

“Moving from Anxiety to Joy: Overcoming Worry with Joy”

Today we’re continuing in the series we started a few weeks ago called “Moving from Anxiety to Joy.” We’ve been focusing on the book of the Bible called Philippians. It’s a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote from prison awaiting his execution. It’s a letter where he talks about joy and rejoicing, in the midst of hardship, in the midst of conflict, joy that truly lasts.

Today we’re going to address worry and depression and how we can overcome these two joy-destroyers. Let’s start with a diagnostic question to see if this message is for you. Think about the major categories of your life. Your job, your health, your physical appearance, your relationships, your finances. How many of you have at least one problem?! Raise your hand. Well, then this message is for you!

Let’s start with worry--one of the most crippling forces to attack human beings. Think about it. Worry has the power to rob you of so many things. It can rob you of joy. Worry can make me obsess about myself. It will keep me from connecting with other people and it can keep me from loving other people. Worry keeps me from taking risks and going on the adventures that I really want to go on. It can keep me from daring to do what God created me to do. Worry can erode your trust in God. It can eat away at your faith. Maybe most damaging of all, worrying about what might happen in the future can keep us from living in this moment, right now, enjoying the good things that that are all around us.

Jesus makes this extraordinary statement, he simply says, **“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear...Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?...But seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:25-33, NIV)**

Jesus talks about all kinds of things we can worry about, not just small stuff like gaining five pounds or finding another grey hair (for some of us our hair turns grey, for others of us our hair turns loose). Jesus says, don’t worry about anything. What you eat, what you drink, what you wear. These are the essential things of life, most of us don’t worry about these things, but we do worry about other important things. When you get fired, when you go bankrupt, when you have bad news about a pregnancy, when you’re betrayed by a friend, when you go through a divorce, when your health fails. Jesus teaches us not to worry about anything.

The apostle Paul says almost the same thing. He says, **“Do not worry 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” (Philippians 4:6-7, NRSV)**. As you look at that remember, Paul knew about real problems. He wrote that phrase from prison awaiting the death sentence. Yet Paul was able to say, do not be anxious about anything.

But let’s get real! How is a life without worry possible? Is it even possible? That’s what I want to address to today and I want to do it by posing two questions. The first question is: Where does worry come from? And the second question is: What is our alternative or antidote to worry?

Let’s dive into the first question. **“Where does worry come from?”** This is an interesting question to me because there’s a common illusion here. The illusion is that the reason I worry is because I have these certain problems, and if these problems would just go away, I wouldn’t worry anymore. That’s the illusion. You are going to have problems until the day you die. After that, no problems, no worries! Jesus said, **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV)**

One expert in this field by the name of Edward M. Hallowell says that worry results primarily from two things: **“Worry is the result of a heightened sense of vulnerability and a diminished sense of power”** a heightened sense of vulnerability and second and a diminished sense of power—feeling very weak. Feeling like I can’t handle what I’m facing. If I feel increasingly vulnerable and at the same time I feel like I have less of an ability to handle it the result is worry. Whatever the issue is, whether it’s health, money, relationships, whatever. But here’s the good news, the flip side is also true! Where there is a decreased sense of vulnerability and increased sense of your ability to handle it, you’ll feel less and less anxiety.

I remember a time or two as a boy scout where I had the opportunity to have the tar beat out of me. One time was when we were at Scout Camp. There’s always a little healthy rivalry between the different troops, but sometimes things got out of hand. My personality didn’t help matters and I was always shooting off my mouth. One time I went too far to one of the older scouts in the camp next to ours. I started bad mouthing a couple of these older scouts, dissing their troop, probably making a few remarks about their mothers, etc. Before I knew it they had

grabbed me and were about to teach me, as they put it, a new definition of the word pain. I was yelling and hollering and doing my best to fight back. I saw my life flash before my eyes.

But before they started roughing me up, they suddenly just stopped. It was like somebody had hit them with a freeze-ray. They let me go and turned and slunk away. I was feeling pretty darn good about myself, until I turned and looked up and there stood Carl Koons. The biggest, badest, meanest scout in our troop. This guy was over 6 foot tall and instilled fear in all. He looked like the result of the marriage between Hercules and Zena the warrior princess. We called him Mongo—never to his face. He just stood there and kind of flexed at those guys that were getting ready to rough me up.

I found that my attitude changed. I suddenly found myself saying, “You guys better not come back here again!” I had this deep sense of confidence that together, Mongo and I could handle it. I was filled with a sense of boldness and a sense of daring. My worry and anxiety went way down; my confidence went way up.

