

“Letters to Phil—Conquering Worry and Fear”

Today we’re in the second episode of this series called “Letters to Phil.” Phil is not a guy, Phil is actually a city. We’re studying the book of the Bible called *Philippians*, which is actually a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in the city of Philippi. Thus, letters to Phil!

Now, because we’re in anxious times, fearful times, we’re reading this with an eye to find out how we can move from anxiety to joy. This letter to the Philippians is only four short chapters, but during those 4 chapters Paul talks about *joy* 14 times—his own joy or the joy of the Christians in the city of Philippi who were being persecuted for their faith. In fact, he *commands* them to rejoice, over and over and over. In the process, he teaches about how to find deep, lasting joy in life, no matter what your circumstances are. And the irony of this is that Paul’s writing from a dingy Roman prison cell waiting to be executed. *He knows something we can learn that can change or lives.* Today we’re going to focus on worry and fear.

I’ve had several conversations in the last 10 days where people voiced real fears around the election. People on all points of the political spectrum. All of them saying in one way or another, “If this person is elected it’s the end of the world. If that person is elected it’s the end of the world!” People are afraid. So, this is the perfect time to learn what Paul has to say about worry and fear, and what Jesus said about this too.

But I want to set the stage this way. When I was a kid we had a collection of Golden Books. My parents read them to me over and over, and even before I could read I would sit and look at the pictures. One of the books I remember thinking was hilarious was called, “Henny Penny”. “Henny Penny” is an old, old story. There are forms of it that go back 2,500 years in China and Europe. It’s been told and retold lots of different ways. Henny Penny is a chicken who’s out scratching in the barnyard one day when an acorn falls out of a tree and hits her on the head. She starts shouting, “**The sky is falling! The sky is falling!**” She’s absolutely convinced that the sky is falling, and she thinks she needs to tell the king that the sky is falling too.

On the way, she runs into her friend, Cocky Locky. She says to Cocky Locky, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” So Cocky Locky starts shouting with her, “Oh no! The sky is falling! We must go tell the king!” Then they run into Ducky Lucky and they tell Ducky Lucky, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” So Ducky Lucky starts shouting with them, “The sky is falling!” And off they go to tell the king. Then they meet Goosey Lucy and the same thing happens. Pretty soon there’s mass hysteria as they’re on their way to tell the king that the sky is falling. It never occurred to me to wonder, “What were they going to do about it, if the sky is falling?!”

The story of Henny Penny is a parable about being afraid of things you don’t fully understand, the hysteria those things can create and the consequences of that hysteria. It’s a story that’s been told for 2,500 years in different ways and in different cultures, *because we have this tendency to fall prey to our fears.*

Let’s talk about our fears. There’s an ongoing research project at Chapman University on fear. Every year they do in-depth surveys to track the fears of Americans. It’s a fascinating website to pour over. One thing that interested me is that our fears change over time. Of the top 10 fears Americans had in 2019, 5 of those top 10 fears had to do with air pollution, water pollution, and damage to the environment. Five out of 10! And get this, none of those 5 fears made the top ten list 4 years ago.

Two of the top 10 fears are very personal, our fear of people we love getting sick or dying (and this was before the pandemic). Our number 10 fear is not having enough money for the future—four years ago that was number 3. Before I tell you our number one fear, give me a number between 11 and 88 and I’ll tell you what that fear is...

By the way number 84 is the fear of zombies!

But our number one fear for 2019 was...government corruption. It’s been our number one fear for years, and it’s a *growing* fear. In 2016, 61% of people named this their top fear. In 2019, 77% named government corruption as their top fear. According to this information from 2019 (keep in mind this is pre-pandemic) we Americans are becoming more and more afraid in general, and our fears about specific things are increasing.

Why is this happening? **Why are we getting more worried and more afraid?** In part, the answer is that fear is the most powerful motivator for human beings. It’s our survival instinct and it keeps us alive! That’s a good thing in that regard. But because fear is so hardwired into us and such a big part of our survival instinct, it can also be used to manipulate us. Those who know this are getting better at it. Fear is used to sell us tires, deodorant, life insurance, home security systems. Fear has been used by pastors and churches to

manipulate people into faith or behaving a certain way. Fear is used as a tool of greed to make us buy things we don't need. Fear is used by politicians to get our support, money and to secure our votes.

