

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
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THE ANTIDOTE TO ANXIETY

Sinclair Ferguson, in commenting on Paul's admonition *do not be anxious*, observes: "Within the space of three verses he appears to present us with two impossible tasks: constant rejoicing (v. 4) and now the rejection of anxiety (v. 6)! But the two are related; the joyful person is not likely to be dominated by anxiety; the anxiety-ridden spirit cannot be a joyful one. But how can we be delivered from anxiety?"¹ Phillip Cary likewise notes our text actually makes many Christians all the more anxious: "We have enough things to be anxious about already in life, and now we have to worry in addition about how we can manage not to be anxious about any of it. And so the way we respond to this word from God, which is clearly meant to comfort us, actually adds a whole extra dimension to our burdens. Sometimes the Christian life can get to be like that: trying to live like Christians just seems to add one more layer of anxiety to our lives. We have our work, our families, our friends to worry about, and then on top of that we worry about getting our Christian lives right. And if being a good Christian is at the center of our lives, then this worry can settle into the depths of our hearts and turn everything we do into something to be anxious about. When that happens, something has clearly gone wrong. The word of God *is* meant to comfort us, to strengthen us by making us cheerful in doing the work God has given us to do. That work has its stresses and strains, which is why we're invited not to be anxious. Like every commandment of God, this is at bottom a kind of permission: you don't have to be anxious, and just in case you think you do, you're commanded not to be. Behind everything God tells us that we *must* do, is really what we *may* do. We may live because God gives us a way of life, and therefore he tells us, 'Choose life' (Deut. 30:19). We may live joyfully because his good word frees us from anxiety, and therefore he tells us, 'Do not be anxious.' In that way, each of God's commandments is fundamentally an invitation. But our anxieties turn God's invitation into a burden. That's why we're invited and even commanded to get rid of them! But if this invitation too is not to become a burden – one more cause for anxiety – we need to figure out what we're getting wrong here. How is it that this good word of God becomes a source of anxiety to us? Why is living the Christian life filling us so full of worries?"²

- I. **THE PROHIBITION.** "In nothing be anxious," *mēden merimnate*. This is in the present tense imperative and means "stop being anxious." Lightfoot defines this as anxious harassing care.³
- II. **THE PRESCRIPTION.** Four terms are used in the vocabulary of the soul's inner life. *Prayer, proseuchē, and supplication, deēsis*, are frequently found together in the apostle's writing, and are distinguishable in two ways, according to G. Abbott-Smith's *Lexicon*. He says that *proseuchē* is used of prayer in general, while *deēsis* gives prominence to the sense of need. On the other hand, *deēsis* is used as well of requests from man to man, while *proseuchē* is limited to prayer to God. *Requests, aitēmata*, is a word which specifies the content of prayer as the formulating of definite and precise petitions (cf. Lk. xxii. 24; 1 Jn. v. 15). Prayer is thus saved from becoming a sentimental 'mooning before the Lord,' to quote Oswald Chambers; it

can express itself in direct and specific *requests* (e.g. Lk. xi. 5, 9, 10). *Thanksgiving, eucharistia*, is an important accompaniment of true prayer. The recalling of God's goodness and mercy will save us from the many pitfalls which await the ungrateful soul, e.g., over-concern with our immediate problems, forgetfulness of God's gracious dealings with us in the past, disregard of the needs of others who are more unfortunate than we are."⁴ Silva adds: "The real significance of this stylistic richness is not what it says about the theological components of prayer (or the psychological make-up of human beings) but rather about the great importance that Paul attaches to the believer's prayer life. The opposite of anxiety – indeed its relief – is the peace that only God, in answer to prayer, bestows upon His people. It is worthwhile noting that our Lord's instructions not to work (*mē merimnate tē psychē*, Matt 6:25 and Luke 12:22) are grounded in the assurance that God knows our needs (Matt. 6:32; Luke 12:30), and this very fact provides the theological underpinnings for effective prayer (Matt. 6:7-8; cf. in the broader context 7:7-11 and Luke 11:9-13). That the apostle is here reflecting, or even directly alluding to, Jesus' teaching seems very likely indeed."⁵

III. THE PROMISE. "A blessing awaits those who thus take all their cares to the Lord in prayer. The peace of God will keep their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Of this peace which God gives, the peace of mind which God works, it is furthermore said that it 'passes all understanding.' This can be taken as meaning in general that no human mind can grasp or fathom or comprehend the greatness and fullness and the glory of the peace which God gives (cf. Eph. 3:19: 'To know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge'). In close connection with verse 6, however, it probably means that the peace which God gives excels and surpasses all our own intellectual calculations and considerations, all our contemplations and premeditated ideas of how to get rid of our cares – and which after all *cannot* completely remove our faint-heartedness and worry, and restore peace and calm to our minds. What God gives, surpasses all that we ask or think (cf. Eph. 3:20)."⁶

