

Hey Creek family, I hope you are enjoying a beautiful spring, with flowers blooming, trees showing signs of color and life, and the weather, slowing but surely, warming up. We are now 7 weeks into sheltering in place. 7 weeks into doing church online. 7 weeks into following the news which seems to only be able to talk about one thing. 7 weeks of watching very unsettling numbers rise. 7 weeks of people experiencing loss and heartache, fear and panic, confusion and frustration - so many different emotions. I want to encourage us, as a church family, to really summon our mental, emotional, and spiritual strength at this point and commit to staying sharp and focused, compassionate and wise. We don't know exactly how long this season is going to last, but we are at a stage in the journey where fatigue and restlessness could very easily set in. We could get into unhealthy patterns with how we are spending our time, we could lose our patience with family members, we could end up with almost all of our thoughts focused primarily on ourselves rather than focused on God, and on other people, and on how God might be calling us to love and serve other people. So we don't know how much longer this might last, but I think we need a pastoral moment right now to encourage us to stay focused, to stay strong, and to commit to finishing this challenging season well.

On that note, I'd like to take a brief moment to share with you some things that are happening at our church right now, to give you an update on how things are going. And there are truly *so many* incredible stories to report. As a faith family, people at The Creek have stayed united and encouraged. Our online attendance has actually been more than 25% to 30% more than our in-person attendance ever was. Our small groups are continuing to meet. Groups are meeting on their computers and posting pictures, which I love. There have been groups that have met in the church's parking lot to actually be in person, while still being socially distant. One group didn't even allow the rain to stop them! They put up umbrellas and said, "Let's make it happen." I love that!

And as a church, we are continuing to live on mission: we are loving God, loving others, and making disciples, all in an effort to connect people to Jesus. I was in our warehouse a few days ago and on a single day, as a church you dropped off *over 900 pounds* of food to share with people in our community who are in need. It blew every previous record out of the water! This is a church that is *for the 317*. And did you know that we have about a dozen people who are in active conversations with pastors and leaders at our church about being baptized? People are placing their faith in Jesus - finding the life and hope available in him, and in him alone.

Your generosity has continued to astound me. I was on the phone just a few days ago with a pastor who told me he had to lay off half of their staff because the financial giving at their church had so drastically declined. It was heartbreaking to hear. Your generosity and your faithfulness has allowed our story to be so different. So many of you have transitioned to online giving, our contributions have been well over 90% of our budgeted need - which, given the financial climate we are in, is truly exceptional. The needs of our staff have been met, our ongoing ministries have continued without any disruption, and our valued mission partners who are doing great work all around the world have continued to receive 100% of our pledged support.

And, just a few days ago, I was with a family in our church. The husband pulled out his wallet and handed me a check made out to The Creek. *It was for \$500,000.* He said, “Our church is doing such great work. Let’s get debt free so that we can keep changing lives and keep connecting people to Jesus for years and years to come.” That’s New Testament stuff right there! I saw that check and even though we are supposed to be doing social distancing, I gave him a huge hug. I said, “Thank you! Praise God. We should pray!” And right after I said those words, “Let’s pray,” that very second, my phone went off. I looked down...it was my 3:17 PM alarm reminding me to pray for our church and our community. It was the best timing in the world, almost undeniably God’s way of saying, “I got this. I’m in control. I’m working in so many ways, even in ways you can’t see.” Later that day I sent a message to a few friends in our church, sharing the good news of that gift, and the people on that text thread were all so inspired by that first family’s generosity that they pledged about \$10,000 to add to it! So many incredible stories! And friends, that puts our debt *under \$1,000,000.* The end is in sight!

There is an old adage that says: “Adversity reveals reality.” No one likes facing adverse circumstances, but when they come (and they inevitably will!), how you respond to them shows who you really are. This adversity has allowed the true colors of the people at The Creek to shine. I am so proud of you. I am so grateful for you. And this weekend just happens to mark my 3 year anniversary here at The Creek! It is such an honor to be a part of a church like this.

