

Opening dating story illustrates the struggles of anxiety

Good morning church family and guests! I'm so thankful for this time together to be encouraged by God's Word. And thank you to Rick Clayworth and everyone else who's been working hard to make this livestream possible.

I'll start with a story I recently told our Youth Ministry. So back in college, a girl named Libby catches my eye. Libby loves the Lord, is cute, and laughs at my jokes, so an amazing sense of humor. And I even have an "in" with Libby because her best friend is dating my roommate and she wants me to ask Libby out.

So one night, a group of friends is over, including my roommate's girlfriend, and Libby stops by. And she's doing Libby things like being encouraging and looking cute and laughing at my jokes and even bringing homemade cookies. And at the end of this magical evening, Libby leaves, forgetting her cookie plate.

And my roommate's girlfriend sees an opportunity, saying, "Hey Jeff, you should call Libby and get that plate back to her." And I decide I will be giving Libby a call, not about a plate, but to ask her out.

But I keep that information close to the vest. I say nothing to Libby's best friend or even my roommate about asking Libby out, because past experience taught me that to avoid public shame, don't tell people you're about to ask a girl out. So I just take the cookie plate and say I'll get it back to Libby.

So later that week, after mustering up courage, I take a deep breath and give Libby a call. After a little small talk I say, "Hey, I'd love to take you out on a date this weekend. Would you like to grab some dinner and coffee?"

There's a pause for a couple of seconds, which feel like an eternity to me, and then Libby breaks the silence with, "Are you serious?"

Now I'm already anxious, but my anxiety is now at another level after that pregnant pause followed by "are you serious?" And to make things worse, this is over the phone, so I can't see Libby's body language as I try to figure out if this is a legitimate question, a stalling tactic before saying "no", or a sarcastic put down.

But I respond, “Yes, I’m serious, I’d really like to take you on a date.” I brace for Libby’s answer, hearing again, “Are you serious?” Now there’s even more anxiety, but I feel like I’m at the point of no return, that this conversation becomes even weirder if I say, “No, I was just joking.”

So I say again, “Yes, I’m serious, I’d really like to take you on a date this weekend.” In response there’s a third, “Are you serious?” My anxiety now feels overwhelming as I’m thinking: “Is this girl playing some cruel game? Why does she keep asking me if I’m serious?” I say again, “Yes, I’m serious, I’d really like to take you on a date this weekend.” Finally, Libby answers, saying, “yeah, I’d like that” so we make plans and awkwardly get off the phone.

Now I didn’t know this at the time, but my roommate’s girlfriend had told Libby that I’d be calling her only about getting back her cookie plate. So Libby had it stuck in her mind that I was only calling about the plate, which is why she kept asking, “are you serious?”

But sadly, I didn’t know that until later. So as our date approaches, I anxiously analyze our awkward phone call so thoroughly that I think even a middle school girl would say, “You know Jeff, I think you’re overanalyzing things here.”

And as you can imagine, my anxiety negatively affected the vibe of our date. And Libby also knew how awkward our phone call had been, and long story short, our once promising romance quickly dissolved, thanks to anxiety.

Relevance: we all face anxiety, and how we respond makes a big difference

Looking back now, I can laugh at that awkward, anxiety filled situation. But at the time there was nothing funny about my anxiety. There was nothing funny about the motor of worrisome thoughts and feelings racing inside of me. There was nothing funny about how my anxiety kept me from relating well with Libby as I couldn’t stop focusing on my anxious self.

And there’s certainly nothing funny about the anxiety we face today. Anxiety over our health, over our income and the stock market, over shortages of certain goods, over social isolation, and even over things like what we’re going to do with the kids home all day.

