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A Call to Prayer in Times like These

By Peter Robinson

In the midst of this present crisis one of the greatest gifts the church has for the world is prayer. Not prayer as a way of retreating from, or turning away from, the world, but prayer as means of being more present to the world in the midst of this crisis. In prayer, in worship, we begin with who we are; God's people seeking to understand how to live out of God's presence with us, for the world. As churches struggle to know how to respond to the boundaries of self-isolation many have moved online with daily services of prayer. Others are putting together resources to support individuals and families in renewing practices of daily prayer and Bible reading. Some churches are calling for days of prayer and fasting. What a gift it could be if, in the midst of what we are facing, we are able to renew and strengthen our practices of regular prayer.

In Philippians 4, as Paul speaks to a church facing struggles and difficulties (including the mixed messages of false teaching) he exhorts his readers to stand firm (verse 1) in the face of their situation. He then goes on to say: *Let your reasonableness (or forbearance) be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing but in everything by*

prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God and the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard (keep) your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Stand firm, be reasonable, and be anxious for nothing.

Our first instinct to these imperatives may be to ask, "how exactly are we supposed to do that when faced with the extraordinary events of the past few weeks?" Or maybe we might ask that question a different way—who is not anxious in one way or another in the midst of the upheaval we are all experiencing? Anxiety quickly creeps into our hearts and minds preoccupying us, distracting us, surrounding and overwhelming us, filling our horizon with fear. The Bible speaks consistently of faith as a remedy for anxiety. But as anyone who has struggled with anxiety knows, this is not as simple as gritting our teeth and choosing to believe; the idea that we should control our worry through sheer willpower only makes it worse.

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Thank goodness that the focus of these verses is not on our ability to quell anxiety. The focus, instead, is on the practice of prayer as an act of faith, it is about our turning to God in the face of anxiety. The weight of the imperative (do not be anxious) is not so much a call to deal with our anxiety as it is a call to turn to God in prayer. Pray in everything, and, in every situation we find ourselves in, pray. Prayer is basic to living the Christian faith day by day, turning to God in the midst of every situation. In the crucible of these days, we have the opportunity to recognize at a more visceral level how basic prayer is. Prayer redirects the focus of our confidence towards God and away from our ability to control our circumstances. Prayer is no magic tool that washes away our anxiety or resolves all of our issues. And Philippians 4 is not a guide to self-help—five easy steps to obliterate the worries in our lives. Rather, it speaks of what it means to live the Christian life in any and all circumstances.

In *Testament of Hope*, Martin Luther King Jr said, “faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come...”

Paul is writing this letter from prison.

He doesn't know if he is going to be set free or sentenced to death. The church he is

writing to is facing opposition and hardship from many different quarters. There is division in the church and false teaching is causing confusion. Paul is not suggesting that we just have to pray and everything will be okay or that God will swoop in and fix it all. Rather, in verses 11 and 12, he says “I've learned to be content, satisfied, whether I have a lot or little.” Rather than putting his confidence in what he has or doesn't have, rather than putting his confidence in the hope that everything will work out the way he wants it to, he is putting his confidence in God, in Jesus. His freedom to trust is not grounded in what he hopes God will do, but in who God in Jesus Christ has already shown himself to be: step by step Paul has come to see more clearly the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus.

The letter to the Philippians is an encouragement to us in the midst of darkness or distress, to keep putting one foot in front of another. The practice of daily prayer at times feels repetitive or burdensome and yet it consistently serves to put our focus and attention where it should be. It is our reality check—loosening the grip that worry has on our heart, prying us open to see the world in light of God and God's goodness. It lifts our eyes off the yawning chasm in front of us, that threatens to overwhelm us, helping us to focus instead on the God who meets us and stays with us even in the midst of our darkness.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not

fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling (Psalm 46:1-3).

Paul's words are timely for us today because in this time of crisis the world needs people of steadfastness and forbearance, people of prayer who are able to stand firm as the storms batter us all. With so much sickness and fear, people losing their jobs or businesses, medical professionals putting their lives on the line, and all of us being asked to self-isolate, it can feel as though there is little that we can do.

But we can pray.

