

“Peace in a Time of Anxiety”

Fruit of the Spirit

Downtown

June 26, 2022

Good morning, how are we? If we haven't met yet, my name is Brandon Clements and I'm one of the pastors at our Lexington church. I'm really glad to be here with you guys today.

Our summer series is covering the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5, as you just saw. Before we get started, I just wanted to say this is a different feeling for me today because this is my last sermon before going on a sabbatical for a few months. Our family of churches has a goal for pastors to do a periodic sabbatical for long-term health.

Our goal is that we would make it in ministry over the long haul, in a context where a lot of pastors don't. I find it ironic that my last sermon before my sabbatical is on peace.

There is a widely repeated research claim that feels absurd to me. It's hard for me to believe. The claim is that the average high school student today reports the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s.

When I first read that years ago, I was like “I'm sorry, come again?” Like, what do you mean? How is that possible? I picture a patient at Bull St back in the 50s, sitting in a room all by themselves...and then an average high school student at one of our high schools?

There's an article on Psychology Today where a professor from a medical school repeats this claim and then grapples with how this is possible, venturing into some sort of explanation. Some of the reason might be the decrease in social connectedness—we tend to move more, change jobs, participate in less civic organizations, and are less likely to participate in religious communities. People are far less likely to get married, more likely to delay getting married, and more likely to live alone today. So maybe the fabric of our social connection being stretched in so many ways contributes to that claim.

Next, he talks about the way our expectations have changed over the past 70 years. We expect to have a more affluent lifestyle, we are driven by unrealistic ideas of what we “need,” and have unrealistic ideas about relationships. He ends by talking about how the news cycle allows us to see the latest catastrophe and constantly reminds us that we are in danger, even though we live longer, have better healthcare, travel safer, are richer, have safer cars, etc. We may not be in greater danger—but it's what we think that counts in the way we feel.

He ends the article with something rather hopeful: *“No wonder we are nervous wrecks.”*

That's it. That's the end of it. The high schooler is still as anxious as the psychiatric patient.

But then I realized something. The article was written...in 2008! And I was like, “Oh buddy...it feels like you are in 1950 now.” That article was written before we put smartphones in every pocket. The “cable news” he talked about showing catastrophes across the world now comes through in ping notifications. It was written before social media became widespread, connecting (I mean dividing) everyone.

Before the advent of cyberbullying, before teenage girls got on Instagram and Snapchat. Before the sharp rise in suicides in that age group that you see going up right around 2010, as some researchers have claimed that giving every teenage girl a smartphone with Instagram was akin to giving every teenage boy a loaded gun.

That article was written before Covid, before lockdowns. It was written the year that Barack Obama was first elected President, running as a Democratic nominee in support of traditional marriage between a man and woman. 2008 was the year I turned 23, a year that feels like eons and eons ago. The problem he wrote about though, I would argue, has only gotten worse and more complex.

To say we live in an age of anxiety would be an understatement. Like stating the sky is blue or summers in Columbia are hot.

The ADAA (Anxiety and Depression Association of America) states anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S...affecting 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older, or 18.1% of the population every year. And that's just the "disorder" category, the issues that are clinical in nature. That doesn't even begin to address the more ordinary anxiety of life that wouldn't be characterized as a disorder but is very real nonetheless.

Things like:

- How are we going to pay that bill?
- Is my friend upset with me? Were they offended by the way I said that?
- Did I handle that situation at work correctly?
- I just got home and I still am getting emails from the office...
- Do we seriously have to go to that wedding of the person we'll probably never see again?
- Is there a wifi provider that doesn't cost part of your soul?
- Will I ever be able to afford to retire?
- Is my physical health ever going to get better?
- Are my kids going to turn out okay in this world?

The spiritual fruit of peace is something that would stick out anywhere, but most definitely it would do so here. Open up your Bibles to Philippians 4, we'll get there in just a minute.

