient. There is a reason. Thanksgiving recognizes the benefits and blessings of what you have rather than focusing on the threats and anxiety that you perceive. It is mindful awareness of the benefits of life. It is the greatest of virtues.

Meister Eckhart, a well-known mystic, believed that thanking God was the most important prayer. Prophets and monks learned that gratitude brings you closer to God. Thanksgiving enables you to see your life in a larger context than your immediate troubles. It expands your life experience, from the present to the whole. It counteracts preoccupation with losses, fears, and wants. It focuses on the many blessings that you have instead of the constant obsessive recital of what you've given up or what might happen, something we are unfortunately reminded of too often in the media.⁵

Studies link the emotion of thanksgiving with a variety of positive effects. Grateful people tend to be more empathetic and forgiving of others. People who keep a gratitude journal are more likely to have a positive outlook on life. Grateful individuals demonstrate less envy, materialism, and self-centeredness. Gratitude improves self-esteem and enhances relationships, quality of sleep, and longevity. If it came in pill form, gratitude would be deemed the miracle cure, a vaccine for incredible health. It's no wonder, then, that God's antidote for anxiety includes a large, infusion of gratitude.⁶

It is why I responded so quickly to the suggestion to our member who was worried about Thanksgiving. You have to be up for thanksgiving. The holiday may look different this year. But the purpose must be embraced even more fully. It's the only way to survive because thanksgiving is the antidote for anxiety.

So, count your blessing. Share your gratitude lists, in prayer, and with others. It will heighten your sense of connection and well-being. Express thanks daily, to God and others. Consider a gratitude journal; write thank-you notes. Find ways to live "with thanksgiving." I am confident that you will discover what Paul is suggesting is the antidote to anxiety. And I am also confident that "... the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

¹ <https://www.healio.com/news/psychiatry/20201021/apa-poll-shows-62-of-americans-more-anxious-now-vs-this-time-last-year#:~:text=21%2C%202020.,APA.,%2F%20anxiety%20poll%202020.>

² Lucado, Max. *Anxious for Nothing* (p. 21). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

³ Johnson MS. Between Text and Sermon: Philippians 4:4-9. *Interpretation*. 2019;73(1):54-56.

⁴ Lucado. (p.24).

⁵ <https://psychcentral.com/lib/thanksgiving-and-gratitude-in-hard-times/>

⁶ Lucado. (p.94).