

FEAR NOT: Five Questions for Fighting Anxiety

How Do I Pray?

1 Peter 5:6-11

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“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 5:6–11).

Do your prayer times ever sound like this?

“Father in Heaven”...{Uggh, I’m so tired. I’m not sure I have the energy or the time for this today} . . . “I know that you are in control of my life”... {What happened overnight? Is the market projected to lose more value? What’s on my schedule today? What’s the weather forecast?} . . . “I need you to help me today” . . . {What’s going to happen to my job? What food do I need to pick up this week? What is this summer going to look like?} . . . “I’m asking you to help me trust in you” . . . {But what if you don’t help me? I’m really tired of this. I’m not sure I can do this much longer} . . . “In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Some of us know what it’s like to pray with a mind and heart that feel scattered or deeply distracted. It can be exhausting trying to pray when the worries, cares, and problems of life flood your mind and assault your soul.

Prayer, for some of us, is really hard when we are full of worry.

For others, your prayer life goes silent. Fear and anxiety lead you into a season of prayerlessness. You just don’t pray anymore. Maybe it’s because you feel better when you “do” something, and prayer doesn’t feel like you are taking any action. Perhaps it feels like you have too much to do or think about. You just don’t have the time or the desire to pray.

Sometimes prayerlessness sets in like a fog because you are so filled with despair or discouragement. You find it hard to pray because talking to God means embracing a glimmer of hope. And there are few things scarier than starting to hope again when you’ve been disappointed or burned.

I would also imagine that some struggle to pray because you feel like God isn't listening or answering. Maybe you are fearful, and you don't know why. You can't figure out the cause, so you don't know what to say. Or maybe you are worried because you prayed before and it didn't work. You may not be willing to pray because you feel angry with God, so you give him the silent treatment.

How Do I Pray?

Today we are exploring the connection between fear and anxiety and prayer. We are in our fourth week trying to understand how to win the battle with the prevalent and complicated issue of fear. We are examining these questions:

- Who's in control?
- What is fear?
- What must I believe?
- How do I pray?
- What should I think?

Last week, we walked through Matthew 6 to learn about the connection between belief and unbelief. We cautiously considered that underneath most of the fears and anxieties we face are belief issues. Now, this is nuanced, and we need to be thoughtful in how we consider this. That's why I gave you nine questions to ask yourself when considering your fears and anxiety.

This week, we need to consider how prayer factors into the mix as we examine 1 Peter 5. In 2016-2017, we walked through the book of 1 Peter in a series called *This Exiled Life*. The book was written for people who are in the early stages of cultural opposition and limited persecution. The theme of suffering is all over the book (1:6-7; 2:18-20; 3:1, 13-17; 4:1-4, 12-19; 5:10).

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good (1 Pet. 4:19).

However, there is no mention of any of them having to give up their lives. There is more of a focus on verbal abuse (4:3-4) and some limited physical mistreatment (2:19-20). It doesn't appear that widespread, state-sanctioned persecution was taking place at the time, so the letter was written before the persecution under Nero in 64 A.D.

Peter writes these words to a group of people who are facing the looming clouds of difficulty and possibly persecution. How do they pray? How should you pray?

Five Ways to Pray

Allow me to identify five ways that believers can pray and the lesson we can learn from each of these adverbs:

1. Humbly

Let's start with humility. Verse 6 highlights the importance of this heart and life posture which is central to the Christian life:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you (1 Pet. 5:6).

The word "humble" means to make low or to bring down. It can be used for the physical act of bowing, of being embarrassed, or of circumstances that are not what you expected or feel like you deserve. But the word can more actively mean to make the heart small.¹ The sense is not that a person falsely creates a condition or mindset that is inaccurate. Rather the idea is one of re-leveling or aligning something into reality.

The word "therefore" is important because it links the previous verse to this concept. Here's what Peter said: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet. 5:5).

