

Reading #1: STRESS AND YOUR BODY

I avoided using the word stress because of its popular misconceptions and ambiguities. In these articles we will look at this topic in more depth and will use the common terms used in stress research. Technically, what I have been referring to as pressures and demands are called stressors. The effect on our minds and bodies because of our response to stressors is called stress.

Whatever terms we use, most of us have a sense of what stress is. For most of us it is the tension we feel when the demands of life-relational, vocational, physical, financial, spiritual, and so forth-seem to exceed our resources. I have called the spiritual and mental tension from these demands "noise in the soul:'

A noisy soul promotes the destruction of the body. Many people do not realize how wrongly handled pressure may contribute to the following:

1. Unexplained weight gain-"Why is it that no matter what diet or exercise program I use, I can't lose weight?"
2. Sleep disorders- "No matter what I do or what medicine I take, I still can't seem to 'click off' at night. I lie awake for hours, and when I do fall asleep, I wake up at the slightest noise."
3. Chronic exhaustion-"No matter how many hours I sleep, I still wake up fatigued!"
4. Autoimmune dysfunction-"It seems like I am susceptible to every 'bug' in the atmosphere. I have developed allergies I never knew existed, and nothing my doctor gives me really helps."
5. Aggravation of preexisting pathologies- "The doctor says there isn't any real explanation for why I experience so much joint pain when my arthritis isn't that bad."
6. Promotion of new disease and dysfunction-"It seems like every month I am facing some new disintegration in my body. Am I just 'disease-prone'?"

To be sure, every one of the above problems may have other causes, but most physicians are in agreement that stress is at least an aggravating culprit in many of these maladies. The immediate goal of this discussion is not to help you diagnose the cause of physical problems, nor is this an attempt to blame all physical problems on wrongly handled pressures. But if you have a physical problem, wrongly handled pressure will complicate and exacerbate that condition even if its original cause was not mishandled stressors.

We know that God never intended for fallen man to be disease free. He did intend for us, however, to be good stewards of our bodies, and He desires that we think biblically about life's challenges. To ignore our bodily, mental, and spiritual stewardship is to invite disaster. Therefore, no matter what the original cause of our physical ailments, we can profit physically from the right spiritual approach to the demands and pressures of life. More

importantly, learning to handle these issues biblically glorifies God-regardless of whether we profit physically.

To understand what is happening in the "stress response" -and what we will discuss later in the "relaxation response"-we must review some basic biological facts we learned in high school. This is not extraneous information. It is vital to your understanding of why wrongly handled stressors are so harmful to the body. The information below comes straight from a high school biology text.

THE BODY ON "AUTOMATIC PILOT - *Biology for Christian Schools, 2nd ed. (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 1999), 588.*

All internal organs (glands, blood vessels, the heart, and the smooth muscle tissue in the walls of internal organs) are under the control of the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the in-voluntary part of the peripheral nervous system. These parts function automatically without conscious control.

The ANS helps maintain a steady internal condition in the body. For example, the ANS carefully regulates the internal body temperature (keeping it an almost constant 98.6°F) and the pH of the blood (keeping it within the narrow range of 7.35-7.45). It also regulates the heart-beat, perspiration, breathing rate, and other body activities.

There are two divisions of the autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic and the para-sympathetic. These divisions have generally opposing influences on body organs. While both divisions function at all times, one usually dominates at a time, depending on the environmental stimuli.

The sympathetic nervous system is composed of neurons whose fibers originate in the thoracic and lumbar portions of the spinal cord. It helps the body adjust to stressful or frightening experiences. It is "sympathetic" to problems during times of emergency; it helps a person "gear up" in order to survive and be successful.

For example, if a person suddenly sees a snake move across his trail while he is hiking, his sympathetic division instantly activates his body. Primarily, the adrenal glands release a rapid surge of the hormone epinephrine (adrenalin). The adrenalin stimulates a quick increase in heart and breathing rates and causes a rise in the blood sugar needed for muscle action. The pupils of the eyes dilate quickly so that he can see where he is running. His digestive system is "shut off" ("I can finish digesting food later; now I must save the body.") His entire nervous system is put on emergency standby, making him jumpy.

The parasympathetic nervous system is composed of neurons from the brain stem and the sacral portion of the spinal cord. Its overall function opposes that of the sympathetic nervous system. It serves the "business as usual" functions of the body. It stimulates proper digestion, absorption of food, and elimination of wastes. It also maintains slower, normal heart and breathing rates as well as lower blood pressure. These functions are performed best when a person relaxes in a pleasant, peaceful environment. The best example of the control of the parasympathetic system is its control over a person who sleeps after eating a delicious meal.

The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are both necessary, but both can be misused. A person who is almost constantly in stressful situations, stimulating the sympathetic nervous system and having the body on alert most of the time, may damage his body. If a person is constantly "tense;" he may not be able to meet the demands of an emergency because he has exhausted his supply of reserves. Peace and rest are necessary for a properly functioning human body.

SIGNS OF STRESS - Lists from Cyralene P. Bryce, "Insights into the Concept of Stress" (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Health Organization, 2001), 19-21.

The following lists are indications that you may not be handling the demands of life in a biblical fashion. They reveal that the body and mind are not holding up well under the pressures. These lists certainly do not constitute a scientific diagnosis but should cause you to examine what is going on in your life and how well you are handling it. The presence of several of them indicates a noisy soul if other medical causes for them have been ruled out.

Common physical signs and symptoms of stress:

- Rapid heart rate
- Elevated blood pressure
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Chest pain (urgent medical evaluation indicated)
- Difficulty breathing (urgent medical evaluation indicated)
- Fainting (urgent medical evaluation indicated)
- Dizziness
- Tremor
- Increased perspiration
- Headaches
- Muscle twitching
- Thirst
- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Grinding teeth
- Visual difficulties
- Hearing difficulties
- Non-specific body complaints

Common cognitive signs and symptoms of stress:

- Poor concentration
- Memory impairment
- Increased or decreased awareness of one's surroundings
- Difficulty making decisions
- Poor abstract thinking

- Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- Loss of time, place or person orientation
- Racing thoughts
- Disturbed thinking
- Intrusive images

Common emotional signs and symptoms of stress:

- Apprehension
- Uncertainty
- Fear
- Agitation
- Anxiety
- Severe panic
- Anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritability
- Hopelessness
- Emotional shock
- Guilt
- Grief
- Depression
- Denial
- Inappropriate emotional response

Common behavioral signs and symptoms of stress:

- Change in activity levels
- Sleep disturbances
- Erratic movements
- Change in usual style of communication
- Loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities
- Change in eating habits
- Emotional outbursts
- Antisocial behavior
- Inappropriate use of humor
- Suspiciousness
- Hyperarousal
- Substance use (e.g., caffeine, nicotine or alcohol use)
- Deterioration in performance and effectiveness
- Accident proneness

- Nervous mannerisms (e.g., foot tapping, nail biting, teeth grinding, hair pulling, hand-wringing, etc.)

Suppose you were to go out to your car in your garage, set the parking brake, put the transmission in park, start the engine, and push the accelerator to the floor. The engine would race and eventually overheat. All the energy produced by the engine was designed to be turned into motion to get you from one place to another. When your car is parked with the engine full speed, the energy is turned into heat only. Eventually some component in the car will fail—a seal will rupture, a water hose will burst, a bearing will seize, or something else catastrophic will destroy the engine.

The stress-response mechanisms of the body respond in a similar fashion. If they are over-loaded for an extended period of time, some bodily function will begin to disintegrate. The lists above are some of the signs that the "engine is overheating!"

As you can see from this brief overview, God has created the human body with a remarkable mechanism to handle the emergencies of life. That same mechanism can become destructive, however, if it is continually activated.

Reading #2 - TURNING OFF THE STRESS RESPONSE

With the overview of "Stress and Your Body" behind us, let's look more specifically at the body's stress response and its corresponding relaxation response. The more you understand these bodily functions the more alert you will be to your own physical and spiritual condition, and the more quickly you can do something about both.

Serious study about stress was begun by a couple of post-World War I physiologists, Walter Cannon and Hans Selye. Cannon watched the responses of animals and coined the phrase "fight or flight" to describe their common reactions to danger. He coined another word-*homeostasis*-to describe the body's attempt to stabilize itself by internal corrective mechanisms when its equilibrium has been disturbed.

The research of Selye (pronounced *sel'ye*), a Nobel Prize laureate, built upon Cannon's ideas. He was the first one to use the word stress to describe the body's response to a perceived threat. He proposed the General Adaptation Syndrome, or GAS (called more commonly the stress response today), to describe the predictable way the body seeks to maintain homeostasis when the demands and pressures of life disrupt internal control mechanisms.

THE STRESS RESPONSE

Selye, who became known as the father of stress research, outlined three stages in the stress response. They provide a model to help us understand what happens in our bodies when our minds have declared an "emergency" of some sort after reaching certain conclusions or when our bodies react to an invasion by some outside pathogen or experience some type of dysfunction.

1. The alarm stage

This is the initial response of the body during the first few minutes after it senses a demand. The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is activated, sending neural and chemical messages to various organs putting the body on "high alert" status.

More specifically, the hypothalamus in the brain stimulates the pituitary gland, which in turn signals the adrenal glands to produce what are commonly called "stress hormones." The most familiar of these hormones to most of us are epinephrine (adrenalin), norepinephrine, and cortisol (a natural steroid similar to cortisone). These in turn notify other parts of the body of the emergency. As a result, pulse quickens, pupils dilate, digestion stops as the blood supply

is sent to the muscles rather than the stomach and intestines, heart rate and blood pressure increase, muscles tense, and thinking quickens. Fats are released into the bloodstream as sources of emergency fuel, and the thyroid increases the metabolic rate of the body. All of this is a part of the body's way of readying itself for "fight or flight."

2. The adaptive/resistance stage

After the initial emergency passes, the body attempts to return to its former resting state because of its built-in mechanism to seek homeostasis.

If the emergency persists, the body continues to produce the stress hormones. Extended cortisol release results in increased blood sugar levels, weight gain, bone loss, elevated blood pressure, digestive problems, sleep deprivation, decreased sexual drive, and a weakened autoimmune system making the body more susceptible to viral and bacterial infections, fungal infections, and allergies.

Worry and anger keep the body in this state of emergency, and eventually serious physical problems develop as adaptive resources are depleted. This extended alarm state eventually leads to the final stage-the exhaustion stage.

3. The exhaustion stage (overload)

In this stage all of the above effects-weight gain, autoimmune dysfunction, and so forth become elevated as the body shuts down because of depleted resources. Extended illnesses, chronic fatigue, thyroid depletion, inflammatory disorders, heightened allergies, coronary complications, and insomnia, though not always caused by exhaustion and stress are nonetheless worsened by extended stress.

These deteriorating physical conditions tempt the individual to more worry and anger and therefore, place even greater strain on the body. It is a deadly spiral. No wonder God so clearly forbids worry and the wrong kind of anger. They not only dishonor Him because of the underlying unbelief, but they also eventually destroy His creatures.

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

As we have seen, God has given us a wonderful "fight or flight" mechanism-called the "stress response" -to help us handle the emergencies of life. We have also seen that "stress hormones are wonderful friends in a genuine emergency, but deadly foes as a way of life:' The sustained stress response becomes highly destructive.

It is important to understand that the stress response of the sympathetic nervous system does not "turn off" until the nervous system detects that both the body and the mind are at rest. When that signal is received, the parasympathetic nervous system begins to counteract all the effects of the emergency mode of the sympathetic nervous system.

The parasympathetic nervous system works to conserve energy and return the body to a state of "rest and digest" instead of "fight or flight:' The heart rate decreases and arteries dilate, the gastrointestinal tract begins to function normally, and so forth.

Most "stressed-out" people never relax enough physically or spiritually for this trigger point to be reached. The sad consequence is the destruction of their bodies. Many studies have been done that demonstrate that patients who learn how to handle life's pressures better experience improvement in coronary disease, autoimmune diseases, and inflammatory diseases.

The best the world can do in their "stress management" techniques is to help the person manage his emotional responses, better prioritize his life, establish a regular exercise routine, develop good eating habits, and practice some relaxation techniques. Essentially, we would agree with all of these concerns, and many of them will be addressed as you work through this study guide. But by themselves, they are not enough to quiet your soul.

Biblical meditation-The biblical approach is different from the world's approach in that the person, instead of learning some sort of mind control such as transcendental meditation or yoga, finds true inner peace as he begins to practice the Lord Jesus' invitation to "come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ... " (Matthew 11:28-30). This is the original and the only truly effective, God-honoring way to stop the noise in the soul.

If you do not establish a regular time of meditation on God's Word, allowing Him to teach you Who He is and that He is more than enough, and if you do not respond to Him personally with trusting submission and hopeful petition for your troubles, your soul will not rest and your body will not relax.

Physical relaxation-Biblical meditation will by itself calm your soul, and, eventually, your body. When both are at rest, your parasympathetic nervous system will turn off the adrena-lin-and all the other stress hormones-and activate the "rest and digest" response.

You can hasten this process by adding a program of physical relaxation to your daily rou-tine. The world offers many flavors of relaxation techniques that should be avoided-many of which are tainted with Eastern mysticism or New Age thinking, such as guided imagery, yoga, hypnosis, and so forth.

Two types of physical relaxation are very helpful. New Agers have often incorporated them into their own routines, but they are not essentially New Age techniques. They are valid physical exercises, which when practiced over a period of several weeks do activate the parasympathetic nervous system and shut off the stress response. These two techniques are breathing exercises and muscle relaxation exercises. Both are extremely helpful for people living tense, agitated, stress-filled lives.

BREATHING EXERCISES

Deep breathing helps the heart and the lungs function efficiently, and a habit of taking deep rather than shallow breaths can help to reduce tension. To develop the habit, sit or lie in a comfortable position, and breathe deeply and slowly, timing the breaths so that you take about half as many as usual in the course of one minute. Continue this rhythmic activity for five minutes, but stop if you begin to feel dizzy. Try to do this twice a day every day. If at other times you begin to feel a build-up of tension, make a point of breathing slowly and deeply for a few minutes. One result should be some easing of your sensation of mental strain. [Jeffrey R. M. Kunz, MD. *The American Medical Association Family Medical Guide* (New York: Random House, 1982), 20.]