And even before the Coronavirus, recent research from the American Institute of Cognitive Therapy found that “teens today have the same level of anxiety as a psychiatric patient did in the 1950s.” And also before the Coronavirus, anxiety was already the most common mental health disorder among U.S. adults. And not only does all this anxiety harm us

individually, but anxiety is also like a virus in the sense that the more the people around us are anxious, the more likely we are to become anxious too.¹

Speaking of anxiety's harm, Christian author and concentration camp survivor Corrie Ten Boom once said, "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength."²

Orienting to God's Word (and caveat that Phil 4 not all the Bible teaches on anxiety)

And so for our sake, and for our neighbors, it's important to seek God's Word about our anxiety. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of Philippians. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers you see are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

As we're turning to Philippians chapter 4, know that this passage focuses on spiritual support for our anxiety. But also know that other Bible passages show that sometimes we need to take additional supportive steps. For example, when the Old Testament prophet Elijah was anxious and depressed, God sent him an angel. And the angel didn't say "Hey Elijah, you're anxious because you're not praying enough." Rather, the angel provided Elijah food, and then Elijah rested, and then the angel provided more food. So sometimes when we're anxious, part of the solution is rest and healthy eating, or exercise, or taking a break from the news, or taking time to grieve big and small losses during this season, or going to a Christian counselor or to a psychiatrist. I want us to take advantage of all the kinds of good support that we need.

Defining anxiety in Philippians 4

But this morning, in Philippians chapter 4, we're focusing on the spiritual support available in anxious times. Philippians chapter 4, starting in the middle of verse 5. It says:

The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

¹ Research reported by Dr. Tim Elmore on <https://careynieuwhof.com/episode187/> and at "Stressed Out" (accessed 12/26/18) <http://bms.buckeyeschools.info/documents/Newsletter%20and%20forms/Stressed-Out-Ebook.pdf>

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/35574-worry-does-not-empty-tomorrow-of-its-sorrow-it-empties> (accessed 3/19/20).

I looked up *anxious* in the Greek that Philippians was originally written in, and it defined *anxious* here in verse 6 as having an unhealthy concern.³ So to be clear, it's normal to have a stress response in stressful times and to have a healthy care and concern for yourself and for others. The problem is when our anxiety becomes an unhealthy concern.

So in our current times, it's right to have an appropriate level of concern and preparation as we listen to the recommendations of health officials. But there's a point at which you're so anxious about the Coronavirus that it's moved from a healthy concern to an unhealthy concern. In an article on the Coronavirus, Christian author Andy Crouch defines this kind of anxiety that is an unhealthy concern as "imaging the future without Jesus in it."⁴

Spiritual support for anxiety

Jesus' faithfulness in the past – But before we think about Jesus in the future, let's think about Jesus in the past. As I thought about these verses in Philippians 4, and how they tell us not to be anxious, but instead to pray with thanksgiving, leading to God's peace, I first thought of Jesus in a garden. There Jesus experienced deep anxiety about taking God's wrath for all our sins the next day on a cross. Jesus was so anguished that night that His sweat was like drops of blood.

And there in that garden, Jesus sought His Heavenly Father in prayer, and the Father empowered Jesus with peace that transcends understanding. So the next day as Jesus is brutally beaten, mocked by people that He created, and even nailed to a cross, Jesus is able to pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." That's peace!

But then towards the end of His time on the cross, Jesus suddenly cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What happened there to Jesus' peace?

In that moment, Jesus absorbed God's righteous wrath for all of humanity's sins. Jesus took the judgment that I deserve, and that you deserve for your rebellion against God, for every way you've ever hurt people, for every good thing you've failed to do, for every wicked thought you've ever had, for every evil thing you've yet to do. Jesus was forsaken for you.

So Jesus is not only our model of how to apply Philippians 4 in prayer, His life and death also remind us of Jesus' great faithfulness to us in the past. We see Jesus' faithfulness on the cross, as He lost His peace with the Father so that you and I can enjoy God's peace forever. And

³ "undue concern" *BDAG*, 632.

⁴ <https://journal.praxislabs.org/love-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-26aaeb0396e3> (Accessed 3/18/20).

so when we're anxious today, we receive spiritual support as we remember Jesus' faithfulness in the past. His faithfulness on the cross for us, His faithfulness when we first met Him, His faithfulness forgiving our past sins and working in the past seasons of our lives.

