

“Here’s How I’m Feeling, God”

Devotions for Coaches and Athletes in this time of Coronavirus Concerns



The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting our world and our lives in ways we could not have imagined. As coaches and athletes, we’re likely experiencing a variety of emotions as we walk through this season. The following devotions give us a chance to honestly consider our emotions and what God is saying to us in this unprecedented time.

1 – “I’m Feeling Anxious”

1. *What specific anxieties and fears have you been experiencing in this time of coronavirus concerns?*

In the sports world, courage is essential for success. Pushing yourself harder in training and practices so that you can get better at your sport takes courage. Having the chance to be successful against great competition means you can’t be afraid to fail and that takes courage. Coaches and athletes regularly talk about and tap into courage.

But desiring to be courageous doesn’t mean we’re immune to anxiety and fear. The COVID-19 pandemic has understandably stirred widespread anxiety and fear. If we’re honest, we’ve all experienced – and probably continue to experience – anxiety at some level as the coronavirus has spread, threatened increasing numbers of people, and brought not only athletic competition but also so many other parts of our society to a virtual standstill. Will we or someone we love get sick? How will this impact us in the long run? When, if ever, will we get to resume the sport that’s been such a huge part of our lives?

Read Psalm 56 and Acts 18:1-11

In the New Testament, we read about how the Apostle Paul was an incredible missionary, bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to many cities in all kinds of situations. He faced multiple threats, physical beatings, angry mobs, arrests, being thrown into jail – but he kept going. If you’re looking for someone who personifies courage, Paul seems to be a good bet.

Yet consider what happens to Paul while he’s in the city of Corinth, attempting to share the gospel (Acts 18:9-11):

⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid! Speak out! Don't be silent!" ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me." ¹¹ So Paul stayed there for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God.

In the original language of the New Testament, the Lord Jesus' directive to Paul, "Don't be afraid," literally reads, "*Stop being afraid.*" Paul was struggling with fear. He was anxious, and there were understandable reasons for this because of the possibility of being attacked. But Jesus encourages Paul to refuse to be controlled by fear. Jesus then gives Paul the "secret sauce" that makes this possible: "*for I am with you.*"

The antidote to fear is faith: faith in Jesus. When we're feeling anxious or fearful, the solution is not merely to try harder to be courageous. Rather, we look with faith to Jesus, remembering that he is with us. Jesus makes this promise not only to his original disciples but to all of us who put our trust in him and follow him: "*And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20)

2. *Why does knowing that Jesus is with you enable you to move forward with courageous faith rather than being controlled by anxiety or fear?*

Jesus is the Lord of all whose love is unending, whose power is unrivaled, whose wisdom is unlimited, and whose grace is unfailing – and he is with us. Jesus is literally with us by his Spirit whom he sends to dwell in us when we place our faith in him. So as we encounter anxiety and fear because of the COVID-19 pandemic or anything else, we can look with confidence to Jesus. He is present, he knows, he cares, and he will not be thwarted from fulfilling his promises to us and carrying out his plans for us.

Listen to Jesus as he says to us, "Don't be afraid! For I am with you."

3. *Ask the Lord Jesus to help you hear his voice as he says to you, "Don't be afraid! For I am with you." Ask him to show you what it means to live with courageous faith in your specific circumstances.*

Psalm 56:4 -

I praise God for what he has promised.

I trust in God, so why should I be afraid?

What can mere mortals do to me?

2 – “I’m Feeling Frustrated”

1. *In what ways are you struggling with frustration and anger because of the impact of the coronavirus?*

If you are a coach or athlete whose season was suddenly brought to an abrupt end or canceled even before it started as a result of coronavirus concerns, you’re likely feeling frustrated. Maybe you’re feeling angry that something you love so much was taken from you. On top of this, you’re probably feeling some guilt about your frustration and anger because you know that there are other significant issues at stake as a result of this pandemic: people’s health, lives, jobs, and futures.

