

Teach Us to Pray

Lesson 6: Thanksgiving and Peace Instead of Anxiety -- Philippians 4:4–7

Paul is writing from prison. Chained to a Roman guard, his future uncertain, possibly facing execution, he picks up his pen and writes one of the most joyful letters in the New Testament. And right in the middle of it he says something that sounds almost impossible coming from a cell: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Do not be anxious about anything.” Not some things. Anything. You can almost hear a reader push back: easy for you to say, Paul. But it was not easy for Paul. He had simply learned a secret, and he wants us to learn it too.

We live in an anxious age. Worry hums in the background of ordinary life like an appliance we have stopped noticing, until at three in the morning it roars. We worry about our kids, our health, our money, our reputation, the state of the world. We carry it into the day, into our relationships, into our beds. And much of our praying, if we are honest, is just worry with a religious accent, the same anxious thoughts circling, now addressed vaguely upward.

Into all of that Paul speaks a better way. He does not say, stop caring, or just think positively. He gives a specific path out of anxiety, and prayer is at the center of it. “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Notice the surprising ingredient tucked in the middle: with thanksgiving. We are to bring our worries to God not with clenched fists but with open, grateful hands. And Paul promises a result that does not depend on getting the answer we wanted: “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

That is where this lesson begins, with a prisoner who is freer than most people walking around outside, and with the question of what to do with all our worry. Read these few verses slowly. They hold one of the great exchanges of the Christian life: our anxiety handed over to God, and his own peace standing guard over our hearts in return.

Group Discussion: Anxiety seems to be everywhere in our culture, and it quietly shapes a great deal of how we live and even how we pray. What do most people do with their worries, and how is that different from what Paul tells us to do with ours? Why do you think simply trying harder not to worry never seems to work?

Personal Reflection: What is the worry that most often steals your peace, the one that shows up at three in the morning? When that anxiety rises, what do you usually do with it, and how much of your praying is really just worrying in God’s direction rather than handing the worry over to him?

Read Philippians 4:4–7

Study Questions

1. Paul commands, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (v. 6). Why does Paul prescribe prayer as the God-given alternative to anxiety, and what does the structure of this verse teach us about what we are to do with our worries?
2. Be honest about your habits. When anxiety rises, do you actually take it to God in prayer, or do you mostly stew on it, distract yourself, or try to manage it alone? What would it look like this week to turn a specific worry into a prayer the moment it appears?
3. Paul says to bring our requests “with thanksgiving” (v. 6). Why does he include thanksgiving as part of the cure for anxiety, and how does gratitude reframe our worries by reminding us of who God is and what he has already done?
4. Anxiety tends to magnify what is wrong and shrink what is right, while gratitude does the opposite. What are you currently overlooking that you could give thanks for? How might deliberately practicing thanksgiving begin to loosen the grip of your particular worry?
5. Paul promises that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). What is this peace, how is it different from the peace the world offers, and what does it mean that this peace “guards” us rather than simply makes us feel better?
6. Paul describes an exchange: we hand God our anxieties, and he guards us with his peace. Take the worry you named earlier. What would it look like, this week, to actually make that exchange, bringing it to God with thanksgiving and trusting him with the peace he gives, even before anything changes?
7. Paul frames the whole passage with “Rejoice in the Lord always” and “The Lord is at hand” (vv. 4-5). How is rejoicing “in the Lord” different from rejoicing in our circumstances, and how does the nearness of the Lord give us a ground for joy and peace that our situation cannot touch?
8. Paul wrote “rejoice always” from a prison cell, which means this joy is possible even in hardship. Where in your life is it hardest to rejoice right now? What would it look like to rejoice “in the Lord” there, not by pretending the difficulty away, but by turning to the One who is near?
9. This passage promises peace, but it does not promise that God will always remove the trouble or grant the specific outcome we ask for. Why is it important to see that the peace of God is a gift that guards our hearts even when circumstances do not change, rather than a technique for getting what we want or a guarantee of a trouble-free life? How does this protect us from a “name it and claim it” view of prayer and anchor us instead in trusting God’s wisdom and goodness?
10. Look back across Philippians 4:4-7, with its call to rejoice in the Lord, its command to trade anxiety for prayer with thanksgiving, and its promise of guarding peace. Name one specific anxiety you will start bringing to God this way, and one way this passage is reshaping what you do with worry when it comes.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Peter 5:6-7, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you; Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus' teaching on anxiety and the Father who feeds the birds and clothes the lilies; Psalm 55:22, cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; John 14:27, the peace Christ gives, not as the world gives; Colossians 3:15-17, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, with thankfulness.