

Series: Wisdom for Life

A Sound Mind

Philippians 4:6

Sermon by Teaching Pastor Paul Joslin

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, January 28, 2024

Just a couple more. We do not have them on the screen, but over 40 million adults, twenty percent of the population in America have an anxiety disorder, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and according to that same bureau, about one third of adults, so over thirty-three percent, reported anxiety or depression symptoms in 2023. So, it is all over our culture and our society and everybody, and if you are not one of the people who is dealing with one of those issues, my guess is that you know someone who does, just statistically, and here is the other reason why I want to talk about it today, it is important for you to know. For me, those aren't just statistics. I am actually one of those statistics. I actually have had a lot of struggles in my life with depression and anxiety, and so it is a journey. I am still learning about myself and learning how to deal and cope and what all of that means for me and the root causes of some of that from my life, but for me, anxiety is one of the big things that I struggle with, and it looks a little different. Most people who know me, I do not think they would consider me a very anxious person. I do not have panic attacks. Externally, I actually look pretty calm, and like I am in control or have things together most of the time, but internally my mind is just chaos. It is just out of control, and I struggle with doomsday scenarios of worst possible situations for my family. I struggle with fears of failure or not measuring up in certain ways. I have a lot of anxiety around looking foolish in front of people, which I wish I had known about myself before I became a preacher. It does not always go well, and I do not have anxiety before I get up to preach. It is always after the fact. It is like, "Why did I say that?" or whatever, and so for me, it is this internal struggle, and my therapist says it is something called high performance or high functioning anxiety. Most people think you are fine, and internally you are just like a little wreck, and that is the way it presents for me, and my guess is that for many of you in this room, those are not just statistics either. My guess is that for many of you, that may be part of your struggle in one of these mental health areas, or you know someone, and chances are this, if you have children, it seems like mental health issues are just increasingly on the rise for young people and getting worse and worse, and so it is an important topic for the church to talk about.

Here is the last thing I will say before we come and dive in. If you are sitting here saying, "Yeah, this is not for me. I am going to take a nap like Landon, and this is great. I'll just get in the morning nap before playoff games this afternoon," or whatever it might be, I just want to say this, there are other people in the room who are struggling, and if you are not someone who is struggling, they need you. They need you to know what the struggle is like, and they need you to be a support, and so I hope that this is a conversation today that's actually impactful and meaningful for all of us as we dive into this topic.

All of those caveats aside, my personal story, one more thing right before we get in. I need you to know this. I think there are so many times in the church when people get up on the stage, and they talk about things that they show us, and they use this phrase, "I used to have this problem," or "I used to struggle with this," and it is always past tense. It is always something that is in the past that we have overcome or that we found freedom from, or maybe God showed up and fixed, or whatever it might be, and I am not dogging those stories. I love stories of freedom. I believe God steps into situations and can

heal and bring freedom and wholeness to people. I just need you to know that that is not where I am coming from today. This is very much a current struggle, a current reality that I am trying to figure out and understand where God is in the midst of it, so the wisdom that I think scripture has to offer us today is just as much for me as it is for you, hopefully. So, ready to dive in? All right, great.

So, we are going to start out and look at the wisdom of scripture for how to not be anxious or how to deal with anxiety or mental health issues, and Paul starts out, and he says, “Do not be anxious about anything,” which does not feel very helpful, right? Let’s just be honest. If you have ever struggled with anxiety or any kind of mental health, and someone is like, “Yeah, just do not do that anymore,” that does not feel great. In fact, it really reminds me of the old Mad TV skit with Bob Newhart. Does anyone know what I am talking about, the “stop it”? If you do not know, take a look at the screen, and you will see what I am talking about.

