

Be Anxious for Nothing Series: *Think Upon These Things*
Philippians 4:4-9

We are taking a break from our Genesis series to present a short, four-part series entitled, *Be Anxious for Nothing*. The whole series is based upon Philippians 4:4-9, and we've already heard two outstanding messages on this subject by Pastor Mark and Pastor Tami. Next week the series will conclude with a phenomenal message by Pastor Jeff Sparks...it is a message you will not want to miss. Today you will be subject to my small part of this series as we unpack Philippians 4:8, where Paul gives direction regarding our thinking. So, please stand and let us read once again Philippians 4:4-9:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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. 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.

As you can see from the full passage of this series, Paul gives very specific direction to the Church on how to deal with chronic anxiety. As Mark covered in the first message of this series, Paul first charges the church to practice rejoicing in the LORD in all circumstances and to extend grace to those we interact with. Because so much of our anxiety is rooted in events and relationships that we cannot control, remembering and celebrating the presence of God with us and extending grace to others will help fend off our tendency to stew over things that we cannot control.

Last Sunday, Pastor Tami covered the third very important imperative that Paul gives to the church, and that is the mandate to be anxious for nothing by praying about everything! Pastor Tami's message was helpful and instructive about how we are to pray and why prayer is so effective in dealing with and defending ourselves from anxiety.

The fourth imperative that Paul gives to the Church is to be intentional about our thinking, so that is what we will focus on this morning. To that end, my message will fall under three subtitles this morning: 1) The Doom Loop; 2) Right Thinking; and 3) David's Affirmation of Meaning.

I. The Doom Loop

I think it's safe to say that something is amiss in our culture. The statistics are daunting. According to the National Survey of Children's Health, between the years of 2016-2023, the prevalence of diagnosed anxiety amongst adolescents increased 61 percent (from 10.0% to

16.1%) and depression increased 45 percent (from 5.8% to 8.4%)¹. 45% of female Americans between the ages of 12 and 26 had received a formal diagnosis of anxiety or depression by 2024. Church, think about that statistic: nearly half of all the young women in our nation—were FORMALLY diagnosed with depression or anxiety or both less than 2 years ago. From 2004 to 2024, the percentage of women thirty and under who said their mental health was “excellent” plummeted from 48% down to 15%.² The numbers for men are not as extreme, but the trends are consistent regardless of gender. We have become “The Anxious Generation.”³ So, what does that mean?

It means that we suffer from anxiety on a regular basis. It means an unprecedented number of young Americans suffer from panic attacks. It means that we are increasingly unhappy, worried, depressed, and unfulfilled in our lives. But why? Why now? What has changed? Why are so many people anxious and/or depressed?

I would point you to a new book that has recently come out by Dr. Arthur Brooks entitled, *The Meaning of Your Life*.⁴ Brooks is both a Christian and a Harvard professor who devoted several years to researching the rapid decline of mental health among college students and young adults. Having interviewed many of the students at Harvard, Brooks discovered a tendency among those very intelligent, hard-working, socially-advantaged young people: they almost to the number felt that their lives were *meaningless*. Meaninglessness, according to Brooks, is the new psychogenic epidemic in our society. A psychogenic epidemic refers to a phenomenon that causes tremendous suffering but has no organic cause, meaning the onset is social or psychological, but not biological.⁵ In other words, there is no virus to account for the growing sickness called meaninglessness, but this horrible condition is spreading faster than COVID.

So, what is the cause of meaninglessness which coincides with and/or contributes to the conditions of anxiety and depression?

According to Brooks, the research points to one factor above all others, and that is the little device that you all have in your pockets and your purses: the smart phone (show pic). Ever since the I-Phone hit the market in 2007, the mental health of our country has plummeted. Brooks writes:

I find a clear relationship between social media use and our emotional problems. As a general rule, the more time you spend looking at your phone, the more depressed, lonely, and anxious you will become.⁶

¹ [Adolescent Mental and Behavioral Health, 2023 - National Survey of Children's Health Data Briefs - NCBI Bookshelf](#)

² Arthur Brooks, *The Meaning of Your Life* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2026), 3.