Be sure to breathe abdominally and not from your chest. To be sure you are breathing deeply enough, place your hands on your stomach. If you are breathing abdominally, you

should feel your hands rise and fall as you breathe. This will fill the bottom of your lungs. Once they are full, you should feel your chest expanding. Breathe out fully by contracting your stomach muscles.

MUSCLE RELAXATION EXERCISES [Jeffrey R. M. Kunz, MD. The American Medical Association Family Medical Guide (New York: Random House, 1982), 20.]

The following relaxation exercises are helpful. Work on them for several minutes daily. They will help release physical tension and help your body relax. Once your body is totally relaxed, move on to the meditation portion. Practice this routine at least once a day and twice if possible-once in the morning or midway through the day, and the other before bedtime.

Caution: If you have experienced neck or shoulder problems, consult your physician before doing these exercises. Lifting your head and raising your arms as described may be harmful in such cases.



I-Loosen or remove any constricting clothing. Lie on the floor, face up, eyes closed, either in a warm room or covered with a light blanket.



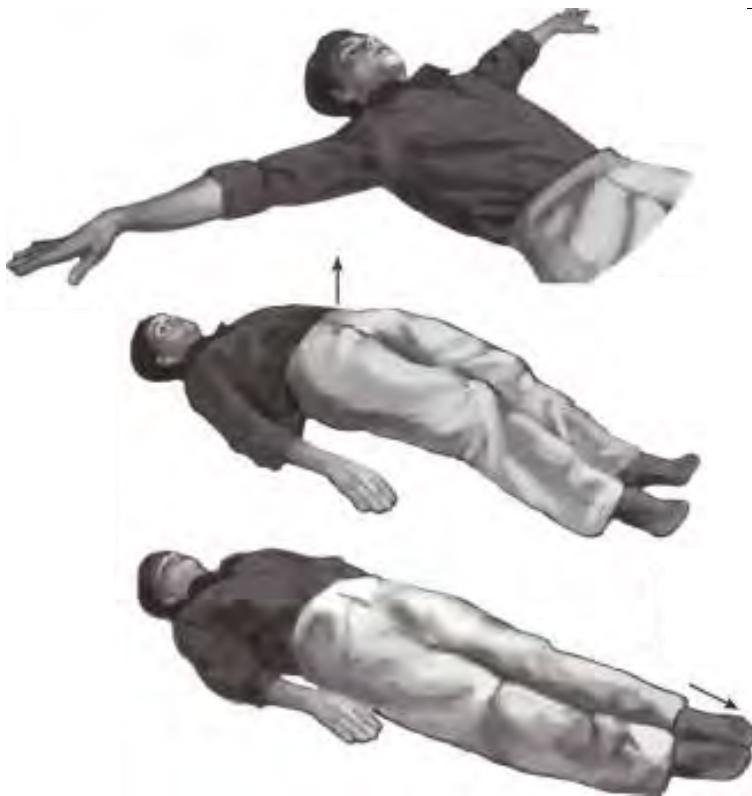
2-Tighten the muscles in your face and then let them relax.



3-Lift your head and let it fall gently back. Keep your jaw and neck relaxed so that you can feel your throat opening.



4-Press your shoulders down • onto the floor. Then relax them.



5-Stretch out your arms and fingers. Hold them taut for only a moment before easing the strain completely.

6-Lift your buttocks and let them fall again, feeling your spine stretch and relax as you do so.

7-Keeping your heels together, stretch your legs and toes. Then relax them completely.

Continue these exercises, one after the other, for a few minutes until you feel totally limp and relaxed from head to toe. Rest with your eyes open or closed. Before standing, turn and lean on your side for another two or three minutes. Repeat this routine every day.

Reading #3 - THE HEART-BODY CONNECTION

We must keep in mind an important principle when dealing with physical issues. The principle is that God made the body to be a servant to the heart.

That truth is most obvious to us when we think of how our heart and body work together on mundane matters. Our heart wants to purchase a new pair of shoes (when our mind has concluded we need them), and our body mediates that desire. Our hand opens the door for us, our feet carry us to the car, our body through coordinated efforts drives us to the mall, and so forth. We easily recognize how our body fulfills the purposes of our heart. If the body did not cooperate with the heart in these matters, we would literally be seriously handicapped.

As we have seen, bodily mediation of the heart's desires also takes place on a more covert level through internal body mechanisms such as the autonomic nervous system. God has designed the body so that when the heart (the mind, in this case) declares an emergency that must be faced, the body will kick in automatically with chemical and neurological messengers that ready the body for the response the heart has determined is necessary. The heart says, "Go;" and the body says, "Yes, sir:"

The same is true of the relaxation response. When the heart finally says, "All is well;" the body says, "OK, we can settle down now;" This is not merely a secular "mind over matter" principle; this is a divine demonstration of the fact that God made the body to be the servant of the heart.

This is a wonderful truth, and we can see God's marvelous reasons for the arrangement, but the body can sabotage the process if the heart is pushing itself to want something it shouldn't or can't have.

Like a loyal dog who joins his master in fighting off a wild animal attack in the woods and gets killed while protecting his master, the body is constructed by God to gear up for whatever emergencies the heart has declared-even if it destroys itself in the process. Look at how this plays out in several areas of life.

STRESS AND ADRENALIN "ADDICTION"¹

Ever wonder why you can never seem to relax-even when on vacation? Have you ever noticed that you have a hard time "unwinding" from a full day at work? The following information will give you some helpful answers.

¹ Gerald G. May, MD, *Addiction and Grace* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 86-89. Dr. May is a Christian psychiatrist who has devoted his life to working with the chemically addicted. His writings promote many integrationist principles of counseling that cannot be supported biblically, but his descriptions of the inner workings of the nervous system in layman's terms are accurate and helpful.

For biblical help with addictions of any kind, I recommend Dr. Edward Welch's book *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Puritan and Reformed Publishing, 2001). This is one of the most thorough and biblical approaches to addictions I have discovered and is helpful for both the addict and for anyone working with him.

The body naturally creates adrenaline, noradrenaline, and other chemicals that are important in responding to stressful situations. In addiction some of the body's natural opiates, such as the endorphins and enkephalins, are often released in times of stress. All these stress chemicals act as neurotransmitters. They may be generated by nerve cells and act as message carriers across synapses, or they may be released elsewhere in the body and travel through the bloodstream as hormones. Adrenaline, for example, is manufactured by the adrenal gland and acts as a hormone. Whether stress chemicals come across synapses or through the bloodstream, they exert powerful effects when they arrive at neuroreceptors of nerve cells.

Normally, the body is accustomed to a low level of stress chemicals in the circulation, with intermittent bursts of higher amounts during times of crisis. Most normal stresses are of relatively short duration, and the brain's natural responses cope with them quickly. In our hectic modern society, however, many individuals find themselves in prolonged stressful situations. Many jobs today are geared to continually high stress levels, and some professionals even pride themselves on the amount of stress they habitually live with. The effects of such protracted stress have been well demonstrated in terms of heart disease, ulcers, and the like. Jogging and other exercise programs, by stressing the body physically, help accustom the body to coping with high stress levels so it more readily handles them as normal. With all of this, stress becomes a habit.

What happens is not difficult to understand. In responding naturally to a stressful situation, the body increases its production of stress chemicals. The chemicals have their expected effects on the cells that receive them, and things return to normal when the stress passes. But if the stress continues, the receiving cells must cope. They try their feedback mechanisms to achieve a lower level of stress chemicals, and, if this doesn't work, they habituate and adapt. Their adaptations establish a new normality that includes an excessive quantity of stress chemicals.

The body suffers in a variety of ways. The circulatory system, for example, must adjust to a normality that includes much more work. Of special significance to our discussion, however, is what happens when the stress-addicted person tries to relax and slow down. If the person takes a vacation, goes on a retreat, or even tries to settle down to pray for a while, the removal of external stress causes less stress chemicals to be generated. This is precisely what the person wants and expects—a time of relaxation—but she does not expect the response of her brain cells to this reduction of stress chemicals.

The neurons, having adapted to high levels of stress chemicals, now react as if something were wrong. They send signals, ironically, of stress to the rest of the body, trying to get things going again. Thus the person who is trying to settle down may find herself becoming increasingly anxious, looking around for something to do, and not at all experiencing the rest and relaxation she had hoped for.

Further, other cells that have become habituated to stress chemicals may go through a backlash withdrawal and "crash"; they become lethargic in what now seems to them a virtual absence of stimulation. Thus, in addition to agitation, the person may also feel great fatigue and sleepiness. "I never knew how tired I really was until I settled down." Again, both phenomena tend to encourage the person not to relax. The choice is limited: either a crash-like sleep (which is often impossible because of agitation) or just getting back to doing something demanding and stressful. A severely stress-addicted person can thus be in a completely no-win situation, becoming increasingly fatigued but at the same time increasingly uncomfortable with any situation that might offer rest.

In most average cases of stress addiction, people simply find they need extra time to wind down before they can begin to relax. Some individuals know this pattern so well that they plan their vacations around it. "I have to take at least a two-week vacation because it takes me almost a week to relax, then a few days just to sleep, and then I can have a couple of really enjoyable days." With more severe stress addiction, people may be totally unable to relax unless they do something that gives them their fix of stress chemicals. Many people choose jogging or some other physically stressing activity. Such activities have become immensely popular among the stress-addicted because they provide enough chemicals to keep withdrawal symptoms at bay, while at the same time freeing the mind from normal worries and work tasks.

It is in the realm of spiritual practice, however, that attachment to stress becomes most obvious. Spending time in quiet, receptive openness is an essential part of prayer, meditation, and most other spiritual practices. In such settings, even mild addiction to stress becomes rapidly and painfully evident. For many modern spiritual pilgrims, the simple matter of taking time for daily prayer can become a battle of will excruciatingly reminiscent of that encountered in chemical addiction. The mind can generate wondrous excuses to do something instead of just being open and present. The struggles that go on between being and doing can be awesome. Issues of control and willpower, surrender and defeat rage with all the drama of true spiritual warfare.

There are many things all of us might rather avoid in prayer: we might rather not relinquish our sense of self-mastery; we might rather not hear what God might ask of us; we might rather avoid the self-knowledge that comes to us in quiet. Now, in addition, increasing numbers of us are discovering that we would rather not experience the discomfort of being peaceful.

Here you see the body once again trying to serve the heart. The heart amidst the pressures of daily life has been saying, "The battle is tough, get busy, push harder, and push longer!" And the body with its intricate sympathetic nervous system is saying, "Whatever you say, boss. We'll do our best."

The body gears up neurologically for a certain level of stimulation and makes it the norm. It now expects that same level of stimulation. When that level of stimulation isn't forthcoming, the body-trying to perform its servant role-asks for the stimulation it was programmed to expect. The result is agitation and fatigue. The body can once again be trained to expect a lower level of stimulation over several weeks of time, and the agitation will cease. The body's adjustment to the desires of the heart is crucial to understanding much of what happens during times when we try to rest and relax and to understanding the dynamics behind psychosomatic illnesses.

This "servant to the heart" role of the body is seen in other areas as well. Consider how the body mediates pain based upon what is going on in the heart.

STRESS AND PAIN

All of us are familiar with the experience of pain. Someone drops a heavy object on our toe; we suffer from the effects of a stomach virus; we feel the gnawing pain of a degenerative arthritic condition, and so forth.

The body again has been wonderfully constructed to alert us when something is not right. Pain is the alarm notifying us of the injury or disease. What you may not realize is that many times the intensity of the alarm is affected by the emotional condition of the heart. Dr. James Halla, a board-certified rheumatologist, describes the phenomenon.²

So how does a person feel or sense pain? Where does pain come from? Think of pain and the pain signal as electricity going through a wire or even water going through a pipe. Pain is electrical and chemical energy in motion. It results from a series of electrical and chemical transfers or exchanges moving from a receptor to the spinal cord by nerve fibers, and then to the brain.

² James Halla, MD, *Pain: The Plight of Fallen Man* (Stanley NC: Timeless Texts, 2002), 10-13. Dr. Halla's book presents a thoroughly biblical viewpoint about how a Christian must approach his efforts to relieve pain. It is a must-read for anyone suffering from acute or chronic pain conditions.

How do these structures relate to each other? Pain is perceived or felt in various areas of the body when pain receptors are stimulated or activated. These receptors, which are located on the end of nerve fibers, sense an unpleasant stimulus such as a cut, burn, or heavy pressure. Once the receptors are stimulated, a series of impulses (or signals) are set in motion and travel to the spinal cord by nerve fibers that are connected to the pain receptor. These receptors are of different types and respond to different types of stimuli (such as touch, pressure, warmth, and heat). The speed at which pain impulses travel along the nerve fiber varies depending on many factors (such as the diameter of the nerve fiber or whether the fiber is covered with a myelin sheath).

Once they reach the spinal cord, the impulses meet nerve cells that are able to function as gatekeepers, allowing or refusing to allow the pain impulse to pass to the brain. After entering the spinal cord, the pain impulse travels in nerve fiber bundles upward toward the brain. Other parts of the nervous system are stimulated into action so that bodily movements occur to reduce or eliminate the unpleasant sensation that triggered the message.

For example, when someone places his hand in the way of a saw blade and is cut, he immediately removes it. In addition, within the spinal cord, the message may be changed so that it is toned down. This happens when a person rubs, massages, or applies pressure to the injured area.

Nerve cells in the spinal cord release chemicals that may increase or decrease the passages of the nerve impulse to higher centers of the brain.

In the brain, the impulses first arrive in the thalamus, which is a sorting and switching station for pain impulses. The thalamus, upon receiving the impulses, quickly sends them to other parts of the brain (the cerebral cortex, including the frontal lobes, and limbic system) for evaluation and interpretation. Nerve input from the cerebral cortex contributes to pain perception in such a way that a person's attitude and thinking influence the perception of the pain signal (the cerebral cortex is involved in various cognitive activities including intelligence and thinking). The limbic system provides motivational and emotional input so that feeling states ... such as sadness, anger or bitterness can worsen pain.