Digging deeper, what’s behind our feelings of frustration and anger? In his book *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*, James Bryan Smith asserts that two things are usually at the root of our anger: unmet expectations and fear. For example, when the games we assumed we would be playing or coaching in are suddenly taken from us, our expectations for what competition in sports does for us are unmet. Maybe we look to sports to provide us a sense of fulfillment. Perhaps we rely on sports for a big part of our identity. We then fear that we’ll experience the ongoing emptiness that comes with the loss of our source of fulfillment or identity. This can make us afraid that things will not go well for us in other areas of life.

Read Psalm 4 and Philippians 4:4-9

The antidote to frustration and anger is peace: peace in Jesus. The “peace” the Bible talks about is captured in the Hebrew word *shalom*. It means more than the absence of conflict. *Shalom* carries the idea of experiencing well-being, flourishing, and harmony in all areas of our life as we’re living according to God’s good intent under his reign as our King.

We see this in Psalm 4 as the psalmist contrasts “letting anger gain control over you” (v. 4) with v. 8: “In peace (*shalom*) I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, will keep me safe.” Just a verse before, we get a picture of the flourishing that *shalom* from God brings: “You have given me greater joy than those who have abundant harvests of grain and new wine.” All of this is not the result of the psalmist’s circumstances suddenly changing. Instead, he experiences *shalom* because he has intentionally chosen to “trust in the Lord” (v. 5), knowing “the Lord will answer when I call to him” (v. 3).

2. *How does this understanding of shalom change how you think about the peace God offers you through faith in Jesus? What difference would experiencing this peace make in your life, especially during this difficult season?*

Philippians 4 points to this same pathway to experiencing God’s peace, including in the face of temptations to let frustration, anger, and fear control us because of all the ways the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our lives:

⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

When we place our faith in Jesus and surrender our life to him, we are “in Christ Jesus” – united to Christ. He is now the source of true and lasting *shalom* for us, no matter what we encounter. To access this peace, we bring everything to the Lord in prayer, trusting him. We continually remind ourselves of all the things for which we can be thankful, knowing that every good gift comes from God (James 1:17). Even when in the midst of circumstances like what’s happening with the coronavirus, we can experience God’s peace through trusting Christ – a peace “which exceeds anything we can understand.”

Bring your frustrations, anger, and causes of worry to God in prayer – including missed games, canceled seasons, and unmet sports expectations. Express gratitude to him for all you do have even as you’re encountering the fallout from the coronavirus. Daily commit yourself to trusting and living for Jesus. Let God’s peace guard your heart and your mind.

3. *For what can you be thankful to God during this season? Express your gratitude to him.*
4. *Ask the Lord Jesus to guard your heart and your mind with his peace. Ask him to help you trust him and flourish in his good design for your life during this tumultuous time.*

Philippians 4:6-7 -

⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.

⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

3 – “I’m Feeling Like Everything is Out of Control”

1. *With all that’s happening because of the coronavirus, what areas of your life now seem like they’re out of your control? How does this make you feel?*

Coaches and athletes mark time more by the sports calendar than the actual calendar. Every year we could count on certain events at certain times: the start of our sports season, March Madness, Opening Day for baseball, the Masters in April... These were always there – until suddenly they weren’t. What seemed like far-fetched rumors just a few weeks ago (“Surely they wouldn’t cancel the NCAA tournament or the spring sports season, would they?!”) are now reality.

This and so much more that’s happened because of the COVID-19 pandemic can leave us feeling like the world is spinning out of control. This is amplified by the fact that we have no idea when, or if, everything will return to “normal.” We much prefer to feel like we’re in control. Coaches and athletes are fond of saying things like “control the controllables.” But what if we’re now feeling like pretty much everything is beyond our ability to control?

Read Psalm 46 and Romans 8:31-39

The antidote to struggling when things feel out of control is surrender: surrender to Jesus. This may strike us as the opposite of what we’re inclined to try to do. When things feel out of control, we try to seize back control – even if this is impossible. We double-down on our efforts to hold tightly to what we think we can control – even if actual “control” of these things is by and large an illusion.

