

# Peace in a Pandemic: Battling Anxiety in the midst of Crisis

Philippians 4:6–7

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## Introduction

Well, in the midst of the global pandemic of the Coronavirus, we find ourselves in a time when it is easy to worry. The world is in a panic. And, in some sense, with good reason. There is a dangerous virus, with no known cure or proven treatment, spreading across the globe at an exponential pace. With each passing day, we hear of disproportionate increases in the death toll, new reports of the severity of symptoms, new reports of younger and healthier people contracting the virus and suffering severe complications from it. The other day I came across a Facebook post from an unbelieving friend of mine from college. And it was sobering in its simplicity. She just very honestly confessed, “Ok, I’m getting scared now.” That’s not unreasonable. What if I get sick? What if my spouse or my kids get sick? My parents or my grandparents fall into the “at-risk” category; some of them are older and have underlying conditions that predispose them to complications from all of this. What if we’re one of the unfortunate ones who wind up sequestered in a hospital room, prohibited from seeing friends and family in person, unable to breathe without a ventilator? And what if that’s the rest of my life?

And it’s not only the world that’s in a panic. The church is also facing significant temptation to be anxious during this time. On top of what I just mentioned, we’re all grounded, locked down and sheltering in place, trying our best not to come within six feet of other human beings. School is canceled and the kids are trying to do distance education for the rest of the year. Many adults are working from home; that’s if they can work at all. The gyms are closed, the beaches are closed, the hiking trails are closed. Restaurants are take-out only. Going to the grocery store can feel like an episode of Survivor, combined with amusement-park-length lines. We’re away from our church family, and fellowship groups, and Bible studies, and the ministries we serve in. Governors are threatening to permanently close churches who do decide to gather during this time, sparking serious concerns about governmental overreach and religious liberty.

And perhaps worst of all, we just don’t know when anything is going to go back to normal. The indefiniteness and uncertainty of all of this—the fear of the unknown, coupled with our own helplessness—is a cause for anxiety. The overwhelming majority of us are going to survive the Coronavirus. But with virtually the entire American economy shut down potentially for months, it’s not going to be easy for the economy to just pick back up again. Businesses have already closed down because they’re unable to recoup their losses. People have lost their jobs. Even

though so many of us will make it, what's waiting for us on the other side of this thing? We are living in a time when it is easy to worry.

But in the face of all of those concerns—most of them legitimate concerns about our families' health and well-being, concerns that seem so basic and so foundational to the very fabric of our lives—the Word of God cuts entirely across the grain of all of that and has the audacity to command us, with utter simplicity, to “Be anxious for nothing.” “Well, yeah, I understand that’s the *ideal*, but this is a pandemic! Surely God understands—” “Be anxious for nothing.” “No, I mean, I get it. Don’t sweat the small stuff. But this—” No! “Be anxious for *nothing*.”

But God’s Word doesn’t only lay this duty upon our shoulders. It also strengthens our hands to perform this duty by telling us how. While the world literally drives itself crazy looking for the cure for anxiety in positive thinking, in the opinions of “experts,” in prescription medication—the cure for anxiety has been clearly prescribed in a two-thousand year-old publication that the life coaches and the wellness professionals, and the gurus, and the psychiatrists have managed to overlook! Here, in the pages of Scripture, in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church of Philippi, we find the antidote to anxiety and the prescription for peace—even in a pandemic.

And it comes in the context of Paul’s remarks on the pursuit of spiritual stability. In the opening verse of chapter 4, he exhorts the Philippians, “Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, *in this way stand firm* in the Lord, my beloved.” And this is something we want. We want to be a steadfast church. As followers of Jesus, we want to be stable people. We don’t want to be shaken and thrown about by every false teaching, or persecution, or interpersonal conflict, or severe temptation, or trying affliction. We want to stand! And this passage tells us how.

