

Killing Anxiety

Philippians 4:6-7

Extravagant Grace, Part 3

Years ago someone sent me an article from the U. S. Government Peace Corps Manual for its volunteers who work in the Amazon Jungle. I tried to verify it – and could only come up with the fact that it evidently was included in an early 1970's manual.

It gives the volunteer 10 points to remember in case they are pursued by an anaconda.

I looked up Anaconda in my encyclopedia. This snake happens to be one of the largest snakes in the entire world.

A mature anaconda can reach lengths of more than 30 feet and weigh up to 300 pounds or more.

If you're in danger of being swallowed by an anaconda – which, by the way, feeds on young crocodiles and pigs – here are the 10 points to remember.

- Point #1: Do not attempt to run away; the snake is faster than you are;
- Point #2: Immediately lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight against one another;
- Point #3: Tuck your chin in;
- Point #4: Lie still as the snake nudge you and climbs over your body (he's measuring you);
- Point #5: After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow, beginning at your feet – lie still and permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles.
- Point #6: Keep in mind this will take a long time.
- Point #7: Do not panic.

- Point #8: When the snake has swallowed you to your knees, slowly reach down with your knife and gently slide it into the side of the snake's mouth; then quickly rip upwards, cutting the snake's head and ending its life
- Point #9. Be sure you have your knife;
- Point #10. Keep your knife sharp.

Listen, just reading these 10 points would give anybody second thoughts about volunteering with the Peace Corp.

The truth is you happen to live in a world just as dangerous to your spiritual and mental and emotional well-being as a volunteer with the Peace Corp in the Amazon.

You have plenty of things to worry about in the jungle maze of your own life.

What can consume you probably isn't gonna be an anaconda, but something just as capable of swallowing whole your sense of joy and courage and trust . . . it's a deadly serpent called anxiety.

The truth is, it's faster than you are – it can catch up to you at just about any time, day or night. It can slither around your heart and mind measure you up and down – and it isn't simply interested in nibbling here and there – it wants to swallow you whole.

It isn't any surprise that the Lord dealt with this in His famous sermon on the Mount – in fact, He spent more verses on worrying subject than on just about any other subject.

When Matthew copied the Lord's sermon manuscript into His Gospel account, people were living in incredibly difficult conditions; water was scarce; food was a daily acquisition; the average

worker was paid at the end of every day, rather than weekly or monthly, and they would take care of the need they had for food, effectively, one day at a time; which is why the Lord taught them to pray, “Give us this day, our daily bread.”

They didn’t store food – there wasn’t refrigeration to keep milk or produce fresh; their government didn’t provide social security or benefits; there were no public hospitals or pharmacies; the average worker paid as much as 40% of their income to taxes.

And Jesus Christ preached to them – don’t be anxious . . . don’t be consumed by worry . . . look at the birds of the air – if your heavenly Father can take care of them – will He not take care of you? (*Matthew 6:25*)

In other words, if God has the power to create your life, He has the power to take care of your life.

Yes, times have changed, but people haven’t. We might have refrigeration now and benefit packages and pharmacies on every other corner . . . but the ability to worry about a thousand things hasn’t changed.

One author wrote, “Worries cast shadows on our future; stubborn anxieties work like petty thieves in the dark corners of our thoughts as they pickpocket our peace and kidnap our joy.”ⁱⁱ Well said.

Listen, every Christian – young and old – is at risk. Christians are not immune from anxiety just because they’ve been eternally vaccinated by saving grace.

More than ever, you have to be alert to the slithering danger of anxiety; and let me be as brutally honest as Jesus Christ was when He ended His sermon points on worry by saying that every single day is filled with trouble (*Matthew 6:34*).

You will never master this serpent; you will never outlive it; you will never be able to outrun it . . . it comes after you every day – some days more relentlessly than others.

You can’t tame worry . . . you have to kill it over and over and over again. When you think it’s gone for good . . . it comes back.

Worry is like the weeds in my yard . . . guess what? They’re back. Oh joy oh delight. Now if there was anybody on the planet that had an excuse to worry, it would be the Apostle Paul. As he writes to his friends in Philippi, he would have been forgiven if he’d written, “I’m eaten up with worry . . . I wasn’t expecting any of this; I had asked

you and all the other churches to pray for me that I would eventually make it to Rome to be refreshed and spiritually productive in the churches in Italy but God didn’t answer my prayer like we prayed it – and now I’m chained to Roman guards every single day and at the same time the churches here in Rome have effectively abandoned me. I am consumed with anxiety about the future . . . my joy and my peace has been swallowed alive.”