Paul faced the most difficult trials anyone could face. Persecution, abandonment, torture, death, and he says to us, “Don’t be anxious, don’t worry, about anything.” How can he say that? He knows that there is somebody really big going through life with us. Paul knew that he was not alone in those prison cells; he knew that he was not vulnerable about what really matters.

Then there’s the dimension of power. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are plugged in to THE source of power. Paul wrote, **“I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13, NIV).**

He’s saying, “In some mysterious way, the strength and power of Jesus Christ is available to me for the situations of life in which I find myself.” Paul’s not anxious about anything because he’s dealt with the issues of vulnerability and powerlessness. He knows that ultimately he is not vulnerable and ultimately his has limitless power through Christ. He knows that he is in the care of God. He knows that he has the power of God available to him and you do too! If you’ve asked Jesus to be the Lord of your life, you have no reason ever to be anxious, or to worry. You are not vulnerable, you have the power.

I’ve believe this to be true. But in my experience, knowing this is usually not enough to eliminate anxiety. So let’s move to the second question. **“What’s the alternative or antidote to worry?”** This is very important, because as a general rule you can’t free yourself from worry simply by trying really hard not to worry. Telling yourself to relax is not going to do it. Beating yourself up because you can’t make yourself stop feeling anxious is not going to do it. What we see in the Bible is a strong connection between worry and prayer. Jesus and Paul both say, in essence, “Don’t worry, pray.”

In fact, the best way to worry about nothing is to pray about everything. Now, just because you pray doesn’t mean that you never feel worried. The idea is this: Every time you feel a twinge of anxiety or worry, God wants you to take it directly to him. Tell him all about it. Scripture says, **“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7, NIV).** Your job is not to make the anxious feelings go away, maybe they’ll go away, maybe they won’t. Your job is, when you have a worry, to take it directly to God through prayer.

What does this kind of prayer look like? Paul says, **“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).** It’s that little phrase, “in everything.” The implications of that single phrase are enormous. And one of the biggest barriers to prayer is that we don’t really take it seriously. Here’s what often happens to me. In my mind I have this constant stream of thoughts. And sometimes they are not very spiritual. I’ll think about what people are thinking of me, or how I look, or how do I sound, or am I going to get things done on time, or any number of things. Then when I go to pray I won’t talk to God about those things I’m really thinking about because they don’t sound very spiritual.

So I’ve had this tendency to talk to God about things that sound more spiritual, as if the only time God is listening to what’s going on in my mind is when I’m praying. So I’ll pray about the church, or people I know that are hurting, or world peace, but my mind keeps wandering to this stuff that’s weighing on my heart. I have a wandering mind when I pray. Any of you have your mind wander when you pray?

There’s a solution to this in this little phrase, “in everything.” And the solution is this, **“I must pray what is in me, not what I wish was in me.”** And what is in me is often self-centered. Paul says, “In everything” make your requests known to God. I don’t need to wait to clean up my motives first. I don’t need to try to sound more spiritual than I am. I don’t pray what I think **ought** to be in me, or just what I think God wants to hear. I pray what’s really in me.

If you’re going to grow in prayer and overcome worry, you must begin by becoming an “in everything” pray-er. So I want to challenge you. Make this week an experiment. This week, starting to today, pray what’s in you, not what you wish was in you. Whether your request is large or small, whether your motives are mixed or pure, whether

what you're asking is wise or foolish, God can sort all that out! You can trust him to respond wisely. Part of what this means is that you've got to hold onto your prayer loosely and trust that if God doesn't answer it the way you want it to be answered, he has very, very good reasons. Your job is to talk to God what is really on your heart and you can do that. Become an "in everything" prayer.

That's the first component of prayer that overcomes worry. Then there's a second part. And I think it's this: **Make listening and responding a part of your prayer.** Prayer is supposed to be a two-way conversation. And this is especially important when it comes to casting my anxiety on God. Here's a key question I want you to ask God. Ask this question to God: "God is there any action you want me to take about this concern?" Because sometimes a concern is a prompt to action.

A while back, Janet and I were lying in bed and she said, "Aaron do you hear a loud crashing noise outside?" I knew that if I acknowledged that, one of us would have to get up and go outside and check it out. So I said, "No." Although I had to say it real loud so she could hear me over the loud crashing noise that was going on outside. Because I knew that once I acknowledged the concern, the next step would be that somebody would have to take action. And I had a pretty good idea of who that somebody would be.

This is an odd thing about us human beings. We'll spend 10 or 20 or 100 times more energy worrying about something than we will taking steps toward resolution. And as a general rule that is not God's will. So what will often happen in prayer is that God will prompt you and God will say, "Part of what I want you to do, my son, my daughter, is to get up and take a step and move towards a solution." Your worry will be a prompt to take action. So be ready to say yes. Be willing to say yes.

