

Rest for the Worried

Introduction

You can't rest if you're worried.

**When you're focused on the "what-ifs" of the future, give you worries/cares to God through prayer.*

Let's imagine, once again, that we're at the end of the day, slipping into bed. We're tired, but as we lay there trying to sleep, we just can't turn off our thoughts. Our minds race with concerns about sick loved ones, financial troubles, or relationship issues. Our worry over what's going on in our personal lives, in the lives of those we care about, and in the world keeps us from being able to rest.

Have you ever been unable to sleep because of worry? What are some things that you worry about?

Like the other topics we've discussed so far, hunger and distraction, worry can also affect our spiritual rest as well as our physical rest. When we worry, our focus is on our situation and on the "what-ifs" of the future. Worry always has to do with what might happen. It's speculative, and it's never based on truth. It's based on our overactive imaginations.

The truth is, we can't control what is going to happen in the future, so it does no good to speculate or worry about all the things that might occur. Now, there is a difference between worry and preparation. It's one thing to think about and to prepare for the future, but it's another thing to worry about it, obsessing over it in a negative way and imagining all the bad things that might happen. For example, it's one thing to set aside some money for retirement. It's another thing to worry about whether that money will be enough to survive on, or to worry about whether social security will fail and you'll be left destitute. Do you see the difference?

The Truth about Worry

Worry is actually a sin because we're commanded in Scripture to not worry. In fact, in the New Testament, according to the NIV, the words "do not worry" occur 8 times (Matthew 6:25, 31, 34; 10:19; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11, 22, 29). Other translations use the phrase "do not be anxious," so anxiety and worry are synonymous. For the sake of this study, however, I'm going to stick with the word "worry." So, it seems clear that we're not to waste time worrying.

Why is worry such a bad thing? Why are we commanded so many times not to worry?

We don't often view worry as a sin. If we happen to call it a sin, we see it as a harmless little sin, one that doesn't really hurt anyone. However, worry actually reflects a lack of trust or a lack of faith in God. When we worry, it's like saying to God, "I don't think that You can handle this situation. I don't think You will take care of me in this situation. I don't believe that You will work this situation out in the way that is best for me." Worry is a direct attack on the character of God, calling into question His goodness, His power, His sovereignty, His love.

So, worry is a very serious thing. It takes our focus off of God and puts it on our situation, and it causes us to doubt God. It's not productive or helpful. Worry makes it impossible to rest in Christ, because our problems take center stage.

The Cure for Worry

What are some ways that you deal with worry? When you find yourself worrying over a situation, how do you turn it off?

There are a number of ways to combat worry. In fact, we've already talked about Scripture reading and meditation, both of which could help you put aside worrying about a situation to focus on Christ. But for tonight's study, we're going to look at prayer as a cure for worry, because that's the remedy that Paul lays out for us in Philippians 4:6-7:

Do not be anxious [or do not worry] about anything, 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 your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul is basically saying, that instead of worrying about something, we should pray about it. Talk to God about your worry and anxiety and fear, and God will give you peace. He will guard your heart, taking away the feeling of anxiety and fear. He'll also guard your mind, taking away the worrying thoughts that can run amok in our minds and can be so hard to turn off.

There are so many things that can be said about prayer. We can talk about how we are to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We can mention the fact that we are to pray persistently and not give up. We could discuss the proper position for prayer, or the outline we should use to pray, or the advantages of keeping a prayer journal. There have been books written about all of these things, and I can't possibly cover everything there is say about prayer. However, the focus of this study is to find rest in Christ through prayer by putting aside our worry and focusing on Jesus. To do that, we need to focus on the content of our prayers.

Beyond Childlike Prayers

I grew up in Mississippi, and all of my family are still there. The boys and I go down there two or three times a year to stay with my mom and dad. In fact, we just got back from a trip on Monday. While we're there, my brother, his wife, and their three kids, and my sister and her three girls all come over, and we have a big family meal at least once, usually more. When my dad asks for a volunteer to pray for the meal, my little niece, who just turned seven, usually volunteers. She used to always pray the same thing, up until this last trip when she finally changed her prayer. She used to always say, "God is great; God is good. Let us thank Him for our food," and so on.

