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## HOW TO NOT TURN TO THE DARK SIDE Philippians 4:6-7

A number of years ago Laurie and I were going on vacation and our trip began with a flight scheduled to leave at 6:15 AM. We would fly to LA where we would get a connecting flight to our destination. Since we had to be at the airport at 5 AM we had to wake up in the middle of the night. I set my alarm to allow us to get as much sleep as possible. But that morning as we were getting ready I reviewed our schedule for the morning and the thought took hold that I had miscalculated. As I thought about how long it would take us to get to the airport, park our car, take a shuttle to the terminal, check in and survive TSA I began fearing we were going to be late. If we missed that flight we would miss our connecting flight. If that happened misery was going to ensue. I voiced my concerns to Laurie and insisted that we needed to hustle and get going. Driving to the airport I sinned. I broke the law, driving just under Mach 1. I was careful to stay under Mach speed because if I broke the sound barrier the resulting sonic boom would be sure to attract the attention of the CHP. Most of the way I fretted, increasingly concerned that we were going to miss our flight. Laurie just shook her head. She said, "Rick, we're going to be fine," but I have known since before we were married that she is an unrepentant optimist. She often just doesn't see how dire the situation actually is. To my surprise, everything went smoothly and we got to our gate with plenty of time to spare. Laurie showed remarkable grace in not saying, "See, Rick, I told you." But this is where the irony comes in. As we waited for our flight we were informed that there was going to be a delay. I knew our window to catch the flight in LA did not allow us a ton of wiggle room. I waited for a few minutes, then went to the gate to talk to the airline agents. I informed them of our connection schedule and they said, "You're not going to get there in time." They put us on a shuttle bus and drove us to LA where we missed our flight. Thus began the adventure that turned what should have been a travel time of total 7 or 8 hours into a 20 hour ordeal. My worrying about getting to the airport on time was pointless. We were never going to make our connecting flight no matter what I did. These two experiences remind me that worry, being anxious, is a futile and damaging exercise. It also turns out to be an unspiritual one.

As we think about the issue of fear in our lives, we must take a look at one exceedingly common form of fear that we don't usually call fear, even though it clearly is. That form is worry. Worry is fear of what might happen in the future. It

is an insidious form of fear that has some very negative effects on us. Let's look at what one passage in the Bible has to say about worry. It is Philippians 4:6-7.

### GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO WORRY

Paul wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." I find it interesting that the root of the Greek word for "anxious" actually meant "to divide." I think that's because when we are worried we are divided. We undoubtedly have things to do right now, in the present, but we have trouble focusing on them because we are distracted by our concern over this thing that might happen. It feels like something is hanging over you and it drains the joy and energy out of whatever you are supposed to be doing.

Worry is a significant issue for all of us. *The Theological Dictionary Of the New Testament* (vol. IV, p. 590), says, "One can hardly live one's life without cares (worries). They even disturb sleep. The frivolous try to drown them in love or drink. But at the last only death can free us from them." Well that's depressing. The only way you can escape worries is by dying? Great. I'm thinking that no one is going to try to sell us that one as an answer to anxiety. I can see the commercial now. "Worried? Stressed? Do you feel torn? Is worry sapping your strength? Now at last we have found the perfect remedy for worry. Die." Well, that will certainly solve the problem, but it is definitely also a case of the cure being far worse than the disease. Surely there is a better answer than that. Fortunately there is, as we will see shortly.

Worry is a common problem. Back in 1989 an article in *USA Today* quoted Tim Willard of the World Future Society saying that the 1990's would be "the most worry filled decade the world has ever seen." I don't know if that was true, but I do know this. He hadn't seen anything yet. The new millennium has seriously upped the ante on worry. Anxiety has been skyrocketing in our society. Dr. Jonathan Davidson cited an astounding fact in his book titled *The Anxiety Book*. It is that normal children today score higher on tests for anxiety than child psychiatric patients did in the 1950's. In other words, anxiety for kids is the new normal. And it's worse for adults.

Let's notice that this verse is a command. It's not a recommendation from your doctor. It is God ordering his people to not worry! That means that when we worry we are directly disobeying God. After many years of marriage I've learned to at least try to avoid a particular phrase. I still forget from time to time and use it, but I

know as soon as I say it I'm making a mistake. This happens when Laurie is having trouble deciding about some matter that could range from which shoes to wear to what color of napkins she should use at a meal for guests. In an effort to point out that it doesn't matter that much I have often said, "Don't worry about it." I usually get the slightly testy and impatient response, "I'm not worrying about it, Rick." I have to point out that no matter what the issue is, God says, "Don't worry about it." I don't think he wants to hear us answer, "I'm not worrying about it, Lord."

