

Essential Choices: Prayer over Anxiety

Acts 1:6-14; 4:23-31; Philippians 4:6-7

Synopsis.

In the face of threats and opposition, the early church committed all their anxiety in prayer to the One who controls all things—and the Spirit worked powerfully in their midst!”

Introduction.

Many years ago, when our oldest child, Emerson, was born, the joy and relief of having him finally with us was shattered by a phone call from his pediatrician soon after arriving home from the hospital. The doctor told us his newborn screening test showed positive markers for Cystic Fibrosis, a genetic disorder that, through repeated lung infections and eventual organ failure, eventually takes the person’s life before the age of 40. At that moment, the doctor’s plan for a second screening test to confirm or contradict these initial results did little to calm my racing heart, thoughts, and nerves. The next week or so was one of the most agonizing I’ve ever lived through, not knowing how things would turn out. In His mercy, God graciously provided a negative test result the second time around, but my nerves and emotional stability were so shaken that I doubt I’ll ever forget those few days. When we lived through the same exact experience with our youngest, Evelyn—positive, then negative—I felt only *slightly* less driven over the edge into a total emotional breakdown. In both cases, the literally nauseating anxiety I felt was almost beyond words. And though the worst outcome for us was graciously averted, many families do not get to breathe a sigh of relief when a diagnosis confirms their worst fears. That’s a different sermon series, but in both scenarios, God is--at all times--completely in control, infinitely sovereign, and loving and good and holy.

As Pastor Warren mentioned last week, several of us will be preaching through the summer about twelve essential choices we observe through the Book of Acts.

Each message stands as an invitation for each of us to make the same essential choices that will draw us into the work of the Spirit, the resulting transformation of the church, and into the movement of God in the world today.

The choice in focus this week is “Prayer over Anxiety.” I invite you to turn with me to Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 14, where we see the disciples’ final interaction with Jesus before he ascends to heaven.

Acts 1:6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

To put this in context, the Apostles had experienced the transforming power of the Gospel in profound ways: scattered during the Crucifixion, astounded by the Resurrection, and then restored and united over the following 40 days. Their question gives insight into what they hoped Jesus would accomplish: bringing about a final, just, and glorious order in the nation of Israel, even more splendid than the ancient kingdom of David.

Jesus seems to ignore their question, but if we look closer, I think we'll find his words filled with meaning. What he says is this (and I paraphrase): "God alone knows when that will be, as His plans are perfect. What you should know is that God Himself will supply everything you need to be My witnesses to the ends of the earth." To put it another way, Jesus is saying: "it is not for you to be anxious about these things, for that is not my purpose for you. My intention for you instead is to be witnesses in spirit and truth and power, proclaiming My Saving Work wherever you go."

Instead of being told the exact timing and nature of God's Kingdom coming (as they understood it), they are promised power through the Holy Spirit to be faithful to the ends of the earth. They are *saved* from the anxiety of not knowing the exact timing or methods or even who of them will live to see the new Kingdom, so that they can be *empowered* for the calling He has for them: living as witnesses pointing to the glory of the Gospel and His work on the cross. From this, the here-and-now kingdom of Jesus, at least until he returns one day, is brought about by the work God is doing through us, as His witnesses.

But while we may *believe* these promises—and want to see them realized in our lives—the natural pull of our hearts is toward grappling for control over our lives, fear-driven self-preservation, and doubting that God is infinitely powerful, good, and wise. Together, these components produce anxiety.

The *Pitfall* of Anxiety

I opened with a story of acute, sudden anxiety as an adult, but low-level undercurrents of worry and fear have defined most of my inner monologue for as long as I can remember. Some of the earliest, most powerful memories I have from early childhood are a racing heartbeat, trembling hands, and the sensation of choking while trying to breathe or swallow. Most of the time, these physiological symptoms were directly related to some situation with an uncertain outcome (i.e., waiting in the car rider line at school and imagining my mom forgetting to pick me up). But in recent years, these fears have grown into relentless, compulsive obsessions, heralded by stabs of panic in my chest that erupt over my mind, transforming my thoughts into a mass of gnarled roots, like a forest of thorns lit with green flames. In the past year, I've been diagnosed with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders--what today's therapists and physicians would call "clinical" conditions. I'm grateful for physicians and medication and the helpful explanations of family history. Perhaps you have struggled in the same ways I have. Or perhaps your experiences with anxiety have been less physiological or frequent, but just as intense.

But clinical or not, diagnosed or not, chemical imbalance or not, anxiety in our fallen world is real. *At best*, anxiety is our frustration at our inability to be God. And at worst, the unresolved questions and immense despair that anxiety produces culminate in total paralysis and despondency. The result is a struggle to survive long enough to see tomorrow--existing instead of living, as it were. And this can destroy any ability to be Christ's witnesses to the righteousness, peace, and joy He promises and gives.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

You see, the early church faced many anxieties, from very real threats of persecution, to uncertainty about provision for material needs. In today's passages, we see them committing their anxieties to the One who owns and controls all things--specifically, with ten days of constant, concerted prayer. Listen again to verses 12 to 14:

Then they returned to Jerusalem ... [and] when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying ... All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

In moments of fear and anxiety, we have a *blessed hope* in the reality of Jesus speaking directly to us. In Luke 12 and Matthew 10, we hear Him say,

"Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap ... and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!"

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father ... Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

"...[Consider] the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ... Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

And finally, Paul writing to the church in Philippi, saying:

"...my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

When we pray, Jesus answers us with reality, comfort, and help. He acknowledges our fears but counters them with reasoned, objective truths. He doesn't say, *"stop being anxious—get a grip and pull yourself together! Stop sniveling! Quit thinking your problems are worse than everyone else's!"* No. He gives patient, wise help as he speaks directly to the nature of anxiety, admonishing us to: Pray. Ask. Think. Consider. Rest.

