

“PEACE vs. ANXIETY”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Webster’s Dictionary describes “peace” as freedom from war or discord... an undisturbed state of mind... the absence of mental conflict... the presence of serenity and tranquility. The primary and basic idea of the biblical word “*peace*” — OT *shalom*; NT *eirene* — is wholeness, completeness and soundness. It is a favorite biblical greeting (Gen 29:6; Lk 24:36) and is found at the beginning or end of nearly every New Testament epistle. To this day it is still one of the most common greetings to the Semites. Peace has reference to health, prosperity, well-being, security, as well as the absence of war (Ecc 3:8; Is 45:7). The prophet Isaiah pointed out repeatedly that there is “*no peace for the wicked*” (Is 48:22; 57:21); i.e., those whose master & lord is not God. Peace is a condition of freedom from either internal or external strife; it is a comprehensive and valued gift from God, and the promised messianic blessing (Is 9:6-7; 11:6; Mic 4:1-3; Jn 14:27; 16:33; Rom 5:1; Phil 4:7). The godly are enjoined to seek it earnestly and diligently (Ps 34:14; Zech 8:16, 19). The purpose of Christ’s coming was to bring *spiritual peace with God* to all humanity (Mk 5:34; 9:50; Lk 1:79; 2:14; 24:36). The gospel is the “*gospel of peace*” (Eph 2:14-15) — Jesus Christ is our peace (Rom 5:1; 1 Th 5:23).

Stress and anxiety have been around since the fall of man in the “Garden of Eden,” and is particularly in abundance in our world today. Stressful circumstances and pressures abound — banks have been foreclosing on houses in record numbers... the value of most of our retirement assets have been dropping dramatically... debt has been skyrocketing with no end in sight... and then there are natural disasters, unhappy marriages, the loss of a job, the loss of health, the death of a loved one, the stress of relational conflict, work issues, cars breaking down, unexpected crises, accidents, driving in traffic, and waiting in line everywhere you go; the list goes on and on. So many things in life irritate us... provoke us... frustrate us... and exasperate us... and every time we feel like we’re just about ready to “enjoy some peace and quiet,” another bomb seems to go off in our life, and once again peace is but a mirage. We spend our entire lives just trying to “make life work,” so that we can enjoy “just a little bit of heaven” right here on earth. “Is that too much to ask?” we groan. That in a nutshell is the goal of human beings the world over. So what do we do when Mt. Suvius erupts in our soul? The *natural way* to cope with the pressures of this world is to “*feed one’s desires*” — be it over-eating, over-drinking, over-partying, over-shopping, over-spending, over-accumulating, over-working, or fleeing from all the noise by retreating to some quiet place with nature (lakes, mountains, oceans).

It is easy to be pessimistic about life. But the believer in Christ can experience something in the midst of pain and suffering that the world cannot experience — a deep abiding peace in the midst of crisis. Jesus did not preach the “*absence of trouble*” in this life — on the contrary, He declared its certainty (Jn 16:33); therefore it should not come as an unexpected surprise when it arrives. The Greek root of the word “*tribulation*” has the meaning of “*pressure*.” Jesus is saying that we will be “under pressure” at times, where we are being squeezed by the troubles of this life. Here’s the paradox: In the midst of it all, Jesus says, “*Be of good cheer and take courage – I have overcome the world!*” In effect Jesus is saying, “The battle has already been decided! There is nothing the world can do to you or ultimately defeat you, because I have won a certain victory over sin and death! Though you experience trouble in this world, if you abide in Me you will have peace!” The “*things*” that Satan uses to discourage us... God uses to develop more

Christlikeness in us (Rom 8:28). Our problem is we do everything we can to *maximize our joy*, whereas God does everything to *grow our faith* — remember, this life is God’s classroom.