By way of reminder, when Paul introduces the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, he juxtaposes the works of our flesh, or our sinful, self-reliant nature divorced from God, with the fruits that are produced in us as we seek to put our flesh to death and instead walk in the Spirit.

It's an agricultural metaphor, that as we keep in step with God's Spirit given to us upon conversion, as we pursue God through disciplines and practices, like the watering and weeding of a garden, slowly but surely over time fruit grows. These things that cannot come from us, because we've tried on our own apart from God, somehow supernaturally come out as the Spirit births them in us.

We who used to be self-centered now become people of love. We who used to be controlled by anger become people of gentleness. We who used to be increasingly dominated by anxiety have supernatural peace birthed in us.

And when I say peace I'm not sure what you think about. I'm around a lot of parents of young kids, and sometimes peace sounds like a date night. Or a weekend getaway. I think people have the idea of tranquility in their minds when they think about peace. Like an Instagram or Pinterest kind of peace, a scented candle kind of peace, drinking coffee by a waterfall peace. Maybe you're on a beach somewhere with a book in your hand. Or on the golf course with a beverage of your choice. Finally getting a little R & R. Finally.

It's almost as if we equate peace with just the right circumstances, or with the absence of negative, or stressful stimuli. I think of the Corona ad of the pristine ocean saying "Find your beach."

There are some pretty major problems with this though. One, at this stage in my life I'm almost never able to find "my beach." My beach is the actual beach, with no one else but my wife, with a good novel, and a drink. But having 4 kids 8 and under, that doesn't exist right now. Now when I go to the beach, I'm trying to keep my

8 year old from getting washed out to sea by a riptide because she thinks she's 18. I'm chasing Ames 100 yards because he thinks he can catch a seagull.

The second, and deeper problem with the "find your beach" picture of peace, is have you ever finally gotten those ideal circumstances and found that you grossly lacked peace? I certainly have. I have felt the gross failure of peaceful surroundings as I was assaulted by anti-peace. If you think about peace as the absence of negative stimuli, I have bad news for you: your brain and your soul go with you to whatever "your beach" is.

So while drinking a cup of coffee by a waterfall may coincide with peace, that's not what Paul is talking about in Galatians 5. This is not greeting card peace. Scented candle peace. He has in mind something far deeper and more powerful than that. He has something in mind that will stabilize and anchor you in the worst of situations, a peace that is not reliant on your circumstances changing.

So let's get into Philippians 4, another passage where Paul teaches on the concept of peace and see what he has in mind. We'll work through this passage to see what Paul says about peace, and at the end I'll bring up one big takeaway point from all of this.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Here we have a situation where the recipients of the letter evidently have reasons to be anxious. So they are not sitting by a waterfall drinking a cup of coffee with smooth jazz in the background. They are not getting a massage, or kicked back at the lake. Something is happening in their lives where Paul knows they are anxious.

And we know more about Paul's circumstance as he pens this letter than we know about the audience. Paul is in jail as he writes this letter. He doesn't know what is next for him. So the author is in jail, writing to an audience who has reasons to be anxious, maybe because their spiritual leader is imprisoned and they might be too...

And Paul says, instead of being anxious, in everything by prayer and supplication, or asking, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding—meaning it doesn't make sense for someone in that circumstance to have peace, but it is still there—will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

He is getting at a peace that has nothing to do with your circumstances. According to this, it's possible to be in circumstances that are the exact opposite of peaceful, and still have the supernatural peace of God, literally guarding your heart and your mind.

If you were to ask the guys in my LG what I hate most, I'm not sure what they would say. One thing I imagine they might mention is that I hate to be cold. And they would be right. I don't just hate being cold, I despise it. Cold weather makes me angry. There's a reason I live in South Carolina, the greatest place on Earth.

But here's what I realized years ago. My father-in-law took business trips to China, and he would bring back these North Face jackets he'd buy from street vendors. The big ones, with the soft inside layer and super thick gore-tex liner. I had never had a jacket like this, and what I realized is that I could go outside at night wearing this, and look at the stars, and not really be all that cold.