Here’s why surrender is the path forward: there is only one who is truly in control of all things, and it’s not us. God alone is sovereign, which simply means he rules over all and therefore nothing is beyond his authority and control. As Psalm 46 says, he is “the Most High” (v. 5): there is no one greater. He is “the Lord Almighty” or “the Lord of Heaven’s Armies” (vv. 7, 11): he is the all-powerful God who has the armies of heaven at his disposal as he reigns over the universe. Because of this, even when everything feels out of control, we can trust this: “God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble” (v. 1).

So rather than trying to hold onto the illusion of being in control, we entrust ourselves to the Most High God who is sovereign over all. We do this through surrendering to Jesus, God’s Son, who came to make a way for our sin against God to be forgiven so that we can be reconciled to him. We surrender *fully* to Jesus, releasing control of every part of our lives to him as our Lord and Leader. And we surrender *daily* to Jesus, living out our commitment to trust and follow him in all things and in every situation.

2. *In what specific areas of your life have you been trying to hold onto control? Bring these areas to the Lord, and commit to fully and daily surrendering to him*

As we surrender to Jesus, he gives us the gift of true and lasting *security* – which we so desperately need in times when everything feels out of control. We are secure in knowing that we are completely and unfailingly loved by the Lord, as Paul assures us in Romans 8:38-39:

³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are secure in knowing that we belong to God no matter what has happened or what may come, as Jesus proclaims to us in John 10:27-30:

²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, ²⁹ for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one.

When everything feels like it is out of control, this is a great reminder of our need to surrender to Jesus and to find our security in him. It is through surrender to Christ that we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is true: *“despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.” (Rom. 8:37)*

3. *Read slowly through Romans 8:38-39 again, allowing the Lord to assure you of his unfailing love for you personally. Pray for open eyes to see how Jesus is directing you to share this love with people around you today – especially people who are struggling.*

Psalm 46:10-11 -

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!

I will be honored by every nation.

I will be honored throughout the world."

¹¹ The Lord of Heaven's Armies is here among us;

the God of Israel is our fortress.

4 – “I’m Feeling Confused”

1. *What questions do you have for God as a result of what’s happening with the coronavirus?*

“Why?” As we experience the ongoing and devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on sports as well as the world as a whole, we may be asking, “Why is this happening?” We’re not looking for scientific explanations of how the coronavirus spreads or why it’s so dangerous. We’re looking for something deeper: “Why is God allowing this to happen?”

We can feel confused and unsettled when we’re confronted with unanswered questions of such significance. Why does God allow pandemics to take place? Why did God allow your sports season to be taken away when you were looking forward to it so much? Why did God allow your platform of coaching or playing to be abruptly removed when your heart was set on using sports for his glory? Where do you turn when you’re feeling confused?

Read Psalm 13 and John 11:1-44

The antidote to confusion is knowledge: knowledge of Christ. The knowledge we ultimately need is a personal, relational knowledge of our Lord Jesus. At the end of the day, this is more important than knowing all the answers to our “why?” questions.

In Psalm 13, the psalmist is confused about why God is allowing him to continue to suffer at the hands of his enemies. While he doesn’t receive answers to his “why?” questions, he pivots in the last two verses to what he *knows* to be true of the Lord: the Lord loves him with unfailing love, the Lord is his rescuer, and the Lord is good (vv. 5-6). His *knowledge of the Lord* is critical in the midst of confusing, unsettling circumstances because it enables him to trust the Lord – even while he doesn’t have answers to all his questions.

In John 11, Mary is confused about why Jesus did not come to heal her brother, Lazarus, right away. Why did Jesus allow her brother to die? Jesus cares about Mary and responds to her confusion and grief – but he doesn’t give her an explanation of why he didn’t arrive more quickly. It is far more critical that Mary *knows who he is*.

²⁵ Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. ²⁶ Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God." (John 11:25-27)

Jesus wants Mary to grow in her personal, relational knowledge of him: knowing that Jesus is the resurrection and the life; being confident that he is truly the Messiah, the Son of God. This is what will enable her to trust him even while she doesn't have answers to all her questions.