Just like every other election cycle, as soon as this election cycle began we started to be bombarded with messages aimed at making us afraid, because fear is a powerful motivator. Unfortunately, that's just how it works, from both parties. Fear is used as a tool.

One researcher on fear, Dr. Shana Gadarian, writes that when we're afraid, no matter what the fear is, we begin to look for news sources that talk more about the thing we're afraid of. This is true even on something like the weather. Like, if you have two weather people in Joplin and one says "We're going to have a tornado on Wednesday!" But the other one says, "There's only a slight chance of bad weather." You're much more likely to tune into the one that says a tornado is coming because that's the most catastrophic news announcement. *We're drawn back to the very thing that scares us and it reinforces our fears over and over and over again.* It's similar to an addict who keeps going back to the very thing he knows is killing him. Roosevelt was absolutely right when he said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Fear is killer.

And what's so very different in this time, than any other time in human history, is that we are in a constant, never-ending, flow of information from dozens of directions all at once, and most of that information is leveraged with a message of fear because it brings us back for more. The recent documentary "The Social Dilemma" exposes how social media preys on this very tendency in us—feeding us more things that make us afraid. It keeps us clicking tabs for more information and watching more videos. (Oh, and this process sells us tons of stuff and relieves us of tons of money!) Never in the history of humanity have we had this toxic mix of our natural fears being fed highly-concentrated, fear-based information in the palms of our hands in every waking hour. Is it any wonder that our fears are growing?! *Is it any wonder that we're convinced that the sky is falling?!*

But listen to me! This is not how the God who created us wants us to live. It's simply not. So how do we live differently? **How do we break the fear cycle, the cycle of worry?**

This takes us to our study of Philippians, our letter to Phil. Paul writes this: **"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."** (Philippians 4:6-7).

Addressing worry and fear begins with prayer. At least according to Paul, who had real things to worry about and fear—he'd been tortured, ship wrecked, persecuted, abandoned, nearly stoned to death, had a contract on his life, and left for dead. As he writes this letter he's awaiting execution! He's like, "I know what fear is *and I know how to deal with it.* Listen to me, begin with prayer."

So how are you doing with this important part of faith? Are you talking to God about the things that scare you and listening for His direction? OR, are you just consuming more fear-oriented information and stewing over it? Listen, *stewing is not a good replacement for prayer! Consuming is not a good replacement for prayer!*

And notice that Paul says an important part of our prayers should be *thanking* God. This is powerful stuff right here, so don't miss this! One thing that deflates worry and fear, one thing that disarms worry and fear effectively, is gratitude. **You can't be worried and grateful at the same time.** You can't be afraid and grateful at the same time. Paul is saying that in the face of worry and fear, channel your prayers and thoughts toward gratitude. Around here we talk about praying 5 times a day, as soon as your eyes open in the morning, before each meal, and right before you fall asleep. Simple prayers of gratitude. Now, that's just the basics of a prayer life, but you can begin there.

Paul says that prayer, with a heavy emphasis on gratitude, will lead you right into an experience of what? God's peace! **"Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand."** (Philippians 4:7). In other words, it's *peace* that is mind-blowing! It's *peace* that exceeds anything we can understand! God's ready to give us this, but we have to stop stewing, stop consuming, and start praying in gratitude!

But Paul doesn't stop there. If we want to defeat worry and fear, if we want to experience peace, he tells us this: **"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 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 4:8-9).

Here's what I take from that, it's real important to **think about what you think about**. If you expose yourself to things that produce fear, or worry you will get caught up in that cycle *and you will not know peace*. We have to think about what we're thinking about. If instead of thinking about things that are excellent and praiseworthy, and noble and lovely, you think about things that create and nurture hate and division *you will not know the peace and presence of God!* You won't. Think about what you think about. Say it with me...