We all know that little prayer. When we're teaching our kids about prayer, we often start them praying simple, repeated prayers like that. I've noticed that even when we let our kids come up with their own prayers, they repeat the same things every time. My boys do it. Every time they pray, they say the exact same words. I even did it as a child. My brother, sister, and I would take turns praying before each meal. My prayer was always the same: "Dear God, Thank you for this day. Thank you for Mama, Daddy, Shannon, and Lori. Thank you for food, clothes, trees, flowers. Thank you for this day. Amen." It's probably been 25 years since I was home saying that prayer, but I said it often enough that I still remember it.

It's ok for our kids to memorize and repeat prayers while learning about prayer. That's a good way for them to start. The problem comes when people never move beyond that, when their prayers never go any deeper than that. We're told to have the faith of a child, but when it comes to praying, we need to move beyond childlike prayers.

How Then Should We Pray?

Have you heard of the acronym ACTS in reference to how we should pray? Each letter reminds us of a way that we should pray: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. I believe that many people focus on just one of those, but never really cover all four.

Can you guess which one I think many people tend to focus on?

Yes, I think most people focus on supplication, asking God for what we want or need. Now, there's nothing wrong with bringing our needs before God. When that's all we do, though, we may start treating God as if He's a genie, just there to grant our every wish. Praying appropriately can be a struggle.

Why do we struggle so much with prayer?

Alistair Begg describes the struggle to pray in his book *Pray Big*:

Prayer doesn't come easy to most of us, in most seasons. And when we do pray, our prayers often seek to do a deal with God; or they are tentative in their requests because we're not sure God will come through; or they are, frankly, so self-centered that they bring little pleasure to the Creator and Savior of the world, as he listens to us present our shopping list of worldly requests to him.¹

Begg later says, "All that matters may be brought before God, but what we bring before God is not always what matters most."² *What does he mean by that?*

It's not wrong to pray for physical things, but our prayers need to go deeper than that, as John MacArthur says in his book *Alone with God*:

If we were to take a survey of the evangelical church today on the topics most often prayed for, we would discover that most prayers are often misdirected, shortsighted, and selfish. We typically pray for health, happiness, and success. We pray for personal comfort. We pray for solutions to remedy all the physical problems of life, such as: healing, a place to live, a job, a car, a husband, a wife, children, a promotion, more money, and so on. As important as those things are, in some respects (especially to the people in need), they are low on the priority list in God's kingdom...Our priority must be with the advancement of God's kingdom.³

Physical things do matter. It matters that someone is sick. It matters that someone is struggling financially. It matters that we want our family and our friends and ourselves to be safe and well. But are those the things that matter most? I think not. According to Scripture, I think there are things that matter more. Let's look at a few passages that can help us see what really matters when it comes to praying.

¹Begg, Alistair. *Pray Big: Learn to Pray Like an Apostle*, 12.

²Ibid., 30.

³MacArthur, John. *Alone with God: Rediscovering the Power and Passion of Prayer*, 153.

Jesus' Instructions on Prayer

In Matthew 6:7-13, Jesus gives His disciples instructions on how to pray in what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer. There are many things that could be said about this prayer, but I just want to touch on a couple of points:

First, God already knows our physical needs, and He has promised to meet them.

Let's look at Matthew 6:25-34. *According to this passage, what should we be focusing on?*

Jesus is telling His disciples to stop worrying so much about physical needs. God has that covered. Instead, we should focus on seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Our focus should be on spiritual matters, on having our spiritual needs met. God has already promised to take care of our physical needs. We don't have to spend so much time asking God to do something that He's already promised to do. That would be like my kids asking me to make them breakfast. But then they keep asking and keep asking, even after I told them I would, even as I'm making breakfast, and even as I'm serving it. They just keep asking for something that I'm already doing for them. That doesn't make sense, yet isn't that what we do with God?

