

Working Through Fear and Anxiety

With the focus on Philippians 4:4-9

Notes adapted from a talk by Jack Crabtree

Preliminary Remarks

With these preliminary remarks, I am suggesting that knowing **all** God's characteristics and persistently recollecting them and holding them together in our minds is enormously encouraging when we are working through fear, anxiety, stress, affliction, and suffering. I am also suggesting that the Bible passages we will analyze assume these characteristics. Therefore, they **all** are an integral part of understanding the message of the Bible and our purpose for existence as God's creatures.

- 1) It is important, indeed essential, to understand that **God is eternal and uncreated**. No one made God. He did not even make himself. He simply has always existed and will exist forever and ever. In addition, no one else is eternal and uncreated like him. He is the only God, so that he has no rivals who are equally powerful, intelligent, and wise.¹
- 2) It is essential to understand that **God is both transcendent and omnipresent (immanent)**. Being uncreated, he exists apart from the creation which he has made and is completely independent of it. If the creation disappears, God still exists. He can destroy the creation and anything within it, but no one can destroy him.²
God is also here in every place within the creation. And he is continually operating in it as the one who brings all things into existence and sustains their existence.³
- 3) It is also essential to understand that **God is sovereign over the entire creation**. He is in total control of every detail of reality at every moment. This means that nothing happens in the world and in our personal lives apart from God's willing and causing it to happen—including our joy and happiness (or any other positive emotion) that we experience, or our fear and anxiety (or any other negative emotion) that we have to work through.⁴
- 4) It is also essential to understand that **God is good**. He is morally perfect, so that he always does what is right and appropriate. There is never a hint of evil, malice, or malevolence in him. And everything he does according to his sovereignty, even bringing suffering into our lives as Christians, is always motivated by his goodness and moral rectitude along with his other attributes which contribute to how he relates to those he is granting eternal salvation.⁵
- 5) It is also essential to understand that **God is just**. He is obligated to evaluate the moral quality of our existential beings, including our inclinations, thoughts, and actions. And the outcome of his judgment will be eternal. If he decides that we deserve his condemnation and punishment, he is entirely right to follow through on his decision.⁶

¹ Revelation 1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Also Isaiah 43:10. Also Isaiah 43:10.

² Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

³ Romans 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (NAS95; emphasis mine).

⁴ John 1:3 All things came into being through [the plan of God], and apart from it, not one thing which has come into being, came into being (my translation). Also, Isaiah 45:6,7; Ephesians 1:11.

⁵ Luke 18:19 And Jesus said to [the Jewish leader], "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (NAS95).

⁶ Romans 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING

- 6) It is also essential to understand that **God is loving**. He has provided all that is necessary for sinful human beings to obtain eternal life.⁷ And he has acted specifically towards those whom he has chosen in order to rescue them from his justice and give them life in his eternal kingdom. Accordingly, he has required that Jesus die on the cross in order to qualify as our priest, advocate, and champion.⁸ He has also used his Spirit to change our inwardness so that we believe in Jesus and love him, his people, and even unbelievers.⁹ And everything he does for Christians, even bringing suffering into their lives, is according to his love and his other attributes which contribute to how he relates to those he is granting eternal salvation.
- 7) It is also essential to understand that **God is forgiving and merciful**. Unlike his being just, God is not obligated to forgive us for our sin. However, if he decides to abstain from punishing us, in spite of our deserving it, and instead grants us what only a morally perfect person deserves, life, then he is entirely right to follow through on his decision. And everything he does for Christians, even bringing suffering into their lives, is in the midst of his mercy and his other attributes which contribute to how he relates to those he is granting eternal salvation.¹⁰
- 8) It is also essential to understand that **God is patient towards those who deserve his punishment**. He will wait and wait and wait for people to repent and seek his mercy. Nevertheless, his patience will run out, and he will judge all human beings.¹¹
- 9) It is also essential to understand that **God is faithful with his love towards those whom he has chosen to receive his mercy**. Therefore, nothing will prevent him from preserving their faith, even through suffering, so that they obtain eternal life.¹²
- 10) It is also essential to understand that **God is strategic and purposeful**. His greatest concern for us, who are his elect, is that we achieve eternal well-being in the future Kingdom of God, and he directs our lives towards this goal. Another way to say this is that God aims to manifest his glory by creating a cosmos that lasts forever and includes

TO HIS DEEDS: 7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. 9 There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (NAS95).

⁷ John 3:16 For thus God loved the world—He gave His unique Son, in order that everyone who believes in him may not experience destruction but have eternal life instead (my translation).

⁸ Romans 5:6 Indeed, while we were still helpless, at that proper moment the Messiah died for the ungodly. 7 Someone will hardly die for a righteous man. Though, perhaps for a good man someone may indeed have the courage to die. 8 However, God demonstrates His own love towards us in that while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us (my translation).