And we can keep encouraging one another to pray. We can pray for those who are sick and for the front line health workers who are caring for them, we can pray for those who have lost jobs and businesses, we can pray for government leaders to make wise decisions, and we can pray for those overwhelmed by worry and anxiety. We cannot erase anxiety with a prayer but in becoming a people of prayer, deeply rooted in God and his faithfulness to us, we begin to feel under our feet the solid ground on which we can stand.

ABOUT

Peter Robinson is Academic Dean & Professor of Proclamation, Worship and Ministry.



Stay healthy, stay well...

During this time of social distancing, the change of lifestyle can be a challenge for many, whether you live on your own, with your family, or with other roommates. As Professor Peter Robinson writes in his blog post, this is a time to turn to God and draw close to him. We would like to point you to some resources that might help you and your loved ones remain healthy physically and mentally.

STAYING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

There are many free online resources that help you stay active and motivated. Here we list a few:

- Canada's National Ballet School and Baycrest are sharing the power of dance and helping people of all ages find creative ways to keep moving. They also have videos for seniors and people who prefer to remain seated while learning the choreography. Visit: <https://www.nbs-enb.ca/Sharing-Dance/Bring-Dance-Into-Your-Home>
- University of Toronto Fitness and Performance puts out videos of exercises that you may easily do at home. See their Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/uoftfandp/>

FOR YOUNG FAMILIES: KEEPING YOUR KIDS ENTERTAINED

- YMCA of greater Toronto streams free family-friendly classes and activities everyday on their Facebook page for the whole family such as parent/child storytime, family fitness. You may find these classes and their schedule at <https://www.facebook.com/YMCAGTA/>
- Some game ideas to help your kids stay active while schools are closed: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-this-photo-scavenger-hunt-is-helping-keep-kids-active-and-engaged/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

- A non-profit initiative of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), eMentalHealth.ca provides anonymous, confidential and trustworthy information about mental health, and where to find support such as key resources, as well as nearby mental health professionals and self-help groups.
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health has designed a site to provide information and suggestions about how best to cope in this difficult time. [Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic](http://MentalHealthandtheCOVID-19Pandemic.com) offers tips, coping strategies, and resources to manage your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Names of Theologians Word Search

Find the names of four theologians. We will post the answers next week.



Hints:



Information for Students

SUMMER COURSES

Registration opens for summer courses on April 1, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, classes may need to be delivered online for part or all of the term, and some classes may need to be cancelled. For more information and any updates, visit wycliffecollege.ca/summercourses.

LIBRARY RESOURCES DURING UNIVERSITY CLOSURE

Professor Tom Power created a [Guide to Accessing Electronic Resources](#) for students during this time of university library closure. The link may also be found on wycliffecollege.ca/coronavirus.

CONVOCATION

Regrettably, all May convocation ceremonies at Toronto School of Theology, including Wycliffe College, will be postponed. For more information: wycliffecollege.ca/about/news-media/covid-19-response-convocation-june-2020.

ASSIGNMENT EXTENSIONS

In the midst of the many challenges students are facing we understand that some of you may find it difficult to meet end of term deadlines. If this is the case for you, see <https://wycliffecollege.ca/about/news-media/covid-19-response-update-assignment-extensions> for information on assignment extension options.

TST SCHOLARSHIPS—DEADLINE EXTENDED

Applications are now being accepted for the TST Board of Trustees Scholarships, Bursaries and Awards. Applications must be submitted by **4:00 pm EDT, Tuesday, April 28, 2020 (extended deadline)**. Visit the TST website for more information: <https://www.tst.edu/academic/scholarships-and-bursaries>

How's everyone doing?

In these strange and uncertain times, we are all needing to find ways to remain connected to loved ones, to encourage the disheartened, to calm the fearful, to adjust our methods of carrying out our callings. We want to hear your stories.

In 300 words or less, tell us about your experiences over the past few weeks. How have they changed you? How have they impacted your learning, your ministry, your life, your faith?

Send your stories to Patricia Paddey, Wycliffe's communications director, at ppaddey@wycliffe.utoronto.ca. We may publish a selection of them online or in an up-coming print or electronic publication.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling (Psalm 46:1-3).