

# Peace in an Age of Panic

Well it is fantastic to see you guys this morning. So glad you're here. Today is a **big day for our church for a few reasons**. One, because it is our first Sunday of two Gatherings for the fall: we're hosting a 9:00am and an 11:00am this morning. Which means that as far as the teaching goes: if you're at the 9:00, my coffee hasn't kicked in yet. And if you're at the 11:00, it has completely worn off. I'm very sorry, but there's no in-between. Just gonna be subpar sermons from here on out. But that said, we're pumped to host two Gatherings so that we can open up some seats for a lot of the new folks coming around our church. It is admittedly a little less fun than having everybody all together at one Gathering, and it might feel a little weird in the room at times, but we also know that we exist as a church to welcome in new folks and get to know them. So insofar as two Gatherings allows us to do *that*, we're pumped about doing it.

**The second reason** that today is a big day—and this is part of the *reason* for having two Gatherings—is that this is typically the Sunday that we have a lot of college students join us (or *re-join* us) for the year. Since the beginning of our church, college students from UT, Johnson, and a number of other schools have been a core part of our church, so we are pumped to have you back with us for the year. As we are fond of saying, our church is not the same without you here. *Knoxville* is not the same without you here. When you are gone, everything is just a little bit worse here in town. Traffic is way better, but everything else is worse. So if that applies to you, welcome (or welcome back).

**The third reason** today is a big day is because today we are closing out a teaching series we've been in over the summer, called *City on a Hill*. So if you've got a bible, go with me to **Philippians 4**, and we'll get there here in just a bit. A while back, the **director of the FBI** received a concerned letter. It was *from* a former member of the Army Intelligence Service. The letter *stated* confidently that a certain U.S. citizen was a "definite danger to the security of the United States."<sup>1</sup> And that letter, really, was the *culmination* of a *collective* panic over this particular individual across the country. Americans *everywhere* were concerned that this one person was single-handedly brainwashing and corrupting the minds of an entire generation, such that the very soul and safety of America was at stake. The year was 1956, and the person responsible for all of this panic was a singer named *Elvis Presley*. It was believed that his singing, and particularly his *dancing*, were a real problem. And quite a few people were *very* concerned about it. **Sometimes, when I'm bored, I like to imagine what that same Army Intelligence officer would say if he saw footage from a Cardi B music video today.**

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<sup>1</sup> [Source \(and a photocopy of the letter itself\) here.](#)

In the 1960s and 70s, another public panic ensued over the yearly practice of trick-or-treating at Halloween. Fears were stoked among parents about strangers who might hide razor blades in apples or lace children's candy with cyanide. Parents everywhere carefully examined their children's stashes of candy. Schools and churches opened their doors so that kids could trick or treat in safer environments. Hospitals volunteered to put kids' candy bags through their x-ray machines to check for suspicious materials. In 1985, a ABC News poll showed that 60% of parents in America were concerned that their children might be victimized by candy they received on Halloween. Shortly after, researchers made a fascinating discovery: the fear of poisoned Halloween candy was all based on a myth: not a single child was poisoned via their candy by a stranger.<sup>2</sup>

In the year 1999, people all over the world began panic-buying everything in sight in preparation for Y2K. The concern, shared by a few and then exacerbated by millions, was that many computer programs would fail once the final two digits switched over to "00." These computer programs would assume that it was the year 1900, instead of 2000, and all types of chaos would ensue. Many people believed that this would trigger a widespread failure of everything from airplanes to financial systems to critical infrastructure. Growing up a church kid, I specifically remember multiple adults telling me that Y2K, without a doubt, would usher in the rapture and the return of Jesus. I knew of churches that were actually planning for that to happen. My church didn't go that far, but we did have a lock-in on New Year's Eve that year, you know—just in case. People, seemingly everywhere, were panicking.

Panic seems to be a semi-regular state of existence for the world we live in. And I could go on with more examples, down throughout history, all the way to present day. Nowadays, just about every four years, whoever wins the presidential election, about half of the population is convinced that that person's presidency will swiftly usher in the end of civilization as we know it. Every summer Supreme Court session, there is at least a case or two that prompts panic from one group or the other. And don't get me wrong. My point is not to say that there aren't ever concerning things happening in those sectors of society; there certainly are.

**My point is simply to say that as a whole, we live in a society that is quite easily given toward panic.** And if you don't believe me, this winter, the first time the meteorologists even say there's a chance of snow in Knoxville, however small, just go sit in the parking lot of your local Kroger and watch the chaos ensue. Watch every school in

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<sup>2</sup> More details can be found in the Introduction of Chip & Dan Heath's book, *Made to Stick*.