I'm a genius, I know. But in all seriousness, I began to love that feeling, of being able to stand somewhere I normally hate and have this cloak of protection over me that allowed me to stand there and watch my breath turn to ice and be very calm. In the one month we have every year that can be called winter...

There's something to that picture for me, when I think about Paul's statement that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds. It will allow us to stand in very undesirable places and be okay. That's the quality of

peace being offered here. No beach necessary. A peace that can thrive in a jail cell. In those anxious to hear from a beloved leader. It has properties that guard and protect no matter the conditions.

We will come back to these verses, but for now let's move on. Let's keep going in Philippians 4:

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

What blows my mind about these verses is the context they were written in. Paul wrote these words, again, in jail. He sat in whatever conditions he was in, and instructed the Philippian church to not focus on all of the hard and bad things, like the fact that he was in jail, but to set their minds on the true and honorable and beautiful things, seemingly cultivating a posture of gratitude instead of one of grievance. And in doing so, the God of peace will be with you. Setting your mind on those things is how you put the jacket on, so to speak.

These verses get at the law of garbage in, garbage out. If you fill your body with nothing but junk food, your stomach isn't gonna like the result. If you fill your mind with nothing but stress-inducing stimuli, negativity, and grievance...your soul isn't gonna like the result.

So I would just ask, as a check, what percentage of the things that come at you on a regular basis on your phone fit into these categories? True, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, worthy of praise? 30% 5%? What percentage of the media you intake fit into these categories? I'm not saying there's gonna be much that fully does, moreso what I'm getting at is what percentage of the stuff you intake is the direct opposite of these things?

Things that are untrue, dishonorable, unjust, impure, uncommendable, unworthy of praise. Junk, mindless drivel, or filth? News that isn't really the news but makes money off of fear and rage, so they are actively trying to make you either fearful or angry?

I'm not trying to be alarmist here, but at some point when you survey the mental health status of our culture, the medication level of our culture, and the practices and habits and agendas that are normalized here, I think some alarms might at some point be necessary.

I have a smartphone, a Netflix subscription, a Hulu subscription, not saying any of that is evil. What I am saying is that I'm not sure humans are able to function healthily plugged in as much as the average citizen here is plugged into the machine. I just don't know that it's possible for us to function like that and have the outcome be that "the peace of God will be with you," any more than a human body could survive off junk food.

I'm not sure if you remember the documentary SuperSize Me where the guy ate nothing but McDonald's for 40 days, but it's almost like there is a digital equivalent that we're collectively trying. Like between 2010 and 2050 let's all just plug ourselves into a screen that makes us angry or sad or fearful or polarized and then we'll just see what's left after that? About 12 years in, I'm not so sure it's going well.

At some point it's wise to stop and consider what we were made to be able to handle. I'm not sure how to not know of every catastrophe that is happening all over the globe, with 8 billion people. But I'm also not sure we were ever meant to know about every storm and tragedy all over the entire planet. I'm not sure we're that big. And sometimes I think knowing about it all keeps us from caring about the things right in front of us. It numbs us.

Maybe what I'm trying to get at here is that if the prescription is to fill yourself with things that are true and honorable and praiseworthy, the law of proportions would mean that in our time and place we

need a heaping dose of those things. Because we get so much of the opposite by default, operating in the world as it is.

Paul says “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things...” Live a life of discipline and pursuit of Jesus. A life of meaningful ministry in local places with real, analog people. Immerse yourself in the truth so much that you don’t grow numb to all the untruth around you. *“And the peace of God will be with you.”*

Pick back up in verse 10. Paul is gonna wrap up his train of thought.

10 I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. Again we see the possibility of peace, even in undesirable circumstances. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

It turns out we were really misled on the meaning of that last verse. Old school evangelical wall posters made me think it meant I could score the game winning touchdown. But it’s not actually about soaring above the competition, or winning the game, or reaching the top of the mountain.