“I have this fear of being buried alive in a box. I just I start thinking about being buried alive, and I begin to panic.” “Has anyone ever tried to bury you alive in the box?” “No, but truly thinking about it does make my life horrible. I mean, I can’t go through tunnels or be in an elevator or in a house, anything boxy.” “So, what you are saying is you are claustrophobic.” “Yes, yes, that is it.” “All right. Well, let’s go Catherine. I am going to say two words to you right now. I want you to listen to them very, very carefully. Then I want you to take them out of the office with you and incorporate them in into your life.” “So, do I write them down?” “Well, if it makes you comfortable, it is just two words. We find most people can remember them.” “Okay.” “You ready?” “Okay, yeah.” “You’re there?” “Yes.” “Stop it.” “I’m sorry?” “Stop it.” “Stop it?” “Yes, stop, new word, it.” “So, what are you saying?” “I mean, you don’t want to go through life being scared of being buried alive in a box, do you? I mean, that sounds frightening.” “Yeah.” “Then stop it.” “I can’t. I mean it’s been with me since childhood.” “No, we don’t go there, just stop.”

Oh man, so is that the best Paul has for us, to just stop it? Just like, don’t be anxious. Just move on with your life. Stop worrying, and just figure it out. Is that really the best wisdom scripture has for us on mental health or anxiety or the things we struggle with? I have got to be honest. Growing up in the church, and I grew up in a Texas church particularly, I got to say, so yeah, a couple of people know what I am talking about. It felt like that a lot of times. If you talked about depression or anxiety, and we maybe did not even have those words, but if you just told someone you were sad, they would just say that; “Stop it. You just need to pray more, and if you are worried about something, just stop worrying. You just need to trust God and pray more,” and it can feel like we come to this passage that says, “Do not be anxious, but in every situation pray and offer petition and thanksgiving to God,” that the solution Paul is offering for us is, “Do not be anxious, like you should never be anxious about anything in your life, and if you do get anxious, if that happens to you, like just pray, and then you will not be anxious anymore,” and that can be the formulaic approach that we take from this verse to mental health, when we come to passages of scripture, and we treat them almost like promises that this wisdom Paul has to offer for us. It is just, “Hey, stop it, cut it out, and if you really can’t do that, pray about it, and then God will stop it for you.” The problem with that is if you live in that world of anxiety or depression or any kind of mental struggle, you know that it is not that simple, and in fact scripture is not that simple either.

It is fascinating to me that we can sometimes just pluck these verses out of context and say, “Yeah, it is just this formula. If you are worried, then pray, and then you will not be worried anymore,” but if you look at scripture, I mean, so many heroes of the faith dealt with anxiety or depression or discouragement or other sorts of mental health things. In fact, Paul himself in Second Corinthians, he

has this whole list in chapter eight, where he is talking about all of the challenges of being a pastor to this church and all of the concerns he has had, all the suffering he's been through. He's talking about how he's been shipwrecked and marooned on an island, and he has been beaten and flogged and he has gone hungry, and he has gone thirsty, and then he finishes this whole list off by saying this, "On top of all of that, I carry with me the deep anxiety and burden for the churches every day." It is the exact same word in this passage, so if Paul was anxious, then why is he saying here, "Just do not be anxious"? but it actually goes even deeper than that.

If you look at the life of Jesus, when He goes to the garden of Gethsemane the night before He is crucified, the night He is betrayed, we are told that He goes into the garden, and as He begins to pray, He is full of sorrow and troubled, and that word, "troubled," is the exact same root word that Paul uses in this passage, that Jesus had anxiety, and more than that, you remember what Jesus was doing in Gethsemane when He had anxiety. He was praying, and so clearly the wisdom from scripture is not that if you just feel anxious, just pray about it, and it will get better. I do not think any of us would come to Jesus before He goes to the cross and say, "Jesus, you really just need to stop worrying about it and just pray a little more." That is not the solution, and so what is the solution that Paul is offering here when he says, "do not be anxious"? Is it really as simple as we just need to stop having anxiety, or is it something deeper?

I think what I would like to suggest to you this morning is that Paul is not saying that if we struggle with anxiety, that we always have to struggle with anxiety. I think a paraphrase or a way of getting at the heart of what he is saying is that anxiety does not have to win in your life. If you are a person who is anxious or struggles with mental health or struggles with any of those issues, it does not have to define your existence. Sometimes when we are stuck in those places, it can feel like there is no end in sight, there is no way out, and this is just our lot in life and what will be true of us forever, that we have no ability or no way to overcome the challenges we face. I think what Paul is offering here is a lifeline to say anxiety does not have to win. Whatever struggle you are dealing with does not have to characterize and define your reality.