⁹ Romans 5:3 Not only this, but we also exult in difficult circumstances, because we know that the stress produces perseverance [of faith], 4 and perseverance [of faith] produces proven authenticity [of our faith], and proven authenticity [of our faith] produces confident waiting. 5 And confident waiting is not a disappointing thing—because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts in the manner of the Holy Spirit who was given to us (my translation).

¹⁰ Ephesians 1:7 In [Jesus] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (NAS95).

¹¹ 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (NAS95).

Romans 9:22 If God, while desiring to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, has endured with great patience clay pots of wrath which were made for a destiny of destruction, 23 then He has done so in order that He make known the riches of His glory on clay pots of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for a destiny of glory—24 even us whom He called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles (my translation).

¹² Romans 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (NAS95).

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it (NAS95).

morally perfect human beings who applaud his work with the highest praise.¹³ Consequently, he strategically places everything in our lives to fulfill this purpose, as the following passages will show.¹⁴

This means, too, that *in this life* God cares about mostly our repentance, our persevering in belief in him, and our pursuit of obedience to him.

This also means that God is quite willing to allow us to go through suffering in order to produce greater depth in our belief in Jesus as Messiah, King, and High Priest. This is also in order to bring about greater and clearer understanding from the Bible of all truth about God. And our understanding will produce greater commitment and confidence in his promise of our eternal well-being in the Kingdom of God.

While this will make for difficult times during our time on earth, God's goodness, love, mercy, faithfulness, and sovereign rule over our entire lives (along with all his other characteristics) are nevertheless what we must accept and hold firmly.

- 11) It is also essential to understand that **God is logical**. This can be inferred from the manner in which all the biblical authors present their ideas about God. They communicate in a commonsensical way where they clearly expect their readers to assume that they are not talking nonsense. We can therefore conclude that God cannot make a rock he cannot lift. He cannot make $1 + 1 = 5$. He cannot make a rose be a rose and not a rose at the same time and in the same respect. Likewise, any interpretation of a biblical passage that is not logical is false. Indeed, every idea that is true about God or the reality which he has created makes sense even to us human beings. This is because God has implanted the same principles of logic in our minds that exist in his. Unfortunately, many Christians choose to believe ideas about God that are illogical and therefore false, just as many non-Christians choose to believe ideas about both God and his creation that are illogical and false.

Sometimes Christians claim that God is beyond logic by referring to [Isaiah 55:8](#) "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. [9](#) "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts (NAS95)."

But the previous verse is key to understanding what God means. He says in [Isaiah 55:7](#) "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon (NAS95)." God is saying to his listeners, who are the nation of Israel, that they are thinking and acting immorally, while he thinks and acts morally. They are evil, and he is good. And he is exhorting them to repent of their sin and change their thoughts and actions to ones that are like his—good and moral. As a result, God will forgive and have mercy on them. Therefore, these verses are about morality and not about logic.

On the other hand, things do happen in this world that do not make sense to us human beings. In addition, we and other human beings make decisions that, when carefully analyzed, do not make sense. But this is not to say that God, the author of human history, is illogical. If we had access to all the data and details of God's plans, and if we have the ability to assimilate and comprehend all the data of world history, then we would be able to say to him and with him, "I understand why these things are happening and why people are making the decisions they are in the light of your plans to bring about the Kingdom of God as the culmination of the present realm."

¹³ [Ephesians 1:5](#) [God] predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, [6](#) to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (NAS95).

¹⁴ [Romans 8:28](#) Thus, we know for those who love God that everything works together for their good, for those who have been called according to His plan, [29](#) because the ones whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brethren (my translation).

Thus, everything that happens makes sense from God's perspective, even if it does not from our vantage point.

- 12) All the above characteristics of God imply that it is essential to understand that he is **personal**. This is to say that he is a person in the ultimate sense. He thinks. He feels. And he freely chooses to act in accordance with all his characteristics and his purposes at every moment.¹⁵

He is constantly thinking of us, his people, and indeed of every human being and all the smallest details of the entire creation.

He is constantly feeling with us and for us with the highest concern for our well-being, especially our eternal well-being as Christians.

He is constantly choosing to act on our behalf in line with his eternal purposes.

God's personhood is assumed throughout the Bible and should be obvious in the following passages we will discuss.

Four Points to Consider Before Looking at the Biblical Passages

- 1) It is a popular myth that Christianity will lead to a life free of fear, anxiety, and stress. (Oh that this were true!)

Modern Christianity tends to take the perspective that, if we have strong faith like the New Testament believers, then God will give us such deep, emotional calmness and peace that we will be able to float through life almost effortlessly. In other words, the normal sorrows and sufferings of non-Christians and immature Christians will not disturb us and affect our emotional well-being.

The extreme view of modern Christianity is that, if we have enough faith, God will bless us with a life free from all suffering.

But both these perspectives are not in line with the biblical teaching.

- 2) Notwithstanding point #1, mature faith that comes from educating ourselves with the Bible will make a difference in the level of our fear and anxiety, but it will not completely eliminate them.

