

ANXIETY MEANS FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

Today's Text: Phil. 4: 1-20

Extracts:

Be anxious for nothing, 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 minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy- meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you [Phil. 4: 6-9].

*Princeton Lyman, a former US ambassador to Nigeria, is reported to have predicted as far back as 2011 that Nigeria would cease to be one country after the 2015 Presidential Elections. He reiterated this in a recent opinion piece in the **Foreign Policy Journal** that the elections would be a 'train wreck' that could make large parts of the country ungovernable.¹ As the Election Day, Saturday, 28 March 2015, approached, local and international apprehension became more acute. Nigerian media reported that a million Nigerian residents had travelled abroad to avoid the impending catastrophe. Others who could not travel began to stock food and supplies at home. But fervent prayers were being offered in places of worship all the time. As the votes were being counted and shown live on national television, it was becoming clear that the challenger, Retired General Buhari, was going to defeat the incumbent, President Jonathan. Anxiety became more palpable. But, to everyone's surprise, Jonathan called Buhari to concede defeat and to congratulate the winner!*

So, where did all the anxiety come from? Where has all the anxiety now gone? Obviously, fear of the unknown had something to do with it. In today's Bible verses, Paul tells believers in the Philippian church to be anxious for nothing but by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, they should make their requests known to God. Is that message for us? Is it possible to be at peace and not in pieces on a routine basis? Let us find out from today's eye-opening study.

¹ Story is based on personal experience plus the following sources: Robyn Dixon, "Former U.S. envoy: 'Nigerian vote shaping up as 'train wreck'," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 05, 2015; [HTTP://WWW.LATIMES.COM/WORLD/AFRICA/LA-FG-NIGERIA-ELECTION-DISPUTE-20150204-STORY.HTML](http://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-nigeria-election-dispute-20150204-story.html) ; and Lucy Fleming, "Nigeria elections: Kano's Christian exodus," *BBC News*, 26 March 2015; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32054402>

1. Background: Seek the peace of God

The *Encarta Dictionary: English* (North America) defines anxiety as a feeling of worry, “a strong wish to do something, especially if the wish is unnecessarily or unhealthily strong.” In psychiatry, adds the dictionary, anxiety is “a medical condition marked by intense apprehension or fear of real or imagined danger.” The late Rev. R.W. Schambach (in a number of his classical CDs/DVDs) defined *worry* as ***the interest we pay on trouble that may never happen!*** Most of us are worry-freaks. We are ever nervous; we fret; we fear. It does not matter our physical or material endowments. ***No one seems to be immune from anxiety!*** Yet, anxiety is medically and spiritually unhealthy.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Job who was said to be “the greatest of all the people of the East.” He was “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” [Job 1: 1-3]. Whenever his seven sons and three daughters went feasting from one brother’s home to the next, their father would go and make atonements to God on their behalf for fear that they could have sinned and cursed God in their debauchery. We are told Job did that “regularly” [vv. 4-5]. Then, following God’s consent for Satan to tempt him, Job lost everything—wealth, children and good health— within a short period of time. As the pain and anguish descended, Job said, ***“For the thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, for trouble comes”*** [Job 3: 25-26].

What does that tell us? Job who had it all also had anxieties! It was fear of the unknown that drove him to atone for his children’s sins each time they went feasting. It was his fear that his affluence and privileged position with God could be jeopardized any time any day. Can you then imagine the situation of those of us today who are not as materially and spiritually endowed as Job? This piece is, therefore, especially for us!

How was your sleep last night? Some of us are scared to go to bed because they cannot find sleep. They twist and turn as they worry over one thing or the other. The rent or mortgage has not been paid and for how much longer can you refuse to answer the landlord/bank’s incessant calls? The children’s school fees have not been paid and you fear they will soon be thrown out of school. Your spouse is not responding to medical treatment or prayers and the doctors say that time is running out. Your party has just lost the elections and you have never been in the opposition all your life. You are close to retirement but you have nothing (material) to show for all those long years of hard work. But, just as you are thinking about your own situation, a close friend or extended family member phones you to ask you for financial assistance!

There has to be a better way. The price, by way of high blood pressure, is too high to pay. ***Medications are mere palliatives as long as the fundamental problem of anxiety persists. Is it not better to find a permanent solution? That is where***

Paul's letter to the Philippians comes in handy. Paul is offering us a remarkably simple solution if and only if we are prepared to listen and obey. Here are the key points to note:

a) *Be anxious for nothing*

Paul told believers to be anxious ***for nothing*** [Phil. 4: 6]. For nothing? How can that be done? Jesus already answered that question in the Sermon on the Mount as follows [Matt. 6: 25-34]:

Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ... Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?... But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

From the foregoing, ***we have nothing to worry about because (1) God has taken care of our needs*** (as He has done for all His creations), ***(2) worry cannot add a cubit*** (i.e., 18 inches or about 45 centimetres) ***to our stature,*** and ***(3) today is all the time we have.*** Clearly, ***we are on our own when we let greed drive our needs into wants.*** For example, God fed the children of Israel with manna in the wilderness for forty years on their way to the Promised Land. They were strong and healthy. Yet, they “yielded to intense craving.” They remembered the fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and garlic that they used to eat in Egypt. So, instead of being thankful, they complained, “Our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!” [Num. 11: 1-6].