Right, I'm just concerned about it. Yeah, uh, concerned is just another word for worried. "I'm just a little anxious." That's nice, but I have to point out that still means you're worried. Well, maybe so, but this is just a little thing. This is where we need to notice what God includes in the scope of his command. Be anxious about **nothing**. He does not want us to worry about anything. But what about how expensive things are getting? Don't worry about it. What about what's happening in our society? Don't worry about it. What about my kids and the choices they make? Don't worry about it. What about how in the world I'm going to survive financially when my kids want to go to college or when I need to retire? Don't worry about it. What about global warming? Don't worry about it. What about the fact that the doctor says I need a biopsy and he obviously is looking for that C word disease? Don't worry about it. Be anxious about NOTHING!

This doesn't mean you never act, that you never do something when you can about whatever issue has your attention. It does mean that you are not to fret over it. Do what you can and let it go. We should notice that God seems to think this is important. This is not the only place in the Bible where he said this. In Matthew 6:25 Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink." In verse 28 he said, "Why do you worry about clothes?" In verse 34 he said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." Do you detect a theme there? Do not worry! That last one in verse 34 pretty well covers all worrying. Do not worry about tomorrow. Our worries inevitably are about something that we fear might happen in the future. Jesus said, "If it's in the future, don't worry about it."

Why does God make a big deal about not worrying? Of all the awful things that happen in this world worrying doesn't seem like it is among the worst, so why does God single it out? There are several reasons. First he makes an issue of it because he loves us. Since he loves us he wants the best for us. He doesn't want us to hurt unnecessarily. And worry does damage to us.

We all know this, but in case you somehow have forgotten, worry is bad for your health. It leads to problems in your back and neck, sometimes in your digestive system, it suppresses your immune system making you more susceptible to infection, leads to heart problems and causes your body to produce more cortisol which causes belly fat. A Harvard study of 1700 men over 20 years showed that those who worried more had a significantly higher incidence of coronary disease.

We all know when we worry we lack peace and life is not fun at all. One of the hazards, for me at least, of being a pastor is it tends to interrupt my sleep once a week. Because I am “concerned” about church on Sunday, I often don’t sleep well on Saturday night. Laurie and I call them church dreams. I remember one when our worship leader didn’t show up and we couldn’t find anyone to lead worship. Finally we found one guy. He played the banjo and led the congregation in singing *Camptown Races*. I had another where I was in the middle of my sermon when I realized that for some reason I had chosen to just wear my underwear that day. In my dream I thought, “Why did I think just wearing underwear was a good idea?” I was comforted a little when John Sisti told me that as a sound technician he has church dreams too. In them he finds cords and cables all over the place and they are a total mess. He can’t get anything to work right and everyone is waiting for him to fix it. Being worried and stressed is miserable. God wants us to have abundant lives, not miserable ones. To do that we must learn to not worry.

Second, God makes an issue of worry because when we worry we are not trusting him and we tend to go off on our own to try to protect ourselves from what we fear. In short, we disobey him. There are bigger issues at stake when it comes to worry than just our peace and comfort. Unfortunately, when we worry we are not trusting God. We have decided that we cannot depend on him to handle the problem. So we have to come up with some solution of our own. That solution will likely involve in doing something God does not want us to do.

Ancient Israel on a number of occasions worried about the world situation. Perhaps a dominant nation was threatening them, and that nation was simply too strong for them. What would they do? God told them to trust him. He said he would protect them. Do you know what they often did? They looked for some other nation to be allied with. They depended on other nations to help them. The problem is that God had told them specifically not to do that. But they did it anyway. Their worry caused them to do what seemed best to them, even though it meant directly disobeying a command from God. In Isaiah 31:1 the prophet quotes God saying,

“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord.”

Third, God makes an issue of worry because it dishonors him. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is impossible to please God. That’s because if we don’t have faith we are not going to trust him. We are saying either God isn’t powerful enough or doesn’t care enough to handle our situation.

Recently Toby and Anna bought a dining table from Craig’s List. She had to drive their pickup truck to the home of the people they were buying it from to get the table. We were up at their house helping with the kids and Toby was working at the hospital. Anna suggested I stay with the kids and she and Laurie go get the table. That’s because the table was big and quite heavy. I wasn’t honored. She thought her broken down old father in law with the surgically repaired arm and surgically repaired hernias was going to blow something out if he tried to lift that table. I appreciated her concern for me. But my honor was at stake. I insisted on going and proving that I was capable. Which is why I’m now scheduled for yet another surgery. Just kidding. Actually it went fine. My point is, when we worry it is a loud statement that we don’t think God is capable. That does not bring glory to his name.