Maybe you're concerned about your finances and you're worried about them, but you've never done anything about them. You've never sat down and tried to make out a budget, never taken the initiative to take a class. Maybe what will happen as you pray about that is that God will guide you toward reading about that sort of thing or seeking some advice on it.

Maybe you're worried about your marriage and as you pray about it God says, "I want you to do something positive." Maybe that action is to find the name of a good Christian counselor. Very often as you pray, what will happen is that God will prompt you to take action steps. And it's crucial, when that happens, that you're willing to listen and say yes and respond in obedience and faith. Because if you pray and think that's all there is to it, if you think you give it to God he will do all the rest, then you have the wrong idea. God works **with** you. Prayer is connected to a life of obedient faith and a willing heart. We have the tools to overcome worry and prayer is a huge part of that.

So far what we've talked about is worry and anxiety. But I want to spend the rest of our time talking about depression. Depression is different from worry and anxiety, but worry and anxiety can lead to depression. The word depression gets used a lot and very casually. We might say that we're depressed when our football team loses but that's not depression. Depression is an ongoing, deep feeling of sadness, despair, emptiness. Over 17 million Americans battle clinical depression each year.

Depression can be brought on by a chemical imbalance, a life-trauma of some sort like a death, or divorce, or loss of job. Sin can bring on depression when we know we are continually doing something wrong. Fears, real or imagined, can bring on depression. Dashed expectations, addictions, abuse, exhaustion and other things can bring on the unrelenting sadness of depression.

People in all places and stations of life, people of all socioeconomic levels, people from all kinds of family backgrounds battle depression every day. Christians battle depression and that includes pastors. But, like we have been talking about throughout this series of messages, God's desires for us is to be filled with joy and I can tell you that it is possible. Many people struggle with depression, but many people also find hope, and freedom from their depression, and in the process they find real joy. So what can we as Christians do to defeat our depression and find joy? I want to share several things that I believe can help.

The first thing we can do is often the one that most people turn to first: **"Ways to defeat depression..."** **Find professional help and possibly medication.** There are many good Christian counselors and I'm thankful for them. They play an important role in the healing process. There are also effective medications to help with depression. But please know that it takes more than a pill to recover from depression. The medication can level out the emotions, take away the drastic ups and downs, but medication is only a part of the solution. Something more than medication is needed.

Another way to get help is **Through your friends.** Find friends who can lift you up when you're down--not other depressed friends who will only bring you down more. Find friends who are strong in their faith who can lift

you up. That's why it's important to be a part of church. But also take the next step connect to others. That's why small groups are so important. Start on Wednesday nights, connect in home group, or some other small group, if you're a youth jump into youth group. That's where you'll connect with people who will listen to you and stand by you. The Bible says in Galatians 6:2, "carry one another's burdens and in so doing you will fulfill the law of Christ." Carry each other's burdens.

Another thing to do is to **Tell your family and friends when you are struggling.** The tendency with depression is to turn inward. But it's vital to let family and friends know how serious it is. Let people know what's really going on in your heart. They want to know and help.

Another good piece of advice is to **Help other people.** One person said this, "When I started helping other people, my problems started to get smaller and smaller." Taking the focus off of yourself by helping others is a great way to overcome those feelings of despair and depression.

Finally the single greatest resource you have as Christians is your faith in Jesus. **"Fall on your faith"** We have a gospel of hope, it is good news. We have the information and the knowledge that God knows us and loves us more than we could imagine or believe. Hope rings through the entire Christian faith, and when we're in Christ and cultivating a relationship with Jesus it changes everything.

I've shared my history of depression here before. Throughout my life, even as a little kid, I have struggled with bouts of deep depression. I call it the darkness. And it's like being slowly smothered. For me it was mostly triggered by pressures that I could not control. And often it would make me feel like an absolute failure at everything, even when things are going well. Logically I know and can see and even list what is going well, but the nature of depression is that it clouds things and distorts the truth. I thank God that he cuts through that depression with his truth.

It's actually been about three years since I've been there and I'm so thankful, I hope to never go there again. But if the darkness starts to creep in, I know I have strategies in place to defeat it. Not by my own power, but through the power of the one who lives in me.

Jesus said, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, NIV).** Jesus is the Lord of Hope and with him there are no hopeless situations. He's the God of new beginnings. Never forget that. Never. He will never leave us nor forsake us. We can lay the control of our lives at his feet and say, "Lord, my life belongs to you, and whatever happens in my life, you are still God and you are not going to let go of me, you are going to hold on to me forever."

Our faith can allow us to retrain our minds to know that we are not vulnerable, that in Christ we are powerful, that in the midst of worry and anxiety we can have that peace that goes beyond understanding and true, lasting joy. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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