It’s about being able to face the valley. To be in hunger, or need, or fill in the blank with any undesirable circumstance. And still have peace. To be standing in the cold, guarded by something more powerful than you.

Paul calls it a secret. This secret is so powerful that he can write these very words about peace from a jail cell, with shackles around his feet or wrists. Which is about as far from scoring the game-winning touchdown as you can get.

Paul was in a situation where, I imagine, I would have been tempted to look at my life and wonder how things are going to work out. Like, I didn’t expect this puzzle piece of a jail cell, how does this all fit into what you’re doing Jesus?

Speaking of puzzles, I have a story I think helps illustrate what is happening here. I’ve already told you one thing I hate, so I might as well tell you another. If you ever decide you hate me and would like to torture me, you don’t have to work very hard. All you have to do is invite me over and make me play a board game. I played Settlers of Catan once, and I couldn’t find ways to give away my wheat and barley fast enough. Like, here you take it please? What do I have to do to not do this?

Puzzles are not any better. I would rather write a 50,000 word book than do a 1,000 piece puzzle. I don’t know what I’m doing with puzzles. I don’t want to know what I’m doing either. They stress me out. When all those pieces are dumped out on a table, I’m doubtful that anything beautiful will be made from that mess.

My friend Cole feels the same way, and he has this great bit that he tells about his mom and vacation. Every year, he says, their family goes on a vacation to a big house somewhere obscure. And his mom finds the large kitchen table, and he goes, you think for a family vacation a mom would look forward to having big family meals around that table. But no, Cole’s mom doesn’t see that. Instead she sees the perfect place to dump out her 1300 piece puzzle of the blue expanse of ocean.

He continues his bit and says if you’re anything like me, an 1800 piece puzzle (the numbers keep going up for sarcastic effect) of the same blue ocean is the opposite of peace. It is incredibly anxiety-producing to try to find where this slightly different blue piece goes, but eventually, after a week’s worth of yelling and tears we complete the puzzle. The puzzle consists of 2352 identical blue pieces and when we finish there is a sort of peace, partially because the nightmare is over, but also because it is complete, each piece where it is supposed to be.

That last piece locks in, and what a feeling. Everything is well.

He says some family members never doubt at this point, and his mom certainly doesn't. She just quietly looks at him when he is talking about how impossible it is to put together a 2700 piece puzzle of the ocean, and she says "Look at the box, we know where we're going." We know we're going to complete it.

My friend's mom is a little bit like Jesus. Not in her love for puzzles, I'm not sure about that. But in her fierce confidence to look at the box and say, "*I know where we are going and I know that we are going to get there.*"

Paul is saying the secret is that Jesus has the box top, and trusting that allows me to face anything. Hunger or plenty, abundance or need. I can face it all because I know the one who has the wisdom and strength to make it all fit in the end.

For Christians, the picture on the box, if you will, is the picture we see in Revelation 21, where all is made right again. Where sin is done away with. Where pain and sorrow and tears are no more. Where anxiety is a thing of the past.

So we can stand here, in the midst of all of the puzzle pieces, and be unsure of how they will all fit. We can be overwhelmed at the challenge. And we can still say we have the box, we know where we are going, and we are doing this puzzle with the true and better Cole's mom. Jesus is putting the pieces together even while we sleep. He's capable and wise.

There is a heavenly city that will come down from the clouds, and death will be swallowed up, and worry will be vanquished, and the pain of our anxiety will be gone. Everything will click together just as it is supposed to, and we will feel foolish for ever doubting it would.

And that's why Paul says what he says back in verse 6, why he tells us to bring our anxieties to Jesus...because he's the one who is putting the proverbial puzzle together, and like we say frequently, he's going to finish what he started. He will not leave a Christian half-glorified or the Earth half-remade.

Transfer of Responsibility

And that actually brings me back to my favorite insight from this passage. I saved it for last, because it's the one I want ringing in your ears the most as we head home. Let's look back at verses 6-7 and look at a fresh angle.

