

WHAT MATTERS
Philippians 4:1-9

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
April 26, 2020

Our stress levels are off the chart, aren't they? To be sure, we all need to take ordinary care and reasonable precautions. There are some ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has become a brutal psychological trial. Admit it or not, the public health crisis takes a mental toll on all of us. Folks are struggling with anxiety, depression, and fear.

And we're grieving, too. We've lost our routines. In some ways, we've lost our friends. We have lost the perception that we, ourselves, are generally healthy and protected.

The crisis also reveals who we really are, doesn't it? It can bring out the best and the worst in people.

Francis Collins, director of the National Institute of Health, said in an interview with the *Washington Post*, "As in all things, it comes down to the balance between having a reasonable concern, especially if it is motivating to actions that can reduce risk, versus having it take over your entire world to the point to where you become paralyzed.

Stress. Worry. Anxiety. All impact our health.

Wake Forest University found, in a study, that cancer cells in animals were fueled by anxiety and worry.

Yale University discovered that worry and anxiety actually shrink the brain.

The *Journal of Molecular Psychiatry* found that worry and stress prematurely age kids.

The U.S. National Institute on Mental Health discovered that stress causes depressive symptoms.

Penn State research suggests that stress causes increases of chronic diseases.

The *Journal of Neurology and Neurosurgery and Psychiatry* stated that stress raises stroke risk.

Columbia University Medical Center concluded that stress raises the risk of heart attack at the same rate as smoking five cigarettes a day, or a 27% higher risk.

Carnegie Mellon University found that stress even makes the common cold worse.

We can literally worry ourselves to death.

For people who really enjoy worrying (for some people I think it's a hobby), there is always something to worry about.

There is a fascinating book written by a psychologist, William Van Ornum, Ph.D., called *A Thousand Frightening Fantasies*. It's a book that some people find very helpful. At one point in the book he says that our minds are like an airport that is always open. No sooner does one airplane leave than another one is ready to land. So it is with the person who is constantly worried about some problem of conscience. He or she might get rid of one particular matter, might go see the preacher, might talk to a counselor, to a therapist, to a psychologist, but then another problem quickly comes along to take the place of the one just gotten rid of. (www.homileticsonline.com)

Some of you need to close down the airports in your mind – shut down the runways, the runways of anxiety, stress, and worry.

Worry robs us of so much.

Worry is really borrowing, isn't it? It's a disease of the future. Worry borrows the unknown trouble of tomorrow. The worrier loses the beautiful spirit of hope because worry paints such a gloomy, shocking, dreadful picture of the future. (Joyce Landorf)

Our message today is a message of hope, and worry robs us of that hope. When you borrow tomorrow's problems, you rob yourself of today's hope.

Worry distorts our thinking. We begin to look at life through a magnifying glass that makes things bigger than they really are. When we worry, our molehills become mountains. (www.unionchurch.com/archive/032501.html)

There is not anyone watching this morning who hasn't had some anxiety or some worry – so, with all of our care and concerns we're going to look at some ways that God's people ought to handle worry.

I. Live in harmony with God's people (v. 2)

Dr. Hallowell, the leading expert on worry, has discovered that being involved with others is a great way to take away worries. (<http://onhealth.webmd.com>) Paul posed the same a long time ago in the book of Galatians when he said, "Bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2)

John Leo, writing in *U.S. News and World Report*, noted that twins are now more frequent. Someone said, "I guess it's because little children are afraid to come into this world alone."

People who feel alone in this world run a much higher risk of illness (*U.S. News and World Report*, August 6, 1990, p. 62). This pandemic has robbed us – for the time being – of a primary source of comfort: the gathering together of God's people. But we have found new ways to reach out and stay in touch. Our Sunday School classes are doing a great job with Zoom. People are

checking on each by telephone. Just because we can't be in each other's physical presence right now doesn't mean that we can't be the presence of Christ for each other right now. Be sure you stay connected to your supportive church family.

II. Focus on others (v. 3)

Amy Flowers, a psychologist, states that when she serves as the beverage lady at a local soup kitchen each week to people whose problems include poverty, homelessness, and paralyzing disabilities, she realizes that her problems are not so bad after all. One way to get rid of worry in your life is to serve others.

By nature, worry is a self-centered exercise. Those who focus on helping others are much less likely to overdose on their own, often illusory, would-be, could-be problems.

Right now, in the midst of this pandemic, ask yourself, "Who needs my help, and how can I safely help her?"

"Is there something you need? Is there a way I can help you? I'm going to the grocery store this week," saying to an elderly neighbor with a phone call. "Can I pick something up and leave it on your front porch?"

Calling people you know who might be alone. Folks who are isolated from family and friends. You focus on others, and you'll feel better about yourself.

III. Admit your fears (v. 6, "make your request known to God)

Maybe you're afraid about losing your job. Whenever that thought pops into your mind, don't try to force it out of your head. That really reinforces the fear by not facing it head on. Take a moment and admit to yourself that it is always possible that one might lose one's job – but one way or another, you'll manage and make it through that.

Acknowledge your scary thoughts, and they don't seem so scary any more. You lessen their power by confession. Paul tells us that in this passage – we are to let our requests be made known to God (v. 6).

IV. Realize that most of what you worry about never, ever takes place (v. 6, "be anxious for nothing)

Most of what you worry about never, ever takes place. **Mark Twain, always insightful, said, "I've been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened." (IOW Fall 2000)**

Did you hear that? That's the way a lot of us are. We put ourselves through the stress, the anxiety, the emotions of a lot of terrible things that never, ever happen. "I've been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened." There aren't many things that actually do

happen. We worry about a lot more than ever does happen. But we'll deal with it when it gets here. Do not borrow tomorrow's worries.

