

Emotional Reasoning

"Anxious for Nothing" Series, April 20 & 21, 2024 | Philippians 4:4-9

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Anxiousness should come with a warning label.

Anxiousness is our body's response to a stressor. The signs are physical and predictable.

Our hearts race. Our stomachs get tied in knots. Our bodies tighten.

Fear takes over and motivates us. We see a threat and respond to the threat.

With all that energy pushed to the body, the brain suffers. Our minds become clouded.

Why is anxiousness so dangerous?

Anxiousness makes us feel powerful. The most anxious person in the room has power for a while, and that can actually feel good. Anxiousness is addictive that way.

Anxiousness is contagious. When you are anxious, you can make people around you anxious. The more connected you are, the more you spread your anxiousness.

Anxiousness destroys. It drains us of energy. It limits our emotions and our thinking. It can lead us to break relationships. It consumes our time and attention.¹²

Anxiousness should come with a warning label.

I like to do projects around the house. I particularly enjoy furniture refinishing.

Some of the products I use come with warning labels.

Some of the warning labels are truly no big deal. One says, "Harmful if swallowed." Noted.

Another says that it should not be used in a closed space because it has vapors that can be harmful, so that has to be used outside.

And another encourages me to use it outside because the fumes can be dangerous, and it also says that I should wear gloves and not let it touch my skin. That stuff is truly nasty.

Emotional reasoning is a form of anxiousness that should come with a big, bright warning label.

In this series, we are looking at ways of thinking that lead to anxiousness.

Emotional reasoning is when we invent our own truth and then believe it and act on it. That truth is based on feelings, rather than facts.

Emotional reasoning leads to anxiousness, and it is dangerous.

What is emotional reasoning? And how can we avoid it?

Jonah gave in to emotional reasoning.

Jonah was a prophet in the Old Testament in Israel.

¹ Based on "Overcoming Anxiety in Ministry" by Scott Riddout (unpublished work).

² Ibid.

He prophesied during the long reign of an evil king who worshipped false gods.

However, that king was successful in battle and greatly expanded Israel's territory.

Apparently, he did it with God's blessing. God saw that the people of Israel were evil, but he also saw that they were alone in the world and suffering. So, God decided to bless them.

God sent word through Jonah that Israel and its king would be successful.

Jonah also has a book in the Old Testament named after him.

It tells what happened when the word of the Lord came to Jonah on another occasion. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach to Israel's enemies. God told Jonah to preach to the evil city of Nineveh that God had noticed their sin and that the city would be destroyed for it.

It seems that Jonah's brain locked down with anxious thoughts driven by emotional reasoning.

Jonah's emotional reasoning took him toward Tarshish.

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. The people of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire they ruled were his enemies. Eventually, the Assyrians would destroy Israel.

Jonah didn't want to preach to them, so he ran the other way. **Jonah 1:3** says:

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah fled by sea just about as far away from Nineveh as he could get.

But Jonah couldn't escape the power of God. God sent a storm, and the boat was tossed around. Eventually, Jonah told the crew that the storm had come from God because of him. He encouraged them to throw him overboard.

After desperately trying to save everyone, the crew threw Jonah overboard.

Jonah sank into the water. He thought that in death he might escape God.

But God sent a fish that swallowed Jonah and carried him safely to land. Alive.

Then the Lord called Jonah again, "Go to Nineveh and preach."

Emotional reasoning wasn't getting Jonah very far.

Jonah's emotional reasoning led him to lash out at God in prayer.

Jonah made it to Nineveh. He went into the city and preached, but he didn't put much effort into it. We read a summary in **Jonah 3:4**:

... "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

However, the sermon worked. The people of Nineveh repented en masse!

Jonah 3 closes by telling us that God saw their repentance and relented from destroying them.

But Jonah 4 opens with Jonah angry and worried that God might not destroy Nineveh!

In **Jonah 4:2-3**, the prophet lashed out at God:

... "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

That's emotional reasoning. I don't like it. I'm angry. I'm disappointed. I'm out of control.

Jonah's emotional reasoning left him out in the sun.

Jonah went outside of the city and made a booth for himself and sat under its shade. He was waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord caused a vine to grow over the shelter and shade Jonah from the heat of the sun.

The next day, at dawn, God sent a worm to eat the plant, and it withered. Then God sent a dry wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah. Jonah became hot, thirsty, and faint.