Knoxville cancel school for three days, only to have a few, lonely snowflakes hit the ground (and immediately melt).

**We as a species are given** toward *panic*. Now, there are probably a number of different reasons for that. One is that *fear* is a very natural human emotion. Another is that the world can indeed be a scary place. There are concerning things happening in our world all the time. *And today, because of access to the internet, we are now more aware of more things happening in more places than any generation before us. We are aware, within minutes, of every alarming thing happening anywhere in the world.* That access is going to lend itself often to anxiety, fear, and panic. Add to *that* the fact that we are also confronted with more *false* and *misleading* information than ever before. And add to *that* the reality that politicians on both sides have now *mastered* the art of manipulating people's fear in order to win votes.

All of that, and I'm sure plenty *more* factors as well, **create the perfect recipe for a society that panics early and often.** Stanley Cohen, the late sociologist, describes the phenomenon of cultural panic like this:

*Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. [...] Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory [i.e. Y2K]; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal or social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.<sup>3</sup> That's a sociologist's way of saying "we sure do love to panic sometimes." Sometimes appropriately, and sometimes inexplicably.*

Now, here's **where all of that intersects** with us here this morning. If you're new with us here on Sundays, like I said earlier, we are **wrapping up a teaching series** called *City on a Hill: Becoming a Church the World Needs*. **Each week, we've been discussing specific ways that we as followers of Jesus are called to be different from the world, for the sake of the world.** We've talked about how we are called to be a community of *orthodoxy* in an age of ideology, *presence* in an age of distraction, *intercession* in an age of gossip, and *self-responsibility* in an age of blame-shifting.

So **today, to wrap things up,** I want us to talk about becoming a community of *peace* in an age of *panic*. **For much of human history, followers of Jesus have possessed a strange ability to embody peace, while most people around them are busy panicking.** Now, I realize you might not gather that from the posture of some *American*

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, p. 9.

Christians in the past decade or so. But *historically*, it *has* been the case. From **the first to the fourth centuries**, nearly every time that plagues and pestilence struck entire cities, most people would flee the city or hide inside their homes. But followers of Jesus would stay *in* the city and care for the sick. Their willingness to do so is said to have greatly reduced the death toll from the plagues.<sup>4</sup> If you've never read stories of the *underground church* movements in places like China or Iran—I would highly recommend it. You'll hear story after story about Christians in situations where *panic* would by all measures be the most natural response, but who *instead* embody supernatural amounts of peace in the midst of it all.

So **whether you're familiar with it or not**, this posture *has* been a pattern for God's people throughout history: *peace* in the midst of *panic*. And in *light* of that, **the question I want to explore this morning is how Christians have been able to do that, and what enables them to respond in that sort of way.** If we can figure out some answers to those *questions*, I think *we too* can learn to become a community of *peace* in the middle of *panic*. / So let's see if we can find some answers from the Scriptures. Look with me at **Philippians 4**, which in theory is already open somewhere near you. Start reading with me in v. 4:

**4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. 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. 8 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. 9 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.**

So **Paul**, the author, tells followers of Jesus in Philippi **“not to be anxious about anything.”** Now, that word *anxious* means to be “divided into parts,” pulled in many different directions. To be *hyper*-concerned with many different things in a deeply *troubled* sort of way. We could say it is to be *panicked*. Or *in* a panic. **To have your mind obsessing over many different things, the vast majority of which are outside of your control.** Paul says to the Philippians, “do not be *that way* about *anything*.”

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<sup>4</sup> Historian Rodney Stark details this in his book *The Triumph of Christianity*. Read several excerpts [here](#).

Now, **before we write off what Paul is saying** here as naive or unrealistic—before we assume that he’s just throwing empty platitudes at people’s problems—let’s think about the *context* of this letter. Best we can piece together, Paul is writing these words from either *prison* or *house arrest*, where he has been detained for following and preaching about the way of Jesus. *Earlier* in the letter, he seems to indicate that he does not know whether he will *die* while imprisoned or be released.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, he *writes to* a group of Christians in the city of *Philippi*, a significant Roman stronghold. The Roman *emperor* at the time was *Nero*, who became *known* for particularly despising the Christian movement. The same Nero who would eventually light Christians on fire and use them as living torches along the city streets.