Jesus' faithfulness in the present – And Jesus wasn't just faithful in our past, He's still faithful today. Look again starting in the middle of verse 5. It says:

The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

These verses remind us that Lord Jesus is near today. We can know Him today as we bring today's anxiety to Him. And verse 6 shows us how we can know God and receive support: it's in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, presenting our requests to God.

To illustrate this, imagine someone is anxious, let's say, hypothetically speaking, about a coming first date after an incredibly awkward conversation. Imagine if "that person" has not prayed in a few weeks, and if I only feel at peace when a girl likes me. In that case, my anxious prayers about the awkward phone call and coming date could be just worrying in God's direction about how God has got to give me favor with this girl to have peace in my heart. You can imagine how that kind of "knowing" God might not lead to much peace.

But if that's honestly where you're at in this current season, it's still good to share your anxiety with God like this. For as we honestly come to God, we give room to experience His unending grace in all our emotions and we give room for Him to continue His work of transforming us. If you don't believe that God wants your honest feelings in prayer right now, read the end of Psalm 137 later today.

But the more we know God today in the way that verse 6 describes, that's even better. Imagine a second guy who's also really anxious about that first date after that awkward phone call. Imagine this guy brings his anxiety to God more like verse 6 describes. Not perfectly of course, but in the last few weeks, this guy has been seeking God in prayer every day, as verse 6 says, prayer "in every situation."

And this guy has sought God daily "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving". *Petition* here in verse 6 talks about asking God to meet needs, including things you're anxious about, like a coming first date and a girl's approval, or the impacts of the Coronavirus.

This knowing of God characterized not only by petitions, but by “prayers and petitions, with thanksgiving” will be richer. It will include things like knowing God’s love, and inviting Him to use us to bless people, and asking for His forgiveness when we struggle to trust Him, and “with thanksgiving” thanking Him for the many blessings in our lives, and even thanking Him as we make our prayer request, before we see how He answers it.

And you can imagine how knowing God in this verse 6 way could lead to less anxiety and more peace. And that’s why verse 6 is here. God didn’t put verse 6 in the Bible to shame us about our unhealthy anxiety. God doesn’t want us to feel even more anxiety over our anxiety.

No, in verse 6 God invites all of us anxious strugglers to know Him in a way that brings us life. And so if you don’t have a daily practice of engaging with God’s Word and praying in this kind of way, now is the time to get that daily spiritual support started. For the more we engage with God in the way verse 6 talks about, the more we position ourselves to experience the peace that verse 7 describes. Verse 7 says:

⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The term for *guard* here in verse 7 is a military term for soldiers protecting a city from attack. The city where Paul wrote this letter of Philippians was guarded by Roman troops, so they’d get this idea. Of God, like a soldier, guarding our thoughts and feelings, helping protect us from lurking anxiety.

Verse 7 also says that this peace of God transcends all understanding. That means it’s more than just an intellectual knowledge that the God of peace is near. Which is important, because when you’re anxious, you want to experience that the God of peace is with you.

And thankfully, He is. As the end of verse 5 says, the Lord Jesus is near. Jesus is faithful in our present. In whatever difficulty you encounter, our city encounters, our world encounters today and in the coming days, Jesus will be present with you, bringing the gifts of relationship and peace.

Jesus’ faithfulness in the future – And Lord Jesus is not only near in the sense that He is present today, but also in the sense that His return is near. When we’re anxious, honestly sometimes God feels distant as our circumstances get worse. In those moments, it helps to remember verse 5, that the Lord is near in the sense that Jesus is coming back for His people.

Years ago, I tutored university students in accounting. Many of my students were struggling in their accounting class and some also had test anxiety.

Now imagine if I was really from the future, and I could tell my anxious tutoring student, “I’m from the future, and sadly, you will fail this class, and you’ll get kicked out of the business school. So you’re in for a rough break, you and your parents will be upset and disappointed.

