



4 KEYS TO
CONQUER ANXIETY

STEPHEN BLANDINO

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION | 5

KEY #1: REJOICE | 8

KEY #2: PRAY | 11

KEY #3: GIVE THANKS | 16

KEY #4: THINK POSITIVELY | 21

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | 27

NOTES | 28

INTRODUCTION

When you were a kid, you probably had one of those nights when fear and worry felt like a stranglehold on your mind. Maybe you had watched a horror movie, or perhaps you and your friends stayed up late one night telling scary ghost stories. Maybe a violent storm was blowing through your neighborhood, and the lightning and thunder struck fear in your heart.

As you laid in bed, scary thoughts started racing through your mind. Suddenly, you heard a noise...a noise underneath your bed. The first thing you did was pull back your dangling foot from the edge of the bed. Then, you wrapped the covers tightly around you, and maybe even put your head under your pillow.

But when the sound wouldn't stop, you began to calculate how long it would take to run to your parent's bedroom. Your calculation included a giant leap from the edge of the bed so that the monster couldn't grab your feet, drag you under the bed, and eat you for dinner.

Sound familiar? I know I had those thoughts more than once when I was a kid. I'm guessing you did too. One thing is for sure: those fear-stricken moments stole my peace.

Here's the reality: "peace stealing" did not end that night. "Peace stealing" didn't end when we became a teenager, or started college, or entered adulthood. The truth is, most of us have never graduated from the school of fear, worry, and anxiety. We just keep taking more courses in it.

And those courses are getting harder and longer.

No matter what label you put on it—a recession, a depression, a national tragedy, a collapsed relationship, a major exam, or a global pandemic—anxiety-inducing events are getting bigger, lasting longer, and becoming more difficult to navigate.

Today, fear, worry, and anxiety are having a ravaging impact on our lives. In fact, anxiety disorders affect 40 million adults in the U.S. every year...that's over 18% of the population.¹ And doctors tell us that anxiety make us feel nervous and restless. It causes rapid breathing, panic attacks, fatigue, dizziness, digestive issues, obsessive thoughts, and even depression.²

And yet, every one of us get anxious about something. We worry about earning a scholarship, graduating college, getting a good job, paying the bills, finding true love, getting married, and staying healthy...just to name a few.

Our anxiety over these things robs our peace, and "peace stealing" is one of Satan's tactics to disrupt our lives. Satan understands that if he can rob your peace, he can rob your future. He knows that if he can steal your peace, he can demoralize you, neutralize you, and paralyze you.

Let me make one thing clear: my goal is not to shame you if you're dealing with fear, worry, or anxiety. And if you're seeing a counselor or taking medication, I'm not telling you to stop either

one of those. Instead, I want us to take a journey together and explore Scripture's remedy for anxiety. We find it in the New Testament, from a guy we know as the apostle Paul.

Why should you trust Paul's advice? I mean, wasn't he a "super Christian." How could he ever relate to my anxiety? He can relate, because he experienced a pretty big dose for himself. Let me give you three quick examples of how Paul wrestled with this monster called anxiety.

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Christians living in the city of Corinth, he said, "When I came to the city of Troas to preach the Good News of Christ, the Lord opened a door of opportunity for me. But *I had no peace of mind* because my dear brother Titus hadn't yet arrived with a report from you. So I said good-bye and went on to Macedonia to find him" (2 Corinthians 2:12-13, emphasis added). Then, a few chapters later, he said, "When we arrived in Macedonia, there was no rest for us. We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and *fear on the inside*" (2 Corinthians 7:5, emphasis added).

No peace of mind? Fear on the inside? I don't know about you, but I can relate. In fact, there are days my mind races with questions, what-ifs, and what-about. At times, it can feel overwhelming, even downright paralyzing. But Paul doesn't end there. He paints an even more vivid picture of his hardship.

In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, Paul says, "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, *I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches*" (NIV, emphasis added).

Get the picture—Paul had no peace of mind, fear on the inside, and he faced daily pressure from concern for all the churches (aka...worry). Despite the reality of this emotional pit, Paul discovered the antidote for his anxiety. What is it? We find it in his letter to the church in the city of Philippi.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men.

The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

(Philippians 4:4-6, NKJV)

The word "anxious" in this passage means *to be pulled in different directions*.³ That's what anxiety does...it pulls your emotions in different directions. One part of you thinks the best while the other part of you fears the worst. It's an emotional tug-of-war. Then Paul continues:

*“and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”*

(Philippians 4:7, NKJV)

The word Paul used for “guard” is actually a military term. It means *standing on guard*. In other words, God’s peace stands on guard over your heart and mind. And this peace “surpasses all understanding.” That means God’s peace is so great that not only can your mind not fully comprehend it, but your mind is not skillful enough to reproduce it.⁴ Paul concludes with these hopeful words:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, 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.”

(Philippians 4:8-9, NKJV)

From Philippians 4:4-9, we discover four keys to conquer anxiety. That’s the purpose of this simple resource...to equip you with these four keys so you can walk in freedom and discover a hope-filled future. As you do, you can enter rest and enjoy the peace of God. Let’s get started.