Now, here’s **why I tell you all of that**. Because I think **sometimes we are inclined to think the cultural circumstances we’re in *right now* are the worst that things have ever been in the world**. We tend to think that encouragements like “do not be anxious about anything” are somewhat *unrealistic*, since Paul had no idea how bad things truly could get in 21st century America. But at least *currently*, I don’t think any of us as Christians are in danger of being imprisoned for being Christians. I don’t know that any of us are in danger of being used as human torches by an evil emperor. I know some things in our world aren’t great right now, but they were pretty bad back *then*, too. So I think we’d do well to at least hear Paul out. Since he also, apparently, knows what it feels like to live in a situation where *panic* could be an easy response.

**So we might ask *instead***: how could *Paul*, in that type of dire situation *himself*, writing to Christians under *threat* of that type of situation, say “do not be anxious about *anything*”? How could *that* feel like a reasonable, *feasible* instruction for him to give to them? Well, for starters, **he doesn’t only say “don’t be anxious.”** He gives *alternative* instructions for what to do instead. First, Paul says, “rejoice in the Lord, *always*. Again, I say ‘rejoice.’” **Anybody else who grew up in a Baptist youth group have the song running through your head right now? If not, you do now! You’re welcome for that: you can now never get it out of your head.**

*But* let’s **talk about the word “rejoice”** for a second. The word Paul uses in Greek is the word *chairó*. And the word on the surface means what it *sounds* like it means: to be *glad*. But the *origins* of the word go a little deeper than that. It shares a root with the Greek word for *grace*. As in, *God’s* grace. So when Paul tells the Philippians to “rejoice,” he’s not saying “hey I know you’re anxious right now, but instead, I want you to spontaneously decide to be *happy* instead.” **Rather, he’s saying something more like *this*: I know right now there are plenty of reasons to be *anxious*. But I want to**

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<sup>5</sup> See Philippians 1:20-25

**remind you that there are plenty of reasons to rejoice, too.** Paul does not say “rejoice,” *period*; he says “rejoice in the Lord.” In Jesus. And specifically, in the grace given to them *in and through* Jesus. **Choose to set your mind, Paul says, not just on the reasons for anxiety, but also on the reasons for joy.**

Then, Paul gives us what I see as at least **four specific ways to do that**. To rejoice. Four practical methods for pursuing peace in a panicked world. So let’s spend some time on each of them together. First, he tells us to...

## Pray Thankfully

Look with me at **v. 6** of our passage. Paul says:

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

In Paul’s mind, the **first alternative** to being *anxious* about anything, is *praying about everything*. In 1 Peter 5, *Peter* uses the language of “casting all our anxieties on God.”<sup>6</sup> So a friend of mine, who struggles with anxiety, says that every night before he goes to bed, right before he closes his eyes, he lists out the top three things he’s anxious about. And then he says to God in prayer: “God, I need *you* to worry about these things, because *your* worry is more *effective* than my worry. And I need you to think about these things while I *sleep*, because I *need* sleep and you *don’t*.” He’s obviously being a little cheeky with his language there—but I think that’s a beautiful practice. And it demonstrates what Paul is saying: that *prayer* is a much healthier alternative to anxiety and panic over things we have no ability to control.

But there’s **one more, very important word** in verse 6. It’s the word *thanksgiving*. Paul says make your requests to God, *with thanksgiving*. Chances are there are a *lot* of things we could pray about. *Lots* of things we need help with, comfort about, assistance from God on. But *knowing* all that, let me just caution you with one thing: **don’t let requests eat up all of your prayers.** Don’t let your prayers become *only* a laundry list of requests from God. Make a conscious effort to include prayers of *thanks* too.

So for a lot of us, when we pray, we **open up with the standard fare**: “God, thank you for this day, thank you for your grace, thank you for your mercy, thank you for hearing us.” And I get that sometimes that can feel so routine that it almost feels *empty*. But I want you to see in this passage that there is a deeply *biblical* reason we open our prayers that way. It’s **because when you worship the God of the Scriptures, there is always**

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<sup>6</sup> See 1 Peter 5:7

**something to be thankful for.** There is *always* something *worth celebrating*. There is *always* something to be *glad* about, to rejoice *in*. And **praying that way, Paul says, is a weapon aimed directly at our anxiety and panic. Anxiety tells us that there are always things that we don't have; thankfulness reminds us of the things we do have.**

Now, **maybe you hear that and go,** “okay but that’s the thing: I *don’t* feel like I *have* anything to be thankful for.” Well, start with the fact that you have breath in your lungs right now, and work your way out from there: *God, thank you that today is another day to live and breathe. Thank you for the job that I have, even if I hate it a lot of the time. Thank you for the friends that I have, even if they are v annoying sometimes. Thank you for a roof over my head and food in my pantry. Thank you for the people in my LifeGroup that care about me, even if they do it imperfectly. Thank you that even when I feel like everything in my life is disappointing, that you are big enough and capable enough to use all of those disappointing things for my good and your glory. If you’re still breathing, there are things to be thankful for. You just have to be willing to stop long enough to take notice of them.*

So we offer *everything*, Paul says, in prayer and petition, to God—with *thanksgiving*. **Second,** we’re told to...