Verses 2 and 3 tell us that one means of spiritual stability is *unity*. If we’re going to stand, as a church, we must be diligently devoted to preserving unity in the body of Christ. Verse 4 tells us a second means is *joy*. A steadfast church relentlessly pursues their joy in Christ. When we’re satisfied in Christ—the one who never leaves us nor forsakes us—we won’t be tempted to be shaken by uncertain and volatile circumstances. These things change; but Christ doesn’t change! And He is always with us. And if our joy is in Him, then our joy doesn’t change. Verse 5 speaks of *gentleness*. When the people of God devote themselves to unity by pursuing their joy in Christ, they become free to deal gently with one another. And that makes for a steadfast church.

And then in verses 6 and 7, we find a fourth means of cultivating spiritual stability. If we are going to stand firm in the Lord, we must also battle all forms of anxiety by means of thankful prayer. Let’s look at our text. Paul writes, “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.”

It's difficult to overstate the importance of mortifying the sin of anxiety in the Christian life. And that's because anxiety is a something of a "gateway" sin. *Many* other sins spring from anxiety. Anxiety about others' opinions of you can lead to lying to save face. Anxiety about finances leads to coveting, greed, stinginess, and even theft. Anxiety about health can make you impatient, irritable, and abrasive. If anxiety could be severed at its *root*, so many other sins would wither. So much is that the case that Martyn Lloyd-Jones regards it a test of the genuineness of our faith in Christ. He writes, "Perhaps nothing provides such a thorough test of our faith and of our whole Christian position as just this matter. It is one thing to say that you subscribe to the Christian faith; it is one thing, having read your Bible and abstracted its doctrine, to say, 'Yes, I believe all that, it is the faith by which I live.' [It's another thing to live by it.] ... It is a subtle and delicate test of our position because it is such an essentially practical test. It is far removed from the realm of mere theory. You are in the position, you are in the situation, these things are happening to you, and the question is, what is your faith worth at that point? Does it differentiate you from people who have no faith?" (*Life of Peace*, 166).

GraceLife, we want to be a people who answers, "Yes," to that question. Surely, we want to be able to say that, "Yes, my faith in Christ and in His promises is a living and breathing reality that protects me from anxiety in the most trying of circumstances, in a way that is manifestly different than those who have no faith." And so we must be equipped to engage in this battle against anxiety, and against the unbelief from which it springs. And we'll look to this text of God's Word to equip us, as we examine what Paul has to say about the antidote to anxiety and the prescription for peace.

We'll outline our thoughts according to the **three components** that make up this text. First, we have **the prohibition** against anxiety in the first part of verse 6. Second, **the prescription** for thankful prayer in the second half of verse 6. And third, **the promise** of God's peace in verse 7. The prohibition, the prescription, and the promise.

## I. The Prohibition: Be Anxious for Nothing (v. 6a)

First, let us consider **the prohibition**. Verse 6 says plainly: "Be anxious for nothing."

Now, in order to understand the nature of that prohibition—of what precisely it is that we are to avoid at all costs—we have first got to understand what Paul does *not* mean by this command. In the first place, he is not sanctioning an apathetic laziness or a whimsical foolishness in which a person abandons all diligent planning for the future. The Proverbs say that the plans of the diligent succeed (Prov 21:5), and that an idle man will suffer hunger (Prov 19:15). To be anxious for nothing does not mean to be dispossessed of all responsible concern or to be careless. And so those who imagine that it's somehow a display of great faith to sit around and do nothing to

improve their circumstances while they “wait on the Lord”—or while they heedlessly and foolishly put themselves in positions to be affected by this virus in an adverse way, because, “Well, God is sovereign, and I’m immortal until His purposes for me are done,”—they have surely misunderstood the Bible’s teaching on this point. We pray and trust the sovereignty of God *as we plan*, not as a *substitute* for making plans and taking precautions.

Neither is Paul prohibiting all kinds of genuine concern—even troubling concern—in the light of realistically fearful circumstances. In chapter 2 of this same letter, in verse 20, Paul uses this very word for anxiety when he describes Timothy’s virtue. He says, “I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be *concerned* [same word] for your welfare.” So the compassionate and sympathetic concern for the spiritual needs of fellow believers is a virtue. In 1 Corinthians 12:25, Paul tells us that God has given spiritual gifts to the church so that the various members would *care* for one another. Again, it’s the same word for “anxiety.” And Paul himself, being the good pastor that he was, spoke of the daily pressure of *concern* that he had for all the churches in 2 Corinthians 11:28.