... The brain contributes significantly to how a person feels pain This leads to another essential principle of pain: since pain is a sensation and is felt, the perception of pain can be changed. Pain perception is modifiable. And because the perception of pain can be changed, pain intensity may be increased or decreased. This principle follows from, as well as contributes to, how a person feels or senses pain.

There are many places in the pain system where the modification of pain may occur. This includes the spinal cord and brain. How? Nerve blocks stop a nerve from sending its message to the brain. To change how you sense and feel pain, pain pills work in the brain and spinal cord, while nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs work in the periphery.

There are other ways to change the perception of pain that are not dependent on things done to the body but come from within. Because there is a connection between a person's thinking and attitude and his body, what one thinks influences pain perception. The mind does influence the health of the body and sensations in the body. This means that how and what a person thinks affects how he feels and interprets pain. What a person thinks about pain and the condition he has are crucial ingredients; for example, focusing on pain and pain relief only intensifies pain.

In addition, what a person wants, desires, expects, and hopes for, affects his perception of pain and strongly influences his thinking. Sadness, discouragement, resentment, discontentment, and hopelessness can make pain worse, even intolerable. The opposite is true: the absence of these and the presence of so-called positive attitudes can lessen pain and make it tolerable.

This is an interesting arrangement. When a person is discontent and out of sorts with the situations God has ordained for him, he is like a man on a construction site who is born -

barded with the noise of the machinery around him. The decibel level is already quite high and drowns out the conversation he is trying to have with his friend. His friend must yell at him in order to be heard.

Discontent, anger, sadness, and so forth generate much "background noise" in the soul. The brain reads the extent of this internal agitation and intensifies the pain signals to be sure the pain is "heard" over all the emotional "noise." The body is again serving the heart-making sure the message gets through.

When the "background noise" check is made and the heart is found to be calm and content, the pain signal does not have to be intensified. In fact, it can even be toned down. Once again, our body mediates its actions based upon what is going on in the heart. No wonder the Scriptures say, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken [crushed] spirit drieth the bones" (Proverbs 17:22).

A word of caution is necessary here. Do not attempt to measure your present spiritual condition based upon how much pain you are experiencing. The pain signal may be strong because the danger to the body is severe. Keep in mind also that the above illustration is just that—an illustration. The actual processes are much more complex. Rather, understand that any suffering is a time for a spiritual checkup—especially of our level of contentedness. If you suffer from acute or chronic pain, I would encourage you to study Dr. Halla's book. He will walk you through the process of examining your current desires and will help you evaluate your approach to your suffering.

My point in spelling out these physiological matters is not to counsel you about how to handle your suffering but merely to show you from a practical standpoint what God has already told us in the Scriptures. He wants us to learn to live without anxiety, anger, and despair. As you have seen in the seminar, that is possible only if our hearts have found God to be more than enough and are content. We pay a heavy price for discontent and unbelief. The systems God has designed to be our servants become masters that keep us in bondage physically.

CHEMICAL IMBALANCES

I want to address one other mind-body connection before closing this article. In his book on depression,³ Dr. Welch offers compassionate and biblical help for dealing with the crushing burden of despair. His research in brain diseases and electrophysiology qualifies him to speak to the issue of chemical imbalances, and his membership in the APA (American Psychological Association) and experience as a licensed psychologist give him ample exposure to how the world has adopted a medical model for the treatment of psychiatric problems. When speaking about antidepressants, he says science is still in the dark about how antidepressants work.

There is still much we don't know The most popular hypothesis is that depression is related, in part, to a lack of the brain chemical serotonin. Many of the new medications, called serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), make this chemical more available in the brain. If these help, that would

³ Edward T. Welch, Depression: A Stubborn Darkness (Winston-Salem, NC: Punch Press, 2004).

seem to establish the presence of a specific chemical imbalance. But there are well over fifty neurotransmitters in the brain, they are found over large areas, and their interactions with one another defy present analysis. The truth is that the biological hypotheses rest on shaky ground.

When medication helps, we don't know why. The brain is simply too complex and our knowledge of its mechanics is too primitive. This year, serotonin is the favored neurotransmitter. In previous years it was dopamine. In future years it will be another brain chemical. There remain many unanswered questions.⁴

Not only are we still in the dark about what actually is happening at the synaptic level of the brain's neurons, but more importantly, neurotransmitter research is not distinguishing between cause and effect.

Currently the hypothesis states that a low level of serotonin is the cause of depressive, slowed thinking. In actuality, a low level of serotonin may be the result of the heart's giving up hope. The heart is saying, "Life is hopeless; I don't feel like doing anything;" and the body-servant to the heart that it is-responds with, "OK, everybody, we're not doing life today; slow every-thing down!"

Even the scenario I described above is hypothetical since it can't be proved that chemical imbalances are either the cause or the effect. My only point is that with what we have come to understand about the body-heart connection, it is more likely that low serotonin (if that condition can be proved to exist) is the result of a despairing heart, not the cause of it, just as high levels of stomach acid are often the result of anxious thoughts in the heart, not the cause of anxious thoughts. The physical condition is real, but the cause is the heart, not vice versa. Furthermore, any attempts to measure serotonin levels in the brain by simple blood tests will result in skewed results. "In humans only about 5% of serotonin is found in the brain. The other 95% is distributed throughout the rest of the body. The majority is in the gastrointes-tinal tract, where serotonin modulates the rhythmic movements kneading food through the stomach."⁵ It is this pervasiveness of serotonin receptors throughout the body that explains why SSRIs have such a global effect on all bodily functions-not just brain function.

In summary, to accurately measure brain serotonin, we would have to have some means to actually measure the levels at the synaptic level. Attempts to measure it by other means will yield only an average of the chemical throughout the entire body. Even if we could measure it at the synaptic level, we would then have to find a way to determine if the increase or decrease is the result of despairing, hopeless thoughts or the cause of them. My guess is that the out-come would be the latter. Those who take a purely materialistic view of the human condition and support the biological, medical model of psychiatric problems must opt for the former. They have no other choice since they do not acknowledge the existence of an immaterial soul as part of the equation.

⁴ Ibid., 210-11.

⁵ Joseph Glenmullen, MD, *Prozac Backlash* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 16.

Reading #4—STRESS AND SLEEP ISSUES

Most anxious, angry, or depressed people admit to sleep loss. Often the sleep loss is accompanied by very troubling nightmares when the person does sleep. In order to understand the issues of sleep loss and nightmares, it is necessary to understand something of the sleep process.

THE COMMON STAGES OF SLEEP

Until the invention of the electroencephalograph (EEG), which measures the electrical activity of the brain, we had very little information about the nature of sleep. Modern scientists, however, have discovered universal patterns of brain activity during the time a person is asleep.

Sleep can be divided into two stages: active sleep, called REM because of the rapid eye movement during this phase, and a quiet sleep called NREM (non-REM). NREM sleep is further divided into four stages. Each stage is distinguished by "increasingly slower and higher amplitude brain waves:¹

Stages of NREM Sleep

Generally, we spend about fifteen minutes in each stage.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
"Light" sleep; slow rolling of the eyes; muscles relax with occasional jerking; dreamlike floating sensation; heart rate slows; easily awakened, but if awakened may insist hasn't been asleep at all. Note: Teachers and preachers are well aware of this all-too-common phenomenon.	Eyes may roll from side to side; more effort or sound needed to awaken; stage can last for 15 to 30 minutes; may still deny having been asleep at all if awakened during this stage. Note: Seeing students in this stage is not uncommon for teachers either.	Stages 3 and 4 are called "deep" sleep; together can last up to an hour; the sleeper is harder to awaken—may need to be shaken or directly addressed by name to wake up; slower and larger brain waves; muscles extremely relaxed; blood pressure, heart rate, and temperature drop; any sleep walking or bed-wetting would occur in the deeper stages. Note: Teachers do not see this as often, but occasionally a student is so fatigued that he actually has to be awakened after class so that he can get to the next class on time. If no one disturbed him, he would continue his siesta.	
SLEEP CYCLES			
Sleep cycles progress from stage 1 through stage 4, then rapidly return through stages 3, 2, and 1, and then into REM sleep. REM sleep lasts for ten to fifteen minutes, and the cycle is repeated. Most complete cycles last about ninety minutes, with the REM sleep getting longer as the night progresses. A person getting a normal night's sleep can go through the entire cycle four or five times. Most people report that they need between five to ten hours of sleep a night though it is well established that everyone functions better when he has at least eight hours of sleep.			

¹ "Sleep and Dreaming" in Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology, ed. by David G. Benner (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1090.

Each individual's biological clock is unique and fairly inflexible. Therefore, an individual generally requires the same amount of rest each day and operates best when he sleeps on the same schedule each day. Because of this, shift work or changes in time zones may not be tolerated very well.

The American Medical Association offers these questions to help you decide if you are getting enough sleep:²

Do you need an alarm clock to waken you? Do you have a hard time getting up? Do you drop off easily in front of the television, at concerts, or at meetings? Do you habitually sleep in during weekends? If so, you may be getting too little sleep.

Do you lie in bed long after the lights are out? There are many reasons for this, but it is possible that you simply don't need as much sleep as you think.

REM Sleep

Dreaming takes place during this phase of sleep. People awakened during this stage will re-call portions of their dream. Dreams increase in emotional intensity and in bizarre effect the longer the person stays in REM sleep. By waking time in the morning, REM sleep may be lasting as long as an hour, and the time spent in stages 3 and 4 has decreased significantly.

During this stage the eyes move rapidly (hence the term "rapid eye movement") as if the mind were playing out a cinema script. The brain provides its own stimuli for these "movies:" in which the sleeper usually plays some part. Heart rate and breathing quickens.

INSOMNIA

Sleep Deprivation

Sleep loss over several days can be quite disconcerting because of the effects on fine motor skills, concentration, irritability, and occasional mild visual or tactile hallucinations. In fact, a person who is getting only an hour or two of sleep can begin to exhibit bizarre behaviors after just three nights of sleep loss. Observers may think he is having severe psychiatric problems or is being tormented by spirit beings when, in fact, his brain is not functioning well because of extended sleep loss. These individuals are generally already experiencing great anxiety, anger, or despair, which greatly aggravates the effects of the extended sleep loss.

Strategies for Dealing with Insomnia

Most individuals can begin experiencing normal sleep after exploring and correcting these causes.

Irregular schedule	Avoid napping and try to establish a regular bedtime.
Anxiety/ depression	Learn to handle pressure and problems biblically.

² Edward T. Welch, Counselor's Guide to the Brain and Its Disorders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 268.

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Poor eating habits	Eliminate caffeine intake (coffee, tea, colas) for several hours before bedtime.
Poor exercise habits	No exercise at all can contribute to poor sleep. Exercise just before bedtime may also cause a problem. Late afternoon exercise may be best.
Irregular bedtime	Try to establish regular patterns of retiring and rising.
Poor sleeping conditions	Eliminate excessive noise, light, and temperature extremes. Keep the bedroom well ventilated.
Excessive worry about not sleeping	Many people aggravate their condition greatly by developing a habit of expecting not to sleep or of worrying that they will not be able to sleep. This habit must be reversed.
Alcohol and drugs	Alcohol and many drugs, including sleep medications, cause insomnia as a side effect. Most sleeping pills reduce REM sleep. The recommended dosage will work for a few nights, but the body's insistence on REM sleep will eventually override the drug, and the person will experience excessive REM sleep accompanied by disconcerting nightmares. Coming off a sleeping drug should be done with the oversight of the prescribing physician.
Certain illnesses Mistaken sleep loss	Some diseases (kidney disease, etc.) can aggravate sleep loss. A person suffering from insomnia may be sleeping more than he thinks. Some people dream very vividly and actually dream of being awake. A good tactic to determine this is to keep a pad and pencil by your bed and mark the pad every hour that you remain awake. This doesn't work for some people, however, because they stay awake looking at the clock in order to be sure they don't miss an opportunity to write down the time.

All of these strategies are a part of what is called sleep hygiene. Basically, the body, when saturated with stress hormones because of anxiety, stimulants like caffeine, or excessive exercise late in the day, is not supposed to be able to sleep. The stress hormones were designed by God to put the body on "alert" status. Trying to sleep when your body is full of stress hormones is like trying to sleep with a fire alarm going off in the next room—it's almost impossible to drop off to sleep. This is why you have been hearing, "Your body will rest when your soul is at rest." When there are no other physical components present—pain, stimulants, and so forth—quiet souls sleep well. Noisy souls do not.

NIGHTMARES (BAD DREAMS)

All of us dream and occasionally may be awakened by a frightening nightmare. When the same nightmares are repeated and unsettling, they are most often associated with past

trau-matic events in our lives (abuse, accident, separation from a significant person, etc.). Increasingly, they come from indulgence in television programs and movies with violent, occult, or sordid themes.

Unbiblical Freudian depth psychology tries to make much of dreams through free association. Dreams are considered by depth psychologists as the "royal highway to the unconscious.'

Other unbiblical theories of dreams range from prophetic announcements to astral projection, in which dreams are thought to be the temporary exodus of the soul from the body to experience events in the spiritual realm. Of course, we reject these theories and can deal with the origin and effect of dreams in more concrete ways that bring both relief and Christian growth as we learn to handle recurring nightmares in the same way we would handle any other trial of life.

How to Deal with the Source of the Dreams-Memory

Most terrifying recurring nightmares have a "ring of familiarity" because they are usually the distortions of memorable experiences (both actual and vicarious-such as movies, television, etc.). Their intensity often parallels the vividness of the memory. Memory is most vivid when the experience is reinforced through any of the following:

Repetition	The event has been reviewed over and over again in the mind.
Emotion	The experience was accompanied by strong anger, fear, love, etc. Strong emotions etch memories more deeply into the mind. For this reason, the images of abuse and other traumatic experiences, of vivid horror movies, or of sensual and erotic movies are more firmly entrenched in the mind and become topics for nightmares.
Concentration	Great thought has been given to the incident in an attempt to analyze and/ or understand the event.

Sometimes the recurring nightmares are the result of sowing and reaping.