One of the most practical ways to break the fear cycle is to turn off the sources of worry and fear! Budget and restrict how much time you spend consuming information. For most of us, 15 minutes a day is way more than enough to be informed. Instead, get a hobby! Get some exercise! Get outside! Listen to music. Hang out with friends. Cook or bake something. Just don't feed your mind more fear and worry! That's what Paul tells us.

And, here's what Jesus said about worry and its alternative, **“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear...Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?...But seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:25-33).**

So, for followers of Jesus, the issue of worry and fear is a faith issue. Do you trust your heavenly Father or do you not? Right before Jesus was crucified, he knew his disciples were worried and afraid because he'd told them what was about to happen. As soon as he tells them he's going to be betrayed, and tortured, and killed, and come back from the dead, they freak out! So he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. And do not be afraid." And then he was crucified and it was like, game over! No peace. All uncertainty. They all ran away. They were so worried about their own lives, and they hid.

Then Jesus came back from the dead. Suddenly, in a moment, the whole idea of not worrying about tomorrow made perfect sense! Because when someone can predict their own death and resurrection and pull it off, and they've told you that you don't need to worry about tomorrow, *you believe him!* The disciples and early followers of Jesus, having met with, touched, and ate with their resurrected savior, suddenly, the whole idea of trusting God with their future made perfect sense. And they were able to embrace the idea of "do not worry, do not be afraid." Which means we're really just left with two options: will you choose to trust or will you choose to worry and fear? Trust leads to peace. Worry and fear leads to death, division, and destruction.

Here's a way to apply this: **When worried about tomorrow, look for a way to participate in what God is doing today.** This is a big deal! Tomorrow, or today, when you begin to worry about something specifically, I want you to STOP, and in your heart or mind, pray for somebody else who's going through a difficult time. Jesus taught that worry should trigger us and get us thinking outside our little lives and our concerns.

When you're overwhelmed with worry, you STOP and write somebody a note. When you're overwhelmed with worry, you give someone a call. When you're overwhelmed with worry, you find a way to serve someone else. We begin to allow our concerns about our life to trigger concern for other people. This was Jesus' way to overcome worry and fear.

So at the very end, when Jesus' disciples were worried and afraid Jesus said, **“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27).**

Why is all this important? It takes me back to the story of Henny Penny. Henny Penny, and Ducky Lucky, and Cocky Locky and Goosey Lucy, are all afraid. Their fear has put them into a panic. They're on their way to tell the king that the sky is falling. On the way they run into Foxy Woxy. Foxy Woxy hears them shouting that the sky is falling, he looks around and sees that the sky is not falling. But he says, "I'll go with you to tell the king that the sky is falling!" Foxy Woxy says, "Hey, I know a short cut to the king, follow me!" And he leads Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Lucy, and Cocky Locky into a tunnel that happens to be the entrance to his den, and he kills them all and eats them. You've got to love the children's classics!

If we let fear overwhelm us, some thing, or someone will use it to lure us away and destroy us. We'll be lured into destroying one another. Make no mistake, fear is a killer. That's why our scriptures tell us over 400 times, "Do not be afraid." They tell us to be shrewd, careful, and wise. They tell us to be compassionate, gentle, kind, and self-sacrificing. Our scriptures tell us to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. *But do not be afraid!* Why? Maybe because our God knows that fear-driven decisions will divide and destroy us. Or maybe it's because God knows that those who lead by making us afraid, deceive us.

There's a lot of fear going on about Tuesday, the days that follow. And there are people stoking fear in all kinds of ways. Here's what I'd tell you: My peace does not come from who's in the president's chair, Republican, Democrat or whatever. My refuge and strength is not in who's in congress. Those are important positions. But I'm with the Psalmist saying, **"God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!...God's voice thunders, and the earth melts! The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. God says, 'Be still, and know that I am God!' (Psalm 46:1-7).**

God is our refuge and strength. Listen carefully, the sky is NOT falling! Do not give in to fear; don't give in to anybody who is a fear dealer. Do not be afraid. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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