## Think differently

Look with me at **v. 8** in the passage:

*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.***

So here’s what I think Paul knows about human nature. He knows that we often can’t *prevent* anxious thoughts from entering our mind—hence why we have to pray *through* them when they come. He *also* knows that we usually can’t *control* our emotional *response to those anxious thoughts when they come*. But **there’s one thing we can do. And that’s that we can choose to fill our minds, regularly, with more productive things.** “...if *anything* is *excellent* or *praiseworthy*,” Paul says, “**think about those things.**” We can’t *stop* panic from entering our minds, but we can crowd it out, over time, by filling our minds with something better.

So can I just **ask: what are we regularly filling our minds with?** And I get that I’m going to sound a bit like a broken record after the past couple teachings I’ve given, but

that's fine because it bears repeating: if you are spending *hours upon hours* consuming media and social media every day, you are *asking* to live in a state of constant anxiety. Most of those channels and outlets *thrive* on giving you one thing after another to be anxious about and fearful of. They actually have a vested financial *interest* in you tuning in constantly to *escape* from your anxiety, only to be made infinitely *more* anxious as a result. So don't be surprised when after giving tons of your time and attention to those things, you turn out very anxious as a result.

**But to the same effect:** don't be surprised that if you fill your mind with *noble, true, praiseworthy* things instead, it brings *peace* as a result. **Just as one example:** what would it look like to fill our minds with truths from *Scripture*? You don't even have to be great at *reading or understanding* Scripture. I'm just saying find a singular verse or idea from the bible that is meaningful to you, and just spend the day turning it over and over in your mind. *Meditating* on it. Maybe you feel like you don't know how to do *that*. Try this: pick a worship song based on a passage of Scripture, look up the lyrics, and just go around singing it and thinking about what it means. You do that and—surprise—you've just learned how to *meditate* on the bible. And if the worship songs you like aren't based on the bible...find better worship songs. There's lots of good stuff out there. They're on Spotify...it's a whole thing. And that's just one example of how to "think on" better things. There are plenty of other ways.

**But I would bet** that the more we choose to *fill* our minds with *worthwhile* things, the less *room* we'd have in our minds for anxiety and panic to grow. So how might we learn to *think* differently? *Third*, Paul says to...

## Practice Persistently

I think **this one gives us some really helpful clarity** on the other two things we just mentioned. Look at the first half of v. 9:

*Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.*

The **word Paul uses there for "practice"** refers to something that is done as a "routine" or a "habit." **The idea is that everything we've mentioned this morning**—and in fact, everything that the Philippians have *learned* from Paul in general—**must be put into regular, persistent, practice. It must be implemented on a recurring basis.** In other words, Paul is not trying to imply that if you "cast your anxieties on God" *once*, it's going to instantly fix a tendency towards panic. He's not trying to say that if you try to fill your mind with "praiseworthy" things *tomorrow*, you are going to magically be done with



**anxiety.** In general, that is not how the spiritual life works. It actually has to be implemented into your life on a regular basis, over time.

What Paul says here in v. 9 actually **could be translated**, “put it into **exercise**.” That’s the idea. So borrowing from that imagery, I want you to imagine a hypothetical situation with me. I want you to imagine that you are a **physical trainer**—like as your job. And I want you to imagine that you take on a new client who hasn’t worked out in a long, long time. Maybe *ever*. And let’s say you get together with them, you give them a list of exercises to do, you show them how to do them. And you tell them that *if they do* those exercises, they *will* get stronger, they *will* lose weight, and overall *will* become a healthier person. You tell them all of that, and send them on your way.

And *then*, you get **a phone call early the next morning** from this same client, and they are *mad*. Like *big mad*. They call you, using all kinds of choice words. They tell you that you are a *terrible* trainer, because they did all the exercises you gave them yesterday, just as you told them to do them. But according to them, they don’t feel *any* stronger, they haven’t lost *any* weight, and they don’t feel *any* healthier than they did the day before. They accuse you of *lying* to them. / Okay—in that situation, what would your response be to that client? Well, if you’re a patient, *understanding* type of person, it would probably be to kindly explain to them that you didn’t mean those things would occur after they exercised *one time*. In fact, you would explain to them, the idea behind exercise is that you do the same things, over and over again, and *over time*, you start to see results. Right?