For example, Susan is troubled by the disturbing nightmares she is having about her fiance, Brad. She dreams that she comes over to his house, sees the back door ajar, enters the kitchen, and finds Brad in a bloody heap on the floor with his arms and legs cut off. Here she is, very much in love with this young man but dreaming about horrible things happening to him. After further discussion I learn that her favorite pastime is watching horror movies-the more gruesome, the better. She loves the adrenalin rush of suspense thrillers but is filling her mind with violence and death. Under the pressures of violating her conscience by her ungodly viewing habits, getting ready for a wedding, and getting her workplace ready for her replacement, she is not sleeping well. When she does sleep, she is tormented by her nightmares. Susan is merely reaping what she has been sowing.

These same dynamics often exist in situations in which an abused woman has unwanted, re-curring nightmares about her abuse. What she may not understand is that the intensity of her nightmares is governed by her current emotions, which keep the memories alive and vivid. If she has biblically dealt with the issues of bitterness, hatred, fear, anger, shame, and so forth, she no longer experiences great noise in her soul when she is reminded about the past in some way. She truly feels sorrow and pain at the thought of what has happened, but added to those emotions is the knowledge she has learned about God that has set her soul at rest.

If she has not been discipled to think through these issues biblically, the intensity of her current emotions will keep the memories vivid and will replay them in her nightmares. Remember that emotion is one of the factors that imprints memory and keeps it alive. When the emotion changes-because the heart is viewing life differently-the intensity of the nightmares drops, and eventually they disappear altogether.

How to Deal with the Recurrence of the Dreams

Understand that the recurrent nightmare may be a signal that you have not adequately handled the traumatic event or that, if the event was your choice (movies, etc.), you are simply reaping what you have sown.

In either case, trying to stay awake so that you will not have the nightmare again is not the right approach. Even when you have dealt biblically with the original cause, you should view any recurrence of the dream as you would any other recurrent trial-the recurrence of cancer, the recurrence of mistreatment by a parent out of control, and so forth.

You will learn in future sessions how to get grace from God for a trial and how to use STOP-Think cards for dealing with fear, or whatever emotion is predominant. You can use them even in the middle of the night to remind yourself that there is a biblical way to respond to the trial of another nightmare.

Commit your sleep to the Lord, knowing that He brings even the unpleasant circumstances in order to develop His Christlikeness in those who will respond biblically to trying circumstances.

Confidence in the Lord's control affects your sleep. Meditate on the following passages: Psalm 3:5; 4:8; 127:2; Proverbs 3:24. Study Proverbs 3:24 in the context of Proverbs 3:13-26. The rest-ful soul promised in Proverbs 3:24 is a result of a man who is looking at life and its problems with wisdom. Any passages on trial, hardship, trouble, pressure, and so forth are appropriate for an unwanted problem like a recurrent terrifying dream.

SLEEP DISORDERS

Following are listed several sleep disorders that should be discussed with your family physician to detect whether any physical causes are creating the disturbances:

1. Excessive daytime sleeping; also called EDS (hypersomnia)
2. Insomnia

3. Nightmares and, in young children, night terrors (pavor nocturnus-in which the child may awaken in total panic and not know why; usually outgrown; more severe than a nightmare)
4. Sleep paralysis (the sense upon waking that one cannot move)
5. Sleep attacks (narcolepsy)
6. Sleepwalking (somnambulism)
7. Bed-wetting (nocturnal enuresis)
8. Teeth grinding (nocturnal bruxism)
9. Sleep talking (somniloquy)
10. Sleep apnea (trouble breathing and sleeping at the same time)

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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253-71. This book is a secular work but shows a good understanding of the issue of insomnia and cautions against using drugs as a solution.

Mack, Wayne. *A Homework Manual for Biblical Living*, Vol. 1. Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979, pp. 166-67.

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Reading #5 - STRESS, EXERCISE, AND WEIGHT GAIN

Probably no single physical discipline of life can reduce the "uptight feelings" of stress more than a regular exercise routine. Moderate exercise releases endorphins (natural pain relievers), which produce a sense of well-being. Stressful situations produce adrenalin and other stress hormones, which are metabolized during exercise.

You certainly don't need to be an athlete to benefit from exercise. In fact, highly stressed people who are also competitive in their exercise will see very little stress-relieving benefit from their exercise. The reason is simple. When they are "pushing" to win, they are placing their body in "emergency mode" and producing more adrenalin.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you start an exercise program.

1. Find an exercise you enjoy-walking, tennis, jogging, cycling, swimming, etc.
2. See your physician for a complete checkup before initiating any strenuous activity-especially if you have health problems or are over fifty.
3. If possible, exercise with a partner and exercise in the morning. Both will increase the likelihood that you will stay with your routine.
4. Strive to achieve aerobic benefit from your exercise. That is accomplished when your heart rate is within established minimum and maximum target zones. There are two ways to know if you are in the right zone.

Method 1-Calculate your minimum and maximum target zones for your heart rate with these formulas:

Minimum target rate: $220 - [\text{your age}] = \underline{\quad} \times .65 = [\text{min. target heart rate}]$

Example for a forty-year-old person: $220 - 40 \text{ years old} = 180 \times .65 = 117$

Maximum target rate: $220 - [\text{your age}] = \underline{\quad} \times .80 = [\text{max. target heart rate}]$ Example for a forty-year-old person: $220 - 40 \text{ years old} = 180 \times .80 = 144$

Method 2-A less precise but helpful way to tell if you are working out hard enough is to make sure that you work until you begin to perspire but not so hard that you cannot carry on a conversation with your exercise partner.

Choose an aerobic exercise routine that will eventually allow you to keep your heart beating between your minimum and maximum targets for at least twenty minutes three times a week. Always stretch and warm up before exercising and cool down by exercising slowly for about five minutes before stopping your exercise altogether.

It normally takes six to twelve weeks to achieve a comfortable and profitable discipline of exercise. Your exercise program does not have to be complicated or expensive. A good pair of walking shoes is all you need.

5. Basic Walking Program-If you are not exercising at all, a simple walking program is a good way to get started. Start with a moderate five-minute walk, then walk briskly for five minutes, and finally, cool down with a moderate five-minute walk. Follow this routine for three days in your first week. The total time, of course, is fifteen minutes each time.

Each week thereafter add two minutes to the brisk walk segment. Keep the beginning and ending walks to five minutes. By week twelve you will be exercising forty minutes three times a week-five-minute walk, thirty-minute brisk walk, five-minute walk. If the next week's routine seems to be too much for you, continue on your present week's routine.

Once you are walking five minutes, briskly walking thirty minutes, and cooling off by a five minute walk (week twelve), you are in good shape to begin exercising within your target heart rate. From that time on, exercise three or four times a week keeping your heart rate within your target zone during the brisk walking times for thirty to sixty minutes each time.

STRESS AND WEIGHT GAIN

One of the stress hormones, cortisol, seems to be linked to weight gain. Cortisol, a natural steroid, has many wonderful functions in the body. During times of short-term pressure, it activates the autoimmune system to take care of any damage to the body during the "fight or flight" response. It also elevates blood sugar, cholesterol, and blood pressure for the same reason. Cortisol makes sugars, fats, and amino acids readily available to the body in order to produce energy for the crisis. "In the liver, cortisol stimulates the breakdown of glycogen into glucose. In the adipose tissue (where we store body fat), fatty acids are released to cortisol stimulation (fat breakdown? - sounds good-but the longer-term effect is fat gain). In the skeletal muscles, cortisol promotes the release of amino acids, which are either used directly by the muscle for energy or sent to the liver for conversion into glucose:

Cortisol is a component in the body's alarm mechanisms to get the body geared up for the perceived emergency. It has many functions, one of which is to regulate how fuel is stored in the body. When cortisol is high, appetite increases, and sugar and fat levels in the blood stream stay high. This is why patients taking cortisone for inflammatory conditions typically gain weight. The rise in cortisol in the bloodstream activates the fat storage mechanisms typically in the abdomen, where the fat is more readily available to burn in the "fight or flight" stress response.

When there is no physical "fight or flight" that takes place, the patient is stewing in his juices in traffic snarls or worrying about her troubles, and the fat continues to be stored no matter what kind of diet he or she is on.

This is why moderate exercise as described above is so crucial to weight loss particularly for worriers, who must also work on reversing "The Way Down" process. When coupled with physical relaxation and breathing exercises and meditation upon God's Word, exercise is one of the most effective ways to lose weight. Exercise, relaxation, and meditation are necessary because trying to lose weight with high cortisol levels is like trying to sleep with

high adrenalin levels. These stress hormones are activating the body to do just the opposite of what the person really wants to do at the moment.

Once again, we see how God intended for these wonderful endocrine functions to be servants to our hearts but how they can turn against us when chronically activated by disease or wrongly handled pressure. As you have heard before, "Stress hormones are wonderful friends in a genuine crisis but are deadly foes as a way of life."

Reading #6 - THE CRISIS

Every crisis has within it the possibility of great danger but also brings with it the opportunity for positive change. Our goal in a crisis must be to escape the danger of the situation and seize the opportunities.

God can rescue us from the dangers of anger and bitterness, despair and hopelessness, or fear and anxiety. He can then turn the situation into an opportunity for our good and for His glory:

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not [allow] you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10: 13).

The word temptation means simply a test God sends to expose something good or bad about a man's heart. Every test of life-every crisis-has within it a danger that we can "escape" if we respond wrongly and an opportunity to show how great God is if we respond correctly.

A CRISIS PRIMER

The Bible is full of instructions for handling hard times. Job faced many excruciating problems. In just a few hours he lost his entire farm; all of his children died when the house collapsed on them during a violent storm; he lost his own health, and his body was covered with painful boils (Job 1:1-2:7). When his suffering did not end, he became very discouraged.

During a conversation with his unhelpful friends, Job said, "Man is born [for] trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). By the end of the book that bears his name, Job had learned how to handle his trouble skillfully and joyfully.

Many of the psalms were written by David during very difficult times of his life. The prophets in the Bible faced much opposition. Even Jesus Christ is called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3).

Two whole books of the New Testament-James and I Peter-were written specifically for suffering people. So, there is much help for us in the Bible about how to handle times of crisis and suffering.

THE MANY FACES OF TROUBLE

Trouble comes from many sources and affects us in many ways. Some of life's problems are temporary; others are permanent. Some problems are caused by other people; other problems are of our own making.

We must realize that each of these troubles has a built-in danger and an accompanying opportunity to watch God at work and to show His greatness to others.

We must also understand that if we respond wrongly to any of these crises, the situation can become even more complicated. Financial problems can increase even more if wrong choices are made. Strained relationships can be further damaged if the parties react in a selfish way. Friends and family members with life-threatening diseases can degenerate further if they refuse to cooperate with their doctors.

So, it is important that we accurately diagnose our trouble and respond correctly. Thankfully, God has graciously given us much help for handling trouble the right way. The following articles will outline the basics for us.

THE TEST OF JOY

As I mentioned before, the New Testament letters of James and I Peter were written to hurting, suffering people. They provide much direction about trouble. One of the first things we see in both books is that it is possible to have great joy in the midst of great trouble. Notice these passages.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath [caused us to be born again] unto a [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. [It is in this hope that] ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are ... in heaviness through [various trials]” (I Peter 1:3, 6).

“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into [various trials]; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her [maturing] work, that ye may be [mature] and [complete], and wanting nothing” – James 1:2-4.

The joy and rejoicing spoken of in these passages is not a giddy silliness in the midst of tragedy. Neither is it the same as having a positive outlook on life. Scriptural joy is the enjoyment and delight that comes from greater intimacy with God Himself in the midst of the sorrow and trouble. It is a direct result of increased fellowship with God. It is called the “fruit of the Spirit” because it is produced within us supernaturally by God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). It is not something we can generate on our own.

The presence or absence of this joy shows us whether we are handling the trial in the proper way. Our example is Jesus Christ, Who experienced great delight in doing His Father's will, even though He was physically tortured by crucifixion. The Scriptures say,

“Let us run with patience the race [of life] that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Because Jesus Christ endured all of the agonies of living on a fallen planet, He can be our best Comforter when trouble comes. He not only feels the afflictions we are experiencing but is also ready to help us in our time of need. The Bible says,

For we have not an high priest [speaking of Jesus Christ] which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet

without sin. Let us therefore come boldly [through prayer] unto the throne of grace [where Jesus Christ sits right now in heaven], that we may obtain mercy [forgiveness for our sins], and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

These verses mean that because Jesus Christ experienced every possible problem that we can encounter, He is very sensitive to the difficulties we are experiencing. And since He is a loving God, He will use His power to come to our aid in times of need. He does not promise to deliver us from our negative circumstances, but He does promise to deliver us from the wrong responses-the dangers-that will destroy our joy and obscure His own glory (I Corinthians 10:13).

THE DANGER

The first truth on our "emergency checklist" is this:

Truth # 1: The greatest danger is always the flesh.

The term flesh may be unfamiliar to you. The Bible uses the word flesh to describe the sinful part of every one of us, which tries to make life work on our own-without God. When a man is living "after the flesh" (Romans 8:5), he is handling life the way he wants to handle it, instead of handling life the way God wants it handled. The result of such self-centeredness is always destructive (Galatians 6:7-8).

DON'T INFECT THE WOUND!

In December 1998 I had quadruple by-pass surgery. As I was wheeled into the operating room, I looked around and saw two workers opening packages of sterilized instruments. They laid them out carefully on two carts next to the operating table. The anesthesiologist was getting me ready for surgery. All of them wore sterilized surgical gloves, gowns, and masks. Every precaution was being taken to insure that my surgery would not be further complicated by an infection from contaminated instruments and people.

In the same way that contamination infects a wound, a fleshly-selfish-response to any crisis of life further complicates the situation.

The apostle James gives specific instructions for handling suffering. He calls us to self-examination. In James 4:8 he says, "Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

Jesus Himself tells us to do some "spiritual lumberjacking" to get the logs out of our own eyes before we try to remove the splinters from other people's eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). The apostle Paul reminds us as well that when people have treated us wrongly we are not to be "overcome [by] evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). We cannot expect to help the situation by pouring more evil into an already "nasty stew:' If we do so, we can make it only worse.

If we do handle the situation with "unclean hands;" we can expect that the "infection" will produce a "fever;" Certain symptoms reveal that our heart has been contaminated by the flesh. They include the things we have already noticed as danger signs:

- anger and bitterness
- despair and hopelessness
- fear and anxiety

They can be avoided entirely if the situation is handled properly at the beginning. If they arise, they can be remedied by following the plan outlined in the next two articles.

