

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Jeff Harrison

### **Pursuing Peace in an Age of Anxiety**

Philippians 4:5b-7

#### **Introduction - Our harmful responses to anxiety raise the question, “How can we pursue peace?”**

Back in my single days I had my hits and my misses in asking girls out. And then there was the time I asked out Libby. I thought she was cute, had a genuine walk with the Lord, and she laughed at my jokes, so she obviously had a great sense of humor. Plus I had an “in” because her close friend was dating my roommate, and she really hoped I’d ask Libby out.

So one time there was a group of friends over at our place and Libby came over. She was doing Libby things like looking cute and laughing at my jokes and she even brought some cookies. We had a great time, and after a while she left and happened to forget her plate. My roommate’s girlfriend saw an opportunity and said, “Jeff, you should give Libby a call and give her that plate.” By this point I had decided to ask Libby out. But I kept that piece of information close to the vest. For I’d learned from past-experience that if you want to avoid public shame, don’t tell everyone you’re about to ask a girl out. So I took the plate and just said I’d get it back to Libby.

So I call Libby later that week and say, “Hey, I’d love to take you out on a date this weekend - would you like to grab some dinner and coffee?” There’s a pause, and then she asks me, “Are you serious?” Huh? I had gotten a variety of responses when asking girls out, but I had never heard “Are you serious?” And to make things worse, this was over the phone, so I couldn’t read her body language to see if this was a legit question, a stalling tactic, or a sarcastic put down. But I was committed to staying the course, so though my anxiety rose, I said, “Yes, I’m serious, I’d really like to take you on a date.” I braced for her response, only to hear her say again, “Are you serious?” My anxiety level rose further. I felt like I was at the point of no return, that it would have been weirder to have said, “No, I was just joking.” So I say again, “Yes, I’m serious, I’d really like to take you on a date this weekend.” What do you think she said? I got a third, “Are you serious?” By this time anxiety had flooded my soul. Was this girl playing some cruel game? Why did she keep asking me if I was serious? So one more time I say, “Yes I’m serious, I’d really like to take you on a date this weekend.” Finally, she gave me

her answer. Believe it or not she said, “Yeah, I’d like that” so we made plans and awkwardly got off the phone.

Now I didn’t know this at the time, but my roommate’s girlfriend had told Libby I’d be calling her *only* about returning the plate, not about asking her out. So Libby had it stuck in her mind that I was not calling to ask her out, which is why she asked me, “Are you serious?” three times. But as I said, I didn’t know that piece of information. So I was left to analyze the conversation with the zeal of a junior high girl - no offense to any junior high girls in the audience. As the date approached, I was filled with anxiety. As you can imagine, my anxiety affected the date. And Libby knew our phone conversation was awkward, and she seemed anxious too. We went on a few dates, but I don’t think we really recovered from that initial awkwardness and anxiety. Our anxiety doomed things from the start.

Isn’t anxiety miserable? First, you feel miserable, like there’s this motor of worrisome thoughts and feelings racing inside of you, accelerating out of control. It can cause you to beat yourself up as you think things like, “You’re such an idiot for screwing that up, or you have such a big mouth, or you’re such a fat pig.” And it hurts our relationships. Anxiety turns some of us into people pleasers. We try to avoid anxiety by always winning the approval of others, as if that’s even possible. Others of us become isolated as we deal with our anxiety by keeping everyone at a safe distance. Some of us turn into control freaks that try to alleviate anxiety by controlling people and situations, which is not exactly a way to win friends and influence people. And some of us try to escape anxiety through addictions to food, drugs, pornography - things that injure ourselves and those closest to us.

Anxiety produces so many sins and so much harm. So, that’s why we’re going to consider this morning, how can we pursue peace? How can we pursue peace? A peace that’s there when you’re worried about your test. A peace that’s even there when your spouse is in the ICU, a trial I saw the Jenness family go through this week. Paul’s letter to the Philippians tell us how we can pursue peace. So if you’ve got a Bible, please turn to Philippians chapter 4, verses 5-7. Philippians chapter 4, verses 5-7. We’re going to examine what peace looks like and how to pursue it.