Okay, so let me **ask you a question: why do we think** that it is any *different* from that **with our spiritual life?** With *spiritual* practices? With *spiritual* exercises? With things like taking our anxieties to God, in order to grow in *peace* as a result? Sometimes, after I teach on something like this—about how we are called to pray instead of being anxious, embody peace instead of panic—people will respond by saying something like, “yeah I tried that—it didn’t work.” And if I ask them some questions about what they mean by “I tried it,” here’s what I normally find out. *Normally*, what they mean is they tried it a few times, or for a short season, and they didn’t immediately feel more peaceful. But you see, generally, that’s not the way it works. Generally, it’s not that you pray one, two, three times, and immediately become a more peaceful person. Rather, how it *generally* works is that as you “put into practice” the things that God instructs us to do, over time, you grow in peace.

And I’ll just tell you, **as a testament** to that, the people I know that regularly, as a *practice*, cast their anxieties before God, over the course of years...have a deep, residing, *peace* about them. The people that choose to fill their minds regularly with

praiseworthy things, over time, become more peaceful people. It's not that they never get anxious, it's not that they never panic about anything—but the frequency with which that happens is *substantially* lower than the general population. They have a “*resoluteness*” about them. A *resiliency*. They can look around them and see difficult things, concerning things, *awful* things—and they can keep marching forward without constantly being given to panic. In Paul's language, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, [begins to *guard* their] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Which leads us to the **final thing Paul says** in this passage, which is less of an *instruction* and more of a *realization* that we need to have. Here's how I'd put it:

## Realize that peace is a person

Look at the *second* half of v. 9 with me:

...*And the God of peace will be with you.*

So here is something **we absolutely must grasp** about achieving lasting *peace* as a follower of Jesus. **Before peace is something you obtain from God, peace is something that God is.** The Psalms say he *is* our *refuge*. He *is* our *strength*. He *is* our ever-present *help* in a time of trouble. It said it *again* right there in v. 9: the *God of peace*, who is *with you*. It said it *earlier* in v. 5: “the *Lord is near*.” It says it in v. 7: “...the *peace of God*, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds *in Christ Jesus*. **Peace is a person, and his name is Jesus.**

**This, to me, explains** why peace is not something we just obtain by way of a magic pill from God, in the moment we ask him for it. Because, you see, **God is not content to give us just one thing we need from him; he desires to give us his entire self.** A life of peace is a *byproduct* of living a life *with* Jesus. *Alongside* him. **God cannot give us peace apart from him, because he is peace.** Ephesians 2 says it that plainly. Speaking of Jesus, it says that “He *himself is* our peace...”<sup>7</sup>

**So when we spend time** in the presence of God through Jesus—via things like persistent prayer—what we are doing is tangibly reminding ourselves of the *nearness* of God. And when we live actively conscious of the *nearness* of God, *peace* naturally comes and resides in us as well. So **if we want to become a community of peace in an age of panic, we will want to be people who are filled with the presence of God through Jesus.** “The Lord is near,” “the God of *peace* is with us,” and *he* will “guard our hearts

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<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 2:14

and minds in Christ Jesus.” *That* is where peace comes from—it comes from a person who embodies it.

All of this is what enables Jesus to say to his disciples in the gospel of John—right before they go through some *horrible, devastating* things, this:

*I have told you these things, so that in me (in who? In “me”—in Jesus himself), you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble* (that’s a promise from Jesus, by the way: ‘in this world, you *will have trouble*.’). ***But take heart! I have overcome the world.***<sup>8</sup>

You and I cannot stop the world from having trouble in it. That is not an ability we possess in the least. *Difficulty* is inevitable in our world. *Suffering* is inevitable in our world. *Brokenness, sin, frustration, hurt*—all of those things are inevitable in our world. The promise Jesus leaves us is not that we can *avoid* or *dodge* any of those things. **The promise he leaves us is knowing the one who has overcome it all.** Who has been through all of those things and come out the other side *victorious*. And the one who can grant you and I the ability to do the same, when we are willing to walk in the way of Jesus.

So each Sunday as a community, we go to the tables around this room and partake of the bread and the cup. And all of that is a way of us remembering the moment that God sent Jesus to “overcome the world.” The moment he made *his peace available* to us, once and for all, by the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus. The cross was where Jesus endured the brunt force of the brokenness in our world, so that you and I, as his people, could experience lasting *peace* in the midst of it. So if you’re a follower of Jesus in the room, you’re invited to head to the tables together with us as we sing and celebrate that reality.

Let’s pray.

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<sup>8</sup> John 16:33