Anxiety is a problem for the vast majority of believers despite the many passages in Scripture that urge us to “*cast our cares upon the Lord*” (1 Pet 5:7). Life is a hard reality for all of us — we live under a shadow of death, disease, trials, afflictions — *unending tension* seems to continually pursue us. Yet, in spite of all the problems and issues of life, we are clearly commanded in Scripture not to worry. Writes Paul: “*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, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7). Once a believer truly experiences God’s peace it becomes one of his most valued possessions in Christ. Innumerable are the evils that beset human life... there is no security in the things of this world... potentially everything is a menace to our peace. It is interesting to note that the command to “*fear not*” appears exactly 365 times in the Bible — happenstance? Some probably think so... irregardless, it stands to reason that since it was repeated so many times it must be an “*ongoing major obstacle*” for all of God’s people. So if you are a “*worrier*,” you are not alone — all of us can identify with that problem.

In 1969, Peggy Lee sang a song titled, “Is That All There Is?” The chorus went like this — “If this is all there is, then let’s keep dancing, let’s break out the booze and have a ball.” That has been the response of sinful man from antiquity (Ecc 8:15; 11:9; Lk 12:19; 1 Cor 15:32). Whatever addiction man pursues, it only provides a “*temporary escape*” from stresses of this world, and ultimately it only results in more dissatisfaction, frustration and stress... because no longer does that remedy satisfy. Another way of coping with stress is through “self-discipline.” In 1988, Bobby McFerrin sang a number one hit song about handling stress when he sang, “*Don’t Worry, Be Happy!*” The lyrics went like this: “In every life we have some trouble... when you worry, you make it double... don’t worry, be happy!” Bobby’s advice was to just stop choosing to worry and start choosing to be happy. Discipline yourself! That’s the most common answer for our secular world. Essentially this is the teaching of modern psychology. It argues, since “*self-talk*” is the problem, “*mind control*” is the solution. Though disciplining one’s mind can produce a semblance of peace, it never produces true peace, because it does not eliminate the problem in the soul; as such, one’s insides will still churn with continuing bouts of worry, anxiety and fear. The last group of people *decide not to fight stress* — they give into it by surrendering to thoughts of worthlessness, hopelessness, and even suicide. This group is far larger than most people think.

The highly respected Christian psychiatrist “Frank B. Minirth” addresses the basic causes of psychological disorders in his textbook — “*Introduction to Psychology and Counseling*,” In it he says that although a person’s genetic make-up does have an enormous effect upon his or her intellectual and emotional potential, an individual’s degree of wisdom and happiness as an adult is *not* predetermined genetically... that most human depression is the result of a person’s irresponsible handling of anger and guilt. Some individuals, he says, are irresponsible because they choose to be, whereas others are irresponsible because they lack knowledge. The truth of the matter is, most human beings simply hate to face up to their own responsibility, especially with regard to their emotional state — it is much easier to blame one’s woes on bad parents, a poor mate, unfair treatment by the world, or “bad genes.” In short, the irresponsible action of holding grudges is what brings on the majority of depressions. (Minirth, Chapter 13)

From a biblical point of view, the genetic potentials and predispositions of each individual are in the plan of God. God allows each individual to have certain strengths and weaknesses as part of His plan to ultimately bring glory to Himself. Scripture makes reference to God's power and purpose in creating us (Ps 119:73; 139:13-14; Is 43:7; 44:24). Though God ultimately chose *not* to make us perfect (as a result of our fallen condition), we must trust that God in His wisdom, love, and justice made the correct ultimate decisions. To be angry at God for not being more "humane" is not only naïve, but arrogant and pompous. People who claim that God "makes mistakes" and who think they are wiser and kinder than God are pathetically naïve. We may look at the *pain of a moment*, but God looks at the *joys of an eternity*. God not only empathizes with the pain of psychological depression (Christ suffered the painful death of the cross), but rejoices in the growth toward wholeness in individuals responsibly working their way out of a depression. (Minirth, Chapter 13)

