

LIVING ABOVE ANXIETY

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PHILIPPIANS 4: 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

A few years ago I was working with a medical/evangelistic group in Brailla, Romania. It was customary to have one of the group give a devotion each morning. On one occasion during the week, a beautiful teen-aged Romanian girl, very musically gifted, gave the devotion from 2 Tim 1:7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. She explained this verse so simply that I was struck anew with its power. I had read it scores of times, had heard sermons preached on this verse, had, in fact, preached sermons on it myself, but this time, as Scripture often does, it had more impact upon me. I saw anew that those of us who serve God are often tempted to fear, and oftentimes allow our weaknesses to overpower our commitment to preach and to live the Gospel. Like fear and timidity, our anxieties hurt both us, and our witness. In Philippians 4:5-7 Paul preaches Good News to his much loved Philippian Church, and to us, as he tells us that we can live above anxiety.

I. We Can Overcome Anxiety, First of All, Simply Because We Are Christians.

Paul reminded his Philippian disciples that they were Christians, and since they were, they were to act as Christians. "Let your moderation be known unto all," is the King James translation. Other translations say "Forbearance" for "Moderation." The meaning of the word seems to be, "Be patient and kind unto all." Could we not say that it means "Be who you are, and you are a Christian?" We are to be Christian so that we may lead others to become Christians. Our life is to be a light to guide them to the Light of the World.

A. One reason we can live above anxiety is because we have overcome already Finitude Anxiety. I use that term with reference to Dr. Wayne Oates, one of my favorite professors at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He had such brilliant insight into human personality and behavior that his scintillating lectures were sources of light and inspiration to his students. He coined the phrase Finitude Anxiety to show the angst and anxiety that we all have being human. We are finite. We must die. We carry that consciousness of our vulnerability with us all the time. When we travel we recognize that one mistake and we must die. We also are always aware that someday our time will run out. Our mortality haunts us with the truth of death, and we are ever anxious about it.

But we who know Christ as our Savior and Lord, we who have experienced spiritual renewal and rebirth, we who have believed that His words are certain who said, "Because I live you shall live also", -- we who are truly Christian have already faced and defeated the anxiety over death in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our sins are forgiven. We have been justified in Christ. On the basis of One Perfect Life, lived and sacrificed for sin, a Perfect God has forgiven all who accept as theirs His Perfect Life, thereby proving that the Perfect God, who hates sin, is both Just and a Justifier of all who truly believe.

B. Let me coin another phrase for another type of anxiety, akin to Finitude Anxiety. I call it Accountability Anxiety. Hebrews 9:29 graphically reminds us—“And as it is appointed to men once to die, but after that the judgment.” Death—then Judgment! Finitude Anxiety—then Accountability Anxiety. In a word, the Bible reminds us that death is followed by an accounting for our deeds during our lifetime. That accounting follows death. Paul writes that we should let our moderation, our pleasant-patience, be known unto all, for the Lord is at hand! This reference is to the return of Jesus in Judgment. We are accountable to our Creator, our Designer, our Maker. We were designed for a purpose, and all of us know that we fail miserably to live up to God’s purposes for our lives. We cannot judge our lives by those who live around us. Rather we must judge our lives by whether or not we have fulfilled or are fulfilling the purpose for our being. Why were we created? Why are we here? Are we living in the purpose of Him who designed us? Like Finitude Anxiety, we all have Accountability, or Purpose, Anxiety. The deeper questions of our inner-being are these: Have we made the contribution to the world we were sent here to make? Are we fulfilling our purpose in life, or will we die having failed to do so? One of the major words for sin in the New Testament is defined as ‘missing the mark’. It is as if one shoots an arrow at a target and the arrow falls far short of the target. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” That is to say that we all have fallen short of the mark that God sets for us. He has designed us to be so much greater than we actually are. But this is precisely where Grace comes in. By faith in Christ, God accounts us as Righteous. Luther wrestled with this issue of Righteousness, and found the answer when he read in Romans that the Just (the righteous) shall live by faith. Abraham believed God and it was accounted unto him for righteousness. The early Christians faced crucifixions, wild animals, and beheadings, and were unafraid because they knew that Christ would greet them as he did Stephen in their martyrdom. They had no anxiety about death or judgment. They were ready to give an accounting to their Lord; and they would give a good accounting. We may be poor examples of Christ, indeed, but we can daily live in such a way that we will be able to give a good account for the deeds done in our bodies. We can live above either Finitude Anxiety or Accountability Anxiety simply because we are Christians. The Lord is at hand!