- 3) Some anxiety, stress, and fear is simply a part of being human and living in this present world. For example, there is Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane when he agonizes over the thought of being crucified the next morning.¹⁶ There is also Paul's experience as he feels the stress of the possibility of people giving up their faith.¹⁷

On the other hand, some anxiety is a result of either complete unbelief or little belief, similar to the disciples' fear when the waves of the Sea of Galilee almost swamp their boat. Jesus says to them in Matthew 8:26, "Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?"

It is important that we be as kind and gracious to ourselves as God is and carefully and deliberately work through our fear and anxiety by reflecting on their origin and importance relative to God's sovereignty, faithfulness, forgiveness, and love. This will become clearer as we work through the biblical passages.

- 4) Our attitudes towards our lives should always be positive, but with the implicit understanding that, while tragedy could hit at any moment, we are ultimately willing to embrace it. This is because we acknowledge that it is part of the good that a good and loving God wants to bring into our lives both now and in the future (cf. Romans 5:1-11; 8:26-39).

¹⁵ Isaiah 43:13 Even from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it (NAS95)?

¹⁶ Matthew 26:38 Then [Jesus] said to [his disciples], "My soul is **deeply grieved, to the point of death**; remain here and keep watch with Me" (emphasis mine) (NAS95). Jesus' fear, anxiety, and sorrow felt like death to him.

¹⁷ Colossians 2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle (literally "agony") I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face (NAS95).

The good now that God is producing in our lives is threefold: 1) the perseverance of our faith, 2) the expectation of eternal life at Jesus' return, and 3) compassionate love towards others who experience similar suffering.

The good in the future that God is bringing about is eternal life.

First Passage Before Looking at Philippians 4:4-9 – John 14:1

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me” (NAS95).

Jesus said this originally to his apostles when he told them that he was leaving them in the hostile environment of 1st century Israel where they would more than likely be killed for their faith as he was about to be.

But Jesus' statement applies to us Christians in general as we serve God without Jesus' physical presence in a world that mostly rejects him.

The word “troubled” means unsettled, disturbed, and shaken to the point that a person gives up his belief in God.

Thus, Jesus is not talking about being shaken emotionally, but being dislodged from the most important commitment of our hearts. This is the commitment to believe and trust God for his promise to be faithful in causing us to persevere in our belief and to grant us eternal life at the return of Jesus.

Therefore, when life presents us with trials that threaten our belief, we should remind ourselves of the truth and work hard to keep our hearts committed to God, his goodness, and his faithfulness.

We conclude then that Jesus is not talking about our achieving complete absence of fear and anxiety. He is talking about our belief and faith winning out over them and surviving in the midst of suffering.

Second Passage Before Looking at Philippians 4:4-9 – John 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (NAS95).

As above, Jesus said this originally to his apostles when he told them that he was leaving them in the hostile environment of 1st century Israel where they would more than likely be killed for their faith as he was about to be.

But it also applies to us Christians in general as we serve God without Jesus' physical presence in a world that mostly rejects him.

As above, the word “troubled” means unsettled, disturbed, and shaken to the point that a person gives up his belief in God.

Similarly, the word “fearful” means to be so overwhelmed with fear that a person abandons his belief and faith in God.

Therefore, Jesus is not talking about achieving complete absence of the feelings of fear and anxiety. He is talking about the perseverance of faith in the midst of fear and anxiety.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word *eirene* (“peace”) is used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*.¹⁸ This Hebrew word refers ultimately to a flourishing existence in the eternal Kingdom of God where we will always be emotionally, psychologically,

¹⁸ A good example is Psalm 37:11 But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity (*rov shalom*) (וְיָשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ שְׁלוֹמָם וְיִשְׂמְחוּ בְּרִבְיוֹן וְיִשְׂמְחוּ בְּרִבְיוֹן וְיִשְׂמְחוּ בְּרִבְיוֹן) (οἱ δὲ πραεῖς κληρονομήσουσιν γῆν καὶ κατατρυφήσουσιν ἐπὶ πλεθρῇ εἰρήνης). Also note Matthew 5:5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth [land] (NAS95) (μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς· ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν).

and spiritually triumphant in every area of life. And this experience will be based upon being immortal and morally perfect in an environment completely devoid of evil and death.

Here in John 14:27 Jesus is saying that he is leaving his apostles with the promise of eternal shalom. This promise is contained in the message which he has taught them and that they are to proclaim after he ascends from the earth. He is also saying that the present world cannot provide anything close to the quality of life of the future Kingdom of God.

In addition, he is not saying that he is granting them perfect calmness that is without fear and anxiety. Instead, he is leaving them with the two tools necessary to survive fear, anxiety, and suffering—the truth of the gospel and the Spirit of God (cf. John 14:26, “And the Persuader, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of all that I said to you” (my translation)).

