

I'd like to thank you for keeping my brother Tom in your prayers. He had his prostate removed this week. The surgery went fine, and the cancer is gone. In the hospital, Tom was groggy, but as he came to, he started talking. I said, "You must be relieved to have that cancer out of your system." He said, "I'm just relieved that the surgery is over." The surgery produced more anxiety than the illness it fixed. A lot of you can understand this. And if you are a fairly calm person, just try surgery sometime; you'll learn all about anxiety.

There are some good reasons why people should feel anxious from time to time, but we sometimes needlessly bring anxiety on ourselves. We burden our minds with images that don't belong there. We dwell on the hurts caused when others have injured us, the jealousies we feel when love doesn't go our way, and the temptations to sin that keep us perversely entertained. Our thoughts may be hidden, but anxiety becomes visible. It affects how we talk, how we look, and how we act. When we're not at our best on the outside, it could be our minds are dealing with needless anxiety on the inside.

Saint Paul explains how to find peace in his letter to the Philippians. Philippi was an ancient city about the size of Cameron today, and its population included veterans and prisoners. When Paul visited there he won a number of converts, but he also made enemies who had him arrested. After he was set free, he left, but he wrote a letter back to the Philippians, and in spite of all that happened to him, he says to them almost flippantly, "Have no anxiety at all." That's easier said than done, but they knew what Paul had been through with them, and that he could speak from experience about anxiety. Paul says you can deal with it by prayer: make your requests known to God; put your cares in the hands of the One who can do something about them. This will replace anxiety with peace. We repeat a sentence from this letter at the end of every funeral: "The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul offers an additional technique to find peace – a mental exercise: replace the thoughts that bother you with thoughts that help you. He says, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." In other words, "Count your blessings." Negative things have tremendous power. One bad experience can damage the rest of your day. One nasty person at school can ruin an entire semester. It shouldn't be this way, and it doesn't have to. But negative things have power, and if we let them inhabit our minds, they will change our outlook and our actions. Paul says don't even think about them. Think about other things. Then, he says, "the God of peace will be with you." Not just the peace of God! The God of peace will himself be with you.

It is hard to have no anxiety at all, but we can usually get better control over it if we remember the good things that uphold us, and hand over to God the bad things that restrain us. When we do that, the God of peace will be with us too.