2. *What do you know to be true of who the Lord is? How does this knowledge of him make a difference as you walk through this challenging season?*

Again and again in the Bible we find this to be the case: in the face of unsettling confusion created by difficult circumstances, the Lord directs us to the knowledge of who he is. It's not that our "why?" questions are unimportant. God can certainly answer our "why?" questions if he chooses. However, the more critical question is "who?": who is the Lord who is sovereign over all?

As we know God personally through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, we're enabled to trust him. We know he's the one with ultimate power and authority. We know he loves us with his steadfast, sacrificial love. We know his wisdom is perfect and his grace is more than sufficient for us, no matter how challenging our current situation might be.

Feelings of confusion during this time are understandable. God welcomes our "why?" questions. But first and foremost, he wants us to focus on who he is. Continue to build your personal, relational knowledge of Christ through spending time with him: studying God's Word, talking to him in prayer, and resting in his presence. The more we truly know him, the more we can walk through this difficult season with unwavering confidence in the Lord. And we can point others to who Jesus is in a world that desperately needs him.

3. *What specific steps can you take to continue to grow in your personal knowledge of Christ? Take a few minutes to solidify a plan for putting these steps into practice. Commit this to the Lord in prayer, trusting his enabling.*

Psalm 13:5-6 -

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love.

I will rejoice because you have rescued me.

⁶ I will sing to the Lord

because he is good to me.

5 – “I’m Feeling Sad”

1. *In what ways are you feeling sadness or disappointment because of the impact of the coronavirus?*

Sports are filled with moments of sheer elation. Sports also have moments of deep disappointment and sadness. I’ve wept alongside teammates on my high school football team after a last-second playoff loss ended our undefeated season, preventing us from fulfilling our dream. You’ve likely experienced disappointment and sadness in sports as well, whether as the result of a devastating injury, a game or season that went awry, or something happening to a team member or coach.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports and the world may have us feeling like we’re living under a cloud of sadness and disappointment. We’re sad about what could have been but now will never be. We’re sad because of the void left by the absence of competition. We’re sad because of how this has impacted fellow teammates and coaches. And we’re sad because at this point there’s no end in sight. How do we deal with this sadness and disappointment?

Read Psalm 42 and Romans 5:1-5

The antidote to sadness and disappointment is hope: hope in Christ. In the midst of his sadness and discouragement, the psalmist engages in self-coaching in verses 5 and 11 of Psalm 42: “Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? *I will put my hope in God!*” In Romans 5, Paul says we can actually rejoice in the midst of problems and trials for this reason: God uses our difficult circumstances to grow our endurance, our character, and “*our confident hope of salvation*” (v. 4). Paul then adds: “*And this hope will not lead to disappointment*” (v. 5).

“Hope” in the Bible is the confident expectation that God will do what he has promised to do even though we don’t yet see it – or don’t yet see it in full. In pretty much every area of life, including sports, we’ll encounter difficulties and disappointment. These things are often painful – but they need not devastate or derail us. Why? Because we realize that compared with the incredible and eternal hope we have in Christ, problems and trials are temporary.

When it comes to God’s promises to all who put their trust in Christ – knowing him; being secure in his love and salvation; having eternal life; being confident that he will use everything that happens in our lives, even painful things, for his good purposes; experiencing his ultimate victory over sin, death, and the enemy of our souls – we will find that God does not disappoint.

2. *How does knowing the hope you have in Christ transform your perspective on current circumstances?*

Feeling sad because of the devastating impact of the coronavirus is natural and even healthy. This is not what God intended for his creation when he made it and declared it was all “very good” (Genesis 1:32). In God’s ultimate future for his people, he promises that “there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). In the meantime, we tenaciously hold onto the hope we have in Christ. We respond to God’s work as he uses trials to deepen our endurance and strengthen our character. We remain confident that God will do all that he has promised through Christ.

During this unprecedented and challenging season, follow the psalmist’s lead and keep engaging in helpful self-coaching: *“Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again—my Savior and my God!”*

3. *Thinking specifically and practically, how can you hold onto hope in Christ day by day? Ask the Lord for his power and grace to enable you to put these things into practice so that hope in Christ will be your daily experience.*

Romans 5:3-4 -

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.