Instead . . . if you’ll take your copy of his letter to the Philippians and turn to *chapter 4 and verse 4*, **Paul instead writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5. Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.**

Make it your resolution to be joyful . . . make it your reputation to be a gentleman or a lady . . . and don’t forget – the Lord is near.

And then he drops this bombshell of a command – *verse 6. Be anxious for nothing.*

Be anxious for nothing! This isn’t an option for Christians who are more mellow than others – for believers who are not so tightly wound or excitable or emotional.

This is a command for every believer – and the first thing contained in this command is something Paul tells all of us to stop. Stop worrying.

And again, Paul leaves no loophole here in the text. Read this more woodenly or literally and Paul is commanding with this imperative, “*Do not under any circumstance worry about anything.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

The word Paul uses here for anxious or worry means to be pulled in different directions. In other words, our hopes pull us in one way and our fears pull us in another; our understanding of scripture pulls us this way and our minds and hearts pull us the other way.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our English word for worry comes from the old German word wurgen which means to choke – to strangle. And over time it came to refer to mental strangulation . . . literally being bound with anxieties.^{iv}

Paul, perhaps more than anyone, knew that it doesn’t do you any good. Worry strangles your faith; it chokes off your praise; it throttles back your courage. It never builds you up – it only tears you down. And it doesn’t help you get ready for anything in life.

If whatever you’re worried about happens, worry doesn’t prepare you for it; and if it doesn’t happen, worry robs you of the joy that it never happened.

Vance Havner, the old North Carolina evangelist – now with the Lord – put it into homespun language when he said, “Worry is like a rocking chair – it gives you something to do, but it never takes you anywhere.”^v

Now we all know this, right? We already know that worry is useless and destructive . . . it even effectively sides us with the Enemy who tells us that God isn’t really interested in us; God isn’t worth trusting . . . so you’re on your own . . . and you’d better start worrying.

We know this about worry . . . and the Philippian believers probably knew it too. Some of them may have personally heard the Lord preach on the subject of worry years earlier.

And most devotionals and sermons prove the point that worry is dangerous; the Bible commands that we stop it . . . and we as Christians sit in our seats and decide to do a better job at stopping it the next time it starts swallowing us up to our knees.

We’ll pull out our little knife and we’re going to kill it – we’ll put a stop to it.

Worry is perhaps the greatest thief of the Christians joy – but to tell ourselves to quit worrying will never catch the thief. And that’s because worry is actually an inside job.^{vi}

And the battle has nothing to do with the circumstances of life; it isn’t stealing our joy because our life is worse off than someone else’s – that you’ve got more problems or challenges than somebody else.

Look at Paul – confined; his prayers effectively answered differently than he wanted; under house arrest; heading for a trumped up court with a biased emperor and he’ll soon be given the death sentence – and he’s the one telling us to stop worrying.

Okay, Paul . . . we will all try to stop worrying . . . in fact, we’re gonna try harder . . . thank you so much for this verse! But wait, therein lies our problem. That isn’t all he says about it.

Notice the next phrase – *be anxious for nothing* – now notice, *but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

Paul begins with this comprehensive negative – don’t worry about anything; and now this comprehensive positive – pray about everything.^{vii}

He doesn’t just tell us something to stop – he tells us something to start. And you have to do both.

Let me ask you something – which wing on an airplane is absolutely necessary? The left one or the right one? They both are.

If you want to kill anxiety, you don’t just stop something, you have to start something. In fact, you have to do both of them or it will never fly!

So this is what you stop – the habit of worrying. And this is what you start – the practice of praying.

Now Paul uses three words here for the same practice of talking with the Lord.

- The first word is *prayer*:

This word is the general term for talking with God. It can happen anywhere at any time. But keep in mind that prayer is exclusively for Christians.^{viii}

All other prayers are exercises of piety with words that float no higher than the ceiling.

Jesus Christ said in *John 14:4, I am the way, the truth and the life – no man comes to the Father except through Me.*

That not only applies to living with God the Father, but talking to God the Father.

Jesus is the only *Mediator between the living Triune God and mankind (1 Timothy 2:5); Christ is the mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 9:15).*

It isn’t the Buddha; it isn’t Krishna and it isn’t Mary either.