THE GREATEST DANGER

The greatest manifestation of the flesh is the familiar toxin of stubbornness. Nothing will pollute a situation faster than a stubborn will. It is exactly the opposite of the humility of Jesus Christ. Though His earthly circumstances included rejection, ridicule, misunderstanding, torture, and eventually death, Jesus Christ submitted to His Father's will for Him. He was never stubborn.

Stubbornness is the greatest hindrance to Christian growth. In fact, the apostle Peter said that "God [fights against] the [stubborn], but gives [divine help] to the humble" (I Peter 5:5).

Stubbornness is referred to by several terms in the Bible. In James 1 it is called "double-mindedness;" and the apostle says that the double-minded man is like "a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed;" He is "unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8). Our double-mindedness stubbornly returns to our own way even though we know it is at odds with God's way.

When our trouble comes from other people, we often think that if we can just get the other person to change, everything will stabilize. Unfortunately-or perhaps fortunately-we have no control over others. The only person we can control is ourself. It is crucial for us to understand that no decision of anyone else can destroy our inner man-our heart. We are the only ones who can destroy our hearts.

If we get bitter, angry, fearful, anxious, or hopeless, it is entirely our own doing. We have allowed self-centeredness to rule in our heart and contaminate it. It is important for us to understand that the greatest danger is always the flesh.

Though other people may have created the wound, we are responsible for our reactions to it.

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

There is no doubt that responding to our trouble in a Christlike way is going to be tough to do. Loving, blessing, doing good to, and praying for those who mistreat us do not come naturally. In fact, they go against everything within our fleshly nature. But to give in to our selfishness will bring great danger into the situation.

Reading #7 - THE PLAN

OUR BIGGEST CRISIS

We must ask ourselves, "What is the biggest crisis a man can face?" The average man on the street might answer, "Losing my family would be my biggest crisis."¹ Others might respond that losing their health would be their greatest crisis. Jesus Himself told us what the biggest crisis is a man can face. He said,

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26).

Jesus' greatest concern for a man is that his soul should be rescued from eternal destruction in hell. Jesus spoke often of hell-more often than He spoke of heaven. He described it as a place of literal and everlasting torment. He was so concerned that people not have to suffer in hell that He Himself became a part of the most wonderful rescue plan of all time.

The interesting thought for you in this discussion of crises is that if you know how to be rescued from the greatest danger you could ever face-eternal separation from God because of your sin-you know how to be rescued from the dangers of whatever trial you are facing now. That brings us to the second truth on our "emergency checklist:

Truth #2: The gospel is always the answer.

A CRUCIAL QUESTION

Let me ask you a personal question. If you were to die today from a terminal illness or in some tragic accident and you were to stand before God, how would you answer God when He asked you this question: "Why should I let you into My heaven?"¹

Some people might feel that because they have been deeply religious and have obeyed the Ten Commandments most of the time, God should let them into heaven. Others might feel that because they have lived by the Golden Rule² and have been honest and moral in their dealings with others, they should be allowed to enter. They are saying essentially that God should allow them to enter heaven because they have been good in some way.

Jesus predicted that many people would come to Him on that day and would say exactly those things. He says that His reply to them will be, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that [practice sin]" (Matthew 7:23). You see, no matter how many good things we have done, the factor that will keep us out of heaven is our sin.

¹ If you are a born-again believer, do not skip over this article. Most believers do not recognize that "salvation" from this present crisis involves the same plan that gave them eternal life. Thus, they have trouble handling the temporal crises of life. Prayerfully reflect on this material even if you have been a Christian for some time. Its truths must become "front-burner" issues for you if you are to handle life well.

² The Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a paraphrase of Jesus' statement in Matthew 7:12.

The Bible makes it clear that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That means that all of us have lived as if we are important and that God doesn't matter. We instinctively place ourselves first instead of God and turn to our "own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

Even our effort to get to heaven by being good shows our rebellion against God because He said that there is no way any of us can be good enough to merit heaven. Every one of us has broken His Ten Commandments-and have done so many times. He very clearly said that the "wages of sin is [eternal] death" (Romans 6:23). That means that all of us, because of our rebellion of going our own stubborn way in life, deserve the everlasting punishment of hell because of our mutiny against the Creator.

GOOD NEWS!

The good news for us is that eternal life-life in heaven with Jesus Christ forever-is not something we have to earn. It is a gift! Though "the wages of sin is [eternal] death; ... the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). That is good news because the Bible also tells us that it is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5). God is willing to mercifully give us a gift we cannot earn. He wants to give us eternal life. But that gift must be personally received by us.

Salvation from the eternal punishment of our sins is available to everyone, but we, too, must personally claim it.

How can salvation be a free gift? Though it is free to us, it cost Jesus Christ everything. You see, our sins against God require that a penalty be paid. Sinning against our Creator is such a great offense that the only just penalty is eternal suffering and separation from God Himself in hell. Hell is the result of God's granting a man his request-"God, leave me alone:' We may not realize it, but that is essentially what we say to God every time we reject His way and live life our own way. That is the bad news for the sinner.

The good news is that God loves us and arranged for His own Son to live on this earth to pay the penalty for us. Though Jesus lived in a body like ours, He did not share our sinful and stubborn nature. He lived a sinless life in complete obedience to His Father while on the earth. He qualified-as a perfect sacrificial lamb-to die in our place. Look at these chilling but wonderful words from the Old Testament, which predicted the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross for us.

"He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement [for] our peace was upon him: and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6).

The apostle John states the same thing this way:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:16, 18).

Jesus' sacrifice of His own blood as the eternal payment for anyone who would believe on Him satisfied the righteous anger of God against our mutiny. All that is left is for us to admit to God that we are indeed hell-deserving sinners, realize that Jesus died in our place and arose from the dead, and then accept the gift of eternal life from God. It is a simple plan-one that even a child can understand. A child will cry out for help to the person he believes will help him. A sinner who wants the gift of eternal life can come to Jesus Christ by praying a prayer like this:

Lord Jesus, I realize that I am a sinner. I have not obeyed You. I have gone my own way many times. Since You are perfect and Your heaven is perfect, I realize that even one sin would disqualify me from heaven. I repent of my sin and ask Your forgiveness. I accept Your gift of eternal life. I want Your substitutionary death to be applied to my sin account. Cleanse me from my sin and make me one of Your own children. Thank You for loving me and for saving me.

Once you are a child of God, your greatest crisis is over. You may lose the whole world, but you will not lose your soul.

Now consider this: If God knows how to rescue you from your greatest crisis, He certainly knows how to deliver you from any other crisis of life. And as we shall see, if you know how to be rescued from your greatest crisis-eternal death-you already know how to be rescued from any lesser crisis of life. We'll look at that in some detail in The Application.

THE APPLICATION

As we have seen, our biggest crisis is the need for the salvation of our sinful souls. God, in His love, worked out a plan to rescue us from eternal destruction. That plan is called the gospel and is the pattern for every other kind of rescue God does for us. The next question is "How do we apply it to our suffering today?"

LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE THE SAME WAY YOU GOT IT

Colossians 2:6 says, "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him:" This verse teaches that our initial salvation from sin is the pattern for our continued progress in being saved from our selfish tendencies. The gospel teaches us the pattern. Here are its basic components.

The gospel reveals man's condition. We saw in the last article that the Bible says we are all sinners. When we receive Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are forgiven for our sins and do not have to pay the eternal penalty of our sins, but we are not yet delivered from the presence of sin in our lives. The Bible teaches us that we still have within us the bent to live selfishly-

to think of ourselves first. This inclination to think of ourselves first seems overwhelming at times-especially if we are in great pain.

The gospel reveals God's provision. Though our sin nature still remains with us, God has provided a solution to its domination: a relationship with Jesus Christ. The provisions we need to deal with our temptations to be angry, bitter, anxious, fearful, and despairing will not be found in programs that teach us to manage emotions or teach us how to relax and find answers deep within ourselves. Neither will the solution ultimately be in the comfort of other people or in principled living.

The only lasting and satisfying answer to life's problems will always be in increased intimacy with Jesus Christ. Any solution that does not put Jesus Christ center stage will be ineffective and will further complicate the problem.

We cannot be saved from eternal death by trusting in Jesus Christ and our good efforts. We cannot be saved by trusting Jesus Christ and the church. Neither can we be saved from the dangers of the fleshly responses to our present crises by anything that detracts from the centrality of Jesus Christ. Any comfort we receive or strategies we attempt must point us to Jesus Christ, Who alone is our Savior. God's provision isn't a program or even a set of principles; it is a Person. Since the flesh is the greatest danger, the gospel-which puts Jesus Christ in the spotlight-is the only answer.

The gospel reveals man's responsibilities. Whether a firefighter is rescuing someone from a burning building or rescuing a cat from a tree, the basics are the same. First, set up the ladder. Second, climb up the ladder. Third, bring the person -or cat-down safely. Admittedly, there are differences between rescuing people from a burning building and rescuing a cat from a tree. But my point is that there are also very great similarities-as there are between being rescued from the dangers of hell's torment and being rescued from the dangers of selfish responses.

Man's responsibilities in salvation are first to turn from his sinful bent to trust himself to make life work. Self-centeredness is at the root of his problem. He must confess his mutiny against God and ask forgiveness.

Secondly, he must trust the provisions God has made available for his redemption. God has made salvation available to anyone who turns to Christ for forgiveness. The Bible message is "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31).

A life focused on Christ will not crumble in cnszs. If we have placed our trust in Jesus Christ-God's Son as our sin-bearer and sole master-then we have entered into a special relationship.

The plan is easy to understand but is not always easy to do because our self-centered ways cry out for relief on our terms.

The plan is to acknowledge the danger of stubborn self-centeredness in our pain. We must ask Jesus Christ Himself for the grace-the divine help-to respond in a way that provides us the opportunity to show how loving and powerful Jesus Christ is in our pain.

Listen to the testimony of the apostle Paul, who endured great physical affliction and found that the grace-the divine help-of God was the solution to removing the dangers of self-centeredness and to preparing the opportunities to show how great his God was.

"And lest I should {exalt myself} above measure [because of] the abundance of the revelations {note: God had used Paul to write over one half of the books of the New Testament-a heady accomplishment}, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me [note: three times he asked God to remove the affliction]. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Salvation from the danger of eternal death requires repentance-turning from sin-and it requires faith-turning toward God. Salvation from the dangers of anger, bitterness, anxiety, despair, and so forth in our pain requires the same thing-repentance for our stubborn self-centeredness, and faith-turning our face toward God for His help. Can you pray something like this?

Lord Jesus, I see how easy it is for me right now to think only of myself in my pain. I realize that my self-centeredness and stubbornness are the source of my anger, bitterness, anxiety, fear, despair, and hopelessness. Please forgive me for thinking that what I want is the most important thing in the world. Your plan is most important. I am turning to You for help. Teach me what You want me to know about Yourself so that I can show others that You are first in my life by the way I respond. I want others to see that You are truly sufficient for whatever happens to me.

We will have a hard time praying this, however, if we do not have the same agenda that God has for us in our trial. If we think our relief is the most important thing, while God thinks our growth in fellowship with Jesus Christ is most crucial, we will not weather the crisis well. The next article, "The Goal; will take a look at God's agenda vs. our agenda in our trial.

Reading #8 - THE GOAL

The crises of life are designed by God to help put the components of life back into their proper perspective. We saw this clearly on September 11, 2001, when America was attacked. Many Americans who had not thought of God for months, or perhaps years, suddenly began to pray. Churches of every denomination were filled with mourners and with people who wanted to know what their religious leaders had to say to them at the time.

Times of national and personal crisis jolt us out of our daydreams, our obsessions with work, and our trivial pursuits of recreation and entertainment. They bring us face to face with the ultimate reality-God.

There is no reality more significant than the facts that God exists, that He made us, and that He made us for a very specific purpose. And since we were created with a free will, we are responsible for whether we live our lives to accomplish God's purpose for us.

Truth #3: God's glory is always the goal.

The apostle Paul said, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31). That "whatsoever ye do" includes all the decisions of life-even those that are the responses to our suffering and pain. If glorifying God is the purpose of our lives, it will determine which "roads" -which right decisions-will bring us to that "destination:'

FACING THE FIERY FURNACE

The Bible gives us a wonderful example of three men who in the face of death made choices that showed the greatness and worthiness of their God. Three Old Testament Hebrew men - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego-were commanded to bow and worship a golden image of the reigning king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar.

They refused to bow to the image. By that act of defiance to the king's command, they showed that their God was first in their lives. If they had bowed to the statue, they would have demonstrated that preserving their own lives was the most important thing to them.

Our responses during times of great pressure and suffering will reveal whether we truly believe that God is the most important reality or whether we think we are the most significant factor in life.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego refused to think of themselves first and were sentenced to die. They were thrown bound into a fiery furnace that had been heated seven times hotter than normal.

God did a miraculous thing for them and spared their lives. Not only did He keep them from being burned alive but He also sent a heavenly messenger-perhaps an Old Testament appearance of Jesus Christ Himself-to be with them in the furnace. Listen to the words of the astonished King Nebuchadnezzar to his associates on that day.

"Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. {The king} answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" Daniel 3:24-25.

This passage gives us some wonderful instruction for handling the "fiery furnaces" of our lives. First, it teaches us that we should always respond in a way that shows that God is more important than anything else to us. And it also teaches us that we should respond in such a way that others who watch us in our "fiery furnace" can see someone "like the Son of God" with us in the furnace of our trial.

In this way we can glorify God because it shows we esteem Him of highest value. We show that we are not living in a fantasy world where we imagine that the world revolves around us. The most significant factor of reality is that God towers above all things in great splendor and majesty.

Thinking like this runs contrary to our natural, fleshly nature. We normally like to promote ourselves, protect ourselves, and please ourselves. The irony of this is that selfishness is at the center of all of our unhappiness in life. God has so "wired" His universe that any response from man that shows Him to be first fills that man with the joy and peace he longs for.