### GOD GIVES THE ANTIDOTE TO WORRY

In a way this command from God is a bit disappointing for me. That’s because I’m pretty good at worrying. But we all know that being anxious doesn’t accomplish anything. Jesus asked in Matthew 6:27 if we can add even a single hour to our lives by worrying. We know we can’t. Our worrying doesn’t have any impact on the circumstances. Oddly I have this weird, unspoken idea that somehow if I don’t worry about something then the bad thing I fear and worry about will happen. I need to worry about it because that will protect me and keep that bad thing from occurring. That’s just dumb. It’s in the category of thinking I need to seat in the same place when I’m watching my favorite sports team when their on a winning streak because if I move I’ll jinx them. I know that’s not really true. But I used to sit in the same seat anyway. Or I did when there were sports teams in San Diego that went on winning streaks. By the way, it never worked.

Anyway, at times I have felt like some of the least helpful advice one could ever give is “don’t worry.” Oh, right, thanks. I’ll stop now. Fearing what might happen is exceptionally persistent. What happens to you when you decide you’re not going

to worry about something? If you're like me, within minutes, maybe seconds, you are worrying about it again. Somehow just gritting our teeth and being determined to not worry about something doesn't help at all. Without even consciously doing so we find we're thinking about that thing again and getting stressed over it. Then I start worrying about the fact that I'm worrying about it.

It's that problem of telling someone not to think about something. If I say to you, "Don't think about jelly doughnuts," what do you do? You think about jelly doughnuts. I've planted the thought in your mind and now you can't get rid of it. Maybe you try, but now you think about the fact that you're trying not to think about jelly doughnuts. God understands this. He knows just saying, "Don't worry" doesn't help us much. So whenever he says that he gives us something else to do.

In this passage he says we should make a request to God about whatever we are worrying about. In other words, pray about it. Instead of being anxious about it, pray about it. He gives us something to do instead of just telling us to stop worrying. But does he really mean we should pray about everything? So if I'm preparing to do a wedding and I don't know whether I should wear the blue tie or the silver tie, I should pray about it? Am I supposed to pray about whether to wear sandals or shoes today?

Look at Philippians 4:6 again. Notice the words "nothing" and "every situation." The English Standard Version translates "every situation" more accurately as "in everything." Nothing and everything are pretty comprehensive. How far are we to go with this? I would keep it in the context of the verse. If you are anxious over it, if you are worrying about it, choose to pray about it instead. No matter how big or how small it is, you have two choices. You can worry or you can pray. God says pray and don't worry about it. Let him deal with it.

We typically think some things are too small to talk to God about. But which of our things are big to God? Everything we deal with is small potatoes to him. So the question is, do we just talk to God about the things that are ridiculously small, or do we also bring up things that are infinitesimally small? They're all small, so why worry about it? Oops, I mean why make an issue of it.

Laurie has been a great example of this for me. She prays about everything, including things that I may think are ridiculous to pray about. There was an incident years ago when we were on vacation with our kids. At the time we thought it might be our last chance to have a vacation with them. We were wrong, but we

didn't know that, and so we wanted it to be special. We were on the island of Kauai. So one day the weather service was saying we were going to have rain all day. Not what you want when you are on a tropical vacation. Our plan that day was to go to some cool beaches on the north shore of the island which is the rainiest part. Where we were was the driest part, but it was already cloudy and rainy. We decided to just go ahead with our plan. As we drove Laurie prayed. She was stressed about the fact that the rain was going to lessen our beautiful vacation. She told the Lord that she knew this was not important, and that we would trust him no matter what, but she asked that he give us some sunshine where we were going. I thought praying about that was kind of silly, but had to admit it was better than being stressed and anxious over it. Now we could leave it with God and trust whatever he decided. It was clouds and rain all the way until we got within a couple of miles of the beach we were going to. As we neared it the clouds overhead broke and the sun began shining through. We spent several hours having a great time at that beach. At one point I looked up at the sky and could see clouds and rain in every direction. But there was a hole in the clouds, right over us. It was clear sunshine right over us, and clouds everywhere else. It was one of the weirdest things I've seen. Probably a coincidence. But that's a pretty strange coincidence, and I've never forgotten it.

Oh great, so we pray about it and whatever we ask for we will get. That's terrific. It's way better than worrying. Uh, hold on there. We have to read the verse. It doesn't say we'll get whatever we pray for. It says we will get peace. We'll get a peace that transcends understanding. In other words, you may be in a situation so dire that having peace makes zero sense, but you still have a profound peace. You are not stressed. You are as calm as it is possible to be.