One study suggests that an average person's anxiety focused in these areas: 40% about things which will never happen; 30% about things that happened in the past, which can't be changed; 12% about criticism from others, most of it untrue; 10% about health, which gets worse with stress; and 8% of our worry goes to real problems that need to be faced and solved. (*Preaching*, Vol. 2, No. 3) How much of your worry is meaningless?

We create a lot more problems trying to solve problems that don't exist. **There is a true story about two guys in Fort Worth, Texas, who had a 90-year-old mother, and they were worried about her safety. She was still driving, still going out and about. She was just an easy target, so they decided they needed to get mama a pistol. "Mama, we'll get you a pistol. We'll show you how to use it, then you can take care of yourself." I guess they were buying themselves peace of mind more than they were buying her safety. I don't think we need a lot of 90-year-old women packing heat out there, even in the state of Texas.**

Well, they bought her a pistol which she dutifully packed in her purse. They taught her how to use it. And one day, when she left the Ridgmar Shopping Center to get into her car, she found two young men sitting in the car. She took out that pistol. She pointed it at their heads, and she said, "Get out of my car or I'll shoot you right now." They jumped out of the car and ran off.

She got into the car, nervous now – put the pistol down on the seat beside her, put the key in the ignition, and it didn't fit. She realized this was their car – it was not her car. She had just become a car thief. She went over the parking lot and found her car. She said she wanted to find the two young men to apologize, but they were nowhere to be found. (Ervin Gathings, via Barry Bailey, Fort Worth, TX 10/4/92)

You know, we have a lot of anxiety over a lot of things that really just don't matter. Most of the things you've worried about in life, well, you have wasted your time.

V. Adjust your attitude (v. 6, "with thanksgiving" v. 4 "rejoice")

With thanksgiving (verse 6), let your requests be made known to God.

Don't deny them, but confess them with a heart of thanksgiving. You might be thinking, "That's easy for Paul to say." What about Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul is awaiting the result of a trial. He is awaiting, with a sense of imminence, the pronouncement of the judgment which will mean life or death. Paul is waiting on the big one. Paul sits and waits for the word that will save his life or take his life. But even as he waits, Paul says, "Have a heart of thanksgiving. Don't worry."

VI. Paul says pray (v. 6).

There is a bumper sticker I saw one time that said, “Why pray when you can worry?” Well, that’s not that far off. There is a Jamaican proverb that summaries the biblical view of worry and prayer. The proverb states, “If you’re going to pray, don’t worry. If you’re going to worry, don’t pray.”

Prayer puts our burden on Him.

Pray. Don’t worry – pray.

VII. Keep your mind on what matters (v. 8)

The other day, I turned on my radio and longed for the day when I wouldn’t hear the words “coronavirus” or “Covid 19.” How long will it be until we can turn on our radios and no one tells us all the bad things?

You know, the reality is that those who projected the very worst scenario for the pandemic, thank goodness, so far have gotten it wrong. Oh, it’s serious, and I am not making light of anyone’s situation. But when the media spins all day, telling us how horrible it could be, should be, might be, creating horrific scenarios over and over again, eventually we become afraid of our own breath. The broadcaster’s stock in trade is often anything that is unholy, unjust, impure, ugly, of ill-repute, vicious, and blameworthy. Are they really giving us a true representation of God’s good and beautiful world?

With internet access and news broadcasts from around the world, we have the bad news now not only from our own city – we have the bad news from the whole world laid at our feet.

Be careful. Don’t read too much or listen too much to negativity. We can’t be ostriches, sticking our heads in the sand, but 24/7 coverage of Covid-19 will cause a mental catastrophe. Keep your mind on what really matters: that which is “honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (v. 8).

I wonder what the ratings would be if the news changed its approach? What if there was one channel that really dedicated itself to the good, the worthy, the honorable? Occasionally the local news will do a positive story. What if there was another channel that occasionally did a negative story, but most often told us about what was good and great in our city and beyond?

Do people really want all the negativity, the bad news? If so, it shouldn’t be that way with God’s people.

There is an old Quaker story told about a king who asked for an inventory to be taken of all the flowers in his kingdom. He sent out a census taker with a clipboard to count all his flowers. Then he realized that the information would be of little value to him unless he had something to compare it with. So he called for a second census taker. This one was asked to count all the weeds in the kingdom. Before long, the first census taker came back, floating into the king’s chamber, draped in smiles and warmth.

“King, whatever you do, don’t ever transfer me or my family out of this kingdom. It has to be the most beautiful kingdom in the world. It is full of flowers.”

Just then the door slammed and the second census taker came stomping in, threw down his clipboard and demanded an immediate transfer to another land. “King,” he shouted, “this has got to be the worst kingdom in the world. It’s overrun with weeds. I didn’t even get past the drawbridge and I couldn’t count all the weeds in this kingdom. I want out!!”

The moral of the story is that in this life you are going to see what you are looking for, and it will affect your feelings and behavior. If we look for the things that are excellent and good, we will excel and be good.

I don’t know what makes you worry...take it and leave it with God.

Sometimes I wonder if we are caught in a dream, with the possibility of waking up in our old world. If not a dream, are we simply reading a hastily written science fiction novel where baseball teams play in isolation to empty stadiums, preachers preach to pews, and kids find a classroom on their couch? Unfortunately, we are wide awake, and this is fact, not fiction.

I learned a long time ago that while we cannot control much, we can control how we respond. Do we – God’s people – respond with fear or faith? With hope or hysteria? Panic or prayer? In the maze of this present madness, respond with patience, grace, and love.

Of course, take all the precautions, but wherever you are, be the presence of Christ.