This truth is what Jesus was talking about when He said,

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

Self-centered goals will always bring us a great deal of unhappiness. Our goal must be to use every circumstance to show in some way that God is first. The result will be a lasting joy and peace no matter how difficult the circumstances.

WHAT IF IT GETS WORSE?

It is important for us to understand that God is not glorified merely by miraculous recoveries and heart-warming times of repentance. He is glorified any time His people have responses that show He is first in their lives.

The patriarch Job demonstrated that God was first by his response to the loss of his family, farm, and health. He said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly" (Job 1:21-22). Though Job eventually got his health and his farm back, he never saw his children brought back to life.

BUT I AM SO WEAK!

If you have read this far in our study together, you may be saying to yourself, "I see how all of this is true, and I genuinely would like to respond the way you are describing, but I am so weak. I don't have the strength to respond rightly, especially over the long haul!"

If this is the genuine attitude of your heart, I have even more good news for you! Jesus taught in His first sermon that this kind of weakness and humility qualifies you for His help. In the section of that sermon we call the Beatitudes, He said that His blessing would be upon

- "the poor in spirit" -those who are spiritually bankrupt.
- "they that mourn" -those who grieve over their sinfulness and weakness.
- "the meek" -those willing to be governed by God and others.
- "they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness" -those who are spiritually thirsty.

When we humble ourselves before God, acknowledging that we need Him, and do not stubbornly insist on our own way, He responds by giving us divine help. That help comes in the form of an increased desire to do His will and increased power to perform it (Philippians 2:13).

During times of great suffering, our desire to do right can diminish, and we can think we do not have the strength to carry on. At these times especially, we need an increase of His grace.

WE ARE NEVER TOO WEAK TO BOW

The beauty of God's plan is that no matter how weak and feeble we become we can always humble ourselves before Him. Fortunately, we do not have to do something great and powerful to get God's help. If that were the case, we would never be able to get His help.

It is easy for us in times of great pain and suffering to lose sight of our goal to show that God is first, especially when the pain and suffering drag on for an extended period of time. It is important during these prolonged times of difficulty to be reminded of what our goal is. If we lose sight of our goal, it is easy for us to lose our way in the darkness.

It is hard for us to understand, however, why God should be first if we do not know Him well. In the next two articles we will explore some of the wonderful aspects of our God. Since it is hard to trust people we do not know well, we must increase in our knowledge of God.

The time of crisis is the time to pray something like this.

Lord Jesus, I realize that during this time of pain I am especially tempted to think of myself. I realize, however, that this is a marvelous opportunity to put You and others first, even as You put us first when You died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Please use this time to make me more like You. May others see You here in the fiery furnace with me as they watch my life. Give me the daily strength and help I will need to keep my eyes focused on the goal of glorifying You in my trial. Please help me to respond properly for the sake of Your glory.

As long as the trial remains, we will have to make this the daily cry of our hearts. We will receive in return a wonderful peace and a satisfying joy when God's glory is always the goal.

THE DILEMMA

The answer for the fears we experience in times of crisis is an increased awareness of the nature of our God. In this article and the next, I want to briefly take you on a tour of God's powers that He has at His disposal, which He will use for our benefit and for His glory.

Sometimes people say, "I have a hard time trusting God." The truth may be that they are refusing to trust Him because trusting means giving up control of their lives in some area. We have already seen the danger of our self-centered ways. Another reason they might have a "hard time" trusting God is that they do not know Him very well.

THE DILEMMA

We have to admit that often we have a hard time trusting God because we really don't consider Him trustworthy. To us He looks more like a wolf among the sheep-making life miserable for us-than a Good Shepherd, Who is willing to give His life for the sheep. This is our dilemma: Whom will we trust?

We may have formed our view of God from hearsay-what others have told us about Him. Or our view of Him may be skewed by situations that did not turn out the way we wanted them resolved, and we have blamed God for our misfortune.

Our sinful natures are clones of Satan's own nature. Our flesh, like Satan, is deceitful. Satan keeps our heart under his rule by scandalizing God. He does everything he can to make God look bad and to make himself look good. Satan is so effective in his strategy that he has temporarily taken over the loyalty of virtually the whole world.

TRUST DECISIONS

The apostle Paul accurately calls Satan "the god of this world;" who "hath blinded the minds of them which believe not" (II Corinthians 4:4). In every circumstance of life, we have a trust decision to make. Will we believe what God has said about our situation, or will we believe what our own heart tells us about our situation-skewed by its natural bent to mimic Satan?

This is why the Bible speaks so much about faith. We may think that the key factor is the amount of our faith. Scripture indicates that we always have enough faith. Our problems result from placing our faith in the wrong person. When the Bible speaks about our having faith, it refers to having faith in God. This is what is meant when the Bible says, "the just [i.e., the ones who are righteous before God because they have experienced God's salvation from sin] shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17).

We cannot make any decisions without believing somebody. The test of our spiritual life is "whom are we believing with our faith-God or our own heart?"

NEW TESTAMENT TROUBLE

The apostles of the early church in Jerusalem experienced particularly difficult times because their message of salvation in Jesus Christ cut cross-grain to the accepted religious

thought of the day. They were regularly summoned before government officials for their preaching and were flogged or imprisoned. Notice this account in Acts 4:23-29 of their response after one such encounter. I want you to especially notice their high view of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ.

"And being let go, [Peter and John] went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when [the church] heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. [In other words, "You predicted that the unbelieving world would act this way toward Your Son."]

For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.

And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word" Acts 4:23-29.

These first-century believers readily acknowledged that their God was the powerful Creator and could do whatever He wished to do in the affairs of men. They didn't insist that their own agenda be fulfilled. They asked only that they would be able to testify to the greatness of their God with boldness even when they faced persecution. God answered their prayer, for we find these words in verse 33:

"And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all."

Only by having the same view of God as these early apostles can we sincerely pray the Lord's Prayer. The words I have added in brackets help clarify the meaning of this well-known model prayer.

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done [through me] in earth, as it is [accomplished by your heavenly servants] in heaven.

These verses teach us that we will not be ready to ask God to accomplish whatever His will is in our lives here on earth if we do not "hallow" His name.

The word hallowed means to be especially honored and exalted in such a way that sets Him high above-separate-from all other beings. It means to view with great respect and dignity. As we saw earlier, it is much easier to trust someone whom we highly respect since every decision is a trust decision-it reveals whom we trust.

So how is it that we can gain this high view of God? How can we believe rightly-make the right trust decisions-about God? We will attempt a more complete answer to that question

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in the next article. We will take some time to look more closely at the resources He has at His disposal to use on our behalf.

Reading #9 - THE HIGH TOWER

ESCAPE FROM THE TOWER

Shirley and Steve-not their real names-sat across the table from my wife and me as Shirley told her story. She was on an upper floor of the second World Trade Center tower when the first tower was hit by Islamic terrorists in a commercial airliner. She and her work associates were able to escape unharmed minutes before the first tower collapsed. They along with hundreds of others ran away from the site and kept on walking. Their only goal: to get out of the city and let their loved ones know they were alive. Though the twin towers would soon collapse, Shirley was still protected by a far more secure unseen tower-the God of heaven.

When David faced danger, he was eager to run into that Strong Tower. Here are his words:

“The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my [shield], and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower” (Psalm 18:2).

“Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy” (Psalm 61:1-3).

“Blessed be the Lord my [rock], . . . my [lovingkindness], and my fortress; my high tower, and my deliverer; my shield, and he in whom I trust” (Psalm 144:1-2).

ESCAPE TO THE TOWER

High towers-like the World Trade Center towers-are dangerous places to be during an emergency. But as these verses teach us, God is a strong tower-our safest place of refuge during an emergency.

This theme of running to God during times of crisis is a frequent theme in the Bible and is captured in the fourth and final truth for times of trouble.

Truth #4: God Himself is always enough.

Since America has experienced the tragedy of the World Trade Center attacks, people are quite ready to evacuate a tall building at the first hint of threat. Buildings that were at one time thought to be entirely safe are viewed as possible deathtraps now.

Unfortunately, many people have as skeptical a view of God as they do of tall buildings. Instead of running to Him in times of danger, they run away from Him. As I mentioned earlier, they do this because they do not know Him well.

When my wife is counseling women who are going through uncertain times, she reminds them of an important truth: When there are things that you do not know about your life's situation, you must focus on the things that you do know about your God.

We must increase our knowledge of God Himself—the one who is controlling all the factors of our life in His sovereignty.¹ We may not be able to see exactly what He is doing or how He will make something turn out, but if we know Him well, our heart can rest.

THE CRISIS REVEALS WHAT WE KNOW

If our hearts are not at rest when trouble comes, it is because we do not realize how powerful and wise God is or because we do not realize how much He loves us. It is not possible to present a thorough study of God here. You studied several of His attributes in sessions 7-11.

THE CRISIS REVEALS WHAT WE ARE

Sometimes extended personal trouble results in a physical crisis of some kind. We may experience stomach disorders, chronic pain, or some other abnormality.

Before the crisis we may not have been eating, exercising, or resting adequately. The crisis reveals a weakened physical condition when we are put under extra pressure.

Our spiritual lives are much the same way. We may experience great despair, heightened anxiety, anger, or bitterness when we face a time of trouble. These discomforts reveal that we have not been adequately taking care of our spiritual life. We need more personal meditation on the Word of God, more time in prayer with our great God, more exposure to the faithful preaching of the Bible, and more encouragement and fellowship with God's people.

A crisis reveals what we are made of spiritually. If we have a high biblical view of God through the consistent study of His Word, we will run to our Strong Tower, and our hearts will rest because God Himself is always enough!

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

I hope you will use this time of crisis to more earnestly study your Bible to learn more about our great God. If you are too ill physically to study your Bible, call your pastor or some spiritually mature friend and ask him to read the Bible to you.

If you are bedridden or confined to your house, purchase some recordings of good preaching. You can also purchase recordings of good Christian music and of someone reading the Bible. All of these resources are means to help you learn more of our great God and to remind you again of truths you already know but may have forgotten in your time of trouble.

Keeping your mind focused on spiritual things during a crisis is of vital importance. Listen to the apostle Peter's instructions to his suffering congregation.

¹ That God is sovereign simply means that, as the reigning King over all the earth and heavens, He is directly superintending every aspect of our lives (Psalm 103:19).

"Gird up the loins of your mind, be sober[minded], and [fix your hope on] the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:13).

"Gird up the loins of your mind" means to prepare your mind for action. Peter is saying that a time of crisis is no time for sloppy thinking. That is why it is important for us in times of crisis to be getting an increased dose of the Bible and of books and recordings that will teach us to think biblically.

It is also a time to fix our hope on what God is going to do for us in the future when we all will stand in His presence and will be delivered from the suffering and pain of this world. In the meantime, Peter tells us to continue to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3: 18).

You will find the Lord to be a Strong Tower when you get to know Him better. May you use this time of trouble to discover more about Him. You will one day be able to testify with great joy and peace that God Himself is always enough!

PERFECTIONISTS WHO DOUBT THEIR SALVATION

Occasionally I deal with believers who have grown up in Christian homes, know their Bibles well, eschew worldliness and sin, but are frequently haunted with doubts about their salvation. They have prayed for God to save them a thousand times and have often gone forward in church meetings to "nail down" their decision to trust Christ as Savior. They have often talked to several pastors, counselors, evangelists, and Christian leaders-all to no avail.

They have searched out the promises of God about salvation but have always found a clause or phrase that seemed to disqualify them from the promise. They reason, "God said that 'whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved; but what if I didn't do it right? What if I didn't have enough faith when I called? What if I had some mental reservation when I asked God to save me? What if I was covering sin in my heart so that the Lord could not hear me?" The result is a joyless, frantic search for an elusive assurance that never seems to come except for brief moments of calm.

It is not enough to tell these struggling believers that they must "just trust God" -although that is in essence the solution. They often need more specific direction than that. Telling them to "trust God" is like a doctor telling a sick patient to "eat better." He may know he needs to do that but probably needs some education about the nature of his problem and how he came to be so ill followed by a structured diet that includes all the necessary foods for healthy living.

When I am counseling someone who has these persistent doubts about salvation, I usually begin by asking him if he has trouble making other important decisions. For example, if he is a college student, I often find he had a hard time making up his mind what college to attend. He agonized over what to major in. He waited until the last minute to pack because he never could figure out what exactly to take. He finally made the decisions about each of these matters because he had run out of time and must do something.

What I want these counselees to see is that they don't have a problem just with their assurance of salvation; they have a problem with assurance about any major decision. The one about salvation, of course, carries more weight in their minds because the consequences of dying without Christ are so enormous.

When they begin to get the picture, I help them see that this is what Paul called a "spirit of fear" (II Timothy 1:7) and the "spirit of bondage" (Romans 8:15). This kind of fearfulness pervades all of life for them.

The more we talk, the more they admit that they are perfectionistic in many areas of life-at least in the areas of life that matter most to them. For example, a guy's bedroom may be a total disaster, but he gives an unprecedented attention to his studies, his sports, or his music lessons and performances. In these areas which he has decided are crucial for his image and security, he is overly disciplined, even intense.

He is often not irreligious. In fact, he is often the student who won the high school Christian Leadership award. He even prays, but his prayers are for God to help him be successful in these areas he has decided must be in place if he is to feel secure.

What begins to unfold is a performance-based approach to life-an approach in which security is related to works. This should not surprise us since every man-made religion is essentially works-based. The gospel of the finished work of Jesus Christ strikes right at the heart of such systems. A man cannot work enough to feel safe-eternally or temporally. There are too many bases to cover and too many loose ends to tie up. A man can no more feel secure in his temporal existence based upon his performance than he can feel secure about his eternal destiny based upon his performance. There is always one more thing to do, one more question to answer, and one more doctrine to nail down.

These poor souls often end up in their midlife times with battle-wearied bodies, relationships that continually disappoint them, jobs that never completely satisfy, and an ever-darkening future with no rest in sight. They grow angry and eventually depressed-though they will never show it on the outside if they can help it. They still want to appear in control and stable. The pride runs too deep.

What sometimes happens next isn't pretty. In what appears to onlookers as bizarre, they throw in the towel for an affair or leave the marriage in a burst of anger and bitterness that leaves everyone stunned. Onlookers reason among themselves, "How can this be? This isn't the Mary we have known! She must have some kind of mental problem or must be experiencing some kind of demonic attack!"