- People might spend the better part of their day devoted to meditation and prayer;
- Devotees might spend time spinning of prayer wheels – believing that every time the wheel spins around, the prayer attached to the wheel mystically ascends to God;
- Sincere people might light candles or work through a dozen Hail Mary’s;
- People might chant in jungle clearings or cry out a prayer in some calamity.

Listen, no prayer offered to anybody but God the Father through God the Son gets heard; and no prayer offered to God the Father apart from a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ has every reached – so to speak – God, our Heavenly Father. It’s just words.

One of the misguided efforts of the church has been to argue that prayer ought to be kept in schools, or in the senate or before the session of the Supreme Court or at the inauguration of the President.

The real issue is not whether or not prayer takes place, but whether or not faith in God through Jesus Christ exists.

And if it doesn't, you're wasting your time. Why in the world would the church focus on the liturgy and overlook the relationship?

I remember years ago being invited to pray with a group of pastor's downtown at the national day of prayer. And when I arrived and walked up on the stage, they were all huddled together wondering out loud if they ought to pray in Jesus' name and possibly offend the people that were sitting out on the lawn.

I thought to myself, hey, why don't we all just offend God – and ignore His Son who is the only conduit – the only mediator between us and God.

We have an Asian couple who recently came to faith in Christ; both from unbelieving families in China. The wife came down after an evening service and with tears in her eyes said to me, "I now believe in Jesus Christ."

I met with them a few days ago as they are now finishing the GreenHouse new member's class and as we wrapped up our meeting I prayed and afterward they smiled and said, "We are learning to do that . . . praying . . . just like you would talk to a friend."

Talking to God – because you are interested in developing your friendship with Him, is prayer.

- The second word Paul uses is *supplication*: And he's not simply being redundant. Your translation might read *petition*.

The word refers to praying with urgency about whatever issue it is that concerns you.

Paul used the word in this letter already because he and the Philippian believers were going through the same struggle of suffering for their faith.^{ix}

- The third word Paul uses is *request*:

This word refers to simply bringing to the Lord any specific need you might have.

And notice that you make your requests to God. Yes, He already knows what you need. But He wants full disclosure from you. And in the giving of

requests to Him you acknowledge openly your dependence entirely upon Him.

I read recently what a church planter wrote about learning how to pray. He was literally consumed by planting this church and had subtly begun to think as if it all depended on him; it wasn't long before he eventually couldn't sleep at night, he was so filled with worry and anxious thoughts about the church. He got a lesson from his little boy one afternoon that he never forgot. He writes, "When we moved into our current house, I saved the heaviest piece of furniture for last – the desk from my office.. As I was pushing the desk with all my might across the floor, my four-year-old son came over and asked if he could help. So together we started sliding it across the floor. He was pushing and grunting as we inched our way along. After a few minutes, my son stopped pushing and looked up at me and said,

"Dad, you're in my way." So I stepped back as he tried to push the desk by himself. Of course, it didn't budge. I realized he had thought all along that he was making the desk move, instead of me.^x

How easy it is to lose our focus and our perspective. Prayer has a way of getting it right again.

I love what one linguist pointed out here – when Paul writes – *let your requests be made known to God* – the preposition "to" – "to God" – pictures prayer as orienting you toward God.^{xi}

In other words, prayer refocuses the lens of life. We get so focused on things down here – prayer orients us back toward God; we get troubled or enamored or worried about stuff down here – prayer gets us reoriented to God up there.

We get muddled on earth – prayer constantly reorients us to Heaven.

Paul uses three words about prayer and then he makes one very important condition to overcoming worry – make all your prayers and supplications and requests with this attitude of thanksgiving!

Listen, here's the brutal truth – without thanksgiving – most often our praying is spiritualized complaining.

And our prayer list is nothing more than whining our way through what we didn't get and what we think we really oughtta have and why God's timing is way off for not come through with it all yet.

Pray with this overarching attitude of thanksgiving. Warren Wiersbe wrote, "Even God the Father enjoys hearing His children say, 'Thank You!' every once in a while."^{xii}

Wouldn't that be great?! Now listen, this doesn't mean that everything we bring to God isn't something we've gotta be thankful for. Lord, there's this anaconda and he's up to my knees and I just wanna thank You for it. Or, my heart is broken and I'm really trying to be thankful about it, like you said here.

That not what Paul means; he doesn't mean that everything you bring to God you can be thankful for. He means, everything you bring to God, you can thank Him:

- for overseeing it;
- for strengthening us to walk through it;
- for planning to resolve it one day according to His will;
- for directing all of it toward His own perfect conclusion for our lives.