Last week we looked at Philippians 4, the most popular, most highlighted section in the entire Bible. And we listened to the Apostle Paul tell us not to be anxious about anything - and that’s quite a statement to people like us, because we live in a time and a place where we are anxious about *everything*. We talked about how anxiety is rampant in our country, affecting more than 40 million people in America. It’s the number one health issue for women in our country, and the number two for men. Somehow, anxiety spreads like a contagion in America. Even though we have so much abundance and affluence, when people move to America from other parts of the world - dangerous, impoverished parts of the world - they get here, where they are safe and have seemingly endless opportunities, and their anxiety goes through the roof! That’s our world today. And that was all *before* the pandemic.

Philippians 4:4 tells us that instead of being anxious we are to rejoice in the Lord. Not to rejoice in our circumstance or our situation, which are changing all the time, but to rejoice in the *Lord*, who is never changing. Instead of taking our attention and focusing on our obstacles or on our fears or on our challenges or even on ourselves which can result in us being worried, distracted or discouraged, we focus on God, and we are reminded that God is omniscient, which means that God knows everything - including everything about us, we are reminded that God is omnipotent, he has all the power in the universe available to him, there is nothing he can’t do, and we are reminded that God is omnibenevolent, he is all good, and he will only ever do the best possible thing. Though challenges and difficulties might come because he has given us free will and because we live in a fallen, broken world, he will be at work through every situation for our good. *That* is why we can rejoice in the Lord always. Yes, hard times will come, anxieties and worries will hit. But when they do, we lay our burdens and concerns at his feet and ask the one who runs the universe to work powerfully on our behalf. When we take those steps, Philippians 4:7 tells us that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Now that's a review from last week, but Paul continues. Listen to how he picks up in 4:8 with such incredibly practical words: "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. 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."

In the previous verses Paul told us to rejoice in the Lord, to turn our worries into worship and bring our request before him in prayer. In these verses, Paul continues to give us Holy Spirit inspired guidance, teaching us what we should spend our time thinking about. And he didn't list our normal top ten on Netflix, or sports, or school assignments, bills, social media, household chores, stewing over the people who have hurt us, wronged us, or disappointed us, worrying about hypothetical worst-case scenarios. He said, "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."

Here's what we need to know - this is so, so important: When it comes to claiming victory over anxiety and/or depression, what you decide to think about, what you decide to meditate on, what you give your focus and attention to makes *such* an enormous impact.

I remember years ago being on the Oregon coast at a place called Cannon Beach. One morning I went out for a run and after a few miles I got to a scenic overlook where I stopped and took in this expansive view of the Pacific. As I was catching my breath and saying a prayer, my gaze was drawn to a piece of driftwood near the shore. Every time a wave came, which was literally every few seconds, do you know what happened to that driftwood? It was washed back and forth, here and there, rolled all around. It was in a constant state of turbulence there in the surf.

If we are not intentional - if we are not purposeful and deliberate - that's what can happen with our minds. We can be tossed back and forth, at the mercy of whatever thought hits us. Which of course leads to distraction, lack of focus, and often to anxiety, depression, fear, the list could go on. But that is not how we *have* to live. At the same time that I was watching that driftwood, I also looked over and saw these enormous rocks, majestically rising out of the ocean. When the waves came, do you know what happened to the rocks? Nothing. Wave after wave after wave, all morning long, it didn't matter how large or how small the wave, nothing moved the rock. It wasn't the rock being displaced by the water, it was the water being displaced by the rock.

And that's the power Paul tells us we have when it comes to the thoughts in our minds. We are not helpless, we do not have to be slaves who follow every idea, every thought, every temptation, every fear that hits us. We can take control of our thoughts and decide to focus on what is true, what is noble, what is right, what is pure, what is lovely and what is admirable. The Bibles tell us in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that we are to "Take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ." *Take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.* We are not to be taken captive by our thoughts, we are to take our thoughts captive. We don't defeatedly say, "Fear, you get to rule over me. Anxiety, you get to rule over me. Worry, hopelessness, despair, you get to rule over me, you are in charge, do whatever you want." No, Jesus rules over us, Jesus is in charge. Our

thoughts are to be obedient to him. We are not slaves to every idea, every thought, every worry, we are slaves to Jesus. And we are to bring our thoughts under his reign and rule, under his sovereign Lordship.

