

FEAR NOT: Five Questions for Fighting Anxiety

What Should I Think?

Philippians 4:4-13

Mark Vroegop

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 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. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:4–13).

A few months ago, I went to bed at a decent time but couldn't sleep. My mind was racing. My heart rate was elevated. I simply could not relax. I was exhausted. But my physical weariness was eclipsed by the emotions of fear and worry. I couldn't sleep because I was battling anxiety. But that's not all.

As I've shared before, fear is a gateway struggle for other issues. My fear opened the door for frustration (“Why am I worried about this?”) and despair (“This is too much! I can't do this!”). So, there I was at midnight—with a full day ahead of me—struggling with the darkness of fear. Again.

Now, you might expect me to tell you what I did to battle my fear. But the reason that I'm telling you this story is not because of what I did after my anxiety started. Rather, I'm sharing this story because of what I did as I crawled into bed.

It's something that isn't wise. After I brushed my teeth and pulled the covers, I did something that isn't helpful: I checked my email.

I knew better. But frankly the fear of missing something or the anxiety of what is happening tempted me to grab my phone and quickly check what I've missed. And one email at 10 p.m. sent me into a cascading battle with anxiety and worry.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has made that mistake. Maybe you have a habit of quickly scrolling through social media, reading the news, or checking the stock figures just before you go to bed. It's crazy how it only takes one post, one email, or one article to send us spiraling into anxiety.

When I trace back some of my battles with worry, there's a direct relationship between my thinking and my fears. I'm not always sure what came first. Did my thinking create my fear, or did my fear create my thinking? But they are connected.

To win the battle with worry, I need to think about my thinking.

A Final Message

This is the fifth and final message in our series on fear and anxiety. I don't know about you, but it's been helpful for me to walk through this series with you. I hope that you will take a few steps in the right direction as it relates to this prevalent and evolving issue.

Here are the questions we've tried to answer:

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

In case you are wondering, next week we'll start a new series for the summer called "Foolproof." It will be a nine-week series on the book of Proverbs. It's a series that I hope will give us some additional grounding in how to be wise. I'm excited about this series because the book of Proverbs has always been a favorite of mine. In high school, my youth pastor recommended reading the proverb that corresponded to the date on the calendar, and it was my "go-to" book.

If you joined us for this series on fear, we'd love to have you stay with us as we study this important and practical book starting next week.

Thinking About Our Thinking

One of the biblical strategies for winning the battle with worry and fear is thinking about our thinking. By that I mean both what type of thinking leads to fear and what we think when we are afraid. Both are important and necessary.

But, again, this is where things get complicated.

Groves and Smith address this in their book *Untangling Emotions*: "We have to do the work of listening carefully to the messages our emotions communicate and discerning what parts of the messages are true or false and respond wisely. This is especially difficult when our emotions are running high. Wisdom

requires us to think clearly at the very moment our thinking is being powerfully shaped by those very emotions.”¹

Our text in Philippians helps us understand what to think about and where it can lead. We see the value of thinking about our thinking. Let me show you three ways right thinking can lead you in your battle with worry.

1. Rejoicing Leads to Reasonableness

The book of Philippians is written by the apostle Paul while he’s imprisoned, probably under house arrest in Rome. He writes to the church in the city of Philippi, and the predominant theme is joy. Paul wants to encourage them in the various struggles they are facing. And there are many.

- They’ve experienced suffering by opponents who have the potential to be frightening (1:28)
- They were living during “a crooked and twisted generation” (2:15)
- False teachers, called “dogs,” were threatening the church (3:2)
- Personal disagreements created division in the body (4:2)

Following Jesus with all these pressures can be overwhelming. It can lead to anxiety, worry, fear, frustration, and anger.

In this kind of environment, Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). You need to understand that Paul is not merely commanding Christians to be happy. This is not some “Pollyanna,” delusional mindset.

Rather, he is pointing Christians toward where they can find true joy. In a broken world, Christians need to be reminded (to think!) about where their true hope rests.

If you look back to Philippians 3:18-4:1, you’ll see this connection:

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Paul commands hurting and fearful people to rejoice in the Lord. What does that mean? It requires us to think about Jesus. When life feels overwhelming, remember that Jesus won the victory. When the world shows its brokenness, remember that Jesus is going to make it right. When people are treating you unfairly, remember that Jesus is going to reward you. When you are weary and discouraged, remember that he is called the Man of Sorrows.

¹ Groves, J. Alasdair. *Untangling Emotions* (p. 131). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

There's an old song that has gripped me recently which speaks to this:

*Dear refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies
To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone can heal
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,
For every pain I feel*

But then notice the effect of this kind of thinking. Paul commands that your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Greek word means to be charitable, merciful, and gracious. Why would Paul say this? Well, because it's not what fearful and anxious people do! Fear causes us to say and do things that are just like those who don't believe in God's sovereignty and care. But when your focus is on Jesus, it allows you to embrace the mind and heart of Jesus like we hear in 1 Peter 2:23:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

This doesn't mean a lack of concern for justice to be done or that believers are not able to express their sorrow. But it does mean our sorrow and our concern for justice are driven by righteousness, not sinful fear and worry. It means we live while remembering "the Lord is at hand"—he's going to return. Thinking this way changes our approach to some kinds of fears and how we respond. Rejoicing in the Lord leads to reasonableness.

2) Grateful Prayers Lead to Peace

The second way to lead our thinking relates to our prayers. Now, we already covered this in week four, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time here re-emphasizing the need to pray.