### **I. What Peace Looks Like (vv. 6-7)**

Let’s start with what peace looks like. Philippians 4, just verses 6-7 - please read along with me. “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 comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Look back with me at verse 6. Paul commands the Philippians to be anxious for nothing. The opposite of peace in the passage is anxiety. Now to be clear, anxiety here is not a healthy care and concern, like being concerned when your child gets hurt. Anxiety is having too much concern in a situation. One Greek dictionary<sup>1</sup> defines the word here as an “*undue* concern.” It’s a level of worry that hinders you and your relationships. At its extreme anxiety is when worrisome thoughts and feelings race out of control.

So if that’s the opposite of peace, what is Biblical peace? Look back with me at verse 7 - “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” We see in this verse that peace includes a sense of God’s protection and presence. The word “guard” here in verse 7 is a military term - it’s used to describe soldiers protecting a city from attack. The city of Philippi, where Paul wrote this letter, was guarded by Roman troops, so they would appreciate the metaphor of God, like a soldier, guarding their hearts and minds. In verse 7 we also see that it says that God’s peace surpasses all comprehension. It’s more than knowing intellectually that God loves us. Which is good because when you’re going through a really dark time, you want more than head knowledge, you want to sense God’s presence right there with you.

Pastor Chuck Swindoll once had a dark time that came in the form of a frightening phone call. It said, “Come immediately to the school, your daughter has fallen from the top of the cheerleading pyramid and something snapped in her back.” While on his way to the school, Swindoll earnestly prayed for his daughter and the paramedics, and because of His anxiety, he also prayed that God would give him peace. As he drove and prayed, Swindoll says he sensed the most incredible realization of God’s presence. He described it as almost eerie. When he got to the school, his daughter Charissa was in a neck brace and told him she couldn’t feel anything below her shoulders. Can you imagine hearing that from someone in your family? Swindoll shared that normally he would have been borderline out of control, shouting at people to back up, yelling at the ambulance driver to hurry up. But God’s supernatural peace calmed his fears and allowed him to calmly minister to his daughter in the midst of crisis.<sup>2</sup> Wow!

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<sup>1</sup> BDAG, 632.

<sup>2</sup> Story found in *Wasting Time with God* by Klaus Issler, p. 175.

## II. Pursuing Peace (vv. 5b-6)

Now it's important to note that if we wish to pursue peace, as Chuck Swindoll did in that crisis, belief in Jesus is the starting point. Throughout the book of Philippians Paul calls his audience "brothers." That's his way of saying that they're already Christians. They had already trusted that Jesus took the punishment for their sin on the cross and then rose from the dead. This gave them peace with God, which meant they could pursue experiencing the peace of God. It's the same for us. Only once you've trusted in Christ can you begin to pursue this peace.

Now let's look at how to pursue peace starting in the second half of verse 5 - "The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." When we experience anxiety, it's an alarm signaling that something is wrong, and these verses show that the best response is to pray in a certain way.

First, we've got to pray with frequency. Verse six says "Be anxious for nothing, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication." It sounds basic, but I think we often forget that if we wish to know God deeply, we have to be aware that He's there throughout the day. We have to talk to Him and take our anxiety to Him. I'm always married to my lovely wife Stephanie, but if I forget most of the time that we're married and I hardly ever talk to her, I'm not going to feel close to her. It's the same with God. Are you convinced that God is always with you? If you remember that, it'll help you pray with frequency.

Second, to pursue peace we've got to pray with detail. We see this in the word "supplication" in verse six. "Supplication" means to make an urgent request to meet a specific need. We also see the need to pray with detail at the end of verse six, which plainly says, "let your requests be made known to God." When we're feeling anxious, we have the opportunity to give our problems to God in prayer, to let them rest on His shoulders rather than ours. That'd be nice, wouldn't it? Again, I know it's basic, but do you pray to God what you're really feeling and what you really want? Too often in my prayers I make the mistake of not praying with detail. I'll just pray something generic like, "God, please bless my day." Or I won't talk with God about how I'm frustrated with how He's handling a situation, as if He doesn't already know. When we don't pray with detail we miss out on really connecting with God, and we miss out on seeing Him specifically answer our prayers.

