

God with us: Keeping focused

A Scripture study from *Caring*, part two of four.

We live in an age when we are bombarded with noise and information and constant, instantaneous communication. We have things pulling at us from every direction, demanding our time and our attention, pressing us with a sense of urgency.

My husband and I were provided a mandatory period to be quiet. We were placed under a quarantine order because of potential exposure to COVID-19. The first isolation period was on a ship—seven days...just the two of us. Then we were transferred to a military base—five more days. Then our state brought us home to quarantine at home—14 days. If you were counting, that's 26 days! We were home, still, quiet, no unexpected guests, even if anyone had come, they would have had to stay on the front porch, talking to us through a door.



If I am honest, I will tell you that there were a few days in those 26 when I didn't do a single thing that was truly productive...occupied with games on my phone, binge-watching TV, time on Facebook. That was the exception, but my point is that if we are not careful, we can easily take on a façade of productivity and focus while really being lazy and distracted.

So, in these days of distraction and pandemic, when we are being asked to stay home to help stop the spread of COVID-19, how do we maintain a right focus?

I propose that the Apostle Paul gave us some good tools in Philippians 4:4-9.

Behind the scenes

There is a temptation to worry and become anxious when life becomes uncertain.

In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount he spoke about worry, asking his listeners to consider how God cares for creation and how pointless worry is (Matthew 6:25-34). There are two verses to which I draw your attention:

"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27 NIV).

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"

(Matthew 6:34 NIV).

Stop and consider those thoughts for a moment.

Are there things in this time that are consuming you with worry? Yes, there are things that are concerning, there is a good deal of uncertainty...but are you allowing it to consume you? Name those worries. Write them down.

And now, Paul's remedy.

Read what Scripture says in Philippians 4:4-7.

Step one: Rejoice! It's important enough that Paul says it again for emphasis. What difference does that make? What does it do for your heart and soul? (If you need a little bit of help, play your favorite praise and worship music, crank it up and let it wash over you.) Worry weighs us down; the simple act of choosing to rejoice adjusts our perspective and makes things lighter.

Step two: Pray! Life is going to come at us, things will not always go as planned, we will face challenges and difficulties. *However*, that reality does not have to consume us (as a side note take a look at 2 Corinthians 4:7-9).

In verse 6, Paul uses some fairly emphatic language. What are we to be anxious about?

What are we to present to God with prayer and petition? And how are we to present those prayers and petitions?

Why is it important for us to present our requests to God with thanksgiving?

As I have considered these words over time, I have reached one important conclusion about the importance of thanksgiving as we talk to God about things that are weighing us down. In the act of thanksgiving, *we remember*. We remember how and when God has taken care of us and provided for us in the past. It becomes a statement of faith and testimony—what God has done before, God will do again. When we remember God's faithfulness, those things that cause us concern come down to size and are brought into the right perspective, from mountain down to mole hill.

When we surrender these worries and concerns and anxieties, God's Word promises that anxiety will be replaced with peace; see Philippians 4:7. Be good to yourself...you may have to give it back to God several times...when you do, give yourself a moment to allow God's peace to wash over you.

There is nothing that is beyond God's ability to handle in our lives. There is nothing in our lives that is too small for God's attention.

Beyond the surface

On the heels of right praying, comes the need for us to think rightly.

Back to the noise of this age and the abundance of information. It distracts us. Our minds and ears are filled. Paul encourages us to be discerning and to focus our attention on things that matter and

will build us up.

What are the eight things Paul encourages us to think on? List them out:

1. Whatever is
2. Whatever is
3. Whatever is
4. Whatever is
5. Whatever is
6. Whatever is
7. If anything is
8. Or

Ideally, the things that we spend our time and energy on will fit through this filter. It's amazing what happens when we filter out the things in our life that have become toxic, sucking the joy out of us. There may be things that are taking up your time and energy that are not necessarily bad, but that do not necessarily feed your spirit or help you remain focused on the right things.

If there is something that the Holy Spirit is already showing you that needs to go, jot it down here, memorialize it so that you don't forget it.

When we fill our minds with things that are positive and pleasing to God, again, those things that have caused us fear or anxiety are brought into perspective.

Between the lines

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9).

It took me a while to come to grips with Paul's words here; it used to seem to me that perhaps Paul was a bit prideful. However, my friend David summed it up this way: "Follow me, as I follow Jesus." Now, that works!

It's not enough for us to know what steps to take to keep focused, we've got to put them into practice. And, as Paul suggests, we need others to help us on the way and to set a good example. It's a truth inherent to growing in faith (and one that is fundamental in 12 Step recovery groups). Partner with someone who can help you along the way, someone who will call you out when your focus drifts and when you become overwhelmed by the uncertainties of this life.

Know that I am praying for anyone who goes through this study, that God's presence will be real, and that in focusing on God and God's presence with you, that you will know God's peace in tumultuous times.

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