Second, Jesus' example of prayer puts much more emphasis on spiritual matters than physical.

What kinds of things does Jesus pray about in His sample prayer? How much of it is physical and how much is spiritual?

When I look at the Lord's Prayer, I only see one part that has to do with meeting physical needs, which is "give us this day our daily bread." All other parts have to do with spiritual matters...showing reverence for God, asking for God's will to be done, asking for forgiveness for sins, asking for deliverance from temptation. Those are all spiritual matters. For those of us who like math, only 1 out of 5 things, or 20% of this prayer focuses on physical matters. 80% is spiritual in nature. How do your prayers match up? What percentage of your prayers focuses on physical matters and what percentage on spiritual? It's something to think about.

So, according to Scripture, our prayers should be more spiritual in nature than physical. What does that look like, though? What kinds of spiritual things should we be praying about? Let's look at a couple of Paul's prayers to see what he prayed about.

Paul's Example of Prayer:

In Ephesians 1:16-21, we see Paul praying for the believers in Ephesus.

What does Paul pray for the Ephesians?

Throughout Paul's prayer here, we never see a single request for the physical needs of the Ephesians. Does that mean that they didn't have any physical needs? Of course not. They would have been dealing with the same kinds of things that we do, but Paul's focus was on their spiritual needs. He prays that the Holy Spirit would help them to grow in wisdom and knowledge of God, and that the eyes of their hearts would be opened to the spiritual blessings that are theirs in Christ. These blessings include hope of eternal life, a glorious inheritance, and access to God's power.

We read another of Paul's prayers in Colossians 1:9-14.

What does Paul pray for the Colossians?

Again, we note the absence of any request for physical needs. Instead, Paul prays that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will so that they could walk in a manner pleasing to God. He prays that they would be strengthened by God's power so that they could joyfully endure their situation. He thanks God for their inheritance, which includes being delivered from darkness into light and being forgiven of sins.

How do Paul's prayers differ from prayers that you often hear or that you pray yourself?

I don't know about you, but I don't think I've ever heard anyone pray like Paul prays. It's something to aspire to, though. We should follow his example as we think about our own prayer life. Paul's prayers were focused on Christ and the benefits of being in Christ. Prayers like that will definitely take our minds off of our worries. When we saturate our prayers in the person and work of Jesus, He becomes our focus, and we find rest from worry and anxiety and fear. So, what does that look like? What are some specific things that we can pray for ourselves and others that will keep the focus on Christ and spiritual matters?

Pray These for Things

I've given you a list of twenty different spiritual things that you can pray for yourself and others. The first few are based on the prayers of Paul that we've already discussed. Let's talk about a few of them to see how we can apply them to our prayers:

1. Maturity—that we and others would grow in knowledge and discernment of God's Word and His will; that we would become more like Christ in our thoughts and actions
2. Clarity—that we and others would be able to see clearly the spiritual realities that surround us; that we would be aware of the inheritance that is ours in Christ; that we would focus more on the eternal than the temporal; that we would realize that this world is not our home and we are just passing through
3. Hope—that we and others would recognize that our hope in Christ is based upon the promises and the character of God; that we would be assured of our salvation; that we would eagerly and confidently anticipate our future in heaven
4. Power—that we and others would be aware of power that is ours through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; that we would make use of that power to overcome sin and temptation and trials; that we would trust His power to complete His work in us and to overcome the evil that surrounds us
5. Endurance—that we and others would have the strength and courage to endure whatever situation we find ourselves in; that through our endurance we could encourage others and glorify God
6. Joy—that we and others would have joy regardless of our circumstances; that our joy would be based in Christ and His work for us

Think about some situations that you might find yourself praying for. Based on our discussion, how can you pray spiritually for those situations rather than just physically?