Mary, however, seems more at peace than she has ever been. She finally feels free, at least for now. She may even join a fellowship of believers in a church that celebrates its "Christian liberty:" They are not bound by such legalistic restraints as Mary has grown up with. She may even find a support group of "recovering Fundamentalists" who have experienced similar struggles.

Sadly, there are some ultra-conservative groups who seem to equate rule-keeping with godliness, but the problem with many "Mary's" is not that the teaching around them is wrong. The problem has always been their own unbelief and discontent.

Look at what has happened through the grid of "The Way Down" chart. Mary's problem started with her unbelief, which said, "God is not doing enough for me; God Himself is not enough for me. I need something more to feel safe and significant." That one statement of unbelief not always stated in those terms, but lived out that way nonetheless-started a watershed of pursuits that has led to her disintegration.

The discontent, the restlessness, and the insecurity has led to a quest for the perfect assurance. Nothing but an answer that removes all possible doubt and quells all possible fear will do. She will disqualify herself from every Bible promise if there is a loophole. God's promise that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28) is not for her because there have been times when she has not loved God. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13) offers no hope since she cannot be absolutely sure she has "called upon the name of the Lord" correctly.

The sinful anxiety is betrayed by all the "what ifs:" What if I didn't call correctly? What if I didn't have enough faith? What if God didn't have me in mind when He said that? What if I am interpreting this verse wrong? What if I have committed the unpardonable sin? What if the peace I have experienced at times is an illusion of the Devil and I'm really lost?

The sinful discontent is exposed by all the "if onlys:" If only I could know for sure if I meant it when I asked God to save me at camp as a teenager. If only I hadn't had such wicked, blasphemous thoughts about God as a youngster-I can't possibly ever be saved if I have thoughts like that.

The flaws in this kind of thinking are myriad, but two bear consideration right now. First, here again is a person meditating upon possibilities rather than upon certainties. He is eating mental "roadkill" and then wondering why his "stomach is so upset." Thoughts about God and His ways that are contrary to biblical revelation must be rejected. Mary must learn to drive around the mental roadkill, not stop, examine it, taste it, and store up portions of it to be eaten later.²

Thoughts contrary to what the Bible says is true must be rejected while Mary fills her mind with truth about the God Who is more than enough for her.

Second, these kinds of thoughts are filled with self-centeredness. Go back to the paragraphs listing the "what ifs" and "if onlys." Underline the first-person personal pronouns (i.e., I, me, my, mine). This person is basing his security upon what he can know and what he has done-not upon what God has said and what God has done.

² If this illustration is disgusting to you, my intention is being served. We cringe at the pictures brought into our minds by this illustration but do not hesitate to entertain unholy and unrighteous thoughts about God and His ways. Both diets-physical roadkill and unholy thoughts of God-will be destructive.

Dr. Jim Berg – Taking Time To Quiet Your Soul

The focus on self is supposed to be unsettling. The solution is to "trust God;" but he must repent of his self-centered unbelief and then turn to the only One Who can reveal the truth to Him-the God of heaven.

I often assign perfectionists like Mary who lack assurance to study *Created for His Glory: God's Purpose for Redeeming Your Life* along with its study guide, *Taking Time to Rejoice*. The study explores the truths of the Christian faith from the book of Ephesians-truths about God that made Paul's heart rejoice even though he was in prison when he wrote the letter. The study targets the despair of our day and offers a fresh view of God to the weary and battered traveler.

Reading #10 - HOW TO HANDLE SHAME

Shame has both an objective and subjective component. It is first of all an objective state of being. For example, we may say, "John was shamed when the coach pulled him out of the game and put him on the bench for losing his temper." Used in this way, shame means that John was demoted. It describes what happened to John.

Shame is also a subjective emotion or feeling. We would also be correct in saying, "John was shamed-felt humiliated-by the coach's decision to pull him out of the game." Here we are describing how John felt (the subjective component) about what happened to him (the objective component).

Essentially, we experience shame when we have been exposed in some way and have been found deficient. Shame is the humiliation that says, "I have been seen and have been found unacceptable." God intends to use shame to fuel our change for good. Satan would like to use our shame to keep us in chains so that we cannot serve Christ.

Confusion comes when we fail to differentiate between the sources of shame. Sometimes we are shamed when we have sinned ourselves, and sometimes we are shamed because someone else has sinned against us.

For example, the shame that comes with being arrested for shoplifting is far different from the shame that comes to a youngster who has been sexually abused by someone. In the first case, the shoplifter is guilty and feels ashamed. In the second case the abuser is guilty, but the victim feels ashamed. So how do we sort this out so that we can face shame biblically no matter where it comes from-our own sin or someone else's sin? We will discuss two overarching principles that should make the issue clear.

WHEN YOU ARE GUILTY, CONFESS THE SIN.

Guilt is the phenomenon at work in Psalms 32 and 38. David is experiencing the shame and other effects of his sins of murder and adultery. In Psalm 51 he confesses his sin to the Lord and experiences the freedom of a clear conscience.

When our shame is the result of our own sin, God intends to use it to motivate us to seek reconciliation with Him and others through confessing our sins. Once sin is confessed, we must learn to rejoice in God's forgiveness as David did in Psalm 32, where he says,

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile {i.e., he is no longer attempting to cover up his sin through deceit}."

Sometimes Christians who have asked forgiveness still feel an overwhelming sense of shame. Often there is a lingering sense of regret-sorrow that our testimony has been damaged. This is not unhealthy. We should feel the weight of how sin has affected others and has affected our usefulness to God at the moment. That sense of sorrow will be a strong motivator in the future should we be tempted to sin again.

Some people, however, cannot seem to get on top of the sorrow. They might even say, "I know that God and others have forgiven me, but I just can't forgive myself' The trouble with that thinking is that "forgiving myself" is not even a biblical issue. It sounds humble, but in actuality it is rooted in a wounded pride.

This person may be despairing because his own view of himself has been shattered. He thought he was better than this and can't stand the thought that he is so deficient. A person with a biblical view of himself will not be surprised that evil has come out of his heart; he is truly surprised that it does not come out more often given the nature of what he is inside.

His pride may be wounded because he has lost the respect of other people. He may have lived for the approval of others, and now his hopes for that acceptance have been dashed to the ground.

In either case, the wounded pride needs to be identified, confessed, and forsaken. Our stability and hope are not dependent upon a sinless heart or upon the approval of others. They rest upon the unfailing love of God for sinners and His promises to use forgiven sinners.

WHEN YOU ARE NOT GUILTY, DESPISE THE SHAME.

The Lord Himself gives us the pattern for how to deal with shame that is the result of someone else's sin. When He hung on the cross, He was put to shame. He was viewed as a criminal worthy of execution. He was humiliated by public nakedness. He was forsaken by most of His followers and by His country's rulers. In the public eye, He was evaluated as deficient. He was "seen" and "found deficient:' He was shamed.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us how He dealt with the shame. It says, "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.'

The Scripture writer says that Jesus despised the shame. What does that mean? Despise means to "think down" or "think against:' The usage of the Greek and English words for despise elsewhere in the New Testament gives us a feel for its meaning.

Jesus taught in Matthew 6:24 that a man cannot serve two masters since he will "hold to the one and despise [think down on] the other:' When the disciples tried to keep the children from coming to Him, Jesus said, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones:' He was saying, "Be careful that you don't 'think down on' these children:'

The apostle Paul told Timothy to "let no man despise thy youth:' In other words, don't be concerned when others "think down" on you because you are younger. The same usage can be seen in II Peter 2:10, where evil men "despise governments"; they 'think down upon' those who rule them.

The lesson becomes clear to us. God wants us to spend very little time thinking about how awful the shame is when someone has wronged us. The world says just the opposite. Some secular programs that treat sexual abuse tell the victim to dwell much on how horrible this

has made her feel in order to authenticate her pain. This often results in great anger-energy that secular therapists try to turn into activism against abuse and so forth. This is not God's strategy.

God wants the focus to be on something other than our wrongful humiliation at the hands of others. Our focus needs to be on how we can respond in such a way that shows God to others. The pattern is found in Romans 12:17-21 and I Peter 2:20-23. It is seen in the responses of David to King Saul's treatment (I Samuel 18-II Samuel 1) and in the responses of our Lord to His accusers and abusers in the Gospels.

Don't forget the governing principles: When you are guilty, confess the sin; when others are guilty, despise the shame.

IS THERE ANY HOPE?

Hope is much more strategic in our immediate and long-term contentment than most people realize. No one continues long in any endeavor if there is no hope of any kind.

The statement above warrants some further expansion. So much rests upon it. The issue of hope is at the core of what is called "the placebo effect" -which we shall look at shortly-and is the misunderstood factor in the phenomenon called "low self-esteem." To begin with we need to start with some clarifying statements about hope.¹

The word hope in the Bible is never used in the way it is generally used today. Hundreds of high school graduates matriculate each fall to the university where I minister hoping to graduate from college in four years. In God's good providence most of them do. When a freshman says, "I hope to finish four years from now;" he is expressing a strong desire to attain a certain goal. He does not know with absolute certainty that he will do so, however. He may be forced to sit out a semester because of financial needs or family setbacks. He may be delayed in his plans because of an illness or an accident that lays him up for several weeks or months. In a very few cases, the obstacles are so great that he never returns to finish at all. Most of the students who experience these reversals, however, at one time hoped to finish college within a certain time frame. Certainly there is nothing wrong with their use of the word hope in this way. We all know they are expressing a strong desire that seems to have a likelihood of being fulfilled. This, however, is not the way the word hope is used in the Bible.

Hope in the Bible is a "confident expectation;" It is an "assured outcome;" When Paul speaks of "looking for that blessed hope, and glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; he is speaking about an event that is definitely going to take place. Nothing can stop it since God has promised it. Our hope in it is not a strong desire with a measure of uncertainty mixed with it. Our hope is a confident expectation that this event will indeed take place.

When someone overwhelmed by trials begins to wonder, "Will this problem ever go away? I don't know if it is worth it to go on;" he is thinking this way because he is losing hope. He

¹ Berg, Created for His Glory (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2002), 102-3

has no "confident expectation" in the trial. Now, perhaps his expectation is misplaced. He may have been enduring to this point because he had some reason to expect that the trial would end. Consider some examples.

- An employee has been telling himself, "It seems like everything will change in two months when that miserable excuse for a boss retires. I don't have to let him get me down; anyone can hang on for two months:' In this case, his hope is in his boss's retirement.
- A wife with an insensitive husband may be placing her hope in the fact that another man in the church has begun to disciple her husband. She is more upbeat and decides to hang on a bit longer because she expects some change to be forthcoming. Her hope is in the involvement of another man in the spiritual life of her husband.
- A man whose recently discovered cancer is being treated with a new drug therapy that gives him some expectation that the cancerous cells will be destroyed has hope in the new drug treatment.

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

Nothing in the scenarios above is necessarily out of place, except the obvious bitterness of the employee to his boss. It is quite natural for all of us to have some hope-some confident expectation-in interventions that seem to promise some improvement in our situation. The danger, of course, is that when this is the only hope we have in a situation, we are even more discouraged when things do not work out as we had expected they might. Our hope must be in something more stable than a mere "expectation" that something might improve.

We might even liken these temporary "glimmers of hope" to the placebo effect familiar to the medical world. When doing tests on new drugs, responsible pharmaceutical companies conduct double-blind cross-over tests. This means that in the drug trial one group of people are given the drug being tested and another group are given a neutral pill. No one in either group knows whether he is being given the placebo-the inactive substance-or the real drug. Thus, it is called a double-blind study. In these studies, not even the people administering the pills should know who is being given the real drug and who gets the placebo. This eliminates the possibility of the results being influenced just by the attitude of the administering team.

Later in the trial some patients who have been given the placebo are given the real drug and some who had the real drug are given the placebo. Again, no one knows who is changed over and who is not. This is called the cross-over component.

The goal is to find out who indeed is really helped by the drug. The double-blind cross-over method must be used to eliminate the placebo effect. This is the phenomenon whereby some people given the inactive substance, the placebo, actually get better to some degree. This is not due, of course, to any ingredient in the pill; it is due to their "confident expectation" that this pill will help their ailment. The hope alone is enough to help them feel better.

What we see in the placebo effect is the powerful influence that hope has on a person. This is why "positive thinking" alone has a healthy effect on many people. This is why the involvement of a caring person in the life of anyone experiencing trials is such an encouragement to the sufferer. God intended for us to be positively influenced in our spirits by the expectation of improvement and by the loving involvement of others.

The danger, however, is that none of these sources of hope is absolutely reliable. People can disappoint us, medical science is limited, circumstances may not change, and so forth. If our hope has been in temporal issues like these, our spirits will surely "crash and burn on the runway" when the thing in which we hoped does not come through for us.

This is why meditation on those things that are unchangeable and absolute about God is so crucial. Don't minimize the importance of memorizing the "Stabilizing Truths: The Knowledge of God" from session 2. The cancer treatment may fail, but "God will always give me the grace I need-always!" The boss may choose to delay his retirement, but "God is always up to something good in my life-always!" A husband may not agree to continue seeing the pastor for help, but his wife can be assured that "God is always in control of all things-always!"

Our hope must be in something true about God, not in something temporal and changeable, if we are to be stable. We can have "confident expectation" because our God is more than enough for us. He is our hope!

THE MISDIAGNOSIS OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

If you understand the part that hope plays in a person's will to go on in spite of hardships and disappointments, you understand what is really at work in the phenomenon our culture calls low self-esteem. Let's look at the issue briefly in an educational setting.²

As individuals in our society have become increasingly self-centered, they have left in their wake a staggering mass of hurting people. My eldest daughter was a student teacher in a public elementary school made up largely of underprivileged children. She told her mother and me story after story of neglected children in her classroom. My heart broke as I pondered their wretched existence, and I wept as I prayed for them during her directed teaching experience.

Most of them had no encouragement from home and almost no direction for any part of their lives.

They were either fearful and withdrawn or obnoxious and unruly. In either case, the common diagnosis of the world was that they had low self-esteem. The supposed answer was somehow to bolster this mystical component of life so that they could succeed. Because the problem was misdiagnosed, the treatment was also misdirected.