"The word peace (Greek, *eirēnē*) occurs no fewer than ninety-two times, twenty-five of the uses being in the Gospels and forty-three in the Pauline letters. Derivations from it occur another eight times, bringing the total to just over a hundred. It is obviously a word to which the New Testament pays great attention. From this extensive use we shall take only samples, but six distinct senses of the word can be found:

1. There is the ordinary secular sense – absence of armed fighting. Jesus uses that sense in Lk. 14:32. It comes twice in Acts (12:20 and 24:2), and once in Revelation 6:4. That, I think, is all. The New Testament is not unaware of the secular sense, but it makes little use of it.
2. More frequently, we find, especially in the Gospels, the ordinary Jewish use of the word as a salutation, corresponding to the Muslim 'Salaam:' 'Whatever house you enter, first say, Peace be to this house' (Lk. 10:5; cp. Mt. 10:13). And this is the primary meaning of the only use of the word in Mark, when Jesus says to the woman whom He has healed: 'Go in peace' (5:34). His words there are more than a merely conventional Good-bye. He bids the woman enter into a new state of peace, arising out of her contact with Him.
3. In fact there is a special peace which the New Testament describes as 'the peace of Christ.' Jesus Himself speaks of '*my* peace' in Jn. 14:27, and in 16:33 He says that He has spoken 'that *in me* you may have peace.' Paul picks up the thought in Col. 3:15, and elaborates it in Eph. 2:14-17: He *is* our peace, making Jew and Gentile into one new humanity, so making peace; and He comes and preaches peace to them that are afar off and them that are nigh.
4. Yet in the New Testament peace goes back fundamentally behind even Christ Himself to God the Father. It is essentially His gift to men. It is a remarkable fact that every Pauline epistle begins with the salutation, very slightly varied: 'Grace to you and peace from God

our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ In the body of the epistles a still deeper phrase is used, when God is spoken of as ‘the God of peace:’ ‘The God of peace be with you all’ (Rom. 15:33); ‘The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly’ (Rom. 16:20); ‘God is not a God of confusion but of peace’ (1 Cor. 14:33); ‘The God of peace and love shall be with you’ (2 Cor. 13:11); ‘The God of peace shall be with you’ (Phil. 4:9); ‘The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly’ (1 Thess. 5:23); ‘The Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in all ways’ (2 Thess. 3:16); ‘The God of peace make you perfect in every good thing’ (Heb. 13:20, 21). If we are to have that ‘peace on earth’ of which the angels sang in Lk. 2:14, it comes as His gift, because it is part of His nature.

The gift of God’s peace comes to men in two ways:

5. Firstly, in the personal reconciliation through Christ between us and God that Peter preached in Acts 10:36, the peace that is the result of forgiveness (10:43). Paul in Rom. 5:1 spoke of this peace as the consequence of the new faith-relationship with God in Christ, and in Col. 1:20 went on to describe it as intended to include all creation. It is no use our trying to set the world right until we ourselves have been set right with Him through the One whom He sent to bring about this ‘reconciliation.’ That is why human efforts at peace-making never succeed for very long, and why even Christian peace-making fails when it is mere patching up on the human level. It is only the peace of God, which passes all merely human understanding, that can really guard your hearts and thoughts and make true peace possible (Phil. 4:7). We often talk about ‘arbitration’ in industrial and international disputes, meaning an attempt to reach a compromise with which both sides will be reluctantly satisfied. The New Testament also uses the word, in Col. 3:15: ‘Let the peace of Christ arbitrate (RV margin) in your hearts.’ The word was used by the Greeks of the judges in athletic contests. Paul is saying that no other referee than Christ’s peace can really keep the struggle of life under control.”⁷