Praying with thanksgiving means that you're praying with a willing understanding that God will give you what you want whenever you want whatever He wants.

One author wrote that when he was 10 years old, after hearing in church that if I believed, I would receive whatever I asked for in prayer (Matthew 21:22), I was thrilled. I remember running outside later that afternoon, standing on our driveway, closing my eyes real tight and praying, "God, I want to fly like Superman. And I believe you can do it; so I'll jump and you take it from there." I jumped 4 times . . . and never went anywhere.^{xiii}

I must have done it wrong . . . or maybe God wasn't listening . . . or maybe I didn't have enough faith . . . or maybe I didn't deserve it after all.

That's why Jesus taught His disciples to pray – ***Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).***

Listen, how do you imagine God's will is done in heaven? How do you imagine the angels respond to the will of God? Debate? Disagreement? A bad attitude? Higher wages and more vacation time?

The angels live to obey Him . . . prayer is another way of revealing to us whether or not we really plan to . . . or want to.

Listen, beloved, we can be confident that God will answer our prayer in exactly the same way we would want Him to if we knew everything He knew too, when we prayed it.

It's only when we start praying with thanksgiving that He's in control over *everything* that we begin to stop worrying about *anything* (repeat).^{xiv}

This is what you stop – worrying.
This is what you start – praying

Finally;

This is what you can expect

Notice *verse 7. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

And the peace of God – watch this – this peace – this serenity doesn't come from you, it emanates from – it is sourced from the very character of God.

And as you share with God every need and every request with surrendered thanksgiving, God shares with you His character – and in His character there is not one hint of worry or anxiety.

So His peace becomes your peace. This peace is not natural, it is supernatural. Paul adds – it surpasses all comprehension.

It transcends intellectual powers, human analysis, human insights and human understanding. It is superior to human scheming, human devices, and human solutions, since its source is the God whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are unfathomable (Romans 11:33).^{xv}

So the real challenge of the Christian life is not worrying about how to eliminate every unpleasant circumstance or even understand them; but how to trust your infinite, wise, powerful God.^{xvi}

Who lavishes His grace on us . . . more than we can comprehend or know. And since we cannot generate this peace – during times of suffering and pain and confusion and loss – this peace is a gift from God.

It becomes yet another demonstration of the extravagant grace of God.

I wonder if Paul made a play on words here on purpose. As he shifts in his seat, making the chains around his wrists rattle – causing the guards on either side of him to stir from their afternoon nap; Paul writes here with subtle praise – the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

It's as if he says, I want you to know that these guys aren't guarding me . . . that's what it looks like . . . but I want you to know that God's peace is standing guard over me. I'm being guarded by the peace of God – and it's guarding – notice here, *my*

heart – that’s what I’m feeling; it’s guarding **my mind** – that’s what I’m thinking.

And the peace of God will stand guard over you too, Paul promises them and us – this audacious, supernatural promise; whenever you pray with thanksgiving for God’s purpose over everything, you will worry about nothing.

I love the Puritan prayer from generations ago that goes like this:
Heavenly Father, My faith is in Thee, My expectation is from Thee . . . I accept Thy word, acquiesce to Thy will; rely on Thy promise; trust Thy providence; I have cast my anchor in the port of peace, knowing that my past, present and future are in nail-pierced hands.^{xvii}

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i Chuck Swindoll, Getting Through the Tough Stuff (Word Publishing, 2004), p. ix

ii J. Dwight Pentecost, The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians (Zondervan, 1973), p. 189

iii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Joyful: Philippians (Victor Books, 1978), p. 112

iv Charles R. Swindoll, Questions Christians Ask (Insight for Living, 1989), p. 19

v Sam Gordon, Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy (Ambassador, 2004), p. 161

vi Wiersbe, p. 113

vii G. Walter Hansen, The Letter to the Philippians (Apollos, 2009), p. 290

viii James Montgomery Boice, Philippians (Baker Books, 2000), p. 239

ix Adapted from Hansen, p. 290

x Adapted from Kyle Idleman, Not a Fan (Zondervan, 2011), p. 96

xi Ibid

xii Wiersbe, p. 114

xiii Larry Crabb, “*Great Expectations*” Pray Magazine (November/December, 2006), p. 34

xiv Adapted from Hansen, p. 290

xv John MacArthur, Philippians (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 284

xvi Adapted from MacArthur, p. 284

xvii Adapted from The Valley of Vision (Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 296