When I think of anxiety, I often think of my daughter Camden, and not because she is an anxious child, she is not, but because she loves to spin in circles. Has anyone seen a kid just run around in circles like a crazy person? I don't understand how they do it. I watch them go twice in a circle, and I think to myself, if I did that, I would probably throw up or pass out, one of the two. I just won't be able to do that, but she can just run in circles on end, and she will sometimes ask me to spin her in circles. Here is why it makes me think of anxiety. It is that so much of anxiety, that worry that we feel, that anxiety we carry with us about the meeting we have on Monday or the situation that is coming up in our lives, maybe it is a conversation we feel like we need to have that we do not know how to have, or maybe it is something going on in our kids' lives that we feel like we do not have control over, or maybe it is something that we know that is going on with our parents, and there is no way we can solve it, all the places we feel that anxiety, worry presents itself, like running in circles continuously. There is so much motion and momentum and effort and energy, and nothing is solved, and you do not actually go anywhere, right? That is what anxiety feels like, and I think what Paul is saying is that when we fill ourselves with worry, when we are not actually solving the problem, we are just expending all sorts of energy trying to accomplish something, and actually all we are doing is sitting with the problem and not achieving anything.

In fact, Jesus puts it this way. Do not be anxious, because who can add a moment to their days by worrying? It does not actually solve the problem, and we can get all worked up about the situation or circumstances we are facing. We can expend all of this energy, and anxiety does not actually make it better. It just deepens and gets worse and burns us out, and Paul is saying we do not have to spin in circles. We do not have to just extend ourselves in that same way.

We do not just need to stop worrying and pray more, but we do not have to live with anxiety as the reality of our life, and if you hear nothing else that I say to that, I need you to hear this. Waterstone is not a church that thinks you just need to pray away your troubles and that if you have mental health issues, they are just spiritual issues that you need to trust God more for. We fully believe in using and resourcing mental health professionals, doctors, medication, all of the tools that are available to us to help with these different things we struggle with. Mental health is not just a spiritual issue. So many times, mental health has deep roots in our stories and our traumas and our past and the things that we deal with on a daily basis. Just praying those things away does not solve them.

Just think about it like this. If you break your arm, and someone from this church tells you, “Hey, do not go see a doctor, and definitely do not take Advil,” how are you going to respond to them? “That is crazy.” We have medicine and medication to help with those things. It is the exact same thing with mental health. There are doctors and professionals and therapists whom we have on our care page at Waterstone. We have an entire resource list of mental health professionals, counselors, coaches, licensed people, and psychiatrists who can help with all of these things, and we will pay for you to go see those people if money is an issue. We do not believe that if you are suffering, you have to suffer in silence and just hope God shows up in your life to fix the problem you are dealing with. Do we believe that God can heal physically? Yes. Do we believe that God can heal mental health issues? Yes, but we do not have to limit ourselves to only trusting God in those situations. God uses doctors and medicine to heal people all the time, and so why would we limit ourselves when it comes to mental health as well? So, I will say this. If you are someone who is struggling in that area, and you feel like you do not have a way out or help, Larry, myself, Melanie, who is our care resident, they would love to meet with you, talk with you, and resource you to a professional who might be able to assist you in that way.

So, if I am right, and the apostle Paul is not just saying, “Do not be anxious, just stop it,” and that we actually have things available to us to get help, what is the wisdom this passage has for us, this verse has for us about how to deal with anxiety of the struggles that we face? He goes on in verse six, and he says this, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanks-giving, present your requests to God.” So, Paul’s second way of dealing with anxiety, the second piece of wisdom for dealing with anxiety he has for us, is “pray about everything,” which feels a little bit like being switched, right? Everything I just said was that you do not just have to pray, and it is not just about prayer and there is other resources available to you. “So, now are you saying that Paul’s solution is just to pray more?” What are we talking about?