And so the Christian who feels no real burden for the sanctification and growth of his fellow believers, who is not anxious to meet the needs of his brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, who is not concerned for the health of the church, is derelict in his duty. So Paul is not forbidding these kinds of genuine, responsible concerns for the people and affairs entrusted into one’s stewardship.

The **prohibition** to be anxious for nothing speaks rather of what we naturally understand as anxiety. Paul is forbidding fretfulness, excessive worry—the harassing, wearying care that troubles the soul, distracts the mind, and paralyzes the hands such that duties are neglected. This is the anxiety that we must banish from our lives. It’s that general spirit of worry that gets a hold of our imagination and says things like, “Sure, everything is OK now, but what if this happens, and it leads to that? Then we’ll be in this condition and we’ll have no way to get out of it!” And Paul is saying that kind of frenzied anxiety arising from the tyranny of our circumstances has no place in the heart of a Christian.

And this teaching is simply an echo of the teaching of Jesus Himself. Turn with me to Matthew 6, to the passage Pastor John led us through so faithfully in our first week of lockdown. In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount—the declaration from the King Himself about what it meant to be a subject of His Kingdom—Jesus spends ten whole verses instructing His disciples on banishing anxiety from their life. Look with me at Matthew 6 verse 25: “For this reason I say to you, do not be worried—or, do not be anxious; same word—about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much

more than they? 27And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? 28And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! 31Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ 32For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. 34So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

You see? Being anxious about these things—that’s a mark of the pagans. The Gentiles are worried about these things, because they don’t have a heavenly Father who cares for them, who knows their needs, and who is sovereign to meet every one of them. But you do! And so when Jesus laments, “O you of *little faith!*” He’s saying that anxiety stems from a failure to *trust* in God’s caring provision for His children. It’s not “just worrying,” as if this were some minor peccadillo. It’s a failure to *believe* in the promises of God. Worrying is disbelief! And so we are commanded to be anxious for *nothing*, because we have a Heavenly Father who is sovereign over *everything*—down to making sure the birds find food and the flowers grow beautifully.

The **prohibition** is exhaustive: no matter what combination of difficult circumstances we find ourselves in, we are not to indulge feelings of sinful anxiety. You say, “Easy for you to say, Mike!” I didn’t write this, friends! Paul wrote this command! And he wasn’t sipping cocktails by the pool when he wrote it! He was under house arrest—something you might be able to relate to a little bit better these last few weeks. But Paul’s house arrest wasn’t sheltering in place! He had been chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day for much of the last two years. And he was awaiting his trial before a psychopath who would decide whether or not to execute him!

The great expositor Alexander MacLaren said, “It is easy for prosperous people, who have nothing to trouble them, to give good advices to suffering hearts; and these are generally as futile as they are easy. But who was he who here said to the Church at Philippi, ‘Be [anxious] for nothing?’ A prisoner in a Roman prison; and when Rome fixed its claws it did not usually let go without drawing blood. ... Everything in the future was entirely dark and uncertain. It was this man, with all the pressure of personal sorrows weighing upon him, who, in the very crisis of his life, turned to his brethren in Philippi, who had far fewer causes of anxiety than he had, and cheerfully bade them” to be anxious for nothing. And when the Philippians considered these truths—where Paul was and what he was facing as he wrote this—I believe they were strengthened all the more to battle every inkling of anxiety that had sought to creep into their hearts. “Certainly if he can be anxious for nothing, we can be anxious for nothing! We have the same God, the same Christ, the same promises!”

And that needs to have the same effect on us, GraceLife. It is a command from the Word of God that is just as binding as, “You shall not steal,” “You shall not commit adultery,” and “You shall not murder.” But you say, “Mike, how can Paul say that? In this fallen world? In this world plagued with untreatable diseases, and healthcare shortages, and collapsing economies, and job layoffs, and increased cost of living, and the necessity of providing for a family? What did Paul know about that?” And here, friends, you need to recall the great doctrine of biblical inspiration. Yes, it was Paul who gave this command, but it wasn’t only Paul who gave this command. Paul is the human author of the Epistle to the Philippians, but it is the Triune God Himself who is its divine Author. And surely our God knows about these circumstances! Surely these concerns have not escaped the consideration of our perfectly-wise, infinitely compassionate God!