One of the steps I think is really important for those who wrestle with anxiety and depression is for there to be a time when we come to the place in each of our lives where we each take ownership and accept responsibility for the role we have played in getting to the place where we are presently at. I realize that when it comes to anxiety or depression, we typically don't get there all on our own (unfair, unfortunate and sometimes very heartbreaking things have happened to us, and I don't want to minimize those), but nevertheless, anxiety and depression come not primarily from what happen to us, but from how we responded to what happens to us.

Countless studies have been done of people who have won the lottery, as well as people who have suffered tragic accidents and permanently lost the ability to walk. So everybody's dream come true, and everybody's nightmare come true. Did you know that, more often than not, when people win the lottery and their wealth goes through the roof, after their initial wave of excitement and jubilation wears off, their anxiety and discontentment with life goes to an all-time high? As their bank account soars, their quality of life takes a nosedive. Just the opposite for those who end up wheelchair bound. After the initial wave of shock and discouragement, their mental state, their joy, their positivity returns to the level it was before, or actually gets better than ever - because now they aren't taking anything in life for granted and are thankful for every breath.

What should that tell us? It should tell us that our joy, our peace, our contentment, our anxiety, our fear, our depression, in the long run is not about *what* has happened to us, it's about how we have *responded* to what's happened to us. So, if right now you are dealing with anxiety, with fear, with depression, take ownership for that, and decide today that you are no longer going to play the victim, you are not going to allow your mind to be like the driftwood, tossed here and there by every thought that comes into your head. You are going to take control, take every thought captive in obedience to Jesus, you are going to decide intentionally, purposefully, worshipfully, to think about, to meditate on what is true, what is noble, what is right, what is pure, lovely, and admirable. That is how you win the war in the battlefield of your mind.

Let me share a few practical examples, based upon a number of scenarios I've spoken with people about recently. I know a lot of parents have worries about their kids. So, when your kids come to your mind you think things like: what if they don't turn out smart enough, or healthy enough, or attractive enough? What if they don't make the right friends, get the right grades, get into the right college, if they don't date the right person, find the right career, or live close to home - the list could go on and on and on and on. Worry and anxiety about your kids can paralyze you. What if instead, every time your kids came to mind, you said to God, "Lord, thank you for my child. What an indescribably great gift. I know with as good of a parent as I hope to be, you are their perfect heavenly father. I entrust them to your care. God, help all of my interactions with them and my love for them to be a perfect mirror of your heart for them." In that moment, you are taking control and focusing on what is true and right, and you are taking what could cause anxiety and turning it into prayer.

What about single people? Our church is blessed to have a lot of single people. I want to remind you, if you are single, one is a whole number. You do not need to be in a relationship, or married, or to be leading a family to be complete. Now I know it's one thing to hear that, it's another to believe it. I know for those of you who are single how easy and natural it can be to allow anxiety about your singleness to settle into your mind. You start thinking, "Why has everyone else found someone, and I haven't? Is there something wrong with me? Will I ever find that person? Will I be too old when I do? Should I lower my standards? Should I try another online dating site?" Those thoughts go on and on. What if instead of chasing every rabbit down every hole, whenever those thoughts came to your mind you turned them into a prayer and said, "God, I trust you. You are in control of my life. So at the right time, if it is your will, I am asking you to bring the right person into my life - and until that time, help me to make the most of this season I am in right now, help me to grow in contentment, show me who you are calling me to love and serve and invest into. Sanctify me during this time so that, if you are calling me to be married, when I do meet the person who is right for me, I have become the person who is right for them." That's how you switch from being a servant to fearful thoughts to being in control, making thoughts obedient to Jesus, and turning any worries you might have into worshipful prayers.

Now you can come up with other examples of what that might look like for whatever it is that's causing anxiety in your life these days - it could be work, finances, the stock market, health, marriage, in-laws, home schooling during the virus lockdown, the list is literally never ending. But again, the key thing is to not allow whatever is on the top of that list to have permanent real estate in your mind. Take control, choose what you are going to meditate on. Just like we said from Max Lucado last week, "The presence of anxiety is unavoidable, but the prison of anxiety is optional." We get to decide what we focus on and give attention to. Notice Paul doesn't tell us what to not think about, what to avoid. That doesn't work so well. If I told you right now, "Try really hard not to think about elephants - big elephants, baby elephants, elephants with ivory tusks, elephants with long trunks," you would probably end up with an image of an elephant in your brain. Instead of trying to eliminate the negative and create a void, God's word tells us to proactively choose what to focus on instead: whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy. That's how we have peace that surpasses understanding.

