

“Melt Down”

1 Peter 1:6–7, 10-16; 5:6-7

Philippians 4:10–13

We live in such an anxious time. Turn to the Lord.



Ready for this? An important 2010 study¹ looking at key psychological scores for American college students from 1938 to 2007, found that 85% of recent college students score above the 1930 - 1940 average on measures of psychopathology. More anxiety, more depression, more feelings of alienation – all are on the rise, often dramatically. The authors of the 2010 study argue that consumer culture and individualism have raised the bar of expectations so high that mental health suffers as a result. This view draws support from research finding that people pursuing extrinsic goals such as money, looks, and status are more likely to be anxious and depressed. Even though this study is now ten years old, my supposition—as we shelter in place—is that our collective anxiousness is even worse. Clearly, we 21st century Americans know a thing or two about anxiety.

“Cast all your anxiety on him”

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In Peter’s day, people were anxious and stressed out even when times were good – much less than when they were bad. For the ancients, the heavens were populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted when they wanted. People coped with the imagined whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn’t control their capricious gods, they’d simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.² Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called “contentment.”³

Far from promoting some sort of detached self-sufficiency, Peter urges the Christians to throw their anxieties and worries upon God, for it is God who cares for these believers. It is God who will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” the believers, even as they discipline themselves and stay vigilant against the work of Satan. Peterson paraphrases Peter this way: “this generous God . . . will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.”

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as “content” (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ.⁴ But Paul

¹ “Birth cohort increases in psychopathology among young Americans, 1938–2007: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the MMPI,” Jean M. Twenge, Brittany Gentile, C. Nathan DeWall, Debbie Ma, Katharine Lacefield, and David R. Schurtz, *Clinical Psychology Review* 30 (2010) 145–154.

² Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that “Epicureanism” has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

³ For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things

⁴ For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul’s appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. The Greeks had always questioned the nature of “being.” Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and “have our being.” He talked to them about Jesus, but in their own words and ideas. Paul knew that all truth is God’s truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the “content” person could not be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different—we rest in the Lord whatever comes.

Paul, you see, is writing from prison and he knows that he may soon be executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution.

How has Paul learned this? What is his “secret”? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul’s secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist’s portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will “fear no evil,” confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul’s cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God’s house forever, because nothing – “not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul’s joyful contentment...and Peter’s...and our own.

Unlearning “self-reliance”

Both Peter and Paul point us in the same direction – toward God. Peterson renders 1 Peter 5:6-7 this way: “So be content with who you are, and don’t put on airs. God’s strong hand is on you; he will promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you.”

I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to “pull myself up by the bootstraps.” Many of us are. Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tentmaker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he could not stand by and leave it up to others. He knew that he was God’s agent, not God’s puppet. “Contentment” for Paul and Peter did not mean just laying back and waiting for life to run you over.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others; we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to fellowship.

More even than that, we are dependent upon God. Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people make us realize that we are dependent upon God, that it is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do, even as our own work and efforts are necessary.

Restoring hope amid anxiety takes a renewed commitment to celebrate God, to embrace the purpose to which God has called us, and to let ourselves fall into God’s arms. As Peter writes to close his letter: “Peace to all of you who are in Christ.”

Daily Bible Readings - *During this series, try reading 1 Peter in its entirety each week, followed by a psalm on Saturday.*

Monday	1 Peter 1	A living hope
Tuesday	1 Peter 2	A chosen people, called to serve
Wednesday	1 Peter 3	Living as exiles, part 1
Thursday	1 Peter 4	Living as exiles, part 2
Friday	1 Peter 5	Tending God’s flock
Saturday	Psalm 56	Trusting in God even under persecution