And in the face of all of those very real concerns—in full consciousness of all the trials of life in a broken world, even the very trials that we’re presently facing—our infinitely wise God has so superintended the pen of the Apostle Paul as to command us Himself, “Be anxious for nothing.”

## II. The Prescription: Be Prayerful in Everything (v. 6b)

You say, “But how can that be? How in the world can we be expected to be anxious for *nothing*?” And that brings us to our **second point**. Number one: the prohibition. Number **two**: **the prescription**. Look again with me at verse 6: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Here we learn that the way to be anxious for nothing is to pray about everything.

See, the reason we are tempted to become sinfully anxious in the various circumstances of life is because, in one form or another, we believe that our needs will go unmet. As much as we might try to be, we know that we are not in control of everything in our lives; and in an attempt to control the things we can’t control, we worry about them. “I will think about every possible permutation for these circumstances until my mind fully comprehends it!” It gives the illusion of control. “I can’t change anything, but maybe I can think about it so upside-down, backwards and forwards, that I’ll have covered every base and every objection, and I’ll know what to do in every circumstance. *Then I’ll be in control!*” But Paul teaches us in this text that the antidote for anxiety comes not by retreating within our own minds in search of the illusion of control, but from presenting our petitions to the sovereign God of the universe—who actually *is* in control of everything in our lives, and who has promised, Philippians 4:19, to supply all our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

The very things that would tempt us to be anxious, these very things we are to take before the throne of grace in prayer. The contrastive parallelism is very apparent: “Be anxious for *nothing*, *but*, in *everything* … let your requests be made known to God.” Just as the prohibition was

exhaustive, so also is the **prescription** exhaustive. In all the situations and circumstances of life that would be the occasion of sinful anxiety, we are to turn these troubles into specific requests that we make of our Father, who delights to give good gifts to His children (Matt 7:11), who causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28), whose good pleasure, Jesus says, is to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32). John Calvin said, in the midst of all our trials, “this is our consolation, this our solace—... to disburden in the bosom of God everything that harasses us” (119). What a beautiful picture! To run into our Father’s arms, to lay our heads upon His chest, and to unload upon the bosom of God every burden that harasses us. Or, in the language of 1 Peter 5:7: “...casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.”

Back in Philippians 4, notice the triple emphasis in verse 6. Paul piles three words for prayer one right on top of the other. He speaks of prayer, supplication, and requests. And so there can be no mistaking Paul’s point here: the antidote for anxiety is the kind of petitionary prayer that makes specific requests of our Heavenly Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This prayer that is the pathway to peace is not a sort of semi-conscious meditative state that some people call prayer. It is not a turning in on yourself, and achieving some sort of heightened state of consciousness or transcendental oneness with some generic higher power. That’s paganism—an Eastern mysticism baptized in the polluted waters of Western narcissism, materializing in authors like Tony Robbins, Oprah Winfrey, and Joel Osteen, and a host of other life coaches coming in the name of spiritual enlightenment.

But peace is not to be found within ourselves. You’d think that would be somewhat self-evident: the whole reason you’re looking for peace is because you discern its absence in yourself! Inside of you is where the anxiety is! Looking for peace by pressing more deeply into the caverns of your own sinful heart is something like pressing further into a cave in search of light, or further into the ocean in search of dry ground. You see, the world flatters itself into the delusion that our problems are outside of us, and that the solution is inside of us. But Scripture tells us that our problems are inside of us, and the solution is outside of us.

And so Paul tells us we have to go outside of ourselves to God. He requires that we make these specific requests known “to God,” or “in the presence of God.” This phrase is *pros ton Theon*, in the Greek. It’s that same phrase in John 1:1 that speaks of Jesus as the Word being *with* God, in His presence. It speaks of communion—of intimate personal relationship. As the psalmist says in Psalm 94:19, “When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul.” Not, “When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, I go even further within myself looking for peace that’s not there”! The cure for anxiety is the sweet divine comfort our Heavenly Father ministers to us as we commune with Him in prayer.