REJOICE

KEY #

1

The first key the apostle Paul gives us to conquer anxiety is to “rejoice.” In Philippians 4:4, he writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (NKJV). Let’s be honest, *rejoicing* is the last thing any of us feel like doing when anxiety is lurking underneath our bed. How do you rejoice when you’re afraid, worried, and battling anxious thoughts? Paul gives us two strategies: rejoice with your *will* and rejoice with your *worship*.

REJOICE WITH YOUR WILL

When you read the book of Philippians, you quickly discover that joy is a common theme woven throughout the entire letter. Over and over Paul makes a choice to rejoice. For Example, in Philippians 1:18, Paul rejoiced, even when the Gospel was preached by people who had impure motives. In Philippians 2:17, Paul determined to rejoice, even if it cost him his life. Then, in Philippians 2:18, Paul said, “Yes, you should rejoice, and I will share your joy.” Finally, in Philippians 3:1, when his future was unclear, Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord.”

Incredibly, Paul wrote these words when he was in the middle of an anxious situation. He was under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier. In fact, he remained that way for two years. And yet, from this prison, Paul writes the most counter-intuitive words: “Rejoice in the Lord.”

How is that possible?

It was a choice. A decision. A deliberate act of his will.

Author Max Lucado observed, “This verse is a call, not to a feeling, but to a *decision* and a deeply rooted confidence that God exists, that he is in control, and that he is good.”⁵

Here’s an important truth to embrace: Joy, at its core, is spiritual, not circumstantial. Joy does not depend on what is happening around you or what is happening to you. It starts with a decision of your will. That’s why James said, “Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy” (James 1:2).

You might read this and think, *Paul and James are crazy*. I get it. Responding to anxiety by “rejoicing” sounds irrational and illogical. So, let me give you a practical example of what it looks like to rejoice with your will.

Dr. James Gills accomplished something pretty amazing when he completed a double ironman triathlon six times.⁶ What’s that, you ask? A double triathlon includes a 2.4 mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26.2 mile run. Now double it...in 24 hours.

James Gills did that six different times, and he was 59 years old the last time he accomplished it. Whenever Dr. Gills was asked how he did it, he gave some rather eye-opening advice. He said, “I’ve learned to talk to myself instead of listen to myself.”

Before the race ever began, Dr. Gills memorized scripture. Then, when he hit the wall and needed an extra boost during the triathlon, he recited the Scripture to himself. He went on to say, “If I listen to myself, I hear all the reasons why I should give up. I hear that I’m too tired, too old, too weak to make it. But if I talk to myself, I can give myself the encouragement and words I need to hear to keep running and finish the race.”⁷

If I had to guess, Dr. Gills probably didn’t *feel* like talking to himself, especially when his *self* was screaming at him to stop. But through a *deliberate act of his will*, he chose to speak life into his lament. He rejoiced. He spoke the truth of Scripture into the trial and the suffering.

And so can you.

You and I have control of our will. We can make hard choices. We can deliberately choose the road less travelled. When we do, we take an important step toward conquering anxiety. Rather than listening to its lies and oppression, we can silence it by speaking words of truth, life, and hope.

REJOICE WITH YOUR WORSHIP

When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Philippi, they were anxious and worried. About what? Suffering, persecution, divisions in the church, and whether or not their physical needs would be met.

Despite all of this, Paul said “Be anxious for nothing” (Philippians 4:6a). The word “nothing” could be translated *absolutely nothing*. The only way to worry about absolutely nothing, is to focus on something bigger than what you’re worried about.

Hold on to this truth: When we worry, we adopt a high view of our problems and a low view of our God. In other words, worry becomes a form of worship.

Let me say it another way: When our mind is distracted by the size of our worry, our heart diminishes the size of our God. We start to believe that God can’t handle our problems. We start to believe that our problems have somehow stumped God. As a result, we focus on our problems more, and the more we focus on our problems, the more we worry.

It becomes a vicious cycle of anxiety, and the only way to break the cycle is to focus on something bigger than the thing we’re worried about. Simply put, rather than enlarging our view of the problem, we have to enlarge our view of God. Worship is how that happens.

God and Anxiety have one thing in common: They both cast a shadow. You will live in the shadow of one or the other. That’s why worship is so important. Worship is how you walk out of the shadow of anxiety and into the shadow of God. Worship shifts your focus from the bigness of your anxiety to the BIGNESS of your God.

How big is God? He's immeasurable. Think about God in terms of creation. How long is the Grand Canyon? It's 277 miles. How tall is the biggest Sequoia Tree? It's the "General Sherman," standing at 275 feet. How deep is the Pacific Ocean? The deepest part is 36,200 feet. And how high is the peak of Mount Everest? It's 29,029 feet. Pretty impressive...but no match for God.

God is longer, taller, deeper, and higher. Whatever you see, God is bigger (and yes, that includes your fear, worry, and anxiety). But it starts by shifting your focus, and worship is how you do just that. In fact, worship robs worry of its weightiness. That's why the prophet Isaiah declared that God would give us, "The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isaiah 61:3, NKJV). Praise breaks the heaviness. Worship breaks the weightiness of worry.

