

## The Reality of Church Life – Part 2

The reality of church life is that we will experience problems with other people. And it is how we deal with these problems that will determine whether we are able to abide in the *peace of God*. **Verses 6 and 7** serve to enlarge our understanding of both worship and inter-cession (according to the apostle Paul), but his advice also accentuates a unique aspect of prayer, something I had not fully considered “...***The prayer of anxiety!***”

Paul urges his readers to break an established pattern – **anxiety!** The ancient Greek word used here has a very negative connotation, namely, *'an anxious harassing care which causes unreasonable pressure'*. However, it may also be used to describe *'someone attempting to carry the burden of the future (the unknown) all alone'*; or *'someone who has unreasonable anxiety, especially about things over which no-one has any control'*. Here, I think Paul is probably speaking of things that seem to *'pull us apart'* (things that pull us in different directions). However, any imaginary troubles or phantom anxieties should also be dealt with. Hence, he tells his readers to stop worrying, and not to be overtly anxious over anything – leaving them no exceptions!

Note, the language is as comprehensive as it can be: *“not... about anything, but in everything...”* No anxiety, real or potential, is excluded! From personal experience Paul had learned that *“the way to be anxious about nothing was to be prayerful about everything.”* *Appropriating verse 6 means recognising the presence of anxiety in our lives, however unreasonable or embarrassing it may appear to be, for nothing can be gained by ignoring it or trying to suppress it. Notice, Paul does not exhort us to get rid of anxiety before we pray. Prayer itself is the therapy! Neither does Paul ask us to make light of our troubles, because he knows that God is greater than all our troubles.*

Therefore, always let God know what is troubling you! For, through prayer, God has provided you with a channel for expressing your anxiety. And the worry itself can only be lifted (rolled over) to God in prayer. Prayer is conversation with, a plea directed to, a request made of, or information given to, the Supreme Person of the universe - who does hear, know, understand, care about and respond to the concerns that otherwise would sink you into despair. Every one of us needs it!

Please understand, Paul is never implying, *“the Lord is near you, so there is no need to be anxious!”* But rather, *“the Lord is near, therefore offer your anxiety to him!”* Therefore, this verse is disobeyed, not by being afflicted with worry but by simply refusing to present your burden to God. Being anxious means that we ourselves suffer (alone), we ourselves groan, we ourselves seek to see what lies ahead. And, we ourselves have chosen to keep the problem. This is a great burden in itself!

Remember, prayer also demands a degree of effort and some struggle.

Most of the time our *'requests'* and *'petitions'* are not always easily offered to God. How many of you have struggled before letting go and allowing God to deal with the problem? Furthermore, most prayers are not always answered immediately, nor is every anxiety instantly lifted. For this reason, the presence of anxiety may require us to draw upon the resources of the church community, and at times, we will need to ask others who are united with us *“in Christ”* to pray for us.

**Verse 7...** This expression, ***“the peace of God”*** is found no where else in the New Testament. Paul seems here to be referring to the tranquillity of God's own eternal being, the peace which God Himself has. Yes, this

is the calm serenity that characterises His very nature and which we (as believers) are welcome to share in. If we choose to partake, not only will inner strife resulting from worry cease, but external strife resulting from disagreements will also be dissolved. '*The peace of God*' is more effective for removing anxiety than any intellectual effort, or the power of reasoning. This is why the verse continues with this statement "...**which surpasses all understanding,**" and ends with "**...will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.**"

God's peace shall protect our hearts and minds. The verb used for "**guard**" is borrowed from a military term and it creates a picture of God's peace as a detachment of soldiers "*standing guard over*" a city so as to protect it from attack. God's peace, like a garrison of soldiers, will keep guard over your thoughts and feelings so that they will be as safe as a fortress against the assaults of anxiety, worry and fear. So let's take heart, for our deep emotions and inner feelings, those very parts which are often so vulnerable to attack by the enemy, become the exact place where God's peace is set. And like battle-ready soldiers, the peace of God defends and protects.

What's also important to understand is that it's not merely profound knowledge about the exceptional peace that God grants us, but experiential knowledge (experienced through the senses) of the calm serenity which characterises His very nature. And it's this kind of knowledge that affects the mind more deeply than our understanding. Therefore, we should be deep-rooted in our belief that prayer is the avenue of anxiety, not its aftermath; and that the "**peace of God**" is the consequence of prayer rather than its basis.

Now, before we end, I would like to demonstrate how the spiritual principles expressed by Paul in this passage of scripture effectively interact with each other during prayer. Firstly, "**to stand firm**" (verse 1) is a sure way to extinguish anxiety. Then, a key to "**giving thanks in everything**" (verse 6) is to "**rejoice in the Lord always**" (verse 4). Finally, "**the Lord is near**" (verse 5) is the assurance that His presence with us will manifest the **peace** which God Himself possesses.