Isn't that really what we want? No doubt there are outcomes you'd like to have, but it's way more important to be at peace with whatever happens. And that's what God promises us. Worry, fear, is the absence of peace. God promises to replace our fear with calm, tranquil peace. That sounds wonderful. Unfortunately, there have been times when I've been super stressed about something, I prayed about it, and the stress didn't go away. I didn't get peace. What's up with that?

I know that everyone has had that same experience. If that's true, then that leaves us with only two possible explanations. Either this promise is empty and it doesn't work, so there's something wrong with God's promise, or there's something wrong with us. Somehow if the promise doesn't work for us it's because we're applying it in a wrong way.

I submit to you that the problem is not with God and his promise. The problem is with us. There are a couple of words included in the promise that we sometimes fail to pay attention to. They are the words, “with thanksgiving.” We make our requests to God with thanksgiving. That changes the equation a bit. What does it imply when I thank God while making the request? It implies that I am accepting and being grateful for whatever he does with it. In other words, the act of giving thanks implies submitting to God’s answer to my prayer and thanking him for whatever he does.

There is an important message here. One thing you want deeply, we all want deeply is peace. Without peace life is unpleasant at best, and can be hellish at worst. So let’s be clear that we need and want peace very badly. It’s great news then that God wants you to have peace. He cares about it a lot. He is the God of peace. The message here is that as long as you are anxious and worrying you do not have peace and will not have it. So God has given you a way to have peace. It is by taking every single thing that you might stress about to him, asking him to deal with it, and thanking him for whatever he decides to do.

## APPLICATION

### TRUST IN GOD’S SOVEREIGN LOVE

Movie mogul George Lucas at one point talked about the arc of his *Star Wars* stories and addressed the question of what caused Anakin Skywalker to turn to the dark side and become evil Darth Vader. In his description he said it started with something good. It started because he loved his mother and his girl so much. He was terrified of losing them and couldn’t let go. Here’s the key statement he made, “When you fear losing something, fear not having power to keep it, you turn anywhere for that power.” In his story Anakin ended up turning to the dark side, to evil, to do something that seemed good. And, of course, in the end he lost everything good.

Worry and anxiety are fear of not having the power to keep from losing something, or to protect ourselves or to get something we feel we need. The key to freeing ourselves from that fear is believing that God has the power and, because he loves us, the motivation and will, to give us what we truly need. We must believe in God’s ability and will to do what is best for us.

God has the power, to be sure. Think just about our galaxy for a moment. There are millions of galaxies, but let’s just focus on ours. We don’t know how many stars



are in it. I've seen estimates that range anywhere from 200 million to 300 billion. The range is so wide because we can't count them, so people use various methods to estimate the number. But we do have some idea of the size of the galaxy. Imagine that we can travel at the speed of light and try to cross our galaxy. We're going 186,000 miles per second. That's 11 million miles per minute, 669 million miles per hour. If you fired a bullet at that speed it would circle the earth 7 times in one second! At that speed we would pass the moon in 2 seconds. We'd go by the sun, 93 million miles away, in just over 8 minutes. How long would it take to go, say half way across our galaxy? A year? No, much more. 10 years? No, more. A 100 years? No. How about 1000? Not enough. It would take 50,000 years at light speed.

Genesis 1:1 says God created the heavens and the earth. Nehemiah 9:6 says to God, "You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens. The heaven of heavens with all their host. The earth and all that is in it." God created that inconceivably immense galaxy and all the galaxies. He has all power. He can handle anything we would ever face. Not only does he have the power, but he has the love that causes him to care about us. This is the God who entered our world and went to the unimaginable extreme of the cross to rescue us. He loves us that much. That means we can be absolutely certain he will seek our good in everything, and nothing can stop him.

The late Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "there is a plan for every life in the mind of God. We must never regard our lives...as accidental." Your life is not an accident. Sometimes it all seems random, but we must never forget that God is at work. So the key for us is to believe he has the power and the love, then let him have his way. Let him do what is best. Our only other option is to worry and in the end turn to the dark side for the power to get what we want and lose it all.

## WORSHIP GOD

We see this in this passage where Paul tells us to make our requests, but always do so with thanksgiving. We should always praise God and give him thanks, because that puts everything we pray about in perspective.