6 do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Notice here, the fruit of peace is connected with an active part that proceeds it. He says in everything, every worry, every anxiety, let your requests, with thanksgiving, be made known to God. That's the action step, that's what it looks like to water and weed this fruit. Let your requests be made known to God with thanksgiving, with an appropriate spirit acknowledging everything you have is ultimately from him.

He doesn't say "Let your requests be resolved by God, and then you can have peace." He says "Let them be *known* to God, and then the peace of God will guard your heart and mind like a North Face jacket in the cold." As a result of bringing your requests to God over and over, the fruit will grow.

Speaking of this passage, Walter Hansen writes:

"The condition for experiencing God's peace is not that God grants all of our requests but that we have made known all our requests to God with thanksgiving...When we pray with that attitude, the focus is not at all upon what we are doing or will do, but on what God will do. God will do something supernatural beyond our best abilities and thoughts: the peace of God will guard us."

I love this because it illustrates something I find so beautiful and necessary to ever truly have peace. I'll give you a picture to explain: anxiety runs deep in the Clements family. I mean, all the way to the roots on both sides. One of my earliest memories is going to my first sleepover when I was around 6. I was very afraid, not of going to a sleepover, but of leaving my mom and knowing that I wouldn't be there to protect her if something happened. So I kid you not, I hid my entire knife collection around her room (I had a lot of knives okay). Then I showed her where they were. I left for the sleepover, but ended up crying at 11pm and having to come home because I was worried about her.

Some of you just went, *"Oh wow, you weren't kidding when you said it ran deep..."*

My oldest Sully is a lot like me. She's very sweet. Thoughtful. Considerate. Wonderful. I can go on if you'd like? She's also very anxious. I don't know how many nights we've had conversations about someone breaking in our house. She's on the second floor, and she's thought through every possible way someone might somehow climb up into her window, even though it's physically impossible.

Now, in doing research on anxiety, one thing I found really interesting is with treatment of OCD. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is actually an anxiety disorder. It's joked about often, but it's a real thing and can be very disruptive. There are many forms, but take the stereotype of someone who checks locks incessantly or checks multiple times to make sure the oven is off, out of fear they forgot and the house will burn down. The interesting thing is, it's often not a self-protective condition, but a disordered way to care for others. It's an overinflation of responsibility, where someone takes on an unhealthy amount of responsibility for others.

And one of the ways you can begin to treat it is through a transfer of responsibility. So if your spouse had OCD, you might say *"I'll check the doors tonight, and as a means of exposure therapy you go to bed without checking them, and if a robber were to break in, that's not on you it's on me."* It's a transfer of responsibility...does that make sense? This can help someone with an anxiety disorder realize over time that they carry an unhealthy and disordered amount of concern and begin to grow out of it.

So back to the conversations with Sully, my oldest daughter who is just like me. I don't know how many times I've stood in my daughter's room as she has rehearsed her anxieties. She's saying some version of, *"But what if the bad guy is really strong? What if he has a really tall ladder, or he has skills like Spiderman..."*

And in those moments, I have said, "Sully, what is your job?" She knows at this point that her response is "To be a kid." "What is Daddy's job?" "To protect us." "Is it your job to worry about someone breaking into our house?" "No." "Whose job is it?" "It's Daddy's job." "Will you trust me that I will do my job, and you do your job and sleep like a baby and focus on being a kid?"

A transfer of responsibility. And that's exactly what we find here in Philippians, is it not?

6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. give the responsibility for those things to God... 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I love this so much. The key to peace is a transfer of responsibility. Give your worries and fears to God, make all of your requests known to Him, transfer all of the appropriate responsibility for things you can't control to Him...and the peace of God will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

Elsewhere Peter says something very similar to what Paul says here. He says *"Cast all your anxieties (sometimes translated cares) on Him, because He cares for you."* Years ago I heard the saying that there is no such thing as an uncast care. Your cares, your anxieties, they will be cast. They will either be cast back on yourself, in an endless cycle of worry. Or they will be cast on God and left with Him. Transferred to Him.

