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Anxiety and Faith

By Mike Sullivan

Let's take some time to think through this wise teaching from Paul in Philippians:

"Do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:6-7, ESV)

There's so much wisdom and power packed into these two verses. Here Paul empowers us to overcome anxiety and find peace in God. Potent stuff. Let's think through this carefully and wisely. In this article I'd like to focus especially on what Paul says about anxiety and faith.

First, let's understand Paul is not coming down on us and condemning our anxiety as some shameful sin that needs repented of. On the contrary, the tone of these verses is very empowering. He's coming alongside us like a great coach or mentor, challenging us--yes, but also meeting us in our struggle with compassion, encouraging us and inspiring us and guiding us, showing us how to overcome and helping us be transformed.

Next, let's make sure we understand this teaching is not meant to be applied shallowly or superficially. If a brother or sister is struggling with anxiety, it's not enough to just say a prayer or two or twenty and think that every bit of anxiety will automatically go away. If a brother or sister is struggling with anxiety, and we throw a little Philippians 4:6-7 at them in a "buck up little buddy" sort of way, we'll do more harm than good. Often times they *have* been praying—praying a lot and praying hard—and yet the anxiety remains. To hear these verses in any kind of light, trite, cutesey way that implicitly (or tragically too often explicitly) criticizes their faith as "weak" or diagnoses their problem shallowly as a "faith problem" will only heap up discouragement on top of discouragement.

Let's also understand that anxiety is not the opposite of faith or the absence of faith. So many great people of faith were hit with all sorts of mental and emotional struggles: anxiety,

fear, depression, despair, etc. We see this especially in the Psalms. We also see it in Paul himself. Listen carefully to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians:

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a death, and will deliver us, he on whom we have set our hope. And he will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through many." (2 Cor 1:8-11)

Notice especially: "we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength" and "we despaired even of life." Was this a crisis of faith? Did Paul have "weak faith" or a "faith problem" here? Just the opposite. Paul was hit with so much and struggled. But in the struggle, Paul turned to God. It's probably more accurate to say: in the struggle, Paul *kept* turning to God. No doubt he groaned, and cried, and wrestled in prayer--perhaps out loud and perhaps silently in his own mind or in a whisper/mutter to himself--time and time again. He would've had questions. He would've had doubts. He would've been anxious and afraid and depressed. And in all that he kept turning to God, kept anchoring or rooting or grounding himself in God. And on the other side of it all he had greater faith and peace with God.

So is anxiety or any other painful emotion from a lack of faith? No it can be a catalyst for faith and a training ground for faith. Even more it is a painful reality in this present evil age, which God redeems(!) and where God himself meets us and walks with us to lead us to the "more" and "better" he so longs to bless us with.

May our God give us his grace and peace. God bless.

