

Faith through the fire part 5, "Be anxious for NOTHING!"

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7

This is a great passage to memorise and be reminded of constantly. It's especially relevant in light of our discussions recently on being ready for the battle, ready God's way, with God's gear, and not leaving the door ajar or flung wide open for Satan and his cronies. But peace is an often-elusive thing in our hearts, and our minds are often at war with themselves, let alone with others. We all know the great promised outcome, peace. But how do we get there? Paul says here that prayer is our answer and that is true. But there is more to it than simply praying.

The first command is, "be anxious for nothing". Well good luck with that. Anxiety, as we all know, gnaws away at our soul, weighs heavy in our hearts and creates all manner of conflict and strife in our minds. Often the battles that rage in our minds aren't even real, but in the absence of any meaningful peace, we wage war against the shadows anyway. The hidden war within yourself then makes unnecessary casualties of others. Because we cannot find peace within ourselves, we lash out and start conflicts, drawing others into our internal struggle, even if we don't even mean to.

King Saul is an example of an anxious person; fearful and fear driven. What was the outcome? He drew others into his struggles through fear, jealousy, envy, bitterness, attempted murder and eventually death and destruction. His inability to lay his anxiety aside, to trust that the God of Israel was there and cared for him, resulted in such a great all-consuming tragedy, even claiming the lives of his sons. His internal struggle hindered him from rising to the heights of faith we see in that young boy, David, who peacefully strode out, his faith in God burning bright, and beheaded a giant; cool, calm and collected.

This is where the second command comes in, "but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God". The command is simple enough, "let your request be made known to God". What requests? Well, "everything"! Whatever it is that's causing you to lose your peace, whatever is robbing you of joy. The unfortunate truth is that most of the time it's you. You feed your own anxiety and rob yourself of peace and, as they say, "step one is admitting it". How should we make these requests known? Prayer and petitioning God. This is the same idea we find in Hebrews (Hebrews 2:14-18 & 4:14-16).

So, don't be anxious and just pray. Sounds like a cliché. Honestly though, that's how we often treat this passage. That's because we often leave out an important clause and the context; the clause, "with thanksgiving" and the context, well Philippians.

Let's start with the clause, "with thanksgiving". Just try to lift up your heart under its heavy burden or call a truce in your mind without thankfulness. Just try to find peace when you aren't being grateful for what it is you have. You know, it's that strange notion of being content with such as you have. Thankfulness goes further than that though, it rests also in God's plan for you. In your own life's story you may rarely see the fruit of your labour or the

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benefit of your struggle but, through faith, you should be thankful that the Lord knows the end.

"Indeed we count them blessed who endure [like the prophets who suffered and showed patience, though not always]. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord – that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful." James 5:11

Why not take up James' challenge and go and read some other people's life stories. Read the lives of the prophets and, in particular, the life of Job. A story of great tragedy, conflict, unhelpfully judgmental friends, the wisdom of youth and a God who never revealed to Job the "why?".

Now the secret to all things is being thankful with such as you have this day, what God can do with what you have, what God can do with you and the blessings and promises of God. To fight for more, rather than trust and rest for more, is the source of our anxiety, so is our inability to see through the eyes of faith "the end intended by the Lord", or that the Lord even intends a good outcome.

We often try to cast off anxiety by unloading on God and waiting for a positive outcome. The positive outcome we seek is usually our own ideal. Our ideal outcome is usually the job we want, the bank balance we want, the house we want, the circle of friends we want, the health we want, the life circumstances we want to find ourselves in, our families to be "normal", our needs met and a spouse who delivers on your expectations, just to list a few. But nowhere in there is a surrender to the things God wants or the circumstances through which glory can be brought to Him; things that line up with God's version of good.

The problem with thankless prayer is that it's often more "God get me out of this" than "thank you God that you can get me through this" or "thank you God that you can make something good and glorifying out of this". So again, the great not-so-secret is being content with such as God has given; the realisation that your thankless heart and discontent may be blocking things God wants to give you and poking you in the eyes of faith so that you can't see God's greater good for you now and in the future.

It's also important to remember that future often means things beyond this life (Hebrews 11). After all, the things of this world, that belong to this world, that we often fight over and for, are merely scraps compared to the weight of glory that is to come; an eternal weight of glory. Remember, the things we see are temporary but what we can't see with our naked eyes are the eternal things (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). If we were more thankful for the things we do have, the things we think we don't have and the fact that we don't have them, then we would clear the way for contentment and its outcome; peace.

