

**Series: Peace of Mind
“Help For Anxious Minds”**

Philippians 4:4-6

Big Idea – I need to learn to replace anxiety with prayer and praise.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything ... Philippians 4:4-6

don't be anxious about anything? is that even possible? ever feel that way?

If you ever feel like you're battling with anxiety you're not alone.

Study after study has sounded the alarm over the emotional and mental crisis gripping American teenagers. (Besides stats on screen, note these facts).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found 1 in 5 high school students reported witnessing violence in their communities. The National Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that almost 60% of teenage girls felt persistently sad or hopeless. One third of female students reported having considered suicide in the past year; more than 13% said they had attempted suicide.

In another troubling finding, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) earlier this month published a report that found that mental health-related visits to emergency rooms by teenagers and young adults had spiked in the past decade. Suicide-related visits accounted for the biggest increase.

More than 2.7 million young people are suffering from severe mental illness - a large percentage of them are found in Pennsylvania, according to Mental Health America. The advocacy organization ranks Pennsylvania third in the nation for the number of young people dealing with at least one major depressive disorder.

“You have the pandemic, the role of social media, the covid landscape that created divisiveness and contention and animosity in communities,” said Dr. Jason Pedersen, a school psychologist in the Derry Township School District.

“The pandemic created a whole new set of stressors,” Pedersen said. “It put a microscope on everything. For everyone there was a lot of stress involved because of the uncertainty. We had people experiencing family members losing jobs or financial insecurity and food insecurity and people being physically ill and dying. Those things added to the stress. It was a difficult time for everyone.”

Pedersen points out, 20 years ago, when the school day ended, any issues that a young person may have been dealing with — with peers or even adults — were set aside for the evening. Today everyone is available — or logged on — most of the time.

“If you didn’t happen to live in the neighborhood, you might not see them,” Pedersen said. “That was a nice break for people. The break has gone away. You see a lot of students that are having difficulties with their peers, well that difficulty follows them on Instagram or whatever app is being used or text is being used all throughout the evening and day.”

I realize this is an incredibly complex subject, and we're all on different points of the anxiety spectrum.

For some might be some occasional, often kind of minor sense of uneasiness and discomfort, and stress may be around a test that's coming up or maybe around some kind of presentation you have to make or some social situation where you come in and you just kind of feel like you don't fit in and you feel kind of awkward.

Or, it can be crushing, it can be debilitating, this constant sense of dread or shortness of breath, you feel your heart rate rising, you feel like the walls are closing in, like you can't function normally. Wherever you may be on the spectrum, I want you to know and believe that God cares about you. He cares about you and he wants to help.

that's why today's message is titled "Help For Anxious Minds."

Would you pray with me? Father, we ask that today in your presence You would do a healing work. That you'd renew our minds. Teach us your Word with your presence and by your power, God. We ask for healing. We ask for your goodness and we ask for peace of mind. We pray believing that you'll hear our prayers and change our minds and our hearts with your comfort, your presence, and your peace. We pray this in Jesus' strong name. Amen

Turn to 2 Chronicles 20, and we're going to look at one of the best kings. There were some good ones and some bad ones. This is one of the good ones. We're going to look at Jehoshaphat, who was the fourth king of Judah in the Southern Kingdom of Israel.

Now Judah had some enemies that were on the attack. If you can imagine, this is a godly king leading a good kingdom, and all of a sudden there were three different enemy groups at one time who joined forces to attack King Jehoshaphat and the people of his kingdom.

Illustrates why many are battling with anxiety today. We can handle one enemy force attacking. We can handle one difficult boss. But when you add to a difficult boss a car that breaks down, on top of financial issues, which creates more stress in your stressful marriage, that can make a lot of anxiety!