The cure for anxiety will not be found within ourselves. Anxiety over the Coronavirus will not be quelled by assuring one another that, “You got this!” I see that all over the place. “Think positive! You got this! The American spirit will defeat this!” What a pitiful delusion! This is one of those instances where people are looking themselves in the mirror and lying straight to their own faces, hoping they can deaden their conscience and pacify their emotions by retreating from reality. Let me tell you something: You do not “got this”! In and of yourself, you are powerless in the face of this disease! And that’s precisely why you’re worried! There’s no peace to be found within ourselves. We will find peace only as we look away from ourselves and outside of ourselves to the all-powerful, all-sufficient God who works all things after the counsel of His own will.

And this also implies, briefly, that we ought not to pray in vague generalities for God to relieve our anxieties. Sometimes we have the tendency to be vague in our prayers. We say things like, “Lord we pray for Mike...” and then we stop right there. Well what do you pray for Mike? Ask for something specific. That is the kind of thing that Paul is after in this text. The cure for anxiety is not in hurried, quick, microwave requests for a generic peace or calm. Those might be necessary at some times. Sometimes those are all that we can manage: “Lord Jesus, help!” But that’s not what Paul is talking about here. The cure for anxiety is in the quiet submission of an undivided heart that takes specific cares and turns them into specific prayers. “Lord, I am worried about getting sick and dying from this virus. But Your Word tells us that You ordained all the days of my life from before the foundation of the world, that nothing can harm me apart from Your sovereign will, that you work all things for my good, and that ultimately it is far better to depart this life and be with Christ in heaven. Help me to trust the promises of Your Word.”

Paul says that we are to let these specific requests be made known to God. Now, that’s a funny way to put it: to make your requests known to God. Paul’s point in saying that is not to suggest that we need to inform God of something He doesn’t already know. We read the passage in Matthew 6:32, where Jesus says the very reason we ought not to be anxious about our daily necessities is because “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” A few verses earlier in Matthew 6 verse 8, He taught His disciples not to pray with meaningless repetition precisely because “your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” So why does Paul speak this way?

Because when the people of God lay out all of our requests before Him in prayer, we are “casting all our cares on Him,” as Peter says. It is in this full self-disclosure of our neediness and our helplessness that we express our complete and utter dependence upon Him for our welfare. And at the same time we are expressing confident trust in Him to provide for us. We’re openly acknowledging, “Lord, I find myself in a set of circumstances that I just cannot navigate on my own. I am entirely insufficient within myself to do a thing about them. But in the depth of my need, I call out to You who are perfectly sufficient in precisely the ways in which I am

insufficient. Where I am weak, You are strong. Where I am helpless, You are powerful. And because You are the only One sufficient to supply my need, I come to You and ask for Your grace and peace.”

Do you see how that glorifies God? When we call upon Him in the day of trouble—looking to Him as our all-powerful Provider and Deliverer—our need magnifies His sufficiency to meet that need. And so because He delights to display His glory as Deliverer, He delights to deliver us. We magnify His provision by simply being needy, and calling out to Him when we discover that need. How kind and compassionate of God to design things this way: that we can do our duty of glorifying Him simply by being needy, and banking on His provision and power.

And one final thought as we consider this **prescription** for peace. This prayer and supplication in which we are to make our requests known to God is to be characterized in its entirety by thanksgiving: “...in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God.” Thanksgiving is absolutely essential to the kind of prayer that cures anxiety. In fact, it’s so essential that one commentator said, “Prayer without thanksgiving is like a bird without wings: such a prayer cannot rise to heaven, can find no acceptance with God” (Hendriksen, 196).

Now why is that so? Well, first of all, bathing your prayers for peace in thanksgiving ensures that you’re not doubting, questioning, or blaming God in your prayers (cf. MacArthur, 283). In the midst of trying and difficult circumstances, we can be tempted to complain to God about our circumstances, and to rebelliously demand Him to change them. “God, what are you doing? Come on! It’s been weeks! I need to get back to work! I need to pay my bills! I’m praying to you like you command me! What are you waiting for?” But this is not the kind of prayer that avails with God for peace.

