

Serenity: A Gift of God's Grace



Christopher News Notes

MODERN LIVES ARE COMPLEX AND OFTEN BESET BY ANXIETIES AND STRESS. The flood of information about what's happening in our towns and around the world can quickly become overwhelming and rob us of our peace of mind. In such an environment, is serenity even possible? Yes, it is. And not only is serenity possible, it's necessary!

God invites us to put down our worries and burdens and accept His peace which "surpasses all understanding."

But how to achieve such a prize? A famous prayer attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr offers an insight into how we can put ourselves in the right frame of mind to receive this grace. Called “The Serenity Prayer,” it is a deceptively simple formula for how we can calm our anxious thoughts and longings, and open ourselves to God. It reads: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

The prayer is a cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs that encourage those struggling with addictions to realize they cannot, on their own, heal themselves. “Never have I seen so much of A.A. in so few words,” said Bill W., the movement’s founder. But the prayer is more than just a lifeline for people with addictions. It is a roadmap to peace of mind for all of us.

Acceptance of Things You Cannot Change

Acceptance can be extremely difficult for people in our culture. We are taught to fight back against things we dislike, to struggle and persevere, and to never take “no” for an answer. But the first step of serenity is realizing we are not in charge. That’s not to say that we can’t, and shouldn’t, do everything we can to improve the world and ourselves. We’re not called to be doormats. But we have to recognize that, ultimately, God is in charge.

Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, wrote in a recent devotional, “Stress relief always starts with letting God be God. It always starts with saying, ‘God, I’m giving up control, because You can control the things that are out of control in my life.’”

This is why acceptance is the first step in the Serenity Prayer. We cannot have peace if we insist on our own terms.

Grammy Award-winning singer Mandisa has achieved success in high visibility shows like

American Idol and in the Christian music industry. She knows her share of pain, however, and in her memoir, *Out of the Dark*, she writes about the depression she encountered after her friend and backup singer Kisha Mitchell passed away from breast cancer. Mandisa had always believed strongly in the power of prayer. Her faith was badly shaken when Kisha died, despite her strong prayers for God to intervene. Speaking to *The Christophers*, Mandisa admitted, “It made me start to question God’s goodness and even His existence.”

Mandisa isolated herself from her friends, seeking solace in TV and food. She spiraled downward, feeling hopeless and even suicidal at times. Thankfully, before Mandisa took action on her feelings, her friends staged an intervention and got her to seek help.

Though Mandisa struggled to see God in her trials, she rediscovered her faith through acceptance, counseling, and leaning on her friends. In other words, she found a level of serenity. As she wrote on her website, “I wish that I had all the answers, but at this point I say, ‘Okay God, I’m either going to trust You with all of my heart, or I’m not. There’s no middle ground here.’ I’m going to let the value and the weight of the character of God outweigh my need to know or understand.”

Courage to Change What You Can

Courage is a Christian virtue that places discomfort and fear aside to achieve a worthy goal. When we see a wrong that we can right or a way to make a difference—even at a risk to ourselves—God can grant us the courage to overcome fear and doubt. Courage is also a key component of serenity that leaves us knowing that our anxieties did not hold us back from achieving a good that was within our power to accomplish.

Consider Saint Titus Brandsma (1881-1942), a Dutch priest who resisted the Nazi occupation during World War II. Father Titus had written forcefully against the Nazi regime, a dangerous position to take at the time, but his conscience would not

Popular author Brené Brown penned a book titled *Rising Strong*, in which she shares stories of people who turned their failures into engines of transformation. For a Christian, God uses those moments to teach us wisdom.

Brown writes, “You may not have signed up for a hero’s journey, but the second you fell down, got your butt kicked, suffered a disappointment, screwed up, or felt your heart break, it started. It doesn’t matter whether we are ready for an emotional adventure—hurt happens. And it happens to every single one of us. Without exception. The only decision we get to make is what role we’ll play in our own lives.”

let him stay silent. After the invasion of the Netherlands, Father Titus was arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp.

During his time at Dachau, he was well-known for his kindness and spiritual support of other prisoners. His death on July 26, 1942, was a result of the Nazi’s program of medical experimentation on prisoners. He gave a wooden rosary to the nurse who administered the fatal injection, calmly urging her to change her ways, even though he knew he was losing his life. She later became Catholic and testified to his holiness. Titus Brandsma was beatified in 1985 and canonized in 2022.

Courage can also be made manifest in less dramatic ways. For instance, author Gary Zimak wrote about overcoming his strong tendency towards chronic worry in his book *Journey with God: Finding Peace and Happiness*. He noted that even though he was raised Catholic and attended Mass every week, God did not seem real to him, so he never asked God for help.

That changed when a friend invited Gary to a Charismatic Renewal prayer meeting. The choice to attend required a level of courage because Gary really didn’t want to go. “Then, I got in there,” he told *The Christophers*. “People were praising the

Lord, and they had their Bibles with them, and they were hugging me. [I thought], 'Whoa, these people are weird...but they're happy. They have something that I want.' I kept going back...and I started to realize, 'God is real and He's bigger than my problems. And He loves me. Maybe I should ask Him for help.' That's what I've been doing ever since."

The courage to do something that made him uncomfortable resulted in a positive change in Gary's spiritual life. It also taught him that accepting our crosses can lead us to happiness. He knows this is a paradox and makes no sense in worldly terms. However, we create a lot of stress when we fight against this truth, so instead we should ask God for the courage to face our hardships and invite Him to walk with us.

"We're all going to have [crosses], whether we're followers of Christ or not," Gary said. "We all will have some suffering in this life because we live in a fallen world. This life isn't heaven, but our heaven can begin in this life. It doesn't mean we won't have problems, but it means the Lord is bigger than the problems and He can give us the peace to deal with them."

Wisdom to Know the Difference

The third part of the Serenity Prayer focuses on wisdom, and asking God for the ability to discern what you should accept and what you should be courageous about. That might be the hardest part



"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

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of the prayer because the wisdom of God is not the wisdom of the world. Our wants and needs, fears and desires, can cloud our judgment. This is where 12-step programs come to rely on wisdom as a gift from God.

Virginia Burton wasn't a typical undergraduate at the University of Washington. The former high school dropout began using marijuana at age six, crystal meth at age 12, and became a full-blown addict by age 15. She was incarcerated several times and had her three children taken away from her. But today, Burton is a representation of hope.

She got sober in prison and has stayed that way for eight years. In 2020, she received a scholarship to the university and saw this opportunity as a chance to change, as a rebirth of sorts. She told *TODAY Health*, "I'd let myself down for so long. I always felt people like me from broken homes don't get to have good things. But we can."

On social media, Burton shared a photo of herself in her cap and gown beside an old mugshot. She aimed to show others that it is never too late to become the best version of themselves, saying, "Stop selling yourself short. You don't know what tomorrow may bring so you might consider starting today."

Virginia Burton **accepted** the fact that she needed help recovering from her addictions. Then, she displayed the **courage** to seek that assistance. Now, she possesses the **wisdom** she needs to move forward with her life—and is willing to show others in similar situations that they can do the same.

Acceptance. Courage. Wisdom. Seek all three in your own life and you, too, will be walking the road to serenity.

The Serenity Prayer

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."