The point I want to make here is this: anxiety grows when we think about how we *feel* or about how things *seem* to be or *could* be. It shrinks when we think, consider, and reason with objective truths--the most important of which are God's promises and the reality of his past and future grace. As we pray in the reality of these promises, we ask Him to accomplish what He has said He will give us.

A Picture of Prayer over Anxiety

In our second passage today in Acts, chapter 4, we see the early church earnestly pursuing God in prayer in the face of further anxiety and fear. Earlier in the chapter, Peter and John had been brought before the religious leaders—the Sanhedrin—and

threatened if they continued preaching the Gospel. Listen to how they responded, starting in verse 23:

Acts 4:23-31

When [Peter and John] were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

*"Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed"—*

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

In the face of threats and opposition, the early church prayed. They took their fears to the One who controls all things—and, incredibly, asked for boldness to witness and for the Spirit to work powerfully—in the very midst of threats and unknown outcomes.

William Barclay, a New Testament commentator, observes four elements clearly visible in this' prayer:

1. They praised God for His total, sovereign power over all things.
 - The greatest evil in all history—Christ's death on the cross—using the very hands of sinners as tools in the hands of a totally sovereign God who, before the earth was formed, had purposed to save His people through Christ's willing sacrifice on the cross.
 - One of my favorite statements outside the Bible proclaiming God's total sovereignty is from Dutch Prime Minister and Theologian Abraham Kuyper when

he says: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

2. The believers recalled David's words in the second Psalm, stating man's rebellion against God's purposes as ultimately and totally, futile in the outcomes they are seeking. Ironically, God uses man's rebellion and perceived autonomy, independence, and freedom to accomplish His purposes.
3. They reasoned, considered, and meditated on God's past grace upon them, through Jesus, as a means to trust for and believe in the future grace still to come. This begins with reason, thought, and consideration in response to the frantic, panicked thoughts racing in circles in our heads. This directly relates to Jesus' words in Luke's gospel, when he tells us to *consider* the ravens and the lilies.
4. Finally, the believers asked for protection from the reality of persecution and injustice they faced. But they also asked for boldness, strength, and miraculous power to continue faithfully living as witnesses, recalling the promise from Jesus Himself before he ascended into heaven.

The result was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a sign of God's hearing of and answer to their prayer. And as if that weren't enough, in verse 31, we are told:

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

They went on to do the very thing they prayed to receive by grace—for boldness in speaking the Word of God. What Jesus promised before the Ascension was fulfilled, giving them what they needed in the days ahead.

The Purpose Behind His Promises

This scene of the early church at prayer can encourage us. When we encounter setbacks and challenges, we can commit our anxiety and fear to God in prayer as we meditate on His promises to work powerfully in our midst--whether that is by changing our circumstances, or changing us.

Paul summarizes this practice of choosing prayer over anxiety in his letter to the church in Philippi in chapter 4:

Philippians 4:6-7

... 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.

So, when anxiety builds, Paul tells us to do three things:

1. Approach God in prayer
2. Tell Him what we need, keeping in mind His *past* faithfulness and grace, which nurture thankfulness
3. *Wait* and *rest* in the moment-by-moment grace He supplies that provides peace--deeper than any human--the very antidote against anxiety.

But someone might say, "For what? So we can live comfortable lives, free from suffering and the effects of this broken world?" Not necessarily. At least, that isn't what the text indicates.

Recalling what we began with, we are given grace to be faithful witnesses, in at least two distinct ways:

- To live with clear, outward evidence that we are His, keeping His commandments, pursuing holiness, fighting against sin in our lives, loving and serving each other, and pursuing justice and reconciliation--among many other things.
- To proclaim the good news of Christ's death, resurrection, and full pardon for desperate sinners, granting new life now and, one day, clothed in glory with Him for all eternity.

These two elements *save* us from anxiety as they change us and glorify Our King. It's true that God saves us from the just penalty for our sin, but also from the gaping maw of anxiety that threatens to keep our focus *anywhere* but on His promises, past grace, and future grace to come--all ours in Jesus. Our desperate pursuit of Him in prayer in response to anxiety gives glory to God by affirming His promises are true, and that He supplies the very means to be his witnesses. In this process, we experience growth in surrender, obedience, and a relishing of Christ, as it were, that proves to all who would see that He is the greatest treasure in the universe.

So, a challenge for the coming week: in the face of anxiety, approach God in prayer. Tell Him what you need (even though He already knows--even more so than you). Then, think, consider, and meditate on his *past* faithfulness and grace, both within your life's unique story, and within the promises in His Word. Finally, wait and rest while continuing to hold His promises of *future* grace in your mind.

And as you pray for your own needs and concerns, please also pray for this body--Millersville BIC Church. As Pastor Warren said last Sunday, we want to thrive as a healthy, growing, empowered, innovative, outward-focused, and life-changing church.

And we can be a dynamic movement of God's Spirit when we make the same essential choices as the apostles—and one of these, clearly, is to pray.

As we preach through the coming weeks about these twelve essential choices of the early church, we can pray that each of these choices would be fulfilled in us, individually and corporately within this church. Starting tomorrow, you'll receive these prayers by email, one after another, each day through the summer, as a way for us to join together constantly in prayer.

And so, I pray with you this week as we all seek and anticipate these things--that God would be glorified in our pursuit of Him, declaring our hopeless, utterly bankrupt estate without Him, as we bring our anxieties and fears to Him in prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, let's pray.

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Millersville BIC Church