But you know what, next semester you’re switching to art school, which is what you really want to do anyway, and you’re going to love it, and you’re going to meet your best friends there, and you’re going to fall in love with your future spouse in art school, and you’ll have a great marriage with awesome kids and grandkids, and you’ll create works of art together that will impact many and make lots of money, and your parents will be really proud.”

Now if I really was from the future and could promise that awesome future to that struggling accounting student, facing today’s test anxiety would look different. For with anxiety we’re often worrying about something we can’t really control that could turn out badly, like the possible impacts of the Coronavirus in the coming days. But if you’re guaranteed that in the end, ultimately everything will come out awesome, it helps us to better face today’s troubles and anxiety.

If you know Jesus, you’ve aligned yourself with His perfect future, and so anxiety, suffering, and death will not have the last word. They may be incredibly painful, but in the end they will not prevail, Jesus will: making all things new, righting all wrongs, healing every broken thing in our hearts. On that glorious day, we will never, ever have to worry about worry again, and that can strengthen our anxious hearts today.

Conclusion:

As Christian author Andy Crouch said, the kind of anxiety that becomes an unhealthy concern is the kind that is “imaging the future without Jesus in it.”⁵ So this morning we’ve remembered Jesus’ faithfulness in our past, present, and future.

Hardships are here because of the Coronavirus, and more hardships may come in the coming days. Because of the virus, or other future difficulties, someday we may reach a point where we run dangerously low on solutions for things like our health, finances, and basic needs.

⁵ <https://journal.praxislabs.org/love-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-26aaeb0396e3> (Accessed 3/18/20).

But have good circumstances and human solutions ever been the true source of the church's peace? Absolutely not. Our peace is rooted in Jesus' past, present, and future faithfulness.

Our peace comes from Jesus' past faithfulness, when Jesus, in love, lost His peace on the cross so that we can know God's peace forever. And our peace comes from His empty tomb, that He has already won for us the victory over sin, death, and the devil. Our peace comes from His faithful presence in our pasts, as He forgave our many failures, saw us through previous hard times, and matured us.

And our peace comes from His faithful presence in our lives today, that He is near, with us and helping us, a gracious high priest who knows what it is like to feel incredibly anxious. And as we know Jesus today with prayers and petitions with thanksgiving, it leads to less anxiety and more of His peace that transcends understanding.

And our peace comes from Jesus' future faithfulness, that Jesus promises to be with us in all of our tomorrows. And one day He will make all things new, as we never have to worry about worry again. The Russian author Dostoevsky anticipated that glorious day by saying:

"I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage,... that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened."⁶ Amen.

And so moving from anxiety towards peace not because of improving circumstances, but because of the past, present, and future faithfulness of our Savior. The same Savior who died and rose for us in the past, and who saved us in our past, and who is with us today and in all of our tomorrows, culminating in that glorious day when He makes all things new.

So that's our first step today, to remember and experience in prayer the past, present, and future faithfulness of our Savior. Having taken that first step, not only today, but every day in the coming weeks, then we can take the next steps to help people as a church family. For as we

⁶ Quote from a translation of Dostoevsky's book *The Brothers Karamazov*. Accessed online on 5/8/15 from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/98267-i-believe-like-a-child-that-suffering-will-be-healed>

seek Jesus, who knows how He might delight to help us to take next steps, as His hands and feet, to bring help and peace in these anxious days.

Next steps to be peaceful, non-anxious presences as we engage with anxious neighbors. Next steps to live with the mindset of a sharer rather than that of a hoarder. Next steps to help our immunocompromised neighbor by picking up their groceries. Next steps through our church food pantry, which gave 60 bags of groceries this week to people facing food insecurity. Next steps to bring our friends to Jesus so that they may know the peace of God. Next steps to take advantage of the additional time at home together to build faith in the next generation. Next steps to lovingly encourage each other with Jesus' words: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

In all of it showing each other, our children, and the watching world what Jesus' church is all about, because of His past, present, and future faithfulness at work in us.

So let's ask for God's help in this, and then sing one last song of praise...