"Yeah, but Stephen, I tried that once and it didn't work." Maybe that's the problem...you tried it *once*. It's the habit of worship that breaks the heaviness of worry. Paul didn't just say, "Rejoice in the Lord." He said, "Rejoice in the Lord *always*. *Again I will say, rejoice!*" (Philippians 4:4, NKJV, emphasis added). Paul's double emphasis reminds us that rejoicing isn't just an act, but rather a habit that results in hope and healing.

So, the first step to conquer anxiety is to *rejoice*. That's probably not the first step you were expecting, and I'm confident it's not the first step you'll feel like taking. But what do you have to lose? Start rejoicing with your *will*. Make a deliberate decision to stop listening to yourself, and to start talking to yourself by rejoicing in the middle of your anxiety. Then, rejoice with your *worship*. Put your focus on the One who is bigger than your anxiety—the Lord. As you do, you'll gain new perspective, and the heaviness will begin to lift.

After encouraging us to “rejoice,” Paul proceeds to his second key to conquer anxiety: pray. Paul continues his challenge in Philippians 4:6 when he writes, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (NKJV). I find it interesting that wedged between Paul’s phrase, “be anxious for nothing,” and the promise of God’s peace which surpasses all understanding, Paul said, “pray.”

TWO DIMENSIONS OF PRAYER

There are two dimensions of prayer I want you to notice in this verse, and both dimensions are profoundly important to overcoming fear, worry, and anxiety. Each one provides a fresh angle on prayer, and each one will help you conquer your anxiety.

1. The Width of Prayer

Sometimes we think God doesn’t care about what’s important to us. But notice what Paul said in verse six, “but in everything by prayer...” Paul didn’t say, “Pray about one thing,” or “Pray about some things.” He said, “Pray about everything.” In other words, prayer knows no boundaries.

It’s often been said, “If it’s big enough to worry about, it’s big enough to pray about.” We find a similar insight in the apostle Peter’s first letter when he wrote, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7, NIV).

The word “anxiety” in this passage is referring to the cause of your anxiety. So, if you’re anxious about your finances, or a relationship, or your job, or a school assignment, or the latest global tragedy—whatever is *causing* you to be anxious—Peter said to *cast it on the Lord*.

The word “cast” means *to throw something*. It’s the idea of throwing something onto someone or something else. In this passage, Peter is saying, “Throw your anxiety off of yourself and onto the shoulders of the Lord.” Prayer is the means by which we cast or throw. Psalms 55:22 makes a similar statement: “Pile your troubles on God’s shoulders—he’ll carry your load, he’ll help you out. He’ll never let good people topple into ruin” (MSG).

Years ago, when the 9-11 crisis was unfolding in the United States, I was dropping our daughter Ashley off at school. That morning I had the radio on, and as we were pulling up to the school, I heard someone on the radio say, “It appears that a plane has flown into the World Trade

Center in New York City.” At the time, they thought it might have been a small plane.

When I arrived at work, nobody could focus. We all kept watching TV as the reports came flooding in. I remember my wife Karen calling me and asking, “Do you think we should pick up Ashley from school.” Nobody knew how long it would last, or if tragedy would strike even closer to home. Before the day was over, nearly 3,000 people had died and over 6,000 were wounded.

A couple of days later, I was driving home, and just before I pulled into our neighborhood, I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety come rolling over me. I was scared. The sense of security I had grown so accustomed to had completely evaporated.

In that moment, the only thing I knew to do was to pray. I clung to Peter’s words and cast my fear and anxiety onto the Lord. I can still remember having a “suddenly” moment...a moment when the anxiety *suddenly* dissipated as God’s peace filled my soul.

Had the uncertainty left? No! Were things all of a sudden back to normal? Not at all. But the worry became a catalyst for prayer, and the prayer was the door God used to renew my hope. It reminds me of how Philippians 4:6-7 reads in The Message. “Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God’s wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It’s wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.” That’s exactly what happened to me shortly after 9-11—God displaced the worry at the center of my life.

Nothing is too small, and nothing is too big, to pray about. When fear, worry, and anxiety come rushing into your mind and emotions, start casting it onto the Lord. Even if you haven’t talked to God in a while, why not talk to Him today. He wants to hear from you.

David said, “My heart has heard you say, ‘Come and talk with me.’ And my heart responds, ‘Lord, I am coming’” (Psalm 27:8). Prayer is not just a *list* for God, it’s an *invitation* from God. Prayer is an invitation to engage in a conversation with the God who actually cares about what you care about...*anything* and *everything*.

We so often look at God’s ability to answer prayers through a very limited perspective. For example, if you sit at your kitchen table, you can measure its length, width, and height. Unfortunately, we think about God the same way. We think there’s a length, width, and height to the prayers He’s able to answer. The moment our prayers exceed his measurements, we’re out of luck. It’s game over. But let me remind you, God is immeasurable. The width of your prayer is no match for the width of His power. That’s why He invites us to bring everything to Him in prayer.