As we come to Him in humility, casting ourselves in utter dependence upon Him, making our requests *with thanksgiving* requires that we have subjected our desires to His perfect will. This thanksgiving is not merely an advance thank-you for His eventually answering your requests. Like: “God, please take care of my finances, and thank you in advance.” No, not at all. This thanksgiving is actually acknowledging the absolute sovereignty of God—that even the difficult circumstances that you face in life are gifts of His own Providence, circumstances over which He is in complete control.

Follow me here. If you’re thanking God for everything, like it says in this text—especially for the circumstances that tempt you to be anxious—it means you’re calling to your own mind the reality that God is the providential Lord of your circumstances, the One who ordains whatsoever comes to pass. You don’t thank somebody for something who had no part in bringing it about. There is a rock solid, robust theology of the sovereignty of God in that little phrase, “with

thanksgiving.” God is not just sort of out there somewhere, kind of in control of everything—He’s keeping an eye on certain things but not everything is going the way He’d like, but He’s going to make sure that it’s not going to go too crazy—no. This is not a mere passive allowance of bad things into your life. This is the God who ordains, by the most wise and holy counsel of His will, whatsoever comes to pass.

And by grounding your mind in the truth of His sovereignty, you’re already on the path to peace. Why? Because this sovereign God is also the wise and loving God who is unwavering in His commitment to His glory and your joy. If He is the One in control of your circumstances, and if He as the perfect Father knows how to give good gifts to His children (Matt 7:11), then there’s nothing to be anxious about!

Pastor John puts it helpfully. He writes, “People become worried, anxious, and fearful because they do not trust in God’s wisdom, power, or goodness. … Thankful prayer brings release from fear and worry, because it affirms God’s sovereign control over every circumstance, and that His purpose is the believer’s good (Rom 8:28)” (283). And so Spurgeon models this kind of thankful prayer that is the antidote to anxiety: ““Lord, I am poor. Let me bless You for my poverty and then, O Lord, will You not supply all my needs?” That is the way to pray,” Spurgeon says. ““Lord, I am ill. I bless You for this affliction, for I am sure that it means some good thing to me. Now be pleased to heal me, I beseech You!” ‘Lord, I am in a great trouble, but I praise You for the trouble, for I know that it contains a blessing though the envelope is black-edged! Lord, help me through my trouble!” Martin Luther put it as helpfully as he put it succinctly when he said, “Pray, and let God worry.”

### III. The Promise: The Peace of God will Guard You (v. 7)

And as we take heed to this **prescription** for thankful prayer—as we let our requests be made known to God with thanksgiving—we will receive **the glorious promise** that is presented to us in verse 7. We’ve seen the **prohibition**—be anxious for nothing. We’ve seen the **prescription**—be prayerful in everything. And now we come to the **promise**. Look with me at verse 7: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The sure and tested result of diligently battling against all forms of anxiety by means of thankful prayer is that the peace of God Himself will reign supreme in the hearts and minds of His people.

Now, notice what the text does not say. Paul does not say, “In everything let your requests be made known to God, and God will grant all your requests, summarily removing you from every anxiety-producing situation in your life.” No. He says as you humbly and faithfully call out to God for rescue, trusting Him in His sovereignty to bring to you what is best, even in the midst of your trying circumstances, then the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds from sinful

anxiety. You see? This is not a promise that God will change our circumstances. Praise His name that the Gospel goes deeper than that! This is a promise that God will change *us*! and will give us grace to endure! and will keep us, even in the midst of trouble. That is such a better promise than the ease and comfort that doesn't push us closer to Christ. I've said it before: Grace is so much more glorious a gift than ease. Why? Because Christ is not enjoyed most deeply where He is needed the least. Christ is enjoyed most deeply where He is needed the most. And so Spurgeon says, "I have learned to kiss the wave that thrusts me against the Rock of Ages." The waves—the tumultuous sea—that can be unnerving. We don't want to be lost at sea, tossed to and fro by every wave. But if that wave thrusts us upon the Rock of Ages, the Rock of Christ, I'll take that wave. I will endure under this wave! I will fight in this wave!

And so your purpose is not to eliminate your trials. It's not to escape the pandemic at all costs! Your purpose is to trust God in the trials, and experience the peace that He promises in the midst of the pandemic.