Stick with me for just a moment, because if you look at the text, there are two really important phrases. There are two action phrases that stand above the rest of this passage, and when you look at the verse, it begins by saying this. Can we put the verse back up on the screen? Thank you. “Do not be anxious about anything.” There is an action phrase. It is a verb. It is telling you what to do about anything, “But in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving,” the second action phrase, “present your requests to God.” That second action phrase, the verb there is actually more akin to making known to God your requests or reveal to God the things that you are dealing with.

Now, why in the world would Paul say that you need to reveal to an all-knowing God, who knows everything about your life, the struggles that you are going through? Why would his advice or wisdom for anxiety be to reveal those areas that you are struggling with to a God who knows everything? If God already knows our situations and our circumstances and the things that we are going through, why do we need to reveal those things to Him?

I think Paul knows something deep about the human condition that we can all tend to struggle with, because I think we all have a propensity at times to forget that God is with us in the circumstances and situations we find ourselves in. I have not been a pastor for very long, but I can tell you that from most of my conversations with people and most of the times when they let me into some of their struggles or their internal world and the realities that they face, most of us feel like those areas where we are struggling, whether it is a trauma from our past, something to do with our identity, some circumstance we are facing, we treat those things like the elephant in the room in our relationship with God. We treat those things like, yeah, we should not really let God know about those things, that we somehow have to find a way to fix those things ourselves, that we just need to muster up enough faith or enough courage, or that if we just believe a little more or we just pray a little more, whatever, that if we just fix it ourselves, then either God does not know or does not care about that, or we do not want Him to know about that, and so we fill ourselves with shame or anxiety about the very things we are struggling with, because we do not want to let God in.

God already knows, and if it matters to you, it matters to God, but I think what Paul is getting at is that God is wanting us to invite Him into the places we struggle. Whether that is through prayer or petition, that word for petition is “desperation,” and God wants to be invited into the places that we are struggling, and so Paul tells us to reveal those places to God. God genuinely cares about the areas of our life where we are struggling, and I think so many of us can fall into this trap where we forget God in the process, and I think so many times that a way to think about this is to ask yourself, where do you turn first when a situation or a struggle, or maybe anxiety or depression or those things arise within you? Do you turn to Google or to God? What is your authority or the resource? What is the first place that you turn to?

I think for myself, what happened is I grew up hearing so much about you just have to pray the anxiety away, and then I grew up, and I found out there was such a thing as a therapist, and talking to someone about my problems really helped, and all of the resources, and somewhere along the way I forgot that God is with me in the therapy room or that God is with me in the places that I am struggling. I do not just have to figure it out on my own, that God wants to be invited into those places, and even if we need therapy or medication or other resources to come around us, and all of those things are good, God still wants to be invited into those spaces and work with us and carry our burdens in those spaces. So, here is something that I am learning over the last few years, that God is strong enough to carry whatever it is that is crushing you, and He wants to carry your burdens. He wants to be invited into the places where you are struggling.

This this last week I was talking with Camden on the way to school, and I just have to apologize. I have two illustrations from my kids, and that is just my whole world right now. I am not going out with friends or anything like that, so all of my illustrations are just coming from my kids. I’m sorry, but I was talking with Camden, and we were driving on the way to school, and we were having this conversation. I do not even know where it came from. Just out of the blue, she goes, “Dad, you are pretty strong, but you are not that strong.” I’ve got to admit, it hurt my pride a little bit, and I was like, “Oh, wow. Okay.

What?” Like, just out of nowhere, kids can be so brutal, and I was like, “Can you just tell me, like, what? What do you mean I’m not that strong? It’s okay. Like my feelings are not hurt. It’s fine,” and she goes, “Well, like, you can lift heavy things, but you can’t lift really heavy things.” So, I was like, “Okay, sure. That is true. Like what? Give me an example.” She’s like, well, you can lift really big rocks. You love to throw rocks in the river with me, and they are really big rocks, or you can lift my backpack and carry it into school.” I was like, “Yeah, okay, cool. I can do the backpack. Awesome,” and then she goes, “But you can’t lift the church,” and I was like, “Oh, all right, we’re good. We’re good, like I don’t need to lift the church for you to think I am strong. That is totally fine,” but it is true that I can carry her backpack, and I do that pretty well, and in fact most days when we come to school, she’s got her books and her lunch and her water bottle and her snowshoes right now, and her backpack feels too heavy for her, and so almost every day we get out of the truck, and we start walking, and she’s like, “Daddy, will you carry my backpack for me?” and every single time I am like, “Yeah, absolutely,” so I want to carry things for her, and she knows that I am strong enough to carry the load that she can’t carry.