Today, the younger generation is the most anxious generation, and one of the reasons is, they're the most educated of all with the least clear path to what they would call success. So you've got an over-educated, under-employed group of people that feel like they're falling behind with inflation going crazy. They can't buy a home so they postpone a home. They feel like they can't get married so they postpone marriage. And they're feeling further and further behind, how in the world are they ever going to catch up? even our children are overwhelmed with anxiety.

to make matters worse, meaning Christians will say, "You shouldn't feel anxious. Once you give your life to Jesus, you should be full of peace and joy. What are you doing, feeling anxious?" So you feel even more guilty for your anxiety and you feel like you must be doing something wrong and don't feel like you have a safe place to talk about it, and that compounds your anxiety and you don't even know what to do and how to handle it.

today I want to show you, first of all, that anxiety isn't a sin. Anxiety isn't a sin. In fact, if you even look at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, before he was going to give his life on the cross, he knelt down and begged God, "God, is there any other way?" He knew the suffering that was coming and said, "If there's any other way, may this cross of suffering, may this cup of suffering be removed from me?" And he cried out, "I am in agony." Deep anguishing agony. He sweat literal drops of blood in agony as he submitted to the will of God. "Not my will. But may your will be done."

Anxiety isn't a sin, it's actually a symptom. Or we might say it's a signal.

For example driving your car and a little red light warning or icon comes on. Your car didn't do something wrong. The signal is indicating that there's something about the car, it's a symptom of an issue that needs to be discovered and fixed. So what do you do? You don't throw the car out, you take the car to the mechanic so the mechanic can fix the car. In the same way, if you find yourself battling with anxiety, this isn't a sin, it's a signal alerting you to three things. What are they?

Anxiety, from a spiritual perspective, is a signal alerting you,

1. it's time to pray. It's time to go before God, to seek God, to take our cares to God

Jehoshaphat did in verse three. He was terrified. Another version says he was alarmed, he was anxious by this news. We're being attacked on three sides. He took his burden to God, he prayed to God, and he begged the Lord for guidance. "Show me what to do." And he ordered everyone else in Judah to begin fasting.

Anxiety isn't a sin, it's a signal telling you turn to God, it's time to pray. Let me show you his prayer. It's a powerful prayer.

He prayed in verse six, "Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, no one can withstand you." Watch his faith. "If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and we will cry out to you in distress, and you will hear us and save us." God, we trust you, our faith is in you, we call on you, God, and believe that you will save us.

You can pray like that. When you feel anxious, when you feel overwhelmed, when you don't know what to do, you can cry out to God like that, you can be fancy just like that. "Oh God, the Lord of our ancestors." You can do that. Or you can do what I do and you just say, "Help! Help! I don't know what to do!" You can get brutally honest. Why is this happening, God? I don't understand it. I don't know how to deal with it.

Dr. Caroline Leaf, wrote the book "Switch on Your Brain."

According to her website, she's a super educated, intelligent lady who's also a believer.

She is a communication pathologist and cognitive neuroscientist with a Master and PhD in Communication Pathology and a BSc in Logopaedics, specializing in cognitive and metacognitive neurology.

So I'm going to shoot straight with you, I don't know what that means. I don't have a clue but it's impressive, she's smart. In her research, here's what she discovered. She discovered that "it's been found that 12 minutes of daily focused prayer over an eight-week period can change the brain to such an extent that it can be measured on a brain scan."

12 minutes a day done consistently over time can actually change your brain. Here's the power. "Not only does prayer touch the heart of God, but prayer changes the chemistry of your brain."

this is exciting, because our brain is not fixed, which is really good news, because sometimes my brain goes to the wrong places and likes to stay there. We live in an era where science has shown us that the brain can change and we can actually direct and we can change our brain, and the fancy term is neuroplasticity,

That the more you think a thought, the more often you can think that thought, and the more you think the thought, the easier it is to think that thought because you're creating millions and millions and billions of neural pathways through your brain that God designed, and he can renew and change your brain with his Word as you focus on it, and literally prayer can not only just touch the heart of God but change the chemistry of your brain.