As the Messiah, Jesus’ own destiny will be a flourishing shalom on the eternal earth (cf. 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). And one day, his apostles will thrive eternally like him and with him. In this new phase of reality, Jesus, his apostles, and all believers throughout history will live in an environment that will be unmarked by sin, evil, death, chaos, suffering, grief, sadness, affliction, hardship, sickness, fear, and anxiety.¹⁹

Philippians 4:4-9

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your minds dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (NAS95).

Looking at v. 9 first, is Paul saying that the “**God of peace**” is the God who gives us emotional calmness, who is committed to our floating through life without fear and suffering? Or is he maybe saying that God causes us to go through suffering without fear and anxiety? Neither of these. Instead, Paul is saying that God is the God of shalom, the same shalom that Jesus mentions in John 14:27. God’s agenda is to lead us to a flourishing existence in the Kingdom of God where life will be free of sin, death, suffering, fear, and anxiety.

In this same verse, is Paul saying that God is “**with you**” in the sense that he is always near us and empathizing with us? No, even though this is entirely true.²⁰ Instead, he is saying that God is faithful and committed to ensuring that we persevere in our faith and obtain his promise of eternal life.

¹⁹ Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (NAS95).

²⁰ Exodus 34:6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth (NAS95).

This is the same thing that Isaiah intends by calling God “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” in Isaiah 7:14 & 8:8.²¹ Just as Israel’s disobedience of God could not keep him from remaining faithful to them, there is literally nothing that can change God’s commitment to us who believe in Jesus. He is not waiting to see if we will be worthy of his blessing. The promise of his blessing has already been established through his predestination of us, Jesus’ death and resurrection for us, and the Holy Spirit’s work in us of changing our hearts. As a result, we have become genuine believers in God. And if God has said he will save us, then he will be causing our faith to endure all the ups and downs of life.

Nevertheless, looking at vs. 8 & 9 and what Paul exhorts his readers to ponder with their minds and choose to do with their wills, it is necessary for us to ask ourselves the question, “Have we committed ourselves to **whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, [whatever is of moral] excellence and...[morally] worthy of praise, [so that we are also committed to have our] minds dwell on these things**” and to “**practice these things**”?

If we show ourselves to be children of God like this, then the God of shalom is with us and committed to our obtaining eternal life. More on this later.

Moving backwards to v. 6, it would be easy to think that by saying, “**Be anxious for nothing...**” Paul is commanding Christians not to tense up, but instead to be emotionally peaceful and calm, to pray, and then God will grant us even deeper and more profound calmness and feelings of peace. And these peaceful feelings will allow us to face any circumstance, no matter how difficult, and have only joy. Plus, this will be true in the midst of great suffering and in spite of our imaginations spinning out of control, where we may even panic and only fear the worst.

But we should look at certain key phrases in vs. 6 & 7 before we conclude that the above is what Paul means.

- 1) In v. 6, Paul says to pray “**with thanksgiving.**” Is gratitude in the midst of life’s difficulties and suffering important? Yes! Indeed, Paul is saying that it is essential. But what can make us grateful when we are in tremendous pain? Only one thing, the absolute certainty that the outcome of our lives will be a pain-free and fulfilling existence in the Kingdom of God for all eternity. This is the same as saying that, ultimately, we are thankful to God for his granting us eternal shalom in the future.
- 2) In v. 7, Paul says that God will guard our hearts and minds “**in Christ Jesus.**” By this phrase, he is referring to being members of the group who believe in Jesus and the truth associated with him. These are people who by the Spirit of God acknowledge they are sinners and do not ignore or reject Jesus as their solution to this problem. Instead, they recognize that, as Messiah, King, and High Priest, he obtains God’s forgiveness and blessing of eternal life for them through his intercession at the final judgment.

²¹ Also, Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are **with me**; Your rod and your staff, they comfort me (emphasis mine) (NAS95).

Also [Isaiah 43:1](#) But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! [2](#) “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. [3](#) “For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;”

As attractive as feelings of peace and calmness are when we are really hurting, these two phrases, “**with thanksgiving**” and “**in Christ Jesus**”, point to concepts that are much more profound than feelings. Therefore, we conclude that Paul is talking about something else. He is talking about people who are gratefully committed to God and their destiny of life in his eternal Kingdom that comes through the combined work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Before going on in the Philippians passage, we should look at Matthew 6:24-33 in the Sermon on the Mount.

- 6:24 “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.
- 6:25 “For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 “Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? 27 “And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? 28 “And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29 yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30 “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! 31 “Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ 32 “For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (NAS95).