I think sometimes we forget that about our Heavenly Father, that whatever you feel like is so overwhelming, the weight of whatever it is you’re carrying that is crushing you, God can carry like it’s nothing. Do we turn to him and trust Him with those things? I think what Paul is getting that is there is an invitation for us with the things that are weighing us down to invite God into those spaces, so we do not simply have to carry those burdens alone. What I am finding out more and more and more about myself is that when I invite God into those spaces, it doesn’t just magically make the burden disappear, but it does change how I interact with and see the burden. We all have a choice in how we choose to deal with anxiety or depression or the issues that we face and the struggles that we face. Do we choose to invite God into those spaces? As I said earlier, for me this is not just some theoretical wisdom like it’s out there. This is the reality that I’m living and working and struggling through and don’t always get right.

There was a moment in my life a few years ago when it was a season when I was just so over-whelmed with anxiety and feeling like I was a failure in every area of my life, when things felt like they were out of control, and I just could not get on top of things, that I felt like things were just, I was in that state of spinning and I could not figure out a way forward. It felt so overwhelming. I did not know how. I just wanted things to stop, and I remember there was a moment, and please just have grace for me as I share this, I actually did not plan on sharing this story this weekend, and last night I felt like I needed to, and I will again today. There was a moment in that season when I was driving, and I just felt like the weight of all of the things that I was carrying, and I had this moment where I thought at what speed would I have to be driving to not take my life? I did not want to end things, but just to like, hit the median hard enough that I could just be in the hospital for a couple of months, and things could just stop then, so that I just would not have to keep trying to keep it all together, and thankfully I could not do the math to figure out that equation, and so I pulled into my destination, and I turned off my car, and I just started, I just prayed, and the only prayer I had was, “God, I need you. I need you,” and I had no other prayer to offer. I had no solution. I had nothing else to say. It was just, “God, I need you,” and the cry was like, “I cannot carry this anymore,” and that simple prayer was enough, and it did not magically solve all those problems.

It did not change my relationship with anxiety. In many ways, it was just the start of a journey, but I told a friend about that moment, and he said, “You need to talk to someone,” and so I started going to therapy, and I started letting people into that struggle, because here is the other thing that we miss

about this passage, is that when Paul says share your requests with God, that “your,” there is plural. It is not individual. It’s not that you were just supposed to go away in the room somewhere and pray about things until God fixes them in your life. It is that you collectively are a community of people who share one another’s burdens and bring them to God, and it is that simple prayer of, “God, need you. I can’t carry this myself,” that it begins to open up our relationship to those areas of struggle, and while it may not solve them, what you need to hear today is God is big enough for that moment. You do not have to hide those things from Him. You can reveal them to Him and allow Him to step into those spaces and show you what He can do.

He can bring healing and wholeness. Anxiety does not have to win. Depression does not have to win. The circumstances you are facing do not have to define your reality. Jesus alone defines your reality, and it is also not the intensity or clarity or depth of the faith you offer in those moments. I think sometimes when it comes to prayer and thinking about suffering, it is just like, “Well man, I do not know if I actually believe that God will show up, and I do not know if I have enough faith. I do not know if my prayer is the right thing,” but it is not about how well you pray or how deep you pray, or even how deeply you believe that God will show up in your life. It is not an amount of faith that determines God’s action in your life.

