

Counselor's Toolbox

How to Pray When You Are Anxious



by ALEXANDER C. THERMENOS

Shortly after my wife, Ariel, and I started dating, I had my first panic attack. I awoke from a nightmare, hyperventilating and in a cold sweat, and I started to black out. Through my shrinking field of vision, I groped and staggered my way into the kitchen in search of juice. I've had only one other panic attack since, but that season of my life was permeated with anxiety. The theme of my nightmare was the fear that I would lose affection for Ariel and break up with her, and the entire church would hate me.

The reasons for this are varied. At this church, dating was considered “courtship,” and—unofficially—courtship was something akin to preengagement. I was new there, but I was serious-minded about dating, and this was my first romantic relationship. Multiple people were talking to her about me; she was telling me about those conversations; and one pastor in particular was what I'll call gently hawkish in his care for Ariel and our budding relationship. Moreover, I was just finishing college and coming to terms with the impacts of an alcoholic mother on my life. One of my struggles was the expectation that people would

Alexander Thermenos (MAC) is a manager of business optimization in Orlando, FL, and a counselor with Heart Song Counseling. His work has also been featured on Mere Orthodoxy.

be displeased with me and that, whatever problems I caused myself, I would have to deal with them alone. In short, I was primed for emotional upheaval, and this situation was just what my worrisome heart needed to shift gears from common anxiety to nightmares and panic attacks.

What helped me most during this time was learning that I needed to adjust the way I was praying about my anxiety. I thought that if I gained enough insight into my anxiety and asked God to change me, he would meet with me in such a way that I would be changed and experience peace as a result.¹ I learned, however, that this is not how things usually work. What I'll share in this article is the kind of praying that helped me emerge from the darkness of that season, and I trust it will help you, as well. Like mine, your anxiety has nuances and a story behind it. Sometimes, it's only the tip of the iceberg in a difficult and painful life. For help, we will look to Philippians 4:6–7 and Psalm 31. These passages will show us that God is more interested in soothing us than shushing us, and his method involves comforting us more than pressuring us to control our emotions.

We will start with a brief conceptualization of anxiety based on Philippians 4:6. From there, we will explore the “method” of prayer Paul encourages and the benefits of employing it. Then, we'll walk through Psalm 31 in which King David illustrates what Paul says and, as a result, experiences what God promises. Finally, we'll reflect on how this kind of praying helps us to feel connected to God through Christ and serves as the root system out of which the peace of God grows (Phil 4:7).

Understanding Anxiety

Most of us have a sense that we *should* pray about our anxiety, but the process of *how to pray* is not straightforward. Should we simply ask God to take the anxiety away? If we don't “feel peace about it,” does that mean we did something wrong? If God already knows all about our worries, what's left to tell him? Isn't it a bit self-indulgent to talk so much about myself in prayer? With these concerns, prayer about our anxiety can

1. I grew up in a theological tradition that taught much of Christian growth flowed from having an encounter with God, and this influenced my understanding of how my struggles with anxiety would resolve.

become yet another source of the distress we seek to relieve. But when we read our two passages, we find God not only permits but encourages us to talk to him about our anxiety, and he offers guidance on how to do so.

To begin, Paul writes in Philippians 4:6:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything
by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your
requests be made known to God.

Let's explore what Paul means by breaking this verse into two parts: What does it mean to be anxious? And when we are anxious, how should we pray?

It's easy to think of anxiety as just a feeling, but there's more to it than that. It is a way of relating to future events. Anxiety looks at the future and says, "I don't want [fill in the blank] to happen, because I find it threatening." Expanding on that a bit, we could say anxiety involves three things: 1) I *believe* something threatening might happen to me or to someone/something I care about, 2) I *desire* to avoid or prevent it from happening but am not sure I can do so, and 3) I experience that belief and desire together as the feeling of anxiety. My anxious feelings, then, involve a combination of what I *believe* might happen and my *desire* to do something about it.²

We see this dynamic of beliefs and desires in my opening example. Here are some of the *beliefs* that fueled my anxiety:

- Displeasing the people in my church would have terrible consequences for me, and I would have to face those consequences alone.
- I shouldn't trust my feelings for my girlfriend. They are inconsistent, and that must mean I am doing something wrong in the relationship.
- Breaking up with Ariel would be the result of a failure on my part to recognize sooner that we should not be dating.

My *desires* corresponded to my beliefs:

- I did not want to be isolated and scrutinized or have this church turn its collective eye toward me in disapproval.

2. I am drawing the idea that fear and anxiety involve desire from David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (P&R Publishing, 2003), 155.

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