

Pentecost 8
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Philippians 4:6,7
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You Don't Have to Worry

1. Our worry changes nothing.
2. God's peace changes everything.

It captured the fancy of futuristic scientists. It was an eight-story, glass-and-steel dome in which scientists would lead a self-sustained life. The elements of Arizona's Sonora Desert would not touch them. Let the hot sun blaze. Let the dry winds blow. Let the gritty sand fly. The scientists would be untouched, safe inside the dome. And so it was that in 1991 eight researchers entered the 200-million-dollar, three-acre dome in Arizona's desert. As they planted their seeds and grew their food, people around the world watched with fascination and, I would imagine, a few of us felt a tinge of envy.

Who of us hasn't longed for a rotunda of relief? Who of us hasn't wished for freedom from fretting? Not from an Arizona desert, but from the harsh winds and hot sun of life: The bank that demands the mortgage each month. Medical bills that pack a knockout punch. Semester finals that lurk around the corner.

Look around you. Isn't there real reason to worry? The sun blasts cancer-causing rays. Air vents blow lung-clotting molds. Potato chips have too many carbs. Vegetables have too many toxins. And why do they call an airport a *terminal*? Why does the pilot tell passengers, "We are about to make our *final* approach"? Even on the ground, we are urged to stay seated until we have come to a "complete" stop. Is there any other kind? Do some airlines have "sort of" stops, or "partial" stops, or "little bits of" stops?

Isn't it true that each of us has a postgraduate degree from the University of Anxiety? We go to sleep worried that we won't wake up; we wake up worried that we didn't sleep. We worry that someone will discover that lettuce was fattening all along. One mother of a teenager says, "My daughter won't tell me anything. I'm a nervous wreck." Another says, "My daughter tells me everything. I'm a nervous wreck." Wouldn't you love to stop worrying? Couldn't you use a strong shelter from life's harsh elements?

Today, as we bring to a close our brief series on treasured portions of Scripture, I am privileged to share with you one of mine. In it God reminds us of a peace that makes for a worry-free life. In a sense, God created a dome for our heart. He inspired the Apostle Paul to write, "*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" Has God piqued your interest? Then listen carefully as I read the rest of the text. "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*"

1. The Christians in Philippi needed a dome. Attacks were coming at them from all angles. There were preachers serving for selfish gain. Squabbling church members were threatening the unity of the church. False teachers were preaching a gospel without Christ and without the cross. There were believers struggling to find food and shelter. Persecutions on the outside; problems on the inside. Enough hornets' nests to make anyone worry. The folks in Philippi had them. Folks today have them. To them and to us God gives the power-packed proposal: "*Do not be anxious about anything.*"

"Yeah, right" you say. "And, while I'm at it, I'll leapfrog the moon. Are you kidding?" Jesus isn't. Two words summarize his thoughts on worrying: irrelevant and irreverent. "*Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*" (Mt 6:27) he asks. Worry is irrelevant. It changes nothing. When was the last time you solved a problem by worrying about it? When was the last time you changed anything by fretting and being anxious about it? The fact of the matter is, worrying worsens things. It leads to headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, even heart attacks. We don't add one day to our life or one bit of life to our day by worrying. Regarding those things about which we fret:

- 40% never happen;
- 30% have to do with unchangeable deeds of the past;
- 12% focus on the opinions of others that cannot be changed;
- 10% center on personal health, which only worsens as we worry about them; and
- 8% have to do with real problems that we can influence.

92% of our worries are needless. They are irrelevant. They are also irreverent, because they demonstrate a lack of trust in God. Jesus says, "*And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?*" (Mt 6:28-30)

Worry betrays a fragile faith. It's not that we intentionally doubt God, but don't we, when we worry, essentially show a lack of trust in him? And, worst of all, since worry betrays a lack of trust in God, it is sin.

That's why the apostle tells us, *"Do not be anxious about anything."* It's not that Paul is promoting an irresponsible, careless life. We're not to be like the procrastinating preacher who convinced himself, "Don't worry. The Holy Spirit will give me my message." All week long he avoided his sermon work, saying, "The Holy Spirit will give me my message." Finally, on Sunday he stood before his congregation and prayed out loud, "OK, Lord, give me my message." Much to the surprise of the assembly, a heavenly voice filled the church and said, "Tell the people you didn't study."

Manage our problems? Of course. But let our problems manage us? That's what the heart full of worry does.

So, what's the solution? How can we learn to stop worrying? Paul offers a two-pronged answer: God's part and our part. Our part includes penitence and prayer. God's part? Peace and protection.

2. Paul says, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* In order to pray, we must know that we are worthy to pray, that God hears and answers all our prayers, and that all his answers to our prayers are for our good. It is only when our heart is full of penitence—sorrow over our sin and faith in the forgiveness that God has won for us in Christ—that we can be assured of all this. And so we recognize that our worry is sin, we confess it before God, and we are assured through the gospel that we have his forgiveness in Christ.

And then we pray. Prayer forces us to look upward in faith rather than forward in fear. Paul's command to pray should not come as a surprise. Regarding prayer, the Bible never blushes. Jesus once told his disciples a parable, Luke writes, *"to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (18:1)*. Paul wrote to the Colossians, *"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and careful" (4:2)*. And James said, *"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray" (5:13)*.

Rather than worry about anything, pray about everything. "Everything?" you ask. "Diaper changes and dates? Business meetings and broken bathtubs? Birthdays and basketball games?" *"In everything,"* Paul says, *"present your requests to God."* Our part is penitence and prayer. And God's part? Peace and protection. As one translation puts it, *"If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."*

We can pray in faith because we know God's peace. Not a random, nebulous, earthly peace, but his peace, a peace that comes to us from heaven, a peace won for us by the Prince of Peace, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the same peace and tranquility that mark his throne room in heaven. Can you imagine God battling anxiety? Can you see him wringing his hands with worry or asking the angels for antacids? Of course not. A problem is no more a challenge to God than a twig is to an elephant. God enjoys perfect peace because God possesses perfect power.

That's the peace that's ours, a peace that *"transcends all understanding,"* a peace that *"will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus."* What Paul is doing here is using a military metaphor. Living in a garrison town, the Philippians were accustomed to the Roman sentries maintaining their watch. Before any enemy could get inside, he had to pass through the guards. God says the same to us. His perfect peace overshadows us like a protective dome, guarding our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Because of God's peace, we don't have to worry.

After two years the experiment in Arizona proved to be a total flop. The biological balance between the plants got out of whack. Oxygen levels dipped dangerously low. The scientists squabbled among themselves. The ants ran amuck and conquered almost all of the other bugs. The experiment failed, and the dome was abandoned.

But God's dome still stands. Are you tied up in knots? *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pt 5:7)*, Peter says. It's a pretty strong verb that Peter uses: *Cast*. Not *place* or *lay* or *occasionally offer*. Peter uses the same verb that the Gospel writers use when they describe how Jesus treated demons. He cast them out. One hand on the collar, another on the belt, and a strong "Don't you come back." My friends, do the same with your fears. Get serious with them. Cast them on Jesus, because he cares for you.

Worry is an option, not an assignment. Repent of your sins of worry. Cling to God's gospel promise of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. And be quick to pray. Focus less on the problem ahead and more on the victory behind. As a result, you will enjoy God's peace, a peace that transcends all understanding, a peace that guards your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.