The bottom line is that Jesus is telling his listeners not to be preoccupied and obsessed with the necessities of this life. Certainly, this exhortation is not only profound but also quite difficult. We naturally have to pay attention to the things of this life in order both to exist and to live wisely and lovingly. We cannot remain alive without time, money, food, shelter, clothing, etc. And we cannot express our love for God, his people, and others without using these same things. So how can we not “eagerly seek all these things” and love God and people? By “seeking all these things” minus the “eagerly,” so that our fundamental heart commitment is for God’s mercy and eternal life. We should “eagerly seek” (“seek first”) the Kingdom of God and his forgiveness and not so eagerly “seek all these things” that make for sustaining our existence in the present world. Then, whatever quantity we have of “all these things,” we should lovingly share them with our fellow Christians and others who are in need.²²

In addition, our usual approach as sinful human beings is to think that as soon as we get enough grain in our barns, then we will turn our attention to God. Or we pay attention to God, thinking that this is the guaranteed way to get enough grain in our barns. Both attitudes demonstrate that the things of this life are our priority, when Jesus is encouraging us to care most about the things of eternal life.

Nevertheless, Jesus is not saying, “Be stupid and ignore the commonsensical, rational order of the universe, so that you strip yourself naked, sit on the ground, and wait for God to take care of you.” Nor is Jesus excusing an irresponsible approach to

²² Ephesians 4:28 He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need (NAS95).

time, money, energy, etc. whereby we use them merely to satisfy our sensual pleasures in an immoral way. Instead, he is acknowledging that a certain amount of attention to the material, psychological, and intellectual things of this life is required to be a responsible human being. But the question always is for us in our specific and individual circumstances, “*How much attention* should I pay to these elements of life, and *in what way* should I pay attention to them?” No one can presume to answer this question for any one of us. Each person has a specific calling from God and role within his story. Plus, we live with our own consciences ultimately before him and not before others.

Jesus is also not saying that God promises to clothe and feed us at every moment of our lives as though he is committed to making sure that we sustain this present existence at all costs. Implied in all of Jesus’ teaching is God’s sovereignty and his strategic purpose to direct us towards the goal of eternal life through times of deprivation and hardship. As already stated, God cares more about our eternal well-being than our temporary one. He cares more about manifesting his glory in the next, eternal realm than he does in this temporary realm. Therefore, God is certainly the one who provides for our earthly needs, but only in exactly the manner in which he wants us to exist and for how long he wants us to live in the present reality before we transition into our eternal bodies.²³

Our tendency definitely is to be fearful, panicked, and anxious individuals, who hold on to this life and seek to get from it everything we can that is satisfying and enjoyable. Thus, we hope we can eliminate all risk and all suffering. But Jesus is saying that the energy this requires is antithetical to an accurate understanding of God. “Being worried [cannot] add a single hour to [our] life” (v. 27). Nor will it change the past and its effects on us. Nor can we change people so that they comply with all our wishes. Nor can we change God’s plans and purposes to fit our expectations.²⁴

Returning to Philippians 4:4-9, Paul begins this passage with “**Rejoice always**” and “**Be anxious for nothing.**” And he ends it with an exhortation to think always of the majestic things he has taught, so that his readers assure themselves that it will be they to whom God is faithful and grants eternal life. We see that Paul is addressing the same issue as Jesus in Matthew 6:24-33. Hence, a correct understanding of the Philippians passage is as follows –

- 1) Paul’s exhortation in v. 6, “**Be anxious for nothing,**” is an encouragement not to set our hearts ultimately on the things of this world. Instead, he wants us to put them in perspective as much, much, much less important than the eternal Kingdom of God. He is also not declaring that it is somehow possible to avoid all feelings of anxiety and fear in this life. The goal, instead, is to avoid permitting these feelings from dominating our hearts and minds so that they end up crushing our faith in God. This will become clearer as we go through the rest of the passage.
- 2) The “**peace of God**” in v. 7 does not refer to feelings of peace and calm. It refers to God’s shalom, the same shalom that Jesus mentions in John 14:27. God has promised

²³ Briefly, we transition from sinful and mortal bodies into morally perfect and eternal bodies at Jesus’ return, either by being raised from the dead or by being lifted off the earth to meet Jesus as he descends to re-establish the Kingdom of Israel and rule over the whole earth. Cf. [1 Corinthians 15:50](#) Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. [51](#) Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, [52](#) in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. [53](#) For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality (NAS95).

²⁴ See Romans 11:33-36 above.

us believers that we will experience our final, eternal comfort and rest in his eternal kingdom. It is then that we will no longer labor in order to enter into a flourishing and fulfilled existence. We will have finally arrived in the shalom of God.