Third, to pursue peace we've got to pray with trust. I get this from the fact that verse 6 tells us to pray with thanksgiving. We are to thank God right when we make the prayer, before

we know if He's going to answer it in the way that we want. This requires a heart of trust. We've got to trust that God is a good Father who will do what's best for His children, even when He doesn't remove the circumstance causing our anxiety. We've got to trust that if we had pure motives and knew everything that God does, we'd want Him to answer every-single prayer in the way that He does. That's praying with trust.

Fourth, to pursue peace we've got to pray with hope. I get this from the end of verse 5, which says, "The Lord is near." We live in a broken world and we're flawed people. Sometimes our situation gets worse rather than better. Sometimes we pray and God still feels distant. I think that's why Paul reminded his readers that the Lord is near. No matter how bleak our situation becomes, we can have hope in Jesus' return. We can look forward to Jesus fulfilling His promises, to a time when there will be no more pain and no more anxiety, when we'll always experience God's perfect peace.

It's what Martin Luther King Jr. had in mind when he gave the eulogy for some young African American women who were senselessly murdered in a church bombing. Dr. King said, "I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invisible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days." What a poetic description of how the hope we have in Christ can bring comfort in the most trying of times. The Lord is near.

So this pursuing peace thing sounds like a piece of cake, right? Honestly, pursuing peace by praying with frequency, detail, trust, and hope feels daunting to me. That trust part seems especially challenging, to always be thankful in prayer because we trust God will answer every-single prayer in the best way.

However, it's good if pursuing peace feels daunting because we need Jesus to empower us to pray this way. The Bible says that because of our ancestor's rebellion, and ours, we became enemies of God. And if there's anything worth being anxious about, it's that, for it meant we deserve eternal punishment. But Jesus humbly came to earth as God and man on a rescue mission for us. The night before Jesus was to die for our sins, He was so anxious He sweat drops of blood. Since Jesus prayed with frequency, He went with His closest friends to

pray in a garden. There Jesus prayed with detail - He asked the Father to remove this cup of wrath from Him. But Jesus also prayed with trust, as He said, "Yet not My will, but Yours be done." And so Jesus was empowered by a supernatural peace. As He's brutally beaten, nailed to a cross, and mocked by people that He created, He's able to say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." That's an astounding peace.

But then, after He's been on the cross for hours and can barely breathe, He suddenly screams, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What happened to that supernatural peace? In that moment Jesus absorbed all the Father's wrath for every wicked thing we've done and are yet to do. Jesus lost His peace with God so that you and I can have an eternal peace with God by trusting that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead. Wow! And Jesus didn't die just so we can enjoy peace in eternity. His death and resurrection also allows us to pursue peace now. Jesus sent us the Spirit to help us pursue peace today. And, as Ephesians 5 says, Jesus continues to nourish and cherish His people. Jesus wants you to experience His peace tomorrow morning, and to even experience it during your darkest trials.

**CONCLUSION - How will you deal with your anxiety? Jesus longs to help us pursue peace as we pray with frequency, detail, trust, and hope.**

Jesus knows what it means to be incredibly anxious. And He invites you to take your anxiety to Him, so that it doesn't wreak havoc on your health, your relationships, and your witness for Him. I recently read a quote by author Dallas Willard that's stuck with me. He says, "A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of the body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living."<sup>3</sup> Baseball players have to practice to do well, and Christians have to cultivate a prayer life if they wish to handle crisis well.

As we leave here this morning, we have choices all around us. When you experience anxiety tomorrow about your job, your family, or your finances, will you deal with it yourself in unhealthy ways, or will you take it to the Lord in prayer? Imagine the pain and heartache you could save yourself down the road if you start learning how to deal with your anxiety today, before the next crisis comes. Would it be neat if you started pursuing peace, and a few months from now you could honestly say, "I'm experiencing more of God's presence and worrying less about what people think, less about my job, less about my appearance."

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<sup>3</sup> *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard, p.4-5.

I want that for us. Think of the incredible price Jesus paid to make it possible. How willing must He be to help us pray with frequency, detail, trust, and hope. To enjoy life in Him rather than a life of anxiety. It won't always be easy, but will you pursue peace? So much rides on that decision.

Let's pray...