In **Jonah 4:8** he cried out to God:

... "It is better for me to die than to live."

Eventually, Jonah's emotional reasoning caused him to lose all perspective.

God asked Jonah if he was thinking rightly to be angry about the plant.

The prophet doubled down in **Jonah 4:9**:

... "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

"I'm angry about a plant! I'm angry about Nineveh! I'm angry." He probably should have added truthfully, "I'm frustrated! Our enemies win! I'm worried! Israel will suffer!"

Jonah was caught tightly in the clutches of anger, anxiousness, and emotional reasoning.

Emotional reasoning denies the truthfulness of God.

Emotional reasoning is a trap that says, "If I feel it, it must be true."

This isn't a problem when we think something like, "I feel hungry, so it must be true."

It's much more of a problem when we feel things like, "I feel terrified about going on airplanes, so it must be dangerous to fly." Then we avoid air travel, even for a job or a great vacation.

These feelings don't reflect reality; they aren't grounded in truth.

Emotional reasoning is unhinged from truth, but it can become lodged in our minds.

Emotional reasoning heads in the direction of idolatry.

Idolatry is the worship of an object or of any false god in place of God.

But what is idolatry really? Idolatry is putting something in the place that belongs to God.

To be God is to be in charge. To be God is to determine what is true, what is right and wrong.

When we determine what is true, what is right and what is wrong, and when we claim sovereignty over our own lives, we are putting ourselves in God's place.

We are engaging in idolatry. Emotional reasoning heads in the direction of idolatry.

God confronts Jonah's emotional reasoning with truth.

There, at the end of Jonah chapter four, Jonah was affirming his anger about a plant.

The Lord countered his emotional reasoning. Jonah had become angry about a plant that he did not grow, that came and went in a night. He was angry, indignant, and concerned about what happened to that plant. That's emotional reasoning, and it is unhinged from truth.

God asked, then should he not care about Nineveh? It's a city full of 120,000 people. God created them. They are his people. They don't know right from wrong. That's truth. Should God not pity Nineveh?

The question lingers in the end. We don't know if Jonah escaped his emotional reasoning or not. But we do know that God has confronted Jonah with truth, instead of emotion unhinged from truth.

God is TRUTH.

In Philippians, Paul was addressing conflict among a group of disciples with truth.

Early in chapter 4, Paul singled out two believers—Euodia and Syntyche. He “entreated” them to agree in the Lord. They, apparently, were the center of a controversy in the church.

Paul asked a friend to help the two of them by mediating the conflict.

Paul reminded all of them that they were his fellow workers in the Gospel enterprise.

He reminded them that their names were all written in the book of life.

Paul was already subtly reminding them of the TRUTH.

Then, in Philippians 4:4-5, Paul confronted them with the TRUTH that should recalibrate everything:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand ...

“The Lord is at hand” is the key claim here.

These disciples were living as if life would go on and on. To be in conflict, these disciples were living as if they had time to fight and bicker.

Paul reminds them that the Lord is at hand. That means that the Lord could come at any time.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is coming again. When he does, he will judge the living and the dead. Paul knew that it could happen at any moment. That claim may seem dramatic after 2,000 years. But the amount of time that passes is not the issue. The issue is that, at any moment, Jesus could return. That simple fact changes everything.

Paul claimed that TRUTH leads to an entirely different way of thinking and behaving.

Paul told them to let their reasonableness be known to everyone.

The word “reasonableness” is the kindness or leniency of a good ruler.

Beyond that, it's not what's out of control.

It's what's appropriate.

Paul is telling the Christians in Philippi to behave themselves appropriately.

He's saying that it's time to set aside conflicts with each other, set aside emotional reasoning, and behave like responsible adults.

Paul wanted these people in conflict to remember that people are watching them. They know that Christ is in us, so when they see us, they assume that they are seeing Christ. But they need Christ. They need to see Christ in us!

Emotion and anxiousness should not dictate our behavior. It should be founded on truth.

God is truth.

In **Numbers 23:19** we read:

***God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.***

Has he said, and will he not do it?

Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

God is truth, and that also means he does not change. In **Malachi 3:6** God asserts his own truthfulness and unchanging nature:

“For I the LORD do not change...”

God’s truth has come to us in Jesus. **John 1:14** says:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God is truth, so truth should be foundational to our lives, to how we think and how we live.

Paul tells us to be intentional about our thought life and align it with TRUTH.