- 3) In v. 7 the “**peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension**” refers to our inability in the present age to grasp how unimaginably magnificent and wonderful will be our experience in the eternal Kingdom of God. It will be better than we can ever contemplate in our present situation that lacks personal and actual contact with eternal life. In other words, we cannot begin to understand completely just how good, satisfying, and enjoyable our experience in eternity is going to be. But we should try through diligently studying what the Bible teaches about it. Cf. Revelation 21:1-4.
- 4) In v. 7 the incomprehensible experience that God has promised us in eternity that “**will guard your hearts and minds**” does not refer to feelings of peace and calm overwhelming our inner beings. It refers to how the limited knowledge of eternity that we Christians acquire from the Bible will captivate our inner beings and minds. It will attract and hold our interest even when we are suffering tremendous pain and sorrow. And this will happen not because we are so capable and clever, but because God is always faithful to his promise to cause our faith to endure. Before he brought the creation into existence, he predestined and chose us to become immortal and morally perfect in the eternal Kingdom of God. Consequently, he makes the very thought of eternal life grab our minds and hearts, so that we do not let go of this thought.²⁵

Accordingly, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, either this vision of eternal life has captured our hearts and minds such that it becomes our recurring preoccupation throughout our lives, or we remain preoccupied with the things of this world and this life like all unbelievers. God ensures that the former occurs for authentic Christians.

- 5) In v. 7 the concept of God’s eternal and inscrutable shalom capturing our minds “**in Christ Jesus**” refers to our becoming prisoners of Jesus in our imaginations, hearts, and inner beings. As a result, we resist and reject being seduced by Satan and the stuff of this world as that which is most important. Those who are members of the group chosen by God to be genuine followers of Jesus will not be led away from God. They will remain faithful to the truth of Jesus as Lord and Savior, waiting for his return which will initiate the eternal Kingdom of God.
- 6) In v. 6 the different parts of Paul’s exhortation “**in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God**” should be understood in this way –
 - a) “**in everything by prayer and supplication**” to God (humbly asking God) is the appropriate response in all of life’s circumstances, whether seemingly mundane or important. More about this in c) below.
 - b) “**with thanksgiving**” is Paul’s emphasis in this clause. We tend to think that he is emphasizing prayer so that this is an exhortation to pray. Instead, he is assuming that we are going to pray when we encounter difficulties in life and we want certain things from God. In other words, prayer is a *natural* response. If we have genuine faith, can we stop ourselves from praying when we are suffering and hurting? No. This is impossible, even if all we do is groan to God.

²⁵ Romans 8:28, Thus, we know for those who love God that everything works together for their good, for those who have been called according to His plan, 29 because the ones whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 And the ones whom He predestined, these He also called, and the ones whom He called, these He also justified, and the ones whom He justified, these He also glorified (my translation).

However, *deep, heartfelt gratitude and thanksgiving* do not come naturally to us. So this is Paul's exhortation and emphasis. He is saying that we should pray to God *unnaturally with genuine gratitude*. As explained above, we are most grateful for God's promise of eternal life, so that this is the content of our thanksgiving.

Certainly we can and should express our gratitude to God for other things. But Paul is referring to being thankful for God's ultimate gift, eternal life through Jesus, which puts everything else for which we are grateful in perspective.

- c) **“let your requests be known to God”** indicates that any appeal at any time for anything within the boundaries of reason and morality is perfectly permissible, *regardless of how trivial or important the issue may be in comparison to our eternal destiny in the Kingdom of God*. There is not one thing in our lives that God does not care about. If there were, he would not have brought it into existence as the author of this vast story which culminates in Jesus' ruling over us on the new, eternal earth.

In the midst of pain and suffering, even trivial things can take on monumental importance and move us to prayer. The issue is not the level of importance of the content of our prayers. It is whether our attitude towards God will be one of thanksgiving for his goodness and promise of eternal life. Or will it be different? For example, will we have an attitude of –

- i) **entitlement** – “God, you owe me for all my obedience and service to you.”

This attitude does not understand God's grace. He owes us nothing (or to say it differently, we deserve nothing) but his wrath, condemnation, punishment, and destruction. We can focus either on what we do not have (a life free from pain and suffering that we think comes through complete financial security, perfect health, conflict-free relationships, unchanging emotional stability and peace, etc.) or on what God has given us –

1. his love through Jesus' death to reconcile us to himself,²⁶
2. his love through the inward work of the Spirit of God to give us authentic belief,²⁷ and
3. his promise of faithfully protecting our belief with his divine power and of granting us life in the eternal Kingdom of God when Jesus returns.²⁸

- ii) **bitterness and resentment** – “God, you are NOT a good and loving God. Otherwise, you would not have allowed this to happen to me.”

²⁶ Romans 5:6 Indeed, while we were still helpless, at that proper moment the Messiah died for the ungodly. 7 Someone will hardly die for a righteous man. Though, perhaps for a good man someone may indeed have the courage to die. 8 However, God demonstrates His own love towards us in that while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us. 9 Therefore, much more certainly, having now been justified by means of his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath through him. 10 For, if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more certainly, having been reconciled, we shall be saved into his life (my translation).

²⁷ Romans 5:3 Not only this, but we also exult in difficult circumstances, because we know that the stress produces perseverance [of faith], 4 and perseverance [of faith] produces proven authenticity [of our faith], and proven authenticity [of our faith] produces confident waiting. 5 And confident waiting is not a disappointing thing—because God's love has been poured out in our hearts in the manner of the Holy Spirit who was given to us (my translation).