Ancient Israel faced worrisome and fearful circumstances when they were in the wilderness. They ran out of water and food at times, and in those moments at places like Meribah and Massah they worried, they cried out in fear, they rebelled. Psalm 95:8 says, "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness." That Psalm begins with the antidote to that kind

of worry generated rebellion. Verses 1-3 says, “Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.” If you want peace in times of stress the best thing you can do is thank God, sing for joy to him, extol him with music and song.

### SEEK GOD’S KINGDOM

In Matthew 6 where Jesus told us not to worry, he gave us something to do in its place. We know we should pray, but what should we focus on? In verse 33 he said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

God’s kingdom is that place in which God reigns. To seek his kingdom is to pursue first having God reign in our lives, then to do whatever we can to bring his kingdom to our world. His kingdom is a place that reflects his character and will, a place, then, of goodness, love, peace, kindness, patience and joy. To seek his kingdom is to desire to bring God’s goodness, love, kindness, joy, patience to everyone and everything. It is to care more and more that God be honored and obeyed.

Do you worry that God’s kingdom is going to fail? Of course not. We know it will not. That means that pursuing his kingdom is a great cure for anxiety and worry. As we focus on his kingdom and pursue it we can let go of the things we worry about.

Recently Michael and Carissa got to go on vacation to Maui. It was much needed, for they have been working very hard. Michael had mentioned that he wasn’t sure about going to Hawaii this time of year because of the possibility of hurricanes. I told him that hurricanes are extremely rare in Hawaii, that we have been there during this season and never had a problem. So they went. It started great. But after they’d been there a few days Michael texted us a report that showed the position of hurricane Olivia. It was northeast of Hawaii, headed southwest. The projected track was a direct hit on Maui!

I began to fret. I started to worry. But I was working on this sermon, so after a bit of debating about the matter I did pray. I wasn’t concerned that they would die, but this had the potential to utterly ruin their vacation. I was concerned enough to worry about it. The funny thing about that is what good would worrying do? I have exactly zero influence on a hurricane. So I needed to trust God, and I needed to

focus on God's kingdom. I needed to care more about his kingdom than their vacation. So I let him decide what would happen and prayed that somehow he would rule more in my life and in theirs and in the lives of others in whatever happened. And I relaxed. As it turned out, the storm did hit them. In fact, the eye of the storm passed directly over them. We picked them up from the airport when they came home and I was sure we would hear about the storm and the awful weather the last couple of days of their vacation. I was surprised. They said it did rain all night one night, but the weather was beautiful the rest of the time, warm and sunny and they had a terrific vacation.

### LIVE A DAY AT A TIME

Our worries are generally about something that might happen. They are in the future. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 6:34. "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Isn't that the truth? Don't you find that pretty much every day of your life hands you all the challenges you need? When you worry you are saying, "Today's not hard enough. I need some more stuff to be upset about, so I'll make up some things that haven't happened and be stressed about them because they might." What a dumb thing to do, but we all do it.

I have mentioned before one of my memorable moments in life. August 25, 1979, Laurie and I boarded a flight bound for the island of Kauai where we would start our honeymoon. We had gotten married at 8 o'clock the night before. We were so excited. We were married! We were on our honeymoon! We were madly in love! And we were heading to Hawaii where we had never been before. It was one of the high points of our lives. Unfortunately during the flight I came to the unpleasant realization that I had forgotten the information about the condo we were going to stay in. It was back in our new apartment. Some friends had given us a free week in this condo as a wedding present. But I couldn't remember the name of it. It was something Hawaiian. And I didn't know where it was. We were going to land in Kauai with zero idea of where we were supposed to go. We had no way of getting in touch with the owners because they were out of town and cell phones didn't exist back then. I began worrying. What in the world were we going to do? I fretted over it. I finally came up with a plan. I would find a phone book and look up condominiums. I'd just go through them until a name jumped out at me. Here's just a partial alphabetical list of condos on Kauai: Alii Kai, Emmalani, Hale Moi, Kahala, Kaha Lani, Kamahana, Kamalii, Lae Nani, Makanui, Mauna Kai, Nihi Kai, Nihilani, Pali Ke Kua, Pili Mai, Pono Kai, Puamana, Puu Poa. How successful do you think I would have been if I had to pull the name of our condo out of that

list? It would have been hopeless. I stressed. As we arrived I was still excited, but this problem was hanging over me. When we got off the plane in gorgeous Kauai, there standing at the gate were Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, the people who owned the condo. They had come to greet us as we arrived! All my worrying ended up being for nothing. Which was good because my plan was not going to solve the problem.

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Let's make the most of it by being focused today on what God has for us to do today. Let him deal with tomorrow, for we know he has the future in his hands. Let's be at peace!