Less than one percent of the population is manic-depressive or schizophrenic. Though their conditions *in part* can be attributed to genetic and environmental factors, much of it could be avoided if people simply faced up to their own behavioral and emotional responsibilities. By the way, nearly all manic-depressive illness is medically curable if properly diagnosed. God allows people to suffer when they wander away from His guidelines for a happy life. All of us as human beings have blind spots, and all of us are the primary source of our own unhappiness. When we grow in God's wisdom and gain insights into our own self-deceit, happiness becomes a choice. David prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and *know my anxious thoughts*; see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139:23-24). Jeremiah provides a key to Christian psychiatry: "*The heart is deceitful* above all things and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). In that passage, the prophet was focusing on our unconscious motives, conflicts, drives, emotions, and thoughts. In Proverbs, wisdom is personified as calling out to naïve human beings to learn the right path to happiness by replacing their ignorant human way of thinking with *God's wise principles*. Wisdom concludes with this statement — "For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD; but he who fails to find me injures himself" (Prv 8:35-36). King Solomon said, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisors make victory sure" (Prv 11:14). To receive guidance from a knowledgeable Christian counselor can help bring about victory over life's seemingly overwhelming stresses — to apply good Christian psychotherapy to one's life is synonymous with Christian discipleship. God brings many people toward Christlikeness in their attitudes and behavior through confrontation with loving and insightful Christian friends, pastors, and counselors. (Minirth, Chapter 13).

The Lord Jesus taught His disciples how to handle stress when He said, "These things I have spoken to you, that *in Me you may have peace*. In the world you have trouble, but take courage, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33; 14:27). Jesus teaches here that peace in the midst of stress is experienced by *living in and through Him*. He taught the same thing when He said, "I am the vine and you are the branches; *he who abides in Me*, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Part of the fruit that Jesus is speaking of here is *that peace that passes all understanding* (Phil 4:7), and that only comes from abiding in Him. To abide in Him is to intimately walk with Him and trust Him with your life, knowing that He indeed loves you. Only a life of intimate dependency and trust will result in a deep inner peace. Is it possible to trust Him when the weight of the world seems to be upon us? Absolutely. Yes. When Jesus was lifted up on the cross, the sin of the entire world was placed upon His shoulders (2 Cor 5:21; 2 Pet 2:24), and in that moment, even the Father forsook Him (Mt 27:46), He still cried out, "Father,

forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). Jesus’ response flowed from His faith in His Father — He believed the Spirit by faith and yielded His thoughts to the Spirit’s thoughts. Jesus lived a life of faith while He was here on this earth — not a life of sight as many think — He trusted His Father in all things and grew in stature and wisdom through-out His life (Lk 2:40, 52; Jn 4:34). He did nothing of His own initiative (Jn 5:30, 36; 6:38; 17:4) — He chose to obey His Father, and He was tempted in every way that we are... yet He did not sin (Heb 2:17-18; 4:15). Instead of focusing and dwelling upon the problem, He focused upon the truth. We are to handle stress the same way, and when we do, we will be enabled by the Holy Spirit to experience Christ’s peace as well — this is how we “let the peace of Christ and the word of Christ rule in our hearts” (Col 3:15-16)... and this is what the Apostle Paul calls “walking in the Spirit” and confidently believing that “God causes all things to work together for good in our lives” (Gal 5:16; Rom 8:28).

The truth of the matter is, God can lead you to a place where you are “not anxious” about what is going on in your life, and give you a peace that will let you “lie down and sleep” — Anybody can lie down; the question is, “Can they sleep?” The psalmist David, was surrounded by enemies who wanted to kill him, “yet he laid down and slept” (Ps 3:5). There is probably nothing that reveals the quality of our Christian faith more than this matter of peace. **Peace is a very practical test** — this is not a theory we’re talking about, but real life. If you are surrounded by many difficulties, problems, and fears, what is your faith worth at that point? How do you differ from the people who have no faith at all? God has designed the Christian life to give believers victory over the tyranny of painful circumstances and challenging, stressful situations. God’s Word tells us to, “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” (Phil 4:6-7). Let’s examine these two verses in greater detail, because they are packed with significance. First, Paul tells us to “not be anxious” — that is, we are not to brood over and ponder negative feelings and circumstances. Our minds can imagine things for hours and cause us to exist in a deep state of agitation and despair — in that sense our heart and mind controls and tyrannizes us. The Bible tells us this is something that we must avoid at all costs. As Christians we are to work hard and make plans for the future, but after we have done that, we are to avoid worrying about the outcome; that’s in God’s hands — He is the one who orchestrates all that goes on in our lives; therefore anxiety and worry are not to characterize what goes on in our souls.

But you say, “I can’t stop worrying!” “How can I possibly overcome these terrible feelings and thoughts that originate in my heart and mind?” “What can I do to avoid this turmoil in my soul?” Well, first of all, notice that the Apostle Paul does not tell us what common psychology tells us: “Stop worrying! Pull yourself together!” He does not say that because he knows that it is useless to tell a person in that condition to stop worrying. It would be like telling a “drunk” not to take another sip of the bottle in his hand! It is not going to happen! Obviously, we all know that the things we worry about most often do not happen... but on the other hand they might happen, and that’s the problem! And that’s what we worry about! So what does the Apostle Paul have to say about it? He says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to GOD” (Phil 4:6). So the answer is this: You need to discuss your situation with GOD, and He will do something for you that you cannot do for yourself! Think about that statement — you cannot do anything about your problem in and of yourself (Jn 15:5, 16; Jam 4:13-17). So, take your situation to GOD!

The cares of this life often “overwhelm us” as believers. To be overwhelmed is to be human. We are all made of the same stuff... none of us walk on water... not even the Apostle Paul. He was a realistic man who knew he did not possess the strength to overcome the pressures of this world in and of himself (Rom 7:18; 2 Cor 12:9-10)... so “*he learned the secret of relying upon God*” in the midst of the most excruciating circumstances (2 Cor 9:8; Phil 4:11; 1 Tim 6:6-8; Heb 13:5). His secret to peace is found in his letter to the Philippians — he presented three principles to them to help them discover peace in the midst of agonizing problems:

1. **First, we are to “go to God in prayer.”** Let your personal anxiety be your alarm clock — when life begins to get out of control, and anxiety surfaces in your soul, it is time to pray. The best remedy for a troubled heart is prayer... if you are worrying about anything it is time to pray... don’t waste your time and energy “*worrying*” — instead go to God in prayer! But immediately you say, “I’m hurting and I’ve tried that a thousand times, and it doesn’t work!” Obviously the Apostle Paul heard that line a thousand times himself, so let’s carefully look at his answer. You’ll notice up front, in contrast to worrying we are to “*pray*,” and when we pray we are to begin by adoring and worshipping the Lord — this is where the vast majority of believers fail. We are to begin by affirming God’s promises to us — we are His children... we are completely forgiven because of what Christ did at the cross (no matter how angry we are at the moment or how anal we have become over our circumstance, we are forgiven!)... and we are standing in His presence right now and He desires above everything to put His arms around us (remember, He loves us more than we can possibly fathom — He went to the cross to redeem us! — and here we are worrying about a flat tire on our dumb bicycle!). The key here is to *get perspective!* That is the first step. Communication with the source of peace — GOD — is essential to experiencing peace. The throne of grace is the fountainhead of the peace of God (Heb 4:16). God is rightly called “the God of peace” (Is 9:6; Rom 15:33; Phil 4:9; 1 Th 5:23; Heb 13:20). In 1855, ***Joseph Scriven*** penned the words to one of most cherished of all Christian hymns, “*What a Friend We Have in Jesus.*” He wrote it to comfort his mother during a time of great sorrow. In it he communicates the liberating power of prayer —

*What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and grief's to bear!
What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer!*

2. **Second, we are to “present our supplications and petitions to God.”** We are to earnestly and fervently present the concerns of our lives to God (Gen 18:23-32; Jn 9:31; Jam 5:16). Elijah was a man of like nature as ours (Jam 5:17); he was hungry (1 Kg 17:11), afraid (1 Kg 19:3), and depressed (1 Kg 19:3, 9-14) — yet when he prayed earnestly incredible things happened (Jam 5:17). Let your personal anxiety be your alarm clock — if you find yourself worrying about something it is time to take your concerns to the Lord and get HIM involved. If God is not GOD, then you have a right to be miserable and worry — but if the earth indeed is God’s footstool, then stop worrying and start praying. Take all your cares and worries to the One who is able to quiet your anxious soul and give you rest (Mt 11:28-29; Heb 4:16). Persistently importune His throne until you discover His peace (Lk 11:1-13; 18:1-8). During your crying out to God you will discover that prayer is more than some “*magical incantation*” — God is not a god who needs to be appeased through sacrifices, prayers & rituals... a force to be manipulated through meditation, spells & incantations... or an uncaring impersonal deity who cannot relate to the sufferings of His creatures. Prayer is the heart of a child crying out to his loving Father for help.

3. **Third, we are to “present our requests to God with thanksgiving.”** If you get on your knees to pray and think God is against you, you may as well get up and go watch television. The Bible says we must approach God “*with thanksgiving.*” There should be no doubt in your heart as to the “goodness of God toward you,” even though you are rife with sin, in despair and troubled. In spite of your condition, you can prostrate yourself at the feet of Jesus and pour out your soul to Him and experience His warm embrace. Remind yourself that He is your Father, that He loves you with an everlasting love... that the very hairs of your head are numbered... that He cares so much for you that He died for you — stop questioning His love for you! You must come into His presence knowing and believing that He loves you. The fact that you are unworthy does not change that! Praise Him for what He has done for you in the past, and for what He is going to do for you in the future. You have much to be thankful for. Worship and adore Him for who He is in confident faith — offering thanksgiving to Him, rather than worrying (that is an expression of belief). *Thanksgiving* declares that “God is in control and that we trust Him.” *Worry* says, “I am not in control and I don’t like it!” By the way, you ought to be glad you’re not in control, or you would really have trouble! “In everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you in Christ!” (1 Th 5:18).

What is this “resultant peace” that the Apostle Paul is talking about? Well, you’ll notice Paul does not say that it consists of a positive rearrangement of the circumstances and difficulties that you’re experiencing... nor does it promise that your bad marriage, your loss of a job, or your health problems will be fixed. No. What the Bible teaches is that whatever the circumstances, whatever the difficulties, *we will be kept in peace in spite of them.* Furthermore, the Bible is not teaching that the very thing we fear will not take place; rather, that God will keep our heart and our mind in a “*state of peace*” whatever happens. It is a *supernatural peace* that God gives to calm and quiet our anxious thoughts, and assure us that He is in control. This is the victory God promises to the believer — *we can live above our circumstances in peace, even while we are going through them.*

Grace and peace are important themes in Paul’s letters. He uses the phrase “*grace & peace*” in nearly every letter (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; 2 Th 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4). The Apostle John uses this phrase as well (2 Jn 3; Rev 1:4). *Grace* is the unmerited favor of God, whereas *Peace* is the state of not having conflict in the soul. Peace is the product of grace... God by His grace bestows peace in the heart.

In addition to those individuals stated in the foregoing material, some of themes for this study were taken from the following authors and sources —

Greg Brezina — Exec. Dir., *Christian Families Today* Counseling Ministry
Website: www.cftministry.org

John Ankerberg — Producer & Host of *John Ankerberg Show*
Website: www.jashow.org

Jim Davis — Author and Writer for *John Ankerberg Show.Org*
Website: www.jashow.org

Walter A. Elwell — Editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (pp. 896-897)