³ See Jonathan Haidt's, *The Anxious Generation*.

⁴ Arthur Brooks, *The Meaning of Your Life* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2026).

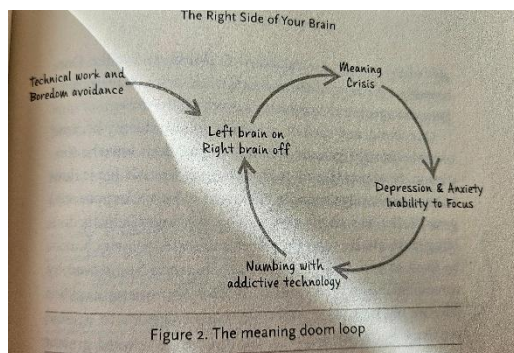
⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

So, to be anxious about nothing, we get rid of our phones...right? Well, that would help, but it's unrealistic for most people. So, let's at least understand what's happening to our brains and why it is that our phone use leads to depression, anxiety, loneliness, and now meaninglessness.

Thanks to the work of the British neuroscientist, Iain McGilchrist, in his book entitled *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, we now have a working theory as to why our phone addictions are wreaking so much havoc with our mental health. According to McGilchrist, The right side of the brain is the “master,” which asks big, transcendental questions such as “Why am I alive?” The left side of the brain—which he calls the “emissary”—addresses such practical questions as “How do I get food so I can keep being alive?”⁷ In summary, the right hemisphere of the brain is where we ask the why questions about life (complex problems). On the left side, we ask what to do now and how to do it (complicated problems).

So, here's our modern dilemma: We struggle with depression and anxiety because our lives feel meaningless. However, because we can't stand boredom and this oppressive sense of depression/anxiety/meaninglessness, we distract ourselves with endless hours on our phones. Every time we look at the phone, our brains are shoved over to the left hemisphere, petrifying our sense of meaninglessness because the left hemisphere of the brain doesn't contemplate meaning and the mysteries of life. Therefore, the more we use our phones, the more we will struggle with our sense of depression/anxiety/ and meaninglessness. This is what Brooks calls “The Doom Loop.” (show image).



So, what do we do? How do we break out of the doom loop and discover meaning in our lives?

Well, let's first define meaning. Two well-known psychologists have suggested that $\text{Meaning} = \text{Coherence} + \text{Purpose} + \text{Significance}$.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

Coherence is the understanding that things happen in your life for a reason. We will never discover meaning in our lives if we go throughout our days thinking that life on earth is random, accidental time plus chance.

Purpose is the conviction that you have life and breath in order to do something. The Greeks called this *telos*--it is the end which informs our goals and decisions. If we don't know our purpose, we don't know where we are and or where we are going.

Finally, Significance is an understanding of your life's value, both to yourself but especially in relationship to others. If you don't understand the value of your life, your life will feel meaningless. Think *It's a Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart! George Bailey was ready to jump off a bridge because his left-brained world had come crashing down around him, but God sent an angel to show George how radically his town, those he loved, and even people half-way around the world would have suffered had he never been born. George reclaimed his life with tremendous joy when he realized his God-given significance, even though his dire circumstances remained unchanged.

So, how do we find coherence, purpose, and significance? How do we discover meaning in our lives?

We must interrupt the doom loop, and, says Dr. Brooks, we must THINK differently. Church, that is exactly what the Apostle Paul just said in Philippians 4.

II. Right Thinking

The Apostle Paul writes his letter to the church in Philippi while he is imprisoned in Rome. Think about that. Paul's freedoms have been revoked. Paul is suffering loss, isolation, and persecution though he has committed no crime. And yet, from the context of unjust incarceration, Paul writes these words of encouragement to the persecuted church. He says, "Be anxious about nothing!" Instead, says Paul, we should practice gratitude, rejoice in the LORD, talk to God and bring our requests to Him. And then, Paul says, THINK differently! He writes in vs. 8: ⁸Finally, 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*.