You lack nothing until you start comparing notes with others- especially those you use as the bench mark to measure your success or progress. Yet, when somebody told Jesus he would follow Him wherever He went, Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” [Lk 9: 57-58]. Was the Son of David not qualified to live in a palace? Yet, He was happy to lay His head on stones and rocks -with His disciples- in the wilderness. Sleep and rest are basic needs, not wants! But to sleep on a water bed- that is greed. That is an important key to knowing how to be anxious for nothing.

b) *Make your requests known to God*

Paul adds, “but ***in everything*** by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” [Phil. 4: 6]. Paul

did not say, in some things, but in everything. Take the example of Solomon, soon after he had been made king of Israel in succession to his father, David. We are told, “Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David...Now the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there. Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.” That night, God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Ask! What shall I give you?” [1 Kgs 3: 1-5].

Today, most of us would do the direct opposite! We may not have any relationship with God. We neither fear nor obey Him. We go to our places of worship to take, not to give. Even when we receive, we hardly thank God for His mercies. When our prayers are not answered, we are angry and “threaten” not to pray to a “deaf” God! Listen to Paul. When your requests (in the form of prayer and supplication) are accompanied with thanksgiving, the Lord will hear and answer [cf: Jam. 4: 3; Ps. 50: 14-15].

c) *Then receive the peace of God*

When you are anxious for nothing but make your requests known to God by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, Paul places the clincher: “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” [Phil. 4; 7]. If the peace of God surpasses all understanding, then you do not even try to explain it for “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” [Is. 64: 4; 1 Cor. 2: 9]. It takes a transformed mind (that no longer conforms to the world) to know what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God [Rom. 12: 2]. When you have the peace of God by Christ Jesus, your heart (the door way to your spirit self) and your mind (the gateway to your physical self) are guarded by the peace of God; then you can afford to be anxious for nothing.

Really? So, it is possible to be anxious for nothing? How can this peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus? It is only by resting on the God of peace who is the author of the peace of God!

2. Learning to rest on the God of peace

Anxiety is our daily bread, to be honest! However, it can be tamed and harnessed for our own good. *A sure way is to anchor our lives completely on the God of peace*. From Paul’s letter to the Philippians that we have been looking at, the following guidelines can be most helpful:

a) *Know the will of God on your situation*

Anxiety actually means fear of the unknown. So, if we can reduce our scope of ignorance, we can control our anxiety. In the science of statistics, we talk of decision-making under certainty, under risk and under uncertainty. Here are the equivalents in the spiritual realm:

- ***God can give us a clear answer on what to expect*** for “surely the Lord GOD does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” [Amos 3: 7]. If God tells you *in advance* what to expect, you are prepared for what is coming. For example, on the way to Rome, Paul and his fellow prisoners were caught in a storm that threatened to wreck their ship and kill its passengers. God sent an angel to assure Paul that the boat would be lost but everyone on board would be safe. That was why in the midst of anxiety, Paul ate and said to the rest, “I urge you to take nourishment (after 14 days without food!), for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you.” They were all encouraged and ate and all 276 persons were saved [Acts 27: 21-38]. So, pray to God to give you clear guidelines on your situation. If you know what is going to happen, you will know how to prepare for it instead of fretting.
- ***Sometimes, God may let us know in advance what to expect but without the details.*** For example, we know for certain that Christ will return to judge the world but the day and the hour are known only to His Father [Matt. 24: 36]. So, instead of focusing on the certainty of His return, many of us still fret about when and how! In another example, God assured David that he would recover all (families and things taken away from Ziklag by the attacking Amalekites). However, he was not told how he would recover all [1 Sam. 30: 1-8]. ***In such circumstances, pray for additional information or use the sound mind that God has given you [2 Tim. 1: 7].*** For example, when David was inside the walled city of Keilah that God had permitted him to go and defend, he received a report that Saul was coming to attack him. He asked God if Saul would come and He said he would. David asked if the people of Keilah would give him up to Saul. God said they would. With such additional information, David knew that God’s earlier mandate for him to go and help the people of Keilah had expired [1 Sam. 23: 1-12]! He ran away instead of fretting over how to defend himself.
- ***Sometimes, God does not owe us any explanation for what to expect*** for “the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things that are revealed belong to us” [Deut. 29:29]. For example, after God had revealed to Daniel many things that would happen to Israel and the world, when “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase,” Daniel asked, “How long shall the fulfillment of these wonders be?” He was given an answer which

he could not understand. When he asked for clarification, he was told, “Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end” [Dan. 12; 1-9]. *In such cases, why not let sleeping dogs simply lie?*

b) *Focus your mind and heart only on godly things*

An idle mind, they say, is the devil’s workshop. So, the best bet against anxiety is to make sure that your mind and heart are totally occupied with godly things. Paul enjoined the Philippians to meditate on whatever things are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy [Phil. 4: 8]. In addition, they could also do what they had learned and received, heard and seen in Paul himself, which he summarised as follows [vv. 10-13]:

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content; I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me

When you realise what Paul suffered for Christ’s sake more than most of us put together [2 Cor. 11: 23-33] and he is the one asking you to be anxious for nothing, you had better listen to him!

3. Conclusion: Relax!

You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. His Father loves you because you have loved His Son and given your life to Him. Therefore, whatever you ask the Father in His name, He will give you. So, *from now on, let not your heart be troubled. You may be passing through fire right now but you will not be burnt or through water but you will not be drowned. You may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death but you need fear no evil. In the world, you will have always tribulation, but in Jesus, you will ALWAYS have peace. So, be of good cheer. He has overcome the world.*

From now on, relax! All shall be well. All is well.