I've heard the act of nighttime prayer framed this way before. As your head hits the pillow and your mind starts down the familiar path of worries, you say, *"Father, here my mind goes again. I am so tired, and you*

know how these things can keep me up. So I take rest in the fact that you never sleep or slumber. I entrust you with these worries, please take them from me."

The key to true peace is not found in circumstances, because circumstances can change. The key is not even in things turning out the way we hope or want. Jesus said in this life we will have trouble. Terrible things will happen later if not sooner. What we learn from these verses is the key to peace, is transferring your cares to the only one who can do something about them, and then going to sleep. Facing the next day, facing the next season, trusting him with the outcome.

Conclusion

I don't know what kind of worries or anxieties you have. But I know that at the end of the day, you only have two options. You can keep casting your cares onto yourself. Over and over and over. Some of them will never come true, and you will have spent a great deal of time and energy and hardship worrying about things that never happened. Some will eventually come true, and they will be very difficult. But as long as you go about this whole process continually casting your cares back onto yourself, you'll never have true and lasting peace. That's not how it works.

The second option is to cast your cares on him. To transfer responsibility to him, and trust him with the outcome. To trust that He knows how all the pieces fit, and that even when you can't see it he'll never leave or forsake you.

Again, I don't know what the specifics would be for you, but I imagine there is some type of correlation for all of us to the story I told about my daughter. I imagine that for most of us, there is something or many things that if thinking in that frame, we would go:

"But God, what if this happens? What if that happens? What if this doesn't happen, or that doesn't happen the way I hope it will?"

And I imagine God, in his fathering heart, may respond and ask "What is your job?"

And you or I might respond by saying some version of *"To be your child. To be faithful. To trust you."*

And then he might respond by asking, "Is it your job to ensure that _____ doesn't happen? Are you big enough to twist the puppet strings of life and ensure the outcome you want?"

And then you or I would say *"No...no it is not my job. And no I am not big enough."*

And then maybe he asks if we would be willing to trust him, to transfer all of our worry to him and let him do his job, and trust that he has a plan that he is bringing to fruition no matter how many puzzle pieces we see scattered about.

And just like with my daughter, I would argue we would be foolish not to trust him. It would be psychologically and spiritually unhealthy to not trust him. Because there is no other way to peace.

The point is not that worrisome and distressing things won't happen. They certainly will. Some may be worse than you even expect.

The point is that you and I are not big enough to prevent them, big enough to control them, or big enough to fix them. So the only way to true and lasting peace regardless of circumstance is to transfer responsibility for all the things that are too big for us to God. To appropriately and rightly say "I need you to take this, it's too big for me." And then to actually let Him take it.

Thankfully, he does not leave us alone to do this. He knows we need help, so he has given us his Spirit to teach us how. The same God who has the box top to the puzzle, who spoke the ever expanding universe into being with the word of his power, dwells inside of you if you are in Christ, and He can never be taken from you. He is the key to peace, the giver of peace, the teacher and helper we need.

So Christian, hear this: in order to have peace, what you need most is not a beach or a cold drink. It's not the right getaway or the right life hack.

What you need most is a transfer of responsibility. A deep seated trust that God knows how all the pieces fit. And a hard-won knowledge, deep in your bones, that the peace of God will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus, and it won't depart from you, no matter what may come.

Pray

Father, thank you that you are wise and capable. I don't know what worries or anxieties are present in this room, but I know they are many and weighty, and I know mine certainly are. So please help us, by your Spirit's prodding and power, to transfer responsibility to you. To trust you with all of the things that are simply too heavy for us. And to receive the supernatural peace that can only come from you.

Communion

Please stand as we prepare to sing and respond. For believers in the room, communion tables are stationed around the room. As you take communion, remember that through his broken body and shed blood Christ made us, who were his enemies, at peace with the Father. He himself is our peace, and he leads us into the fruit of peace.