How we choose to think...what we choose to think about...directly impacts our feelings of anxiety and our understanding of meaning. To combat feelings of anxiety, depression, and meaninglessness, Paul directs the Church to THINK about what is TRUE. Think about what is always true, the ultimate truth that does not change, regardless of the circumstances in our lives.

If you are a Christian, you know that you are God's beautiful creation, made in God's image, and redeemed by the blood of Jesus. You know that you are no accident, and that God is ultimately

sovereign over all of creation and even all of history. We have the promise of Romans 8:28 that “In all things, we know that God is working for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” That is a promise of coherence. Life may be hard at times, but it’s not random. We also find in Paul’s words a promise of purpose. God has a plan for our lives, and He is working out His plan in the hardest seasons of our lives. Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” We also have a promise of significance: God thinks about US! God values us! God is working on our behalf! Our lives are of so much value that God gave His only Son to redeem us from the Fall (Romans 5:8). This biblical worldview is TRUE, so we must think about what is true and live into that truth so that, in the deepest possible way, we UNDERSTAND biblical truth to be actually TRUE in our everyday lives. Are you struggling with anxiety and meaninglessness? Think about what God has said, who God is, and who God says we are. Think about and listen to the One who said, “I am the Truth” in John 14:6. Church, Truth matters, and Jesus is the Truth, amen? Think about what is true.

Paul also directs the Church to think about what is honorable, just, pure, and commendable. Let me ask you a tough question: ? How much of what you watch on TV is honorable, pure, and commendable? How much of what you look at on your phone is honorable, just, pure, and commendable? How comfortable would you feel if your scrolling history was posted online for all the world to see? How often are you subjecting your mind to those things that are dishonorable, crude, and impure? Church, no one is forcing you to think about those things—you are choosing to think about those things. You control what you think about, which means you can change what you think about. Take this challenge to heart: Put down your phone and practice thinking about those things that are God-honoring, noble, and pure. Commit the first hour of your day and the last hour of your day to be phone-free and focus your mind (and your eyes if possible) upon that which is honorable, just, pure, and lovely.

I was out on the lake a few weeks ago with my son Caleb. The sun was setting over the water, the fish were biting, the conversation was rich, and I said something to the effect of, “My life would be perfect if I could spend the last few hours of every day right here.” At the time, I was simply confessing my love for the water, fishing, and the beauty of God’s creation. But upon reflection, my heart was overflowing because I had devoted a few hours to thinking about and gazing upon God’s pure and lovely creation with gratitude in my heart and reverence for God. I was spending time with my beloved son, and it was *real joy* that I was experiencing. I had no feelings of guilt because I was not sinning against God, nor was I filling my mind with crassness, crudeness, conspiracy theories, or fearful predictions of doom. Had Caleb and I stayed home and laid around scrolling on our phones, we can all agree that something totally other would have filled my heart and mind, right?

Church, be intentional about what you feed your mind. Think about what is lovely, what is commendable, those things that are praiseworthy and excellent...all of which will require the full, undivided attention of your RIGHT hemisphere! Think about it: Every word on this list given by the Apostle Paul in vs. 8 is an appeal to the right side of your brain. It is an appeal to the numinous, the place in our hearts and minds where we contemplate mystery, beauty, truth and meaning. If we are to be those who are anxious about nothing...if we are to be those who understand coherence, purpose, and significance in our lives...we must THINK upon these things, which means we must interrupt the doom cycle, put down our phones, and embrace the uncomfortable “boredom” of contemplation. We must risk deep, difficult, revealing conversations with close friends and family about the meaning of our lives, even when answers are hard to come by. We must set aside “virtual” reality and artificial intelligence in order to engage in the real life of meaningful relationships, meaningful purpose, and meaningful significance, even when that makes us uncomfortable or stretches us beyond the safety of our former experiences. The real world, the world of meaning, is full of hard questions, suffering, risk, and mystery. Truth and beauty are only understood in the living and reflecting, not the scrolling and defecting. There is no other path to meaning...we must change the way we think, which will change the way we live. We must change the way we live so that we might change the way we think.