#### A. A Divine Peace

Let's learn more about this peace which we're so bountifully promised here. First, we see that it is **a divine peace**. It is "the peace of God." This peace of God has its origin in the God of peace, which is the name Paul ascribes to God in verse 9. This is the peace that characterizes God Himself. This is the peace which God Himself possesses. God has no anxieties, no worries. He is infinitely happy, infinitely joyful, and infinitely peaceful. Spurgeon calls this peace of God "the unruffled serenity of the infinitely happy God, the eternal composure of the absolutely well-contented God! This," says Paul, "shall possess your heart and mind."

But it's not only the peace that characterizes God; it's the peace that God gives—the peace which comes from God. It's that inward tranquility of the soul that is grounded in the presence and the promises of God (Vincent, 135). One commentator said, "Peace is the smile of God reflected in the soul of the believer. It is the heart's calm after Calvary's storm" (Hendriksen, 196). The Lord Jesus told the disciples in John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." The prophet prays in Isaiah 26:3: "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, Because he trusts in You."

So this is **a divine peace**; it is characterized by God and it is a gift from God.

#### B. A Supra-rational Peace

Secondly, it is **a supra-rational peace**. Not an *irrational* peace, but a *supra*-rational peace. It doesn't *violate* reason, but it certainly *transcends* reason. Look again at verse 7: "And the peace

of God, which *surpasses all comprehension...*" Surpasses all comprehension. This peace transcends all human intellectual powers and capabilities of understanding.

And this means more than just that this peace is so wonderful you can't even fathom it. It means that, but it means so much more than that. This supra-rational character of the peace of God is referring to the fact that the world has absolutely no natural explanation for it. Here you are, a blood-bought disciple and follower of Christ, living in the same fallen world, with the same disappointments, with the same broken relationships, and the same virus permeating the globe that all the unbelievers you come into contact with live in. And in the midst of the deadlines, the kids, the bills, the economy, the political unrest—in the midst of all the storms of this life—here you are: calm, peaceful, even joyful. And the world looks at you, scratches its head, and asks with amazement, "How can you be so calm with everything that's going on? I just don't understand it!" And it's then that you shine the light of the Gospel and say, "What you're seeing is the peace of God that surpasses all comprehension guarding my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Let me tell you more about it."

### C. A Guarding Peace

Well, let *me* tell you more about it. This peace is a divine peace, number one. It is a supra-rational peace. And thirdly, it is a **guarding peace**. This peace of God which surpasses all comprehension "will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

And this word, "guard," is a vivid military term that referred to a garrison—to a "detachment of soldiers who stand guard over a city and protect it from attack" (O'Brien, 498). This would have been a familiar figure for the Philippians, who were living in a Roman colony. And throughout all the Roman colonies there would be garrisons stationed, precisely in order to protect the *pax Romana*—the peace of Rome. And so Paul says, "Just as the Roman soldiers stand together to form a garrison of protection around the walls of this city in order to keep the peace, so will the peace of God itself form a garrison around your hearts and your minds to protect you from the pressures and anxieties that would press upon you."

Why "your hearts and minds"? This is a way of referring to the whole inner person—both the thoughts of the mind and the affections and dispositions of the heart. Now, I find this to be extremely valuable insight into God's own view of the psychology of anxiety. Why would Paul say that the peace of God will guard our *hearts and minds*? Why wouldn't he say that it would guard our neurons and amygdalas? Why wouldn't he say that it would guard our hormones and neurotransmitters? I'm being a tad facetious, but the truth is still the same. Paul identifies anxiety, here, as an issue fundamentally of the heart and mind. At its root, anxiety is a spiritual problem. Now, there might be physical factors that accompany it (and especially that result from it, as research would indicate). But modern psychiatry's attempts to classify anxiety as a disease

is starkly at odds with the implications of this verse. The cure for anxiety is not merely balanced brain chemistry; we need a garrison over our hearts and minds precisely because anxiety is a spiritual issue.