We may distinguish between “peace *with* God” and “peace *of* God” along the following lines. “Christ may have died for us; the Spirit may have applied that death savingly to us; and yet we may hold back from the full consciousness of our safety; wrong thoughts and feelings may stand in our way. We are at peace with God; our conscience knows it. But we may so seldom look to Him who is our Peace, and so much to ourselves, that we fail to take the true comfort and joy of our changed position.”⁸ We have, through the finished work of Christ, peace *with* God. This may be called *objective* peace. This is always true, and we can neither add to it or take away from it. But founded upon this is what we may call *SUBJECTIVE* peace. This is the experiential aspect. This may be cultivated. It is to this that the Apostle refers in Phil. 4:6-9. This is likewise an objective peace, but in this sense: it is objective peace personified (comp. Col. 3:15). It is the subjective appropriation through faith of the objective peace which God establishes in Christ. One very important thing should be noticed in Phil. 4:6-9 and Col. 3:15, 16; in both cases the subjective disposition is cultivated when faith feeds upon the objective Word of God. It begins when the mind is transformed and renewed (Rom. 12:2) by God’s Word. Thomas Manton, in commenting on Psalm 119:165, “Great peace have they that love thy law” made this helpful observation, “There is internal peace, arising either from justification, Rom. v. 1; or sanctification: Isa. 32:17, ‘The fruit of righteousness is peace;’ or from the contentment with our condition, Phil. 4:7. By justification we have peace, when God is reconciled and made a friend; by sanctification we have peace, when we walk evenly with God; and by contentment we have peace, when our affections are calmed and rightly ordered, or set upon more worthy and noble objects, so that we are not troubled at the loss of outward things. These are the ingredients necessary to eternal peace, which is, I suppose, principally intended here – inward comfort and contentment of mind.”⁹

CONCLUSION: “That’s certainly easy enough: prayer + thankfulness = peace. Go through the steps, get to peace. Then why doesn’t the formula work? When I am anxious I pray, but my mind

keeps drifting back to the anxious circumstance, and before I know it I am trying to solve the problem. After again confessing my distractibility, I get back to praying, only to have the cycle continue. Thinking I might do better at thanksgiving, I write out a thanks list, but the list rarely dislodges my anxiety, and for good reason. No matter how long the list, there is no guarantee that I will be spared my most recent doomsday scenarios. Now what? I just tried one of the classic passages on anxiety and it didn't work. A-ha, there is a clue. I was looking for a pill. I visited God-my-pharmacist and asked what to take for my anxiety. That's not the way Scripture works. I should have noticed it when I reduced the passage to a formula. Scripture, instead, is about the triune God. It is about knowing and trusting a *person*, and our formulas can actually turn us away from that person and cause us to rely on a series of steps. So go back to the passage and look for the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6)." He concludes by saying, "There are steps toward peace, but they are a little different than the steps we take in following a recipe. These steps are all personal. Know the God who comes near, expect the better manna, and walk before him in humility. Don't give up on the pursuit of peace. Peace will make you feel better, which is a good thing, but there is something greater at stake. In a world where true peace seems impossible, we want to be ambassadors who say that real peace is available to us only in the Prince of Peace. This, indeed, will bring glory to God."¹⁰ Sinclair Ferguson concludes: "Yes, both joy and peace are possible, even in a world like this. But they can be preserved only by a mind that is well-stocked with grace. In our modern world many people seek freedom from anxiety by trying to empty their minds; Paul teaches us that true peace can be ours only when our minds are properly filled. He points the Philippians to the store from which they can furnish their minds: things that are *true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy*. A mind full of these will leave little room for anxiety-producing, peace-disrupting and joy-destroying thoughts. How can our minds thus be trained? Again Paul answers: by allowing our lives to be shaped by apostolic example and apostolic teaching (v. 9). The kind of Bible study in which we are presently engaged is itself the prescription the apostle provides. Take it, regularly, and we will enjoy the peace of God which comes to us from the God of peace (v. 9)."¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ S. Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians* (Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 104.

² Phillip Cary, *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don't Have to Do* (Brazeal Press, 2010), p. XV. This book is required reading for elder and deacon training. Here is why: "This book is about what we're getting wrong, why it's worrying us, and why we don't have to think and do what makes us so anxious. It's about seeing the invitations in God's word for what they are, so that our Christian life may be lived in cheerful obedience rather than in anxious efforts to get it right. On the negative side, it's about bad theology, the kind of theology that, when it's preached and taught and made part of our lives, makes us worried and miserable. On the positive side, it's about why the things God has to tell us, even in his commandments, are good for us, how they free us from anxiety and strengthen our hearts to do his work with joy."

³ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (rpt. Zondervan, 1973), p. 160.

⁴ R. P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul To The Philippians* (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 169.

⁵ Moises Silva, *The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, Philippians* (Moody Press, 1988), p. 225.

⁶ J. J. Muller, *The Epistle of Paul To The Philippians* (Eerdmans, 1955), p. 142.

⁷ H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of The Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Samuel Bagster & Sons LTD., 1977), p. 67.

⁸ B. B. Warfield, *Faith & Life* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1990), p. 337.

⁹ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton IV* (rpt. Maranatha Press, 1976), p. 200.

¹⁰ Ed Welch, "Peace That Passes All Understanding" *Table Talk Magazine.com/article/2010*. I highly recommend reading the entire article.

¹¹ Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 105.