2. The Depth of Prayer

Paul used three words in Philippians 4:6 to describe prayer: *prayer*, *supplication*, and *requests*. The fact that he used three different words shows us the *intensity* and *intentionality* of Paul’s emphasis on prayer. These three words describe the depth of prayer and its power to

displace fear, worry, and anxiety. Author Rick Renner makes an interesting observation about these three words.

- **“Prayer”:** **Pray Intimately** – The word “prayer” comes from a Greek word that has two compound parts. The first part means, “toward,” and it implies a sense of closeness or intimacy. The second part describes a desire or vow. It was used to describe a person who made a vow to God because of a need or desire in his or her life.

Renner observes that inherent in this verse is the idea of making an *exchange* with God. It was giving something to God in exchange for something you desired.⁸ When Paul said to pray about everything, he was saying, come close to God and exchange your anxiety for God’s peace. Prayer is how you make that spiritual trade-off.

That’s what happened to me during 9-11, when I felt gripped by fear and anxiety. When I prayed, although I can’t fully explain it, it felt like a spiritual trade-off had taken place. It was like I traded my anxiousness about all of the events surrounding 9-11 for the very peace of God.

- **“Supplication”:** **Pray Passionately** – Paul continues, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and *supplication*...” (Philippians 4:6, NKJV). The word “supplication” comes from the Greek word *deisis*. *Deisis* depicts a person who is experiencing some kind of lack in his or her life, and therefore pleads for the need to be met.

Rick Renner says it’s a picture of a person boldly, earnestly, and passionately crying out to God for help. They’re not afraid to tell God how they feel and what they need.⁹ The same word is used in James 5:16: “The *earnest prayer* of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results” (emphasis added). Again, this is a passionate, heartfelt, sincere prayer. That’s how Paul tells us to pray when we experience anxiety in our lives.

- **“Requests”:** **Pray Boldly** – The final word Paul uses is “requests.” Again, he says, “let your *requests* be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6b, NKJV). The word “requests” comes from a Greek word that means to be adamant in requesting assistance for a need.

It’s a word that would often portray a person who insists or even demands that a specific need be met after approaching and speaking to their superior with respect and honor. But it doesn’t stop there. The word also implies an expectation that our need *will be met*. So, the focus of the word “request” is on presenting our needs to God with the faith that God will grant our requests.¹⁰

Notice the depth of prayer articulated in this verse. It’s like an onion that has been peeled back one layer after another. Paul instructs us to pray *intimately*, *passionately*, and *boldly*. And when we do, God promises to give us His peace (Philippians 4:7).

WHEN IT FEELS LIKE GOD'S PLAN SUCKS

Several years ago, a couple in our church experienced the anxiety that often comes when a heartfelt wish is unfulfilled. For years, Michael and Joanna had a deep desire to have a baby. That desire turned into what Joanna described as a “war with God.” This is what she wrote:

“Ten years ago, I began waging, what would turn out to be, a seven-year war with God. Yes, it actually took this stubborn woman seven years to realize that I was never going to win a war with God. In the beginning, my prayers were simple: *“Please, Lord, let me have a baby.”* But even my most persuasive conversations with God, were followed by years of disappointment, fertility treatments and three miscarriages. Eventually, I was so broken that I had no fight left in me. *I finally surrendered.*

My prayers shifted to, “Lord, please grant me acceptance and peace in my heart. Help me let go of my dreams and trust that your plan is best.” These were the hardest words for a total control freak to say. God knew, under no uncertain terms, that I still thought his plan sucked. However, I was finally willing to try things his way. It was amazing how quickly that *peace crept into my life*. Michael and I both reached a point of complete contentment with where we were in our lives...to the point where we almost gave up entirely on the idea of having a baby.

It was more out of fear of regret that we decided to use the last few embryos and give it one more try. We agreed that no matter what happened, this was the end...and if we didn't get a baby, we'd get a dog! We both assumed we would be getting a dog and were just as excited about that.”¹¹

Before I continue, I want you to notice something powerful that happened in Michael and Joanna's prayers. After years of waring with God, they came to a place of surrender. And when they finally did, they experienced what Paul describes in Philippians 4:7: “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (NKJV). Peace followed surrender, and so did an unexpected blessing. Joanna concluded her thoughts with these words:

“So, on this day, when I'm looking with complete awe at our baby girl Ainsley, *I encourage all of you to surrender to God*. Don't waste years fighting. Stop praying that God will see things your way, and start accepting that he has an amazing plan for you. It may not be on your timeline, and it may not be where you think you want to head, but he has amazing things in store for you. And in the end, you just might be more fulfilled and grateful than you ever thought possible.”

I don't know where you're at today in your battle with anxiety. You might feel like you're trapped in a cage, held hostage by fear and worry with no way to escape. You might wonder if your mind will ever slow down and find a place of rest and peace. Or, you might be mad, angry that God hasn't come through yet.

Don't give up. Today, accept his invitation to pray...to present your requests to God and to make a spiritual trade-off. Trade fear for peace. Trade worry for rest. Trade anxiety for strength and healing. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind through Christ Jesus.

GIVE THANKS ^{KEY #} 3

We're halfway through Paul's plan to conquer anxiety. His third key is to *give thanks*. In the middle of his words on prayer, he uses the phrase, "with thanksgiving." Verse six says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6, NKJV, emphasis added).