II. We Can Also Live Above Anxiety by Doing Something About Our Own Anxieties.

The Bible says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything...” We are commanded not to be anxious. The obvious implication is that anxiety is sin. John Wesley once said that he had just as soon curse or swear as worry. Jesus said, “Take no thought for tomorrow.” Worrying cannot change the situation, as He said.

A. So, then, our first step is to stop—stop worrying! God would not command us to do what, by His help, we could not do. Our will is a very powerful weapon, and we should use it for good. Perhaps you have heard about the man who said to another, “I am in deep credit card debt. Besides that I have just lost my job, my car has been repossessed, and my home is in foreclosure, but I’m not worried.” The other man, astounded, said, “Man, how can you keep from worrying about that?” The first man said, “Well, it’s easy. You see I just hired a professional worrier and I don’t have to worry. He does it for me.”

The second man said, “Wow, what an idea! But how much do you pay him.” The first man answered, “I agreed to pay him \$50,000.00 a year.” The second man’s shocked reaction was, “With your financial situation, how will you possibly pay him?” The first man answered, “That’s his worry, not mine.”

We don’t need a professional worrier; we do a pretty good of worrying all by ourselves. But we should not. We must willfully decide not to be anxious—about anything!

B. That cannot be done without God’s help. So the next step is to turn our Problems into Prayers. “In everything” we are to act by acquiring the help of our Heavenly Father. We must pray! Ruth Bell Graham tells about being gripped by anxiety once when travelling overseas. She became so anxious about her wayward son that she could not sleep. She tried to pray, but the anxiety grew worse. Then she felt that God said to her, “Quit studying your problems and start studying the promises.” She quickly arose from bed and opened her Bible. She opened it to the very verses of our study: “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer...” As she prayed, and did what Scripture said, she thanked God, thanked Him for giving her this son. She thanked him for the things she had learned in dealing with these very human problems. She learned that in the giving of thanks in prayer that God gave her the great gift of God’s absolute peace. By thanking God she did what the Bible said we must do.

The exposition of this verse in the Interpreters Bible is well worth quoting regarding true prayer:

“It involves first the attitude of waiting upon God; then it means that in our weakness we ask His help; then it requires we state clearly what we want from God; then it means that in our weakness we ask His help; then it requires we state clearly what we want from God, believing that He will give it. But along with all this, there must be the spirit of thanksgiving. We cannot ask God for new mercies unless we are mindful of those He has bestowed already. The unthankful man cannot pray, for he has no real sense of the goodness of God.”

Through prayer we can live above anxiety.

III. Finally, to Live Above Anxiety Is to Live in God’s Peace. God’s peace is the deep peace, the Shalom that Jesus promised. Our generation is crying, “Peace, peace”, but has very little of it. Like the man in the commercial, many are ‘in debt up to their ears’ and hide it with deceptive smiles. We look at the rich, the famous, the powerful, and we think that at least they have it all. Then we hear about their problems, we see their addictions, we read about their broken home lives and their broken personal lives, and we are reminded once again that the road to peace comes only through trust in God. We pray because we have to pray. Without prayer, there is no Peace.

But when we turn our problems into prayers, we have Peace; and that Peace, that Shalom, is God’s peace that literally ‘surpasses all thought’ and ‘overtops our understanding.’ But not only does that Peace surpass all thought, that Peace, as Barclay writes in his commentary, stands like a sentinel, as a guard to guard our hearts and minds. Thus, when the Will acts with God, God’s peace guides the Heart and Mind. Our hearts are vulnerable to all sorts of hurt; and our minds are vulnerable to all sorts of belief. When God’s peace stands as a sentinel, our minds and hearts are at rest in God’s will. In God’s Peace we can Live Above Anxiety.