Rather, I want to highlight the importance of grateful prayers. It's both interesting and instructive that Paul says, "...in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). We are to take our general prayers and our specific needs ("supplications") to the Lord with a spirit of thanksgiving. In our need, we rehearse the graciousness of God.

Why is this helpful? Adding gratefulness to our prayers helps us to see life more clearly. Fear and anxiety tend to become the dominant thing we think and talk about. In some ways, we can end up making them even bigger by how much energy we give them.

I know from experience that there have been times when I've shared a fear with Sarah, and because it made her fearful, it made me even more scared. I was just about to get over it when I shared it, only to make it worse!

Prayer serves to remind us how faithful God has been in the past. It sets the present troubles on the table of God's kindness. In doing so, it helps us gain perspective.

Isn't it interesting that Paul immediately follows this instruction with a powerful statement about God's peace? Notice that he says this peace transcends all understanding and that it guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

It's as if grateful praying can build a fortification of peace for the believer. We are reminded of God's faithfulness, power, and his care. That's part of the reason why Sundays are so important. But it could also be a step for some of us to consider—to record a prayer of gratitude—take out your phone, a piece of paper, or just tell someone out loud why you are thankful for God.

Some of our anxieties are directly related to how much time we spend considering what we don't have or what is threatened versus all the ways we've seen God provide.

3) Meditation Leads to Assurance

The third way for us to consider battling anxiety with our thinking is to seriously evaluate the things we are thinking about. This is something we really need to evaluate because COVID-19 has given us a lot of time without much social connection. The effect is an increase in social media consumption, and along with that, anxiety rates are climbing.

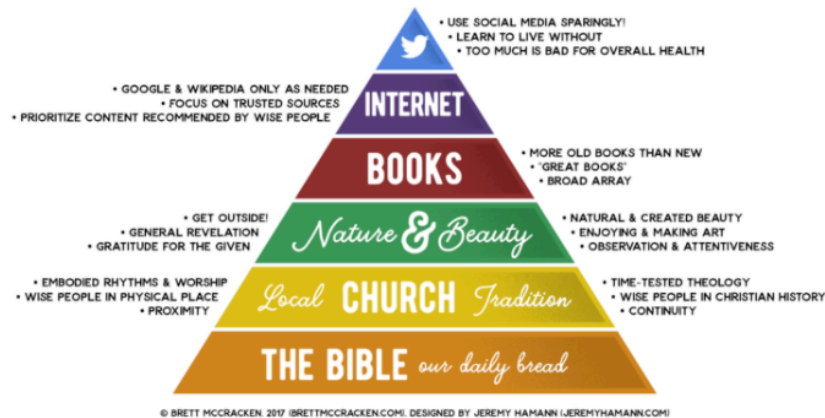
It's important to ask ourselves what we are feeding our minds and if there is a connection to our fears and anxieties. Brett McCracken suggests that our knowledge content should be considered like the food pyramid. He says:

Do you remember the old food pyramid that shows how a healthy body depends on a balanced diet, with the right proportions of food groups and nutrition vs. junk foods?

In our [current epistemological crisis](#), where we are bombarded by a glut of content and information but have so little wisdom, I think we need guidance on healthier habits of knowledge intake. We need a wisdom pyramid. We need to think about what sorts of "knowledge groups," and in what proportion, feed a healthy life of true wisdom and true joy.²

² <https://www.brettmccracken.com/blog/2017/8/3/the-wisdom-pyramid>

Wisdom Pyramid



However, the issue is not merely where you get your information; the issue is which source of information informs your thinking, behavior, and even your feelings. The word “think” at the end of verse 8 doesn’t simply mean to study them or think about them. It means to reflect upon them and allow these things to shape your conduct.³

In Philippians 4:8, Paul provides a list for us to consider when things aren’t clear. In other words, when life is confusing and you have to make difficult decisions, consider these things. Whatsoever things are:

- True – in the ethical sense, what is right and what is wrong
- Honorable – what is worthy of respect and admiration
- Just – that which fits with the justice of God
- Pure – a close connection to what is holy
- Lovely – something that creates affection and love
- Commendable – that which can be recommended to others
- Excellent – containing a moral quality that is superior
- Worthy of praise – something that can be a platform to glorify God

These are the things that should be thought about. These are the things that our minds should meditate on. But, even more, these are the things that we should put into practice and do. We should see them displayed in the lives of others, especially our spiritual leaders.

³ Ralph P. Martin, [*Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 11, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 177–178.

And the result is that the God of peace will be with you. This is more than just a promise. This is an assurance that comes from meditating on the right things. It means investing our minds in the timeless truth of God's Word and considering his ways.

Candidly, some of the problems with anxiety and worry are by-products of the simple fact that we are saturating our thinking with the wrong sources or the wrong people. You may also need to take a break from particular information sources, create some distance from an unhelpful friend, or decide if you are in a good place to talk about certain subjects. Some of you may need to consider committing more verses to memory, reading a book that encourages your soul, praying with an encouraging friend, or listening to a helpful sermon.

Fear is not tame; but it isn't ultimate. Anxiety and worry should be battled against in the arena of the mind by rejoicing in the Lord, offering grateful prayers, and meditating on biblical truth. We have to ask ourselves, "What should I think about right now?"

Well, church, I wish I could tell you life is going to be less worrisome in the future. I wish I could assure you the worst of what we've seen in our culture is behind us. But I can't.

However, the aim of this series has been to help you learn how to more effectively battle against fear and anxiety by asking ourselves:

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

We started our journey in Isaiah 41, and we'll end there as well:

...fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (v. 10)

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