Like "rejoicing," thanksgiving is at the bottom of our list when it comes to actions to take against our mounting anxiety. And yet, giving thanks actually helps us see God's promises, not just our problems. That's what Ruth Bell Graham discovered.

QUIT STUDYING THE PROBLEMS

Ruth Bell Graham was the wife of the famed evangelist, Billy Graham. Years ago, while visiting another country, she woke up at 3:00 in the morning. She was exhausted, but she couldn't get the name of a loved one, who had been running from God, out of her mind. So, Ruth began to pray.

As she prayed, her imagination began to run wild. Fear and worry filled her heart as she pictured the worst outcomes. That's when God interrupted her prayers: "Quit studying the problems and start studying the promises."

Ruth got up, turned on the light, grabbed her Bible, and turned to Philippians 4:6: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God." As Ruth pondered that verse, its truth began to sink deep into her heart. Later, in her book, *It's My Turn*, she wrote these words:

"I realized the missing ingredient in my prayers had been "with thanksgiving." So I put down my Bible and spent time worshipping Him for who He is and what He is. This covers more territory than any one mortal can comprehend. Even contemplating what little we do know dissolves doubts, reinforces faith, and restores joy. I began to thank God for giving me this one I loved so dearly in the first place. I even thanked Him for the difficult spots which taught me so much. And you know what happened? It was as if suddenly someone turned on the lights in my mind and heart, and the little fears and worries which, like mice and cockroaches, had been nibbling away in the darkness, suddenly scuttled for cover."¹²

Let me remind you, the apostle Paul's words—give thanks—were written while he was in prison, chained to a Roman soldier. But if you read all of Paul's writings, you discover that gratitude was a way of life. In fact, Paul expressed three different kinds of thankfulness.

THREE TYPES OF THANKS

As you read Paul's letter to the Philippians, as well as his letters to the Thessalonians and Corinthians, you see his thankfulness unfold. This was more than an annual tradition, like Thanksgiving dinner. It was a habit in his life. Gratitude was a permanent attitude, and it was expressed in three ways.

1. END Thanks

The first type of thanks occurs after something has happened to us. For example, Paul opened his letter to the Philippians by giving thanks because of their partnership with the Gospel. He said, "Every time I think of you, I *give thanks* to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for *you have been* my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now" (Philippians 1:3-5, emphasis added).

Notice, Paul gave thanks *after* something good happened. In other words, he gave thanks at the END of something. But "END Thanks" doesn't just show up after something *good* happens; it also shows up *AFTER* a trial comes to an end.

We express "END Thanks" with phrases like, "Thank God that's over!" or "Thank God I don't have to deal with that anymore." It's how we celebrate when the fear, worry, and anxiety have finally ceased.

2. IN Thanks

"IN Thanks" occurs *during* a test or trial. Paul described this type of thanks in his letter to the church in Thessalonica. "Be thankful in *all circumstances*, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, emphasis added).

The word "all" means *all*—the good, the bad, and the ugly. "IN Thanks" is counterintuitive to our natural desire to complain in the middle of our pain. And yet, research shows that "IN Thanks" can actually transform our lives.

A study was conducted with nearly 300 adults, mostly college students, who were seeking mental health counseling at a university. The majority of these adults struggled with depression and anxiety, and on average they reported clinically low levels of mental health.

The researchers put the participants into three different groups. All three groups received counseling, but the researchers also did something different with each group. The first group was instructed to write one letter of gratitude to another person each week for three weeks. The second group was asked to write their deepest thoughts and feelings about negative

experiences. The third group did not do any writing activity. Interestingly, the adults who wrote gratitude letters reported significantly better mental health four weeks, and then twelve weeks, after their writing exercises ended.¹³

What were these participants doing? They were practicing “IN Thanks.” In other words, they were in the middle of counseling for depression and anxiety, and yet, despite what they were feeling, they practiced gratitude anyway. That simple practice loosened the grip of anxiety on their lives.

3. FOR Thanks

This type of thanks is the most difficult. I’ll be honest, what I’m about to say doesn’t make sense from a natural point of view. In fact, it sounds irrational and illogical. So, before I unpack this type of thanks, I want to first make something very clear:

- “FOR Thanks” doesn’t happen quickly.
- “FOR Thanks” might take weeks, months, even years to express.
- Please know that there’s no shame today if you find yourself struggling with the idea of “FOR Thanks”...I know at times I certainly have.

So, what is “FOR Thanks”? It’s choosing to thank God FOR the trial, because of the lessons and the gifts we received *in* the trial. Please, please hear what I’m NOT saying.

- I’m NOT saying that God caused your pain...because He didn’t.
- I’m NOT saying that God caused your fear, worry, and anxiety...because He didn’t.
- I’m NOT saying that God delights in your suffering...because He doesn’t.

In fact, James tells us that every good and perfect gift comes from God (James 1:17). He is NOT the cause of pain. There are many causes of pain—the devil, bad decisions, people with evil intentions, and unfair circumstances (just to name a few). But God is not the cause of pain. God is good, and God is the cause of every good gift.