The reality is that anxiety and fear, when working properly, are actually great gifts from God. When working in moderation, anxiety and fear help us stay alive, but when out of balance, anxiety and fear keep us from really living.

I remember when I was in college taking a week-long trip to California with seven or eight friends. One day, we decided to take a several hour-long hike that ended with us, at lunch time, on top of this mountain, overlooking a pristine valley. Finally to the top, we sat down, said a prayer, pulled out lunch, and began to devour our food. We had worked up quite the appetite. We were in nature, and I was beginning to feel nature call, if you know what I mean. So I excused myself, maybe went 50 yards away to a tree in the distance and began to relieve the pressure that was building up. I was in the middle of that experience when I heard what sounded like a child's toy. You know, like a little rattle. There were no kids around! I looked down, and sure enough, I was peeing on three rattlesnakes. Very quickly I transitioned from peeing on the rattlesnakes to peeing on myself. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my entire life. Now, when I saw

those snakes, I had anxiety and fear! Anxiety and fear were important - if I felt no fear in that moment, I might not be alive today! When anxiety and fear are working properly, in balance, they serve us well - they cause us to keep a healthy distance from poisonous snakes. When anxiety and fear are out of balance, they rob joy from our lives, they attack our mental health, and they limit the range of options in life available to us. It's one thing to say, "I don't want to pee on three rattle snakes. So I'm going to be careful and examine my surroundings." It's another thing to say, "There might be snakes outside, so I'm never going to go on a hike again." You see the difference?

Helpful fear says: "Don't put all of your money on the Colts to win the Superbowl next year."
Unhelpful anxiety says: "Keep all your money in cash and hide it under your mattress."

Helpful fear says: "Don't tell every person you meet your deepest, darkest secret."
Unhelpful anxiety says: "Never let anyone in. Don't give them the chance to hurt you."

Helpful fear says: "Don't let your kids play in the street."
Unhelpful anxiety says: "Never let your kids out of your sight."

I know a lot of people who have allowed unhelpful anxiety to have control over their life, and it's kept them from really living. If that is you, please hear me today: you have to reclaim the real estate in your mind, and to begin to re-training yourself how to think. Don't be the driftwood, take your thoughts captive, focus on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable. If anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things!

So what does God's word tell us to do if we want peace that surpasses understanding? Instead of focusing on our circumstances, we focus on God, that he sees us, that he is in control, that he is working all things together for the good of those who love him, and we rejoice in that truth. We take our worries and turn them into prayers, laying them at his feet and asking him to work powerfully on our behalf. And as we talked about today, we get intentional about what happens in our minds. We don't play the victim, we don't pretend we are helpless, slaves to every thought that enters our minds. We strategically, purposefully, and worshipfully chose what we are going to think about, we take our thoughts captive and make them obedient to Jesus, so that we can flourish in our life and in our faith, and so that God is honored in all that we do.

Those are important lessons, but the key thing for us is not simply to learn those lessons, but to implement them, to apply them in our lives in practical ways. Listen to how Paul concludes the paragraph: "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."

God has given us a very important word today. But we don't just want to be hearers of the word who have acquired new ideas, new facts, new strategies. We want to be doers of the word who put what God has taught us into practice. When we do, we will be able to replace anxiety, fear, depression, and despair with the peace of God that transcends all understanding. And it's not just the peace of God we are promised, it's the God of peace *himself* who will be with us.

Friends, this isn't intended to be a self-help, feel-good, pie in the sky message. This is about

responding to reality as it actually is. We have a God who loved us to the point of sending his Son to die for us. We have a Savior who took the worst the world had to offer, took it from every angle, was laid in a tomb, and three days later, rose from the dead. *He has won the victory.* Our lives and our eternities are safe in his hands. We have *real* peace because we have a *real* God who loved us to the point of death, and even beyond death, so that we could be with him now and forever. That is the God who promises to be near to us, that is the God who lives within us. That's why we have reason to rejoice in the Lord.