²⁸ 1 Peter 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are **protected by the power of God through faith** for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (my emphasis) (NAS95).

This attitude does not understand that God’s goodness and love transcend the circumstances of our present lives. They are found ultimately in his granting us complete forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus at his return. To demand and expect God to be good and loving towards us on our terms is to misunderstand our place under God’s authority in his story that features Jesus as our future ruler and savior.²⁹

- iii) **anger and threatening** – “God, I am so angry with you that if you do not change this situation and give me what I want, I am going to abandon you!”

This attitude has not grasped the fact that, while our anger is a natural response to pain and things not going our way, we are wrong to retain it in the light of God’s love, grace, and promise of eternal life.

- iv) **arrogant hostility and antagonism** – “God, you and I are at war here, and I am warning you that I am going to win!”

This attitude does not understand that God uses suffering in our lives to humble us and deepen our faith. We are inherently proud people who can always use more humbling. In addition, we are merely clay pots in comparison to God as our potter. Therefore, any thought that we are more powerful than God is a lie. Our submission to him and his sovereign plan for our lives is worth so much more than avoiding any suffering that he incorporates into our story.

- 7) **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice”** in v. 4 is Paul’s encouragement to his readers to choose to be as joyful as possible in all of life’s circumstances because of the fact that they and we are in the community of believers in Jesus the Messiah. It makes sense to do this because the outcome of eternal life has been established for us by God. Therefore, we are to rejoice in all that God is doing for us, his people, whom he has destined for immortality. There should be nothing which brings greater joy to our hearts and minds than God’s promise that we will live in complete and perpetual shalom in the future Kingdom of God.

However, to choose to be joyful when our fear and anxiety are compelling us to go in the opposite direction is arguably one of the most difficult decisions to make as human beings. But just as Paul encourages us in every situation to pray, which is *natural*, he likewise commands us twice (!) to rejoice, which, like thanksgiving also, is *unnatural*. We pray for whatever is on our minds in this life, and we rejoice in God’s blessing of shalom in the next life. In this way, the Bible expects us to remain firmly planted in the reality of our present existence and firmly looking forward to the reality of our eternal existence. God is the ultimate realist, and we are encouraged to be as realistic as he is.

- 8) **“Let your gentle spirit be known to all men”** in v. 5 is Paul’s exhortation for Christians to be both humble and respectful of others. Our tendency is to get in people’s faces, bully them, and make them feel bad about themselves for doing

²⁹ One of the most important Bible passages for curbing all our wayward attitudes is Romans 9:21-24 –**21** Does not the potter of the clay have the right to make from the same lump one clay pot for honor and another clay pot for dishonor? If God, while desiring to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, has endured with great patience clay pots of wrath which were made for a destiny of destruction, **23** then He has done so in order that He make known the riches of His glory on clay pots of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for a destiny of glory—**24** even us whom He called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles (my translation).

Imagining ourselves as lumps of clay on the potter’s wheel as God constantly forms and shapes us with his loving, forgiving, and gracious hands is extremely humbling and vital to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. We are entitled to nothing but what God wills. We have no right to resent our Potter, or to threaten and fight against him. Our privilege is to be made, shaped, and used by him for his own purposes.

something that makes us feel bad. (cf. 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 3:2; James 3:17; 1 Peter 2:18). But all human beings are struggling in life. And we Christians have the priceless message of God's mercy and forgiveness that everyone needs to hear, and they can experience it through our gentleness and gracious attitudes and actions. Thus, Paul commands us to be forbearing and kind to them as a reflection of God's grace and kindness towards us. More on this below.

9) **“The Lord is near”** in v. 5 refers to the close proximity of the return of Jesus when he will establish the first part of the Kingdom of God in Israel. Even though Paul must have known that there would be a long time between Jesus' appearances, we Christians are to think of his return as just around the corner. By doing so, we are eager to obey God while we enthusiastically wait for him to fulfill his promise of granting us eternal life.

10) In v. 8 Paul offers the exhortation, **“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your minds dwell on these things.”** (See below my interpretive translation for how to understand each of the above elements.) And Paul goes on in v. 9 to say, **“The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things.”** The Greek text makes it clear that the **“things”** of v. 9 are **“these things”** of v. 8. Therefore, Paul is encouraging us to think of only those ideas which are true and moral and to act only in accordance with those ideas.

For example, God is true. His gracious salvation through Jesus the Messiah, who died and rose on our behalf, is true.³⁰ God's and Jesus' commandments to love our fellow Christians as Jesus loved us, i.e., sacrificially, are true.³¹ Likewise, God's and Jesus' commandments to love unbelievers are true.³²

In the light of all that is true about God, especially His sovereign determination of every detail of the creation, we may think that there is no room for fear and anxiety in the midst of stress, but Paul is saying instead that the gospel urges us to obey God in spite of the stress and resultant fear and anxiety.

Therefore, we are called to learn from Paul and the other biblical authors all the true things that the world rejects and to choose to believe them and act on them with every fiber of our being.

By doing so, Paul says that **“the God of peace will be with you.”** This is to say that God is committed to getting his chosen ones through life in the present realm and into the shalom of the eternal Kingdom of God. He will protect our faith through

³⁰ [1 Corinthians 15:1](#) Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, [2](#) by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. [3](#) For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, [4](#) and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, [5](#) and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (NAS95).

³¹ [Ephesians 4:32](#) Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. [5:1](#) Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; [2](#) and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma (NAS95).

[Colossians 3:12](#) So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; [13](#) bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. [14](#) Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. [15](#) Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. [16](#) Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. [17](#) Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father (NAS95).

³² [Colossians 4:5](#) Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. [6](#) Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person (NAS95). Cf. 1 Peter 3:13ff.

the fearful and anxious times we encounter, while we work hard to believe in his promises and love him, his people, and even unbelievers.

My Interpretive Translation of Philippians 4:4-9

4:4 Consciously, deliberately, and constantly choose to be joyful in the fact that you are in the community of believers in Jesus who will inherit eternal life. Again I say, choose to be joyful in this manner! **5** Let your humility towards God and kind respect towards others to which you have been called be known to everyone through your speech and actions. The outcome of this will be that when Jesus returns, he will usher you into the Kingdom of God. **6** Do not set your hearts on the things of this world such that you are obsessed with obtaining them. Instead, in everything you experience and whatever you think you need, by means of naturally praying to God that includes the unnatural but vital choice to thank God for his guaranteeing that you will acquire eternal life, let the requests that you have for anything you want within the boundaries of logic and morality be made known to God, because he cares about every detail of our lives. **7** And the eternal shalom of a morally perfect and thriving existence that God is going to grant us in his kingdom, which will be so magnificent that it is impossible to grasp just how great it is going to be, will grab and capture your hearts and minds because of the fact that you are in the community of believers in the Jewish Messiah who is Jesus of Nazareth.

4:8 Finally, brethren, whatever is the truth and not a lie from Satan and the world, whatever is honorable and will not make you ashamed by engaging in immorality, whatever is right and not morally wrong, whatever is pure and morally clean, whatever is beautiful in the eyes of God to think and do, whatever is worthy of being praised by God in what one thinks and does, if there is anything that is morally excellent and if anything praiseworthy because of its association with God, let your minds dwell on these things. **9** These are the very concepts of the gospel you have learned and received and heard from me and seen in the way I have chosen to live my life. So willfully choose to think and perform them yourselves. And, if you are this kind of person, then you can know that the God who provides eternal shalom to such people is committed to causing you to persevere in your commitment to obeying him so that you do acquire his future shalom.

Practical Suggestions for Applying These Truths

- 1) Pray to God in line with Jesus' and Paul's teachings, requesting of him what we want and accepting from him what he wants.
- 2) Learn as much as we can from the Bible, so that its eternal truths will be available for us to ponder when we encounter the hardships that rock our faith in this temporary life.
- 3) Reflect on the origin of our fear and anxiety. Are they –
 - a) from little faith and little understanding of God?
In which case, #2 above applies.
 - b) from simply being human in a world where no one escapes tough times?
In which case, #2 above applies while we also accept God's story for us as we work through the tough times.
 - c) from past experiences that have shaped our responses, which are triggered in similar situations without our being able to stop them?
In which case, #2 applies while we also work hard at choosing different and more appropriate responses to these kinds of experiences.
- 4) Confide in a trusted friend with whom we can process out loud our fear and our faith.
A trusted friend is someone who will not judge us, criticize us, try to fix us, get angry with us, ignore us, reject us, laugh at us, make light of our pain, divulge our

conversation to others, or turn the conversation around and make it about their problems and issues.³³

- 5) Earnestly practice love for God and for people, and be thankful for his goodness, love, grace, mercy, faithfulness, and eternal salvation through Jesus our Messiah.

³³ James 5:16 Therefore confess [your] sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be cured [of your weak faith]. The prayer of a righteous man, as it operates, is able to do much. 17 Elijah was a man just like us, and he earnestly prayed that it not rain. And it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 And then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit (my translation).

The Bible naturally is primarily concerned with the problem of man's evil and encourages Christians to confide in one another regarding their sin in order to find mutual help in this area of their lives. However, as argued in this document, Paul indicates that God is concerned with every issue we encounter. Therefore, we can extrapolate from what James says and confide in each other as trusted friends regarding any problem that is causing us pain and suffering. One key to understanding James is that Elijah was a prophet to whom God spoke and commanded to pray first for a drought and then for rain. Therefore, James is implying that God commands Christians to pray for God to strengthen each other's faith, and God will hear these prayers and answer in the affirmative. If we need stronger faith to combat our sin, God will hear us and strengthen us. If we need stronger faith to combat our fear and anxiety, God will also hear us and strengthen us.