However, we often forget that God is *so good* that He doesn’t *waste* pain either, regardless of its cause. Instead, God offers us a *gift* in the pain. In fact, the apostle Paul gives us a personal example. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul expressed “FOR Thanks” when he described what is commonly known as his “thorn in the flesh.” He writes these words:

“Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn’t get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan’s angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first, I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, “*My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.*” Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating

the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, MSG, emphasis added)

Look at some of the phrases Paul used in the midst of his trial: "gift of a handicap," "I was glad to let it happen," "appreciating the gift," and "with good cheer." Those aren't phrases we typically use when the arrows of hardship pierce our lives.

As hard as it is to swallow, Paul was able to give thanks FOR what was happening to him—even though it didn't come from God—because it was the place in which He experienced *God's good gifts* of grace and strength.

Please hear this: Pain is not a gift from God, but because God is good, He offers you a gift *in* the pain. "FOR THANKS" helps you recognize and receive the gift. Let me give you a personal example.

In 2014, I experienced heart failure and pulmonary failure after my heart valve unexpectedly ruptured. I was transported by helicopter to the heart center near downtown Fort Worth, had major, open heart surgery, and spent eight days in the hospital.

When the entire ordeal was over, I certainly experienced "END THANKS." And during the ordeal, I also experienced "IN THANKS." I was thankful to God, and to my wife, daughter, family, friends, church, fellow pastors, doctors, and nurses who were supporting me in so many incredible ways.

But something happened about three months after my surgery that reshaped my understanding of thankfulness. One day I was reading Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12, when suddenly I sensed the Lord say to me, "Can you thank me *for* your heart failure?"

That made me pause.

"God, what on earth do you mean, thank you *FOR* my heart failure?"

Not only does it not *feel* right to say that, it doesn't *sound* right to say it. I certainly wouldn't want to do it again, and I most certainly wouldn't want to put my wife, daughter, or family through it again. Besides...God didn't *cause* the heart failure. How could I thank God for something that He didn't cause?

That's when the light came on. In thanking God for the trial, I was actually thanking Him for the *gifts* and the *growth* I experienced because of the trial—gifts like trust, perspective, and a deeper connection with my family and friends

Again, I know this sounds completely irrational. And let me repeat what I said a moment ago, God did not cause my heart failure, and God does not take delight in our sickness, depression, hardship, or the death of a loved one. He also doesn't take delight in seeing us experience fear, worry, and anxiety.

That's not who God is or what God does. But, again, even though God doesn't cause pain, He doesn't waste it either. He offers gifts when we're going through our pain, and for the apostle Paul, those gifts were *grace* and *strength*.

In the example I gave about Ruth Bell Graham, she expressed "FOR THANKS" as well. Again, she wrote these words: "I even thanked Him for the difficult spots which taught me so much."

HOW TO PRACTICE GIVING THANKS

How can you practice these three kinds of thanks in order to reduce your anxiety? One way is to keep a gratitude journal. Research has shown that people who keep a gratitude journal feel more optimistic, better about their lives, exercise more, and have fewer visits to the doctor.¹⁴

Having a gratitude journal helps me be intentional about setting aside time to focus on the good, even if I've had a bad day. I'll typically write down three things I'm thankful for each time I open my journal. For example, I might thank God for family members, a conversation with a friend, a passage from God's Word, or something God is doing at 7 City Church. I'll even thank him for good food and great weather.

A couple of years ago, I challenged our congregation to take a 30-day gratitude challenge, and to write down a couple of things each day that they were grateful for. During that challenge, Karen gave me a different perspective on this exercise. She said, "I'm going to write down two things I'm thankful for each day—one is something *I can see*, and one is something *I cannot see*."

When I asked her to explain, Karen said, "I want to thank God for something that has already happened (something I can see with my eyes). But I also want to thank God for something that hasn't happened yet, but that I'm praying and believing God to do (something I can't see yet)."

I loved this so much, because it turned the practice of giving thanks into an *act of gratitude and* into an *act of faith*. When you give thanks for what you can see, it's an act of gratitude that disarms fear, worry, and anxiety *today*. When you give thanks for what you cannot see, it's an act of faith that disarms fear, worry, and anxiety *tomorrow*.

Everybody counts something. You might count your money, your sales, the classes you've passed (or failed), or the number of games you've won on your favorite app. The problem is, much of what we count only creates more stress and anxiety. So, what would happen if you started counting your blessings? Giving thanks is how we do just that.

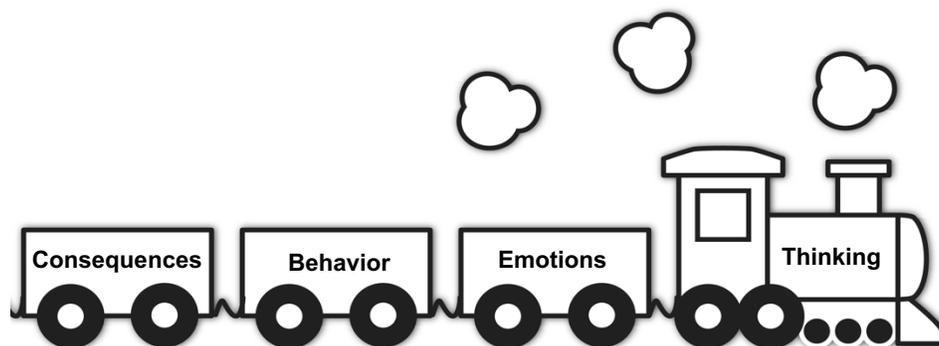
THINK POSITIVELY 4

So far we've learned three keys to conquer anxiety: rejoice, pray, and give thanks. In fact, in another letter Paul wrote, he offered the same three keys: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NIV).