I encourage you to pick up a copy of Aurther Brooks, *The Meaning of Your Life* which will walk you through some steps to discover the meaning in your life that is there for the finding. As we discover our meaning, we will eliminate a great deal of the anxiety and depression that haunts us. I want to close now by directing you to David’s affirmation of meaning.

III. David’s Affirmation of Meaning

Many of you know my dear friend, Pastor Gary Schmitz. Gary is an incredible leader in our city and a devout man of prayer. Throughout the years I’ve heard Gary wonder aloud how David, the young shepherd who became the King of Israel, came to write such profound poetry about God in the Psalms. It’s a reasonable and thoughtful question. We are always quick to say that the Holy Spirit inspired David, and that is most certainly true. But how did David hear God’s Spirit? How did David come to have such a profound understanding and intimacy with God?

Well, among other factors, David had to endure significant stretches of boredom! Boredom is the bane of the modern man, and yet David’s early years were filled with boredom. Young David was a shepherd who spent long hours in the wild and countless nights staring up at the stars. His mind was not devoted to complicated questions of how and what; instead, his mind was devoted to complex questions of why...questions about who God is and who we are as those created in God’s image. As his mind ruminated upon the mysteries of life and existence, David came to understand the deep meaning of his life, and that meaning is powerfully articulated in the 23rd Psalm. As we prepare to enter back into our data-saturated lives, I would invite you to meditate

upon the profound musings of a pensive shepherd who understood the meaning of his existence in a way that every human soul longs to understand meaning.

David affirmed the meaning of his life in these famous words:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

Did you hear it?

Coherence: Whether he is in the quiet, calm, and splendid times of life, or he is walking through the horrors of death and loss, he is one led by the Good Shepherd, so he need not fear evil. David trusts the Shepherd to provide because the Shepherd knows that the sheep is defenseless and incapable of providing for itself...as such, David trusts that God will lead him, provide for him, and defend him against evil...come what may.

Purpose: David understands that God is leading him down a path of righteousness. It is the right path, and the purpose of the path (the purpose of his journey on earth) is to bring glory to God. The path of life is for God's namesake, not his. David has a purpose that is greater than David, and the end of David's life is to be with the Shepherd and to dwell in His house forever.

Significance: David understands that he is loved and cared for by God. God provides what he needs, and it is God that restores his soul. God is the one who validates David's significance, even in the presence of those who oppose David. God has anointed David with significance...his significance is not dependent upon performance or the whimsical acknowledgements of men.

We must remember that David endured tremendous hardships, some of which resulted from his disobedience before God. Even so, David was able to hold on to his faith because he understood

the truth about who God is and who God made David to be. That deep sense of meaning helped David overcome great trials and disappointments, and the world has been forever blessed with David's profound insights into the mysteries of God's work in the world as communicated through the Psalms.

If you are wrestling with anxiety, depression, and meaninglessness, I encourage you to Spend time every day for the next 30 days contemplating the 23 Psalm. Memorize every word and internalize the truth of who God is and who you are as revealed in the psalm. Every minute you spend thinking about these words will fire up the right side of your brain, and you will give opportunity for the Spirit of God to speak to your spirit. You might at first find that exercise to be boring...but that's the point. Boredom is the fertile field of contemplation, and it is there that we begin to discover the meaning that God has already declared for our lives.

Church, be encouraged: God created you, God loves you, God has a plan for your life, and God has made a way out of the darkness that presses upon our souls. Through Jesus, His only Son, God made a way for us to be forgiven, redeemed, and restored to the full value of His beloved children, and that is a gift we call grace. God's grace is sufficient for your soul, and God's plan is sufficient for your life. This is TRUE, so 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. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Will you pray with me?