Some of us use feelings to help us make decisions. Empathy tells us how what we do affects others.

Emotions tell us how we feel about events. Of course, emotions can be useful.

Emotional reasoning, though, is when our emotions and feelings are unhinged from truth.

We believe things that are exaggerated or false.

Emotional reasoning can lead to anxiousness, which can do great damage.

To escape emotional reasoning, we need to connect our thinking with reality and truth.

Paul tells us not to let our thought lives get out of control. Instead, Paul consistently tells us to align our thinking with TRUTH.

It’s part of our sanctification. It’s part of our becoming holy.

God does the big work in our sanctification.

Still, we have work to do. We have a part to play in our own sanctification.

Be intentional about your thoughts.

In 1979, the rock band “The Who” came to the United States on a concert tour.

“The Who” were wildly popular at the time, and one of their early dates was in Cincinnati, Ohio.

There were reserved seats for the concert, but the Riverfront Coliseum, where the concert would take place, had a general admission policy known as “festival seating.” People were on their own to stake out a spot to watch the concert, and they naturally wanted a spot up front.

Ticket holders started arriving for the 8 pm concert early in the afternoon, and the crowd grew.

By 7 pm, the crowd of 8,000 ticket holders was anxious. The gates and doors had not opened.

There weren’t enough ticket takers inside, and the concert organizers didn’t know what to do.

Outside, ticket holders HAD to get into the stadium. They HAD to get a good seat. They HAD to see their band. They thought that the concert had started, and they were missing out.

So, the crowd started pressing forward. Around 7:15 pm, glass doors shattered, and other doors were thrown open. People began streaming into the stadium.

When the crowd cleared, police found 11 people lying on the ground, dead because they had suffocated in the crush.³

Out-of-control thoughts can lead to danger and disaster. Be intentional about your thoughts!

Choose to pray.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:6-7**:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Don't forget that, in verse five, Paul just told us that Jesus is at hand. He's coming.

Therefore, he argues in verse six, don't be anxious about anything.

Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our sin.

He rose from the dead, victorious over sin, death, and evil.

He ascended into heaven and is coming again.

The Kingdom of God has dawned. The victory of King Jesus has begun. His complete victory is coming. Quickly. Imminently. So, we don't need to be anxious about anything.

Instead, Paul says that we should approach God with prayer and supplication. We should ask God for what we need now. The victory is won, and the spoils are being handed out.

These prayers should be made with thanksgiving because God is good and has already won the key victories. We thank him for what he has done already and for what he will do.

When we approach God with this kind of confidence, then God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The peace of God will guard our emotions and our reasoning.

The peace of God, Paul adds, goes beyond all understanding. It is not like our problems. It is not like our inborn anxiousness. The peace of God exceeds all of that.

Choose where to focus.

Paul tells us where to focus our minds and attention in **Philippians 4:8**:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

There are nuggets of insight in all of these individual words, but I think you get the point.

Paul is telling us to choose where to focus our minds. It's no different from a parent telling a child to be careful about the videos they watch, music they listen to, and things they read. If they put garbage in, then they will get garbage out.

Paul is telling us all the same thing. He is saying that we have a choice about where to focus our minds. We can focus them on all kinds of anxious things. We can focus on bad news. We can focus on violence. We can focus on risks. We can focus on worries.

But is any of that even real?

³ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/eleven-people-killed-in-a-stampede-outside-who-concert-in-cincinnati-ohio>

The first thing Paul writes may be the most significant for us. "Whatever is true," Paul writes. Think about these things. Think about what is real. Think about what is true.

Choose whom to imitate.

Paul brings a surprising twist in **Philippians 4:9**:

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul wrote these words to Christians who were in conflict with one another. "Rejoice. Be reasonable. Jesus is coming! Don't be anxious. Pray. Choose where to focus. Imitate me."

Paul had shown them the example of focusing on that which is true.

And he had shown them how to live at peace and free of anxiousness.

Now, he says, "Imitate me."

Paul is counseling us to choose whom to imitate.

There are a lot of anxious models available to us right now.

They're catastrophizing, blaming, and engaging in emotional reasoning.

Are we going to follow them? I hope not.

Did you see the outcome?

The peace of God will guard our hearts and minds.

The God of peace will be with us.

There is a part we have to play in praying, focusing, and following.

Then God does what we cannot do.

Peace, not anxiousness. God with us. Guarding us.

Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that what we want?