There's one final key to conquer fear, worry, and anxiety: Think Positively. We find this key in Philippians 4:8 when Paul writes, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things" (NKJV).

When Paul says, "meditate on these things," the word "meditate" describes a discipline of the mind. Paul is saying, "make it a habit to think this way," and then let this thinking translate into your behavior. Simply put, Paul is encouraging us to turn our habit of thinking into a habit of behaving.¹⁵

Paul understood this simple truth: the rest of your life starts with the thoughts of your life. If you want the rest of your life to be healthy, it starts with how you think. Author Chip Ingram drives this point home by comparing our thinking to a train. He says, the engine of the train is our thinking, and the thinking engine pulls three cars behind it: emotions, behavior, and consequences. In other words, our thinking influences our emotions, which in turn influences our behavior, and ultimately produces consequences.



For example, wrong thinking produces negative emotions, which produces unwise behavior, resulting in devastating consequences. On the other hand, right thinking produces positive emotions, which produces wise behavior, resulting in fruitful consequences.¹⁶

Proverbs 23:7a captures the essence of the thinking train: “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he” (NKJV). When Paul tells us to meditate on, or think about, these things, he clearly defines what those things are.

1. True – So much of the mental and emotional bondage we experience is because somewhere along the way we believed a lie. We believed that we are not loved, not worthy, or that God doesn’t care about us or have a purpose or plan for our lives. All of these are lies, and if we entertain a lie long enough, it will become the narrative of our minds. When a lie narrates your mind, it drags you into a place of bondage. Simply put, we become a slave to the lie.

That’s why thinking on truth is so important. The only way to stop believing a lie is to replace the lie with the truth. In John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the way, *the truth*, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, emphasis added). And in his second letter to Timothy, Paul said, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to *teach us what is true* and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, emphasis added).

2. Noble – The word “noble” is a royal word and is often translated “honorable.” It’s the idea of setting our minds on what’s honorable and reverent, rather than on what’s earthly, cheap, or degrading.

3. Just – The word “just” is often translated “right.” It means “righteous.” When we think about what is right, we are choosing to pattern our lives after what is righteous.

4. Pure – The word “pure” refers to something that is holy and morally clean. With pornography being so easily accessible today, the only way to stay pure is to train your mind in the purity of God’s Word. The psalmist said, “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word” (Psalm 119:9, NIV).

5. Lovely – This is the only place in the New Testament where the word “lovely” is used.¹⁷ It refers to something that is beautiful, attractive, or pleasing. It’s allowing your heart to be filled with gratitude and praise to God?

6. Good Report – A “good report” refers to something that is well thought of, commendable, or admirable. In other words, it’s a “good report” worth talking about. Are the things you think about worth talking about?

Finally, Paul summarizes and reinforces this list of things to think about with these words: “if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8b, NKJV)

You might look at that list and say, “Stephen, with so many bad things going on in the world (or in my life), how could I ever think that way?” But you could just as easily flip that statement on its head and say, “With so many good things going on, how could I *not* think this way.” Either way, good circumstances are not a pre-requisite for good thinking.

Author John Maxwell often says, “Whatever you focus on—good or bad—expands.” Proverbs 4:23 says, “Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life” (NCV). It comes back to the thinking train: Thinking influences our emotions, our emotions influence our behavior, and our behavior produces our consequences.

I’m not suggesting that this is an easy battle to fight. Fear, worry, and anxiety are indeed monsters. But how we choose to think is likely to have the greatest impact on whether or not we conquer this Goliath. And one of the best strategies you can use is a Daily Declaration.

YOUR DAILY DECLARATION

Let me conclude by reminding you of Dr. James Gills. I shared Dr. Gills’ story under the first key to conquering anxiety: rejoicing. Remember what he said whenever he would hit the wall while competing in a double ironman triathlon. He said, “I’ve learned to talk to myself instead of listen to myself.”

That’s the power of thinking positively. He would memorize Scripture and then recite it when he needed it most. Again, he said, “If I listen to myself, I hear all the reasons why I should give up. I hear that I’m too tired, too old, too weak to make it. But if I talk to myself, I can give myself the encouragement and words I need to hear to keep running and finish the race.”¹⁸

What was Dr. Gills doing? He was renewing his mind by speaking truth. In Romans 12:2, the apostle Paul said, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (NIV, emphasis added).

Renewing your mind is not a one-time activity. If you want to change how you think, you have to renew your mind *daily*. Why daily? Because...