This verse helps to affirm that the general orientation of the Christian should be one of humility. Two reasons:

- 1) **We know the gospel.** The Bible tells us God is the creator of the universe and he is holy. It tells us God alone is worthy of praise, worship, and adoration. And it tells us mankind has rebelled against God's holiness. We've fallen short of God's glory, and there is no hope for forgiveness and reconciliation in ourselves. Humanity is in a dangerous position of rebellion with no hope in ourselves. And, yet, the beautiful story of the gospel is that God rescues helpless sinners. Here is how Romans 3 positions this and connects it to boasting:

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded... (Rom. 3:23–24; 27)

- 2) **We value God's grace.** Verse 5 contains a warning: "God opposes the proud." Who wants to be on the wrong side of God? Christians understand what that means. It's not good. But we also know what it means that God "gives grace to the humble." There's a promise here that goes counter to what human beings naturally believe—God gives grace to those who are humble.

Trusting and believing in God's grace rather than yourself is a huge step of faith. And in moments when Christians are called to be humble when everyone else is being proud, it's a chance to live out what you believe. To be humble means that you weigh the promise of what pride produces as opposed to the promised provision of God's grace.

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 747–748.

Christians are humble because they know the gospel and they value God's grace. Pride and loving Jesus just don't go together. Therefore, humility is directly connected to your understanding of who God is. And humility is connected to your understanding of God's grace to you. Humility means that you have an appropriate view of yourself. This is where the gospel becomes so important.

In verse 6, Peter commands humility "under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you." Humility is being reminded of how much we need God's help. And, if we are honest, this is easy to forget. There's a gravitational pull toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency that is a part of our makeup, especially in the West and in the United States.

But when are we most aware of our need? When suffering, hardships, or problems come our way. We are most aware of how out of control our lives are when we experience circumstances or situations that are unwelcome.

Peter wanted these believers to see the coming storm of difficulty as an opportunity to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God.

How does this connect to prayer? I'll show you more in the next point, but I suggest that prayer and humility are deeply connected. Think of the times when you pray—it's usually when you are very aware of a need beyond yourself. We pray because we are desperate. Sometimes it takes a very difficult situation to make us aware of how much need there is in our life. And, to be honest, you may not have wanted to ask those questions before because you thought you were in control.

Proud people don't pray.

One of the steps we need to take with prayer is to embrace the humility that comes with the moment. We need to let the hard circumstances create humility which should then lead us to prayer. Pray humbly.

2. Intentionally

Verse 7 is where we find the most direct reference to prayer: "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

In the Bible, the word "anxieties" can refer to good things and bad things. Sometimes the Bible uses the word to describe Paul's appropriate concern for churches, as in 2 Corinthians 11:28. But at other times, it refers to the pressures and the cares of a broken world, the kind of thing that can distract you from what is most important. The word "cares" and "anxieties" are the same.

And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. (Luke 8:14)

Our world and its systems are full of cares and anxieties. The question is what we do with them.

Verse 7 tells us to "cast them." The idea is to transfer the weight of something onto another. It's not just that someone helps you. It's that someone or something carries the heaviness of it for you. For example, the word is used to describe what happened when the disciples cast their coats on a donkey before Jesus sat on it in Luke 19:35. Another way to think about this is empowering someone else to handle something. Peter says that's what we are to do with our anxieties through prayer as we cast them to God.

Casting our anxieties means telling the Lord, “I need your help with this. I need you to carry the weight of this for me.”

However, for many of us, we come to this moment far too late in the process. We arrive here when we have exhausted all other possibilities or when we have tried everything else. Peter envisions this not as a last resort but as our first step.

In fact, the phrase “casting your anxieties” is a participial phrase. That means humility and casting your anxieties are directly linked together. To be more specific, you humble yourself by intentionally casting your anxieties on Jesus through prayer. In other words, prayer is the way that we demonstrate our belief that we need God’s help.

Prayer comes from humility. Prayer creates humility.

Some of us listening to this message today have stopped praying for any number of reasons: weariness, busyness, frustration. Let me encourage you to start again—even if it’s a small step. Don’t push away the uncertainty and struggle in your life—pull it close. Others of us have made prayer our last resort. It’s the thing we do when we’ve tried everything else.