Whatever has your heart has you. Is that fair to say? Whatever has your heart has you: for out of the heart flow the issues of life, Proverbs 4:23. And whatever has your mind has you: as a man *thinketh* in his heart, so is he (Prov 23:7). “The *mind* set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and,” what? “Peace” (Rom 8:6). And so if the heart and the mind are precisely where anxiety attacks, then we need a fortified garrison around both, so that we might be kept from sin, whether in thought or in desire. And that is precisely what we are promised in this verse.

### **Conclusion: In Christ Jesus**

But oh, we mustn’t forget the final phrase, because this makes all the difference. We know where this peace comes from—it’s from God—and we know what we’re to do to get it—to pray with thanksgiving. But where is this peace found? Look at the final three words of our passage: the peace of God that surpasses all comprehension will guard your hearts and minds in Christ. Jesus. And this makes all the difference in the world.

People search for peace in the attainment of sinful pleasures. “If I had enough of my pet sin, if I could glut the appetites of my soul on everything I take pleasure in, then I could have peace.” They search for peace in between the pages of a self-help book. They search for peace in the bottom of a bottle of pills, or in the bottom of a bottle of alcohol. “I’m not going to find it, so I’m just going to deaden my pain. And hopefully there will be peace for me there.” They search for peace within the dark, cavernous recesses of their own corrupt hearts. Some even search for peace in their own good works, laboring for the good of others, thinking that will bring them rest from their conscience. They know God’s standard of perfect righteousness is something they could never attain. That gnaws and eats and their conscience and says, “I’m not good enough, but I’m going to do my best so that my good outweighs my bad!” But peace is found in none of those places. True peace—the peace of God; the peace which surpasses all comprehension; the peace that can truly and effectively guard your hearts and minds from anxiety—is *in Christ Jesus*, and in Christ Jesus alone.

Some of you, as you listen to God’s Word preached, some of you begin to despair. You say to yourselves, “Oh, if only that were possible for me! If only I could lay hold of a life of peace, free from anxiety! But it can’t be. I’ve tried. For years! But it’s impossible!” Yes, it *is* impossible—*outside of Christ!* Apart from a vital union with the Lord Jesus Christ, entered into by grace through faith alone, none of this is possible! Jesus Himself said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

But *in Christ*, friend, it *is* possible! In union with Christ, this peace *is* attainable. And as you search your heart as you hear the Word of God preached, if you find yourself destitute of this *peace*, friend it may very well be because you are destitute of this *Christ*. You don't get one without the other. There is no such thing as peace outside of Christ.

And if as you hear God's Word you find stirring within you a sort of holy attraction to this life of peace—if you find yourself saying, “Oh, I want that! So badly do I want that peace!”—I just bid you to come to Christ, in whom all peace is found. The Bible calls Him the *Lord* of peace (2 Thess 3:16). Elsewhere it says explicitly, “for He Himself *is* our peace” (Eph 2:14). And in still another place we're told that it is the peace *of Christ* that is to rule within our hearts (Col 3:15).

Jesus Himself said, “These things I have spoken to you, so that *in Me* you may have peace.” Friend, do not make the mistake of thinking that you can have the peace *of God* before you have had peace *with God* through repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you would have the peace *of God* this day, make peace *with God* this very moment, by turning from your sins, by abandoning all hope of commanding yourself to God on the basis of your own righteousness, and by putting your trust for acceptance with God entirely in the righteousness of Another: the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived the perfect life of obedience that you were commanded to live but failed to live, and who died the substitutionary death on the cross that you were required to die but couldn't survive, and who rose again in victory over sin and death, and freely promises eternal life and peace to all who come to Him.

What could be stopping you from laying hold of such a glorious, lovely, compassionate Savior? What could hold you back from taking hold of so great and so free a salvation? What sinful pleasures are worth forfeiting eternal life and peace for? What doubts are worth treasuring when the One fairer than the fairest of ten thousand smiles and with outstretched arms says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest”? Sinner, lay them down. Enter through the narrow gate. Come to Christ and live.

And to my brothers and sisters—those who along with me, by grace, have fled to Christ for life and peace—*He* is where true peace is to be found, even in a pandemic. Pursue this peace—fight for it—ever and only here, in Christ, and in worshipful, dependent, confident prayer to our Father through Him, and be anxious for nothing.