- Daily your mind is being assaulted by negativity.
- Daily your mind is being fed lies that lead to bondage.
- Daily your mind is being filled with circumstances that cause fear and worry.
- Daily your mind is being pumped with messages of anxiety.

Therefore, *daily* you have to renew your mind with truth. How do you do that? I believe the best way is to create and repeat a “Daily Declaration.” A Daily Declaration is a statement of truth built on the firm foundation of God’s Word.

Below is a sample from my personal Daily Declaration. It reminds me of who God says I am

according to His Word. I've found it to be a great way to renew my mind. And it's the perfect way to *start talking* to yourself and *stop listening* to yourself.

I am a child of God. I am a friend of Jesus. I am justified by faith and I have peace with God through Jesus Christ. I have been bought with a high price, and I am a part of Christ's body. I am a saint, and I have been adopted by God as His son. I have access to God through the Holy Spirit. I have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of God, because Jesus purchased my freedom and forgave my sins. I am complete in Christ.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and the truth sets me free, for he who the Son sets free is truly free. I am free from condemnation because I belong to Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit has freed me from the power of sin. God works everything for my good, and since God is for me, nobody can be against me. I am chosen by God, and I cannot be accused or condemned, for Christ died and rose again and I am in right standing with God. I am more than a conqueror through Christ who loves me, and nothing can separate me from the love of God. I have been established in Christ and anointed and sealed with the Holy Spirit. My life is hidden with Christ in God.

I am the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and I have received power from the Holy Spirit to be His witness. I am a branch of the true vine, Jesus, and I have been chosen and appointed to produce fruit that lasts. I am the temple of God and the Holy Spirit lives in me. I am a new creation in Christ; the old life has gone and new life has begun. I am an ambassador of Christ, and God is making his appeal to others through me as I carry out the ministry of reconciliation. I am seated with Christ in the heavenly places. I am God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for me to do. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

What would happen if you made this declaration each and every day? It would begin to change how you think. It would create a habit of *thinking positively*, and it would refocus your mind on truth. Ultimately, your anxiety level would decrease as you create a new, life-giving narrative in your mind.

TAKE YOUR FIRST STEP TODAY

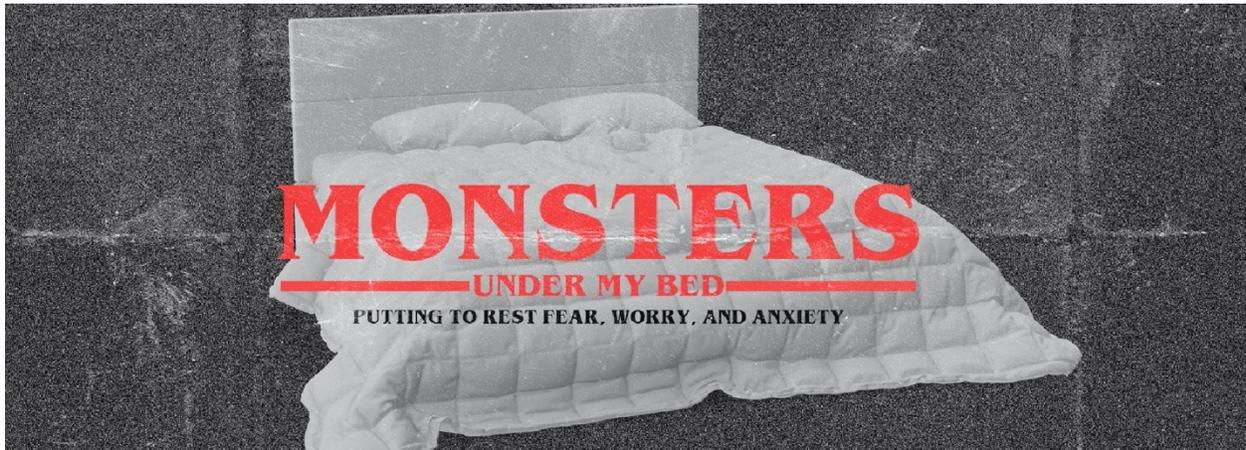
I've shared Paul's secret to conquer anxiety: rejoice, pray, give thanks, and think positively. This isn't an overnight process, nor is it a one-time process. But as you develop these habits, you'll watch the power of fear, worry, and anxiety dissipate in your life. You'll begin to walk in freedom, and the joy of the Lord will be your strength.

Why not start today? Why not take these four steps to help you defeat the voice of fear and the grip of anxiety?

1. **Rejoice** – Make a deliberate choice to rejoice, and then spend time each day worshipping the Lord. As you do, the size of your problems will shrink in the shadow of God.
2. **Pray** – Let the width and depth of prayer lead to a spiritual trade-off where you exchange anxiety for the peace of God.
3. **Give Thanks** – Start a gratitude journal, and each day write down two or three things you are thankful for.
4. **Think Positively** – Read the Daily Declaration each day (or create your own) and allow your mind to be renewed in the positive truth of Scripture.

I'm convinced that as you take these steps, you will conquer anxiety. You don't have to walk in fear and worry. You don't have to let stress drive you to a place of crippling anxiety. You can be free. Take your first step today.

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Notes

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