Let me encourage you to embrace the gap between your ability and God’s sovereignty. Let prayer remind you—even encourage you—that you are not in control. I know it’s humbling. But God has grace ready for those who humble themselves through prayer.

3. Confidently

Verse 7 provides another way that believers should pray. We should pray confidently “because he cares for you.” Casting our cares and anxieties on him is needed not only because the weight is too heavy for us, but also because of the loving and kind heart of God.

Prayer is an act of faith where we practically lay hold of the promise that God cares for his children. Anxieties and fears can quickly move from uncertainty about one thing into a narrative about another thing. Fear can cause us to question everything. Anxiety raises trust issues. Sometimes those trust issues are warranted. But often they aren’t. And we can begin to operate from a trust deficit where we are completely self-protective—even with God.

It’s one thing to wonder if you can trust your employer, the government, your church, your friends, or your family. It’s another thing when it affects your relationship with the Lord.

Prayer builds the trust muscle. Don’t wait until you feel like you can sufficiently trust the Lord to start praying. Use prayer—in whatever meager form it takes—to express your confidence in the Lord.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matt. 11:28)

Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved. (Ps. 55:22)

4. Soberly

Verse 8 looks beyond prayer to the way in which we are to suffer, but it still applies to prayer. This is especially true when suffering and hardship come our way. Therefore, Peter calls for believers to be sober-minded and watchful.

Sober-minded means thinking with a clear head and being self-controlled. Practically, the opposite would be for someone to be intoxicated and act foolishly. Fear and anxiety can cause us to act in a manner that is very uncharacteristic and in a way that doesn't fit with the promises of God's Word. We've seen examples of this during the COVID crisis, for example, the hoarding of toilet paper and other supplies. Fear can make us forget what is true.

But it can also cause us to forget the spiritual danger of the world we live in. Peter reminds us that there is a real devil who is seeking to devour Christians. This danger is not relegated just to us. Suffering and hardship are things that have been experienced by people all over the world and throughout the history of the church.

Peter wants us to understand the threat posed by the Devil. His roar is scary. His intentions are evil. And we must be determined to resist him. Sometimes the Devil can use fear and anxiety to further his agenda and his plans. For example:

- Fear about the future can create a low-grade tension in conversations with friends or family
- Anxiety regarding finances can make you greedy or stingy
- Worry over your job can make you cut-throat and manipulative at work
- Uncertainty about what you are being told can make you cynical or judgmental
- Exhaustion can create behaviors that are unkind or divisive

The Devil wants the church to be fearful, angry, divided, ineffective, and prayerless. Brothers and sisters, we cannot allow this to happen.

Anxiety and fear can be a gateway struggle into other sin issues. Let's not let him win. Let's pray.

5. Triumphantly

The final way we should pray relates to our understanding of the future. Verses 10-11 are filled with promise, assurance, and hope.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10–11)

As we suffer through uncertain times, we need to extend the horizon of what we are considering. Prayer is the means by which we enter into the realm of God's authority, power, and dominion. When we come to God in prayer, we are petitioning the "God of all grace." He has every resource in the entire universe.

What's more, God has a plan, "he who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ." God himself will "restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." They are all unique words, but they are all communicating the same message. What is the promise? That God is going to complete what he's started in you. What does God promise to do?

- Restore – to mend what is broken and make you complete
- Confirm – to make you stronger and more able to endure
- Strengthen – to increase your resolve and determination
- Establish – to make you grow deeper in what you believe

And the end game is for Jesus to be glorified in all things, "To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

When worry and fear are swirling around, prayer is the place where we are reminded of the triumph of Christ. It invites us to enter into the throne room of heaven. It's a place for us to talk to the creator of the universe about our struggles and concerns. Prayer is how we are reminded about the love of God.

So, church, let's pray! Let's not allow our fears to push us away from the Lord. Let's use the hardship of this season to become a people who look even more like Jesus as we pray:

- Humbly
- Intentionally
- Confidently
- Soberly
- Triumphantly

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