The outcome of realising that anxiety fixes nothing (actually it burns down more than it builds up) and being humble enough to thankfully speak with your God is peace. This is the kind of prayer that is an outpouring of thankfulness for who He is, what He has done, what you have or don't have, what you know that He can do and thankfully handing all things

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over to Him. We come to Him thankfully knowing that He is there and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Why not consider Matthew 6:25-34 prayerfully?

"Lord help me to not worry about my life, what I will eat or what I will drink; or about my body, what I will wear. Life is more than food and the body is more than what I put on it. I can see the birds of the air that don't sow or reap or gather into barns but you, heavenly Father, feed them. I know I am of more value than the birds. Anxiety can't make me taller [or more handsome, thinner, have more hair or less].

Why do I worry about clothes? The lilies of the field grow but they don't toil or spin. But I can see that they are more beautiful than Solomon in all his glory. Father, if you clothe the things of the field that are burned tomorrow, then you can clothe me, though I might struggle with believing it.

So why should I be anxious wrestling with what I will eat or what I will drink or what I will wear? The rest of the world chases after all those things. Father, you know that I need these things to survive. But let me be mindful, first, of Your Kingdom and Your righteousness. Help me leave these other things up to you. Help me not be anxious about tomorrow and leave tomorrow to be anxious about its own problems. I know that today will be difficult enough as it is."

Taken at its heart, this famous passage is telling us to thankfully leave it in the Father's hands because He knows what you need, what you really need, and He cares. You stop fighting, you cease the conflict, because you are thankful the Father is on it. There are many in distant lands today and tomorrow who are eating, not because they worried but because the Father placed it on your heart to send provisions from what He has given you, as small and pitiful as your bank balance may seem. Even though it may seem like you only have five loaves and two very small fish, it's only logical to conclude that He is able to keep giving you the opportunity and provisions to keep this going. It's also only natural, no Biblical, to think that our Heavenly Father can do the same for you when your needs arise; based purely on what your Father thinks you actually need and what circumstances glorify Him.

This is also a cause of anxiety; God doing His thing. We find it hard to wrestle with God's purpose clashing with our reasoning and desires. When we look at the lives of others and the hardships that befall them, we often come out sounding like the disciples in John 9, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It's the same type of reasoning Job's "mates" used on him, "Come on Job, your life's collapsed into rubble and ruin, it has to be your fault! Tell us your sin!" But in fact, Jesus speaks to this perfectly, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." So that's it. God's works are to be revealed through you and that's perfect! Embrace it and be content; at peace. Leap out of your skin with joy because this brings God glory; Him doing His thing and you being content with that.

"My brethren, count it total joy when you fall into various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces patience. But allow patience to reach its goal, so that you may

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be mature and complete, deficient nothing." James 1:2-4 (DZV). That's the end intended by the Lord, that glorifies Him, be content and find peace with that, it's to your benefit as well. Thanks be to God!

What of sin? Simply answered, "Jesus". Some helping words, "cross", "propitiation for sin" and "resurrection". Christ's cross-work glorified God; magnified His character, grace and mercy, for all time. So, should we sin that God's grace and glory may about? No, don't be stupid. Well, that's a modern Australian rendering of Paul's point in Romans 6. But the fact still remains that God can be glorified. Your part is not being content with the act but being content with the fact you find repentance, forgiveness, restoration and a future with God. What you did need not define you, but God's grace can redefine you. It can continue its work of transforming you into who you are truly meant to be; the uniquely you in Christ. You can be thankful for that.

What does the letting go of anxiety and a content, thankful, prayer life, bring? Peace. It's a peace that makes no sense. A peace where there should be war. It's in our fallen nature to pursue, to conquer and subdue things for our benefit. But God's ideal peace, joy and happiness is found in letting go of our ways and embracing His; letting go of our ideal life and clinging to His. Always remember He created you not the other way around. If He created you, then He knows you better than you know yourself. There are desires in your heart that you have no way of filling, but He does. Desires that set you ablaze with strife, envy, jealousy and bitterness that could easily be extinguished and fulfilled by Him. The trick is having the faith to see.

This peace does something. God's peace will protect your hearts and your minds. It will protect the very things your anxiety was upending, crushing and hurling into conflict. This peace, that overtakes you, will prevent the unnecessary damage that our internal struggles bring to you and those around you. The hurt, disappointment and dissatisfaction can be seen for what it truly is; a wrestle between God's ideal life and your own, your idea of what is meaningful and fulfilling, your version of happiness and God's.

Now this is where the context comes in. But before we go there, consider Paul's words to the believers at Colossae.