God is fascinating in the way he made the brain. He gave us the amygdala, the little almond-shaped thing that is there for our good. When something goes wrong, it says, "Alarm, alarm, alarm." If you're walking through the woods and you hear something in the woods, a little rustling, you don't think, "It must be a bunny rabbit." What do you think? "It's a bear, it's a wolf, it's Bigfoot coming to get me." That is the amygdala doing its job that God created it to do, but the problem comes when we start to dwell on the alarm.

the word in scripture most often translated as anxiety is the word merimnao. And this word literally means dwelling or pondering on fearful or anxious thoughts. It literally is an image of meditating on the negative.

In other words, some of us, we are training our brains to be anxious. That's what we're doing. We're ruminating, we're rehearsing. "And this could go wrong and then there's this." And we're training the neural pathways in our brain to focus on the negative.

And it may be natural to think about what could go wrong, but prayer is not natural.

Prayer is supernatural. And while it may be natural to think about what could go wrong, supernatural prayer breaks the cycle. It breaks the cycle. It takes our mind off of what we are afraid of, for God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Prayer breaks the cycle.

It doesn't just touch the heart of God. It changes your brain. It's not a sin. You're normal if you feel anxious. It's a signal. Take it to God, take it to God, take it to God,

That's what Jehoshaphat did. "Oh Lord, God of heaven, are you not with us? So hear the cries of our heart and you will save us."

verse 12 says, "For we have no power to face this vast army that's attacking us." Do you ever feel like that? There's just too much for me. I can't handle it all. I can't get it all done. I don't have what it takes. And I don't know if I can go on. And then he says, "We don't know what to do." I don't have what it takes. I'm not strong enough. And I don't know what to do. "But my eyes are on you." My eyes are on you. I'm always looking to you. I'm desperate for you. I need you. I'm training my mind to think about you. I'm not believing the lies of the enemy but I'm renewing my mind for truth. I'm looking at your character, I'm looking at your nature, I'm looking at your goodness, I'm looking at your righteousness, I'm looking at your power,

I don't know what to do, there's too much, I can't handle it all, I'm freaking out. I can't hold it together. I don't know where to turn. No human being can handle this. Right. You weren't designed to handle it on your own. It's not a sin, it's a symptom, it's a signal. You need God. And I don't know what to do and I don't know where to turn, so I'm just hanging on to you.

1 Peter 5:7 says this, that we are to cast all of our anxiety on God because he cares for us. The word cast is a fishing term, it's like cast, like here it is, God, like I don't understand it, God, I'm hurting, God, I'm desperate. I feel alone, my heart rate is rising, I'm sweating, I'm freaking out about my kids. Freaking out about money. I can't handle all the tension in the world. I don't know what I'm going to do with my future, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. Should I stay with this person, should I not? Should I stay in this job I hate, it's under me, what am I going to do? Here it is, God. I don't know what to do but my eyes are on you. And by faith you just take it to him. You take it to him again and you just take it to him. And you take it to him. God cares, you cast your cares because he cares for you.

In other words, if it's on your mind, it's on his heart.

If it's big enough for you to worry about, it's big enough to pray about.

Anxiety, is not a sin, it's a signal.

It's alerting you you're not designed to do it on your own.

It's time to take it to God in prayer.

So, you pray. And then what do you do? Then you jump in and take control. And you start using your spiritual gift of manipulation. All for the glory, right?

That's what I do. Like, here you go, God, you're taking too long. Right?

Anxiety is a signal alerting you it's time to pray and

#2 it's time to pause. it's time to pause.

Jehoshaphat did this after the prayer. He said, "We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you. And all the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord."

Now I don't want to be critical, but I'm an activator. How many of you are activators?

I want to say don't just stand there, do something.

But sometimes God says don't just do something, stand there. Stand there.

There are times when God will tell you to be still.

10 ...Be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)

I don't know what to do. I don't have the power. My eyes are on you. Be still and know that he cares. And he's with you. And that he is God.

Okay, so we're praying and we're doing nothing. And God heals us of the anxiety? Sometimes. Sometimes he does.

But, sometimes it's more of a process.