² Berg, Created, 269-70.

[Those who were "acting up" had not been taught how to esteem others-their teachers or their classmates. Their problem was not too little self-esteem, but too much. They believed that what they wanted was the most important issue. Though they were not lacking in a sense of self-importance, they often lacked hope that anything good would happen in their lives unless they looked out for themselves. The other group of discouraged, withdrawn children didn't lack self-esteem; they, too, lacked hope. Both groups would be best helped by the firm but loving interaction of adults in their lives.]

When a teacher kindly helps a student through a hard problem at his desk, encourages him to try again on the ball field, smiles approvingly when he does raise his hand, and firmly insists that he stay in his seat or he will be asked to leave the room, the teacher is ... [creating) an atmosphere of hope

Hope is built through loving involvement-involvement that says, "I care. Let me help;' and involvement that says, "Here's how. Now you try if' This is exactly how God builds hope in His children.

When teachers-and parents-are involved in the ways I described above, behavior improves and test scores climb. The secularists confidently announce that the reason is that the teacher's or parent's involvement has built the child's self-esteem. The truth is that their involvement has generated hope. The child finally has a reason to try and enough instruction and encouragement to finally succeed.

By now you should realize the importance of hope both for your own stability and for the stability of those you try to help through the trials of life. Despair grows out of misplaced hope. The founder of Bob Jones University, Dr. Bob Jones Sr., used to remind the student body that "the future is as bright as the promises of God:" Despair doesn't see a future. A despairing heart hopes in something temporal that doesn't deliver the goods.

We must never forget that lasting hope-stabilizing hope-is a result of placing confidence in our unchanging God. In addition, we can temporarily lift the spirits of those who struggle by our loving involvement in their lives. We who know Christ ought to be masters at building hope.

Reading #11 - HANDLING A MATTER WISELY

"He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good." Proverbs 16:20

This article consists of an extended outline that will help you when solving problems with others. It is written primarily from the viewpoint of someone who has the oversight of another-a parent, work supervisor, and so forth, but the principles can be applied to other relationships as well.

When someone comes to you with a complaint, an appeal, or a request for an exception, or you realize you need to confront him about something, consider the following steps:

A. Listen Actively.

1. Be calm.

- a. If he is angry or upset, he may calm down if he sees you care.
 - Proverbs 15:1-"A soft answer turneth away wrath:'
 - Proverbs 15:18-"He that is slow to anger appeaseth strife:'
- b. He will respond with anger (or more anger if he came angry) if you are upset/unkind.
 - Proverbs 15:1-"Grievous [harsh] words stir up anger:'
 - Proverbs 15:18-"A wrathful man [in this case, you] stirreth up strife:'
 - Proverbs 29:22-"An angry man [you, again] stirreth up strife, and a furious man aboundeth in transgression:' (You will increase your chances of making a mistake yourself when you are furious.)
- c. God won't bless your efforts to do His work using carnal anger.
 - James 1:20-"For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God:'
- d. You can't "make a difference" in his life if you are reacting the same way he does or the same way that unspiritual leaders have responded to him in the past.

2. Be courteous.

- a. Do not interrupt him unless you need to ask him to step into a more private situation (another room, etc.) so that you can close the door. Interrupting him is rude otherwise.
 - Proverbs 18:13-"He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him:'
- b. If he becomes verbally abusive, calmly but firmly stop him and tell him you will hear his entire story, but he must tell it respectfully.

- c. Even if you know what your answer will be, don't show impatience while he tries to finish his presentation. Your impatience tells him that his ideas are not important to you.
- d. By all means if he is asking permission to do something, don't fuss at him for asking when you are the one requiring that he get permission. He could just do it his own way and deal with you later if he is discovered. At least he has enough understanding of authority to come to you, even if it is for the wrong reason or with the wrong spirit. Now he is in a position for you to help him with both. Tell him you appreciate the fact that he came.

3. Be concerned.

- a. Show you have understood his position by rephrasing it.
- b. Nod as he talks, look at him, and use appropriate facial expression.

4. Be cautious.

Be careful, however. Your nods and so forth need to communicate that you understand. He may take them as agreement with his position and later claim you were on his side unless you eventually clarify your position when you do the talking later.

B. Question Thoroughly.

1. Why should you question?
 - a. If he is angry, a question puts his mind in gear when his emotions are ruling him. Questions penetrate the anger.
 - b. Questioning allows you to gather more information so that you don't answer foolishly before you have the facts.
 - c. Questioning shows you have a desire to understand and help. Questions allow you to put yourself in his place because you understand his problem, what he has tried to do about it, and what he understands about the issue.
2. How should you question?
 - a. Since your purpose in this stage of the conversation is merely to gather information, keep your questions focused on the issue so that you can make an informed decision. If you must correct something with the individual (his attitude, motive, etc.), let that wait until the issue is decided (C below), then "confront lovingly" (D below).
 - b. To keep the questions focused on the issue, avoid questions that begin with "why." "Why" questions focus on the individual and his motives. Information questions ask who, what, when, where, and how and keep the attention on the issue.

c. Most people asking "why" questions are not seeking to resolve an issue. They are venting their anger or punishing their victim and, thereby, clouding the issue with barbed jabs at the individual. For example:

- "Why would you do a thing like that?"
- "Why can't you follow instructions like your sister?"
- "Why did you take the car when you knew I would need it tonight?"
- "Why don't you straighten up?"

C. Respond Graciously.

- When you have gathered all the information you need to deal with the issue, you can then begin to frame your response. Whatever your answer, you can be kind even if you must be firm.
- There is a difference between firmness and forcefulness. Firmness merely means you won't change your position. Forcefulness means you use a great deal of energy to state your firm position.

Colossians 4:6—"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man:"

Ephesians 4:32—"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted:"

1. "No" -If you know the situation can't be changed, communicate your regret that you can't be more accommodating by saying ...
 - "I wish I could help you more:'
 - "I know that's not the answer you would like to hear:'
 - "I'm sorry we can't do more for you:'
2. "Maybe" -If there is the slightest possibility that the situation can be changed, tell him ...
 - "Let me see what I can do for you:"
 - "I can't promise anything, but I'll try" '
 - "I'll do what I can"
3. "Wait" -If some qualification must be met first, leave him with a positive statement about when he can do it, like ...
 - "We will be happy to go to Bill's tonight, as soon as you get your chores done:'

- "I'd be delighted to raise your allowance when I see that you have mastered taking care of your chores entirely on your own initiative. Now, how are you coming on cleaning up your room? Do you need some help?"

4. "Yes"-If you can do something to change his situation, don't leave him with the feeling that you gave him his request, but you sure didn't want to. Instead say ...

- "I'll be glad to let you do this for now, but you can save yourself some hassle and embarrassment by taking care of it by the deadline in the future. Have a good time:'
- "Thanks for bringing this to my attention. I didn't have the full picture until you brought this up."



If the person you are dealing with comes away from you "hurting;" it should be only because he chose to keep beating his head against a brick wall (he met with firm but gracious resistance). Notice the wall's expression in figure 1. It is not gloating or angry but concerned and grieved.

His "hurt" should not come from flying bricks the wall throws at him in anger and frustration. Notice how unappealing the brick-throwing wall looks in figure 2. Even when Christ had to be firm, people stood back in wonder and said, "No man spake like this man:' He wasn't ugly with them, so He didn't look ugly to them.

D. Confront Lovingly (when necessary to confront at all).

1. If handled properly, many people will initiate a reconciliation themselves on the spot. That will happen only if you created an atmosphere in which reconciliation is possible. If you have sinned by blowing up, being impatient, or acting discourteously,

you have placed a stumbling block in someone's path to reconciliation. He will be tempted to focus on your wrong instead of his own. If others rarely "come around" during your conferences with them, you are probably doing something that makes it hard for them to do so. The scriptural warning for placing stumbling blocks in the path of another is severe (Matthew 18:6).

2. If you must confront, do it once the issue has been addressed and you have responded as graciously as possible (C above, Romans 12:18).
3. Build a bridge strong enough to withstand the weight of correction before you ever need to cross it.
4. Remove the "beam" in your own eye (Matthew 7:3-5; Galatians 6:1).
 - Check your own motivation. Are you correcting for his benefit or merely to "save your own image"?
 - Check your own actions. Are you guilty of similar problems?
 - WARNING: No matter what deficiencies you find in your own life, you are not given a biblical option to do nothing. The mandate from God is to remove the beam from your own eye so that you can confront.
5. Schedule a meeting time.
 - a. As soon as possible after the infraction
 - b. At a time when the effects of the meeting will be least felt by others (at the end of the day, etc.)
 - c. At a time when you will not be rushed to deal with the situation calmly and thoroughly
 - d. As privately as possible
6. Be sure you have all the facts (see "Listen Actively" and "Question Thoroughly" above).
7. Clarify what was done wrong. Be specific.
 - Focus on observations, descriptions, and actions, not on conclusions, judgments, and the actor.
 - "John, your (responsibility) wasn't completed by the deadline. Explain to me what happened?" not "John, what excuse do you have for botching your job last night?"
8. State how you feel about what was done wrong. Be specific.

- "John, when you don't finish the job the way you know it should be done, I'm disappointed that someone else has to come in and do your job over. It wastes my time and theirs:'

9. Get agreement about what was done wrong. This is the first step toward reconciliation.
 - "John, is the problem, as I just explained it, a fair picture of the situation?" (If so,) "What are you going to do about it?"
10. Clarify where he stands with you now (re: relationship, restrictions, and restitution).
11. Follow up as necessary to see if the confrontation was productive.
12. As much as possible in the next few days, "catch him doing something right;" and praise him for it.

CONCLUSION

Remember the important steps to handling a matter wisely:

1. Listen actively.
2. Question thoroughly.
3. Respond graciously.
4. Confront lovingly.

Reading #12 - OBSESSIONS AND COMPULSIONS: BREAKING FREE OF THE TYRANNY¹

By Michael R. Emlet

Have you ever had a thought that you found difficult to push from your mind? Have you ever just gone to bed and asked yourself, "Did I lock the front door?" You're 99.9% sure that you did, but that last shred of lingering doubt causes you to get up and go downstairs and check, just to be sure. You find that, indeed, you did lock the door and so you trudge back to bed and quickly fall asleep, forgetting the incident. No problem.

I would venture to say that this is a common and normal experience. But have you or anyone you know struggled in more far-reaching ways as described below?

- After checking the door once, you lie awake in bed and wonder, "Did I absolutely make certain that the door was locked?" You fight the building anxiety, but eventually succumb, checking the lock again. In fact, you unbolt and rebolt several times in order to be sure. And yet, it is not enough. Lying in your bed a bit later, the doubt begins to grow, and the cycle of checking and rechecking continues until you fall asleep out of sheer exhaustion at three o'clock in the morning.
- You worry that the floors and other household surfaces are not clean enough to prevent contamination of your children. So, although you know your fear is irrational, you spend hours a day cleaning the surfaces of your house with Clorox.
- You have stopped driving out of fear that you may hit and kill someone (although you admit that your driving record is untarnished and your driving skills are above reproach).
- You are a CPA who inadvertently makes a mistake while preparing a client's income tax return. You rectify the situation when your mistake is discovered, but now you are wracked with doubts about your abilities. Each tax return takes longer and longer to prepare as you ever more meticulously pore over every line again and again.
- You stop going to church because of an overwhelming fear that you will yell something blasphemous during the sermon.
- Your seven year old son develops an increasingly complex bedtime routine that includes the presence and correct position of a certain number of stuffed animals and other toys, checking and rechecking the locks on the windows a certain number of times, flipping the light switches on and off a set number of times, and a series of standard questions he asks and standard responses to be given by you the parent. Any deviation from this routine leads to a prolonged and violent temper tantrum.

¹ Journal of Biblical Counseling, Winter 2004, pp. 15-26. Copyrighted material. All rights reserved. Used by permission. The material in this article is available in booklet form from CCEF (Christian Counseling and Education Foundation) and can be ordered via their website at www.ccef.org. (The footnotes in Articles Sixteen and Seventeen are Emlet's.)

- You seemingly are unable to throw away old magazines and newspapers and they begin to accumulate in piles around the house. Eventually you do not throw out any piece of paper, no matter how small.

While these problems may seem extreme, there are in fact many people, perhaps as much as 3% of the U.S. population, who struggle in this manner, to either a greater or lesser extent. What is the cause of such a struggle? Is this principally a spiritual issue? Is it primarily a sin issue? Or is it principally a body issue in which a particular portion of your brain circuitry continues to fire in an endless loop, compelling you to carry out certain behaviors? These are some of the questions that must be answered if we as biblical counselors are to be equipped to minister wisely and compassionately to those who struggle in this manner.

The purpose of this article will be to describe the experience/struggle of what has been named Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (hereafter "OCD"),² to discuss the potential causes for such a struggle, and then to suggest a biblical approach that does justice to the person as a body/ soul duplex.³ Hopefully you will gain a greater sense of clarity about how to approach either your own struggle with OCD or such a struggle in another's life.

OCD DESCRIBED

The essential features of OCD include recurrent obsessions and/or compulsions that are severe enough to be time consuming or cause marked distress or significant impairment in the person's daily routine.⁴

²I realize that using the term Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is loaded with certain presuppositions about its cause. While I fundamentally disagree with that hypothesis because it ignores the spiritual aspect of our personhood, for the sake of simplicity I will abbreviate this struggle as "OCD" for the remainder of the article. However, one could make an argument for the use of more purely descriptive language as a shorthand for this problem, such as obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors ("OT CB"). Such terminology comes less freighted with presuppositions about etiology. An even more descriptive phrase might be: "intrusive broken-record thoughts and ring-in-the-nose behaviors" -the "brrn" experience! All said, we need to carefully consider what our language communicates and realize that the term, "disorder," is not neutral in its connotation.

³For a more lengthy background to my overall approach to problems having definite or possible physical components, please see "Understanding the Influences on the Human Heart;" Journal of Biblical Counseling 20, no. 2 (Winter, 2002), pp. 47-52

⁴The description that follows is based upon the American Psychiatric Association [hereafter APA], Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 4th ