

The Cure For Anxiety

It was a Friday afternoon in November, 32 years ago.

It was late in the day and I was about to head home from work when the phone rang. It was my boss.

He wanted to see me along with the general counsel and the chief financial officer of our company in a small conference room upstairs.

The call sounded pretty serious.

In a few minutes we were all gathered together and he began to tell us about a disastrous meeting he had had with his boss—the managing director of Nestlé S.A.—in Switzerland the week before.

As a result of that meeting—and the issues that had come up—he had decided to retire from his position as CEO of Nestlé's U.S. operations.

"You'd better look to yourselves," he said. *"I'll be gone by this time next year."*

We knew what that meant. When you're the staff officer of a corporation you are there at the CEO's pleasure, and when he goes, the odds are you will be going too.

I went home and told Karen.

One of our daughters was ill so I took the other two up to McDonald's for hamburgers.

While we were eating dinner a Christian friend of mine who was in the same line of work as I was came over to our table to say hello.

He asked me how things were going at work, so I told him.

He expressed his sympathy and then he mentioned that a few years before he had lost his job and spent nine months trying to find a new one.

I asked him if that hadn't caused him a lot of anxiety, and he said, *"Well, I was anxious for awhile, but then I read Philippians 4:4-7, and my anxiety went away."*

I remember thinking, *"That's nice, but I don't think a few Bible verses are going to make my anxiety go away."*

My daughters and I finished our hamburgers and went home.

The next day, late in the afternoon, I was moping around the house thinking about the situation and Karen asked me if I was worried.

I told her I was, and then the Bible verses my friend had mentioned came to mind: *Philippians 4:4-7*.

I looked them up in the Bible and these were the verses:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again: Rejoice!
Let your forbearing spirit be evident to all: the Lord is near.
Do not be anxious about anything, but with prayer and petition and
thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
And the peace that surpasses all understanding will guard your heart and
mind in Christ Jesus."

I read them a few times and then put the Bible away and went on with my moping.

The next morning was a beautiful, sunny day, and as we were driving to church, I suddenly realized that my anxiety seemed to have gone away.

Strange as it seemed, I felt confident that SOMETHING good was going to come out of my situation.

I had no idea what it would be, but the anxiety I had felt the day before had been replaced by a feeling of optimism.

Somehow, I thought, God would work things out.

Now this was an extraordinary experience for me.

I was a Christian; I believed that Christ died for my sins and I had eternal life, but I didn't do much praying, even less witnessing and sometimes I didn't act very much like a Christian.

I had never had any "visions" or mystical experiences, yet now I had this fresh, new feeling of confidence.

In spite of the fact that I was going to be out of a job and had no immediate prospects of finding a new one, I felt sure that somehow, everything would work out.

I remember thinking: "I guess I have the peace that surpasses understanding."

That morning was a turning point in my life.

In the course of the following nine months, after a lot of prayer and study and struggle, I became convinced that God was calling me into the ministry.

I went off to the seminary and when I completed my studies, our home church—Our Redeemer Lutheran in Solon—called me to be the associate pastor.

Five years later, the senior pastor retired and I was called to be senior pastor.

I served at Our Redeemer for seventeen years and it was truly a labor of love.

Then, for these last nine and a half years I've served as pastor here at Hope, and that too has been a labor of love.

There is power in the Word! Power to take away anxiety and power to change lives.

"Anxiety," you know, is a comparatively modern word.

That doesn't mean people in the past didn't experience it—it just means they didn't have that word to describe it.

But what they felt is something we all wrestle with every day: *we are fearful and uncertain about the future.*

We worry about how things are going to turn out.

We have responsibilities to meet and as we strive to meet them, Murphy's Law is always hanging over our heads.

We get to the point where we can actually expect things to go south, simply because it seems as if they always do.

The motto of our lives becomes: IT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING!

I saw a bumper sticker once that said "Murphy was an optimist."

We can joke about it but it's really no laughing matter.

Anxiety can turn into a chronic disease that can not only give you an ulcer but can eat away at your faith as well.

Even worse, it's a disease we can feel proud of.

Our reasoning can go like this: *"Sure I'm anxious! I'm anxious because I take my responsibilities seriously. Fools and drunks can laugh their way through life, but somebody has to be responsible. And I'm that person, and therefore I have anxiety, because I'm responsible for how things turn out."*

Well, my friend, I have news for you: **you are not responsible for how things turn out.**

Listen to what Jesus said about the needlessness of worrying: *"...do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

The future belongs to God, my friend, and not to you.

You can work your behind off—and you probably do—but things are going to turn out according to God's design, not yours.

Sometimes God's design matches up with your plans, but sometimes it doesn't.

You can plan your children's lives, but you can't live them.

They're going to live their lives the way THEY choose to live them and the odds are that their choices won't line up with yours.

You can build barns and store up gold but you won't be the one to decide how it gets spent.

And all your worrying and your anxiety won't change things one bit.

Jesus says, *"Who by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"*

Or—we might add—to his health or his bank account or his children's welfare or his country's well-being?

Anxiety isn't a cure, it's a disease—a disease that can kill us, both physically and spiritually.

Paul gives us the cure in the words my friend recommended to me thirty-two years ago—words found in this morning's epistle lesson from his *Letter to the Philippians*.

I'd like to read them again: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

My dear worried friends; there is more peace in these words than there is in all the remedies that medical science and pharmacology can—or ever will—provide.

If the problem is anxiety the cure isn't Prozac, it's the peace that surpasses all understanding—the peace that God alone can give you.

The peace God wants to give you through His word.

It's the same peace that the angels announced through their words to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

It is not, as is so often imagined, peace between nations or tribes or even peace within families.

Jesus ruled out that possibility when he said, *"Do not suppose that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."*

Jesus didn't come to bring peace between people; *He came to bring peace between people and God.*

A peace that derives from His love for us.

It's a peace that vanquishes anxiety and gives us trust in God's provident management of all our affairs.

A peace that completely exceeds our powers of comprehension, because it doesn't come from us, it comes from God.

Does this mean that we shouldn't make plans at all?

That we don't need to try to anticipate problems before they materialize?

Should we just "let go and let God," as they say, and live for the present and leave the future to God?

No.

The Bible doesn't tell us not to plan for the future: it just tells us not to be anxious about it.

After all, the Proverb says: "*A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks about and finds nothing.*"

And again, "*Consider...the ant; it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.*"

God didn't put us in this world simply to bask in the present moment.

Just as he put Adam and Eve in the Garden to work it and tend it, He placed us here to do useful work and lead responsible lives.

And that means, among other things, doing our best to anticipate the challenges the future holds for us and then doing our best to prepare for them.

But making plans and working to fulfill them doesn't automatically mean that we have to feel anxious about whether or not they materialize.

We should try to do the best we can, but we need to remember that the Lord's way is always better than the very best way we can come up with.

And the Lord will bring about what is best for us, whether it matches our plans or not.

Paul Simon, of Garfunkel fame, wrote a song entitled "Slip-Sliding Away" which has the following verse; "God only knows; God makes His plan; The information's unavailable to mortal man; We work at our jobs; collect our pay; We think we're gliding down the highway but we're just slip-sliding away."

I like the way the *Proverb* puts it: "*The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.*"

The believer makes ready his horse for the day of battle, but he knows that the victory rests with the Lord.

But what *only* the Christian knows is that the victory has already been won!

Luther put it this way: "*Work as though everything depended on you, but understand that it all depends on God.*"

And so may the peace of God which passes all of our understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Father in heaven, take away our anxiety and give us peace. Help us to understand that while you have given us faculties of reason and memory and physical strength to perform useful work in this world, you have also given us the gift of faith so that we can entrust the outcome of all our efforts to Your grace and providence, knowing that you will cause all things to work together for good in our lives. Lord, we believe; help us with our unbelief.

Holy Spirit of God, draw near and comfort those who are lonely and hurting. Strengthen and encourage all who are unemployed and who are looking for work. Lead them to good jobs and honorable employers. Protect and preserve all our soldiers who serve our country around the world. Especially we pray for the people of the Ukraine and thank you for their recent successes in repelling their invader.