"But above all these things [clothing yourself in tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another and forgiving each other] put on love which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...and whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." Colossians 3:14-17

Above the need to clothe yourself in all these other things, there is a need for love. With love there is the peace that rules your hearts, thankfulness and allowing the word of Christ to have its home in you. You don't give the word of God a little portion of your heart, you give it a rich dwelling place; all of it. The words about Christ found in the Bible tell us that

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God is, He is faithful, He makes promise and keeps them, and God's got this. Whatever the "this" is you are wrestling with, God's got it.

Now that's a motto that should release anxiety, but it can't if you don't leave it in His hands, instead tearing it back from His clutches as though you know a thing or two about how things ought to be. Were you there when God created all things? Did you put all things into order and alignment? Do you control the sea? Do you make the sun rise? Are you a deep-sea diver charting the sea floor in a time when they didn't even exist? Do you control the solar system? Can you make it rain? Can you take on the great "water creature"? Case closed (Job 38-41).

Truthfully, in order for us to ever clothe ourselves in tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, to bear with one another and truly forgive each other, we need to understand and put on love, allow God's peace to rule us and be truly thankful. How do we understand love? Well we can start in the book with pages dripping with the greatest love story ever told. But as Paul says in Ephesians 3:19, this love surpasses our understanding and, we know from experience, so does God's promised peace. When you dive into these ideas remember to watch your neck because you are still in the kiddie end of the pool. But it's God's desire to lead you into deeper water. You just have to trust Him as He guides you out. Baby steps, start with dog paddle, don't be embarrassed, we all start somewhere. But keep your eyes fixed on Jesus lest you sink.

The importance of love to the idea of peace is profound. To truly show the love of God to others we have to find peace within ourselves. You will struggle to love others if your heart is burning for all the wrong reasons. One of the most loving things you can do for others is being the best possible version of yourself that God created you to be. To be at peace within yourself you have to find that reconciliation between your plans and God's, your ways and His and your ideal and God's. Truth is, you are fighting a losing battle if you fight against the Creator's design for you. The best course of action, when it comes to finding peace, is humbly accept His version of your life and His intended outcome. We need to climb on board not stand in the way. To love God's way, we need to be as cool, calm and collected as possible. Do you trust Him enough to lead the way?

So now the context of Philippians 4:6-7 become all the more relevant. That should smack you as an understatement, after all these verses are not here by accident or without connection. Lift your eyes in the text up a little, depending on your page breaks, to verse 2 and begin reading. What do we find? A conflict that Paul wants resolved. Euodia and Syntyche were at war. After addressing this issue Paul gives these commands; rejoice, let gentleness be seen and don't be anxious but pray. Perhaps these are some simple steps for their conflict to be resolved; a way to resolve the fight that broke out between them and protect from future spot fires? Perhaps it also gives us some indication as to its root cause; not being content with what God was doing in them when compared to the other?

Now notice the first word in verse 8, "finally". This isn't the first time Paul has used "finally" in Philippians; the word also appears in Philippians 3:1, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe". The

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"finally" in Philippians 3:1 introduces a section that runs all the way to Philippians 4:7. Then a "finally" is found in Philippians 4:8. Did Paul start concluding his letter in Philippians 3:1 and then remember in Philippians 4:8 that he had forgotten some details so added them on? No. The "finally" in Philippians 3:1 introduces the last point that Paul wants to raise with his readers, our two verses are found at the end of that point. The "finally" in Philippians 4:8 signals the end of the letter and his final remark.

Why is that important? Well, I'm glad you asked. We will deal with that next time. In short though, and you can read it, please do, Paul makes a great point about finding peace. What is Paul's point? Don't look to what you have done. Don't look to what others think of you. Don't even look too much at what you are now. Healthy self-reflection is good, but it should not consume you. Keep your eyes fixed on what Christ can do and what lays ahead of you and you will find true peace. Fix your eyes on these other things and other people, obsess about them too much, and you will find a spark for conflict; that's our fallen nature.

Remember the great cry of Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me", in Philippians 4:13? Well, it has context,

"...I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."
Philippians 4:11b-13

Paul could find peace with his circumstances and within himself because he learned to be content with his daily existence. As a result, there was nothing that could stand between him and the strength that is found in Christ. We will see that a part of that was the lesson Paul learned; letting go of the past, letting go of people's opinions, realising you are not "there" yet, reaching out for what Christ could do through you and letting what Christ chooses to do with you be enough. Christ's strength brings the power to be content and the power of contentment opens up the store house of strength we only find in Christ.

"Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the heart. Then each one's praise will come from God." 1 Corinthians 4:1-5