Sometimes he directs you and takes you to a Bible verse that starts to renew your mind,

or helps you change your diet so the full chemistry of your body works better,

or helps you find a doctor that looks at things and recognizes that prescription can normalize the chemicals in your brain,

or you do deep therapy with someone who looks into some of the trauma that you've experienced in life and helps you name it and face it and forgive it and heal from it.

Sometimes you do the hard work of retraining your brain through cognitive behavior therapy, whatever it is.

Sometimes it's instant and sometimes it's a process, but it always starts with God, is directed by God, and it's a result of God. You take it to God.

And so while they waited the Spirit of the Lord came on Jahaziel who said this. He said, "Don't be afraid or discouraged." And for someone right now that you don't know what to do, don't know where to go and you feel like it's too much, maybe this is God's word for you.

"Don't be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Go out and face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you." Don't be afraid, listen. Don't be afraid. The battle is the Lord's. Face it, he's with you, he's for you, he loves you, he cares about you, his power is real, he will never leave you, he will never forsake you. Anxiety is not a sin, it's a signal. It's alerting you it's time to pray. It's time to pause. It's also time to praise. It's a time to thank him for who he is.

Jehoshaphat, he prayed, "God, we believe you. Even if we face calamity, you will deliver us, because you're always faithful." He paused, he stood there. And then he did something really weird.

3 He praised - he sent the worship team out on the frontlines, and their weapons were instruments. Tambourine lady, acoustic guitar

Me, I'm sending John Cena, Dwayne The Rock Johnson and Vin Diesel. Okay. He'd pick Matt Redman, Chris Tomlin, and Kari Jobe. Go get them, Kari, tell them they're blessed. They're blessed, okay? And the worshipers went out and started praising God before there was a victory, and by some miracle the enemy forces that came to attack the people of Judah turned on each other and destroyed themselves. God did a miracle. This isn't just a story in the Bible, it is a miracle upon miracle. There were dead bodies everywhere, there was so much pillage it took them three days to get it. They didn't praise just after the victory but they praised before the victory. There were dead bodies. It's easy to praise God, praise God from whom all the dead bodies flow, that's easy to praise God, right? When all the anxiety is gone.

But it takes faith, it takes faith in this moment when you're hurting now. When you're feeling anxiety now, when you don't know what to do now and you don't see a way out, it takes faith to praise before the blessing, before the anxiety is gone.

I want to read to you what happened after Jehoshaphat prayed and after he paused and waited, and after he praised, before he saw anything. And God worked and God fought the battle and scripture says, "The fear of God." The fear of God. Wouldn't it be great if we had the fear of God in our culture today? The fear of a holy and a righteous God.

"And the fear of God came on all the surrounding kingdoms when they heard how the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel." How the Lord had been faithful, how he was the one who was glorified, how he showed up and he did battle. "And the fear of God came across the land and the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God had given him rest on every side." The Lord fought the battle and God had given them rest.

This is how I fight my battles. I pray. I take it to God. When I don't know what to do, I press into God, I keep my eyes on him. This is how I fight my battles. By nature, I'm tempted to act, but sometimes I wait. I pause and I sit in his presence. And I let him do what only he can do. And then I thank him, I worship him, I give him great praise, I pray. It may look like I'm surrounded, but I'm surrounded by God, this is what I do. This is how I fight my battles. I fight my battles with God and sometimes he fights my battles for me because I know that our struggle, our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers and powers and principalities and authorities of this dark world.

I know that I should never be afraid or discouraged because the battle is not mine, it's the Lord's. You should not be discouraged, the battle is not yours, the Lord will be with you. What do you do? You pray. You pause and you praise him.

And let me quote the verse the way it should be. Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation, whatever you're facing, when you don't know what to do, by prayer take it to God and petition with thanksgiving, present your request, cast your cares on God. And

scripture says, "And the peace of God, the rest of God, the rest, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds."

This is how we fight our battles. This is how we fight our battles. This is how we fight our battles. We may look like we're surrounded, but God is all around us. So Father, we pray today that for so many who are facing significant battles with anxiety, or even those with momentary and light afflictions, we come before you. We ask for your help, we ask for you to fight for us and to fight with us.