D.A. Carson has a phenomenal illustration of this idea. I think it’s phenomenal. Maybe you will hear it and think it is terrible, but I need to give him credit, because it is his and not mine. He talks about this illustration of going back to the to the land of Egypt, and the Israelites before the first Passover, before the angel of the Lord is going to sweep through the nation of Egypt and take out every first born who does not have the blood of the lamb over the door, and there are two Jewish, Hebrew men who are talking with one another before this event is about to happen. It’s all fictional, but he says that their names are Bob and Larry, two remarkable Jewish names. I think he is just ripping off vegetables or something. I don’t know, but he says Bob and Larry are having a conversation, and Bob comes to Larry, and he says, “Man, are you feeling worried about tonight? I feel so nervous about this evening and what God is going to do. It feels really scary,” and Larry’s response is, “What are you talking about? God told us what to do. He said you kill the lamb, you put the blood over the doorposts, and then you pack all of your things, and you get ready to go, and you have the Passover meal with your family, and He is going to show up, and what is there for you to worry about?” Bob’s response is, “Yeah, He did say all that, and I have done that, but I mean, just think about what has happened the last few months around here. We had flies that filled the skies, and fire fell from heaven, and the rivers turned to blood. This has been weird. This has been intense, and you have three sons. So maybe if you do not do it right and you lose one, but you still have two. I only have one son. I am worried about what might happen to him. I feel nervous and scared,” and Larry responds and says, “Bring it on. I trust in the promises of God,” and then the angel of the Lord passes through that night, and the question is, “Which of the two was saved, and which lost their son?” and the answer is neither. Neither lost their son, because it is not about the clarity or intensity of their faith. It is the object of their faith. It is not about how deeply we believe God shows up in our lives. God does not rescue us based on how deeply or intensely we trust Him. God shows up because He is a good and loving father who shows up for his children, who need him, and He is willing to carry our burdens.

As we close the service today, the band is going to come out, and they are going to sing a song that I encourage you to respond to in whatever way you may feel like you can. You can pray in this moment. You can sing along. You can just listen to the words and hear them, but this is what I want to

invite you into today. We have prayer people, men and women who have offered and volunteered to pray all week for this service and who have offered to pray with you today, and they are around the room. In the back they have a red lanyard, so it's really clear who is offering prayer today. We have two people up front who are going to be willing to offer anointing. If you're a person for whom getting up and walking across the room for someone to pray with you feels like the most terrifying thing you could even possibly imagine, I need you to know this. In this space, no one is without struggle, not a single one of us that does not have a burden that is too big for us to bear, and so no one is going to look at you if you go for prayer this morning saying, "Oh man, I bet that person has got some stuff." That is not our heart posture. We want to create space where we can share one another's burdens before the Lord and invite Him into the things that we cannot carry ourselves, and so I would invite you today, if you just simply want to come forward and have someone anoint your hand with oil, and they are simply going to pray a simple prayer, "Holy Spirit, pull yourself out and carry their burden." If you would actually like to share with someone a little bit about what is going on, we have people in the back who would be more than willing to pray for you to hear what is going on and to offer prayer, and here's what I think I see in these moments when this happens. It is that so often, even when we are too scared to say everything that is going on, it does not matter, as long as we do the act of going to someone to pray. The Holy Spirit is large enough in these moments to know what is going on with you and someone else and pray the thing that is exactly what you need to hear, because our God is that good, and so I would encourage you in this moment, if you are carrying something that feels too big for you to bear, go to one of these places, and allow someone to pray for you. Invite God into that space. It can be as simple as, "God, I need you," and let's see what He might do. Let me pray for you.

Heavenly Father, God, as we step into this space, and I know there are so many people in this room and maybe even those joining us online. God, we all have things in our life that feel too much for us at times. I pray that we would take the wisdom of Paul seriously, that sometimes all it takes is an invitation into this space. It may not solve the issue, but God, it definitely changes our interaction with it. God, I pray that the words Paul closes this passage with, would be true for us today, that when we come to you in prayer, when we offer our petition and our thanksgiving, when we bring our anxiety and our worries and our struggles to you, that the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, that goes beyond our imagining, would guard our hearts and their minds in Christ Jesus. God, we give this moment to you. It is in Christ's name we pray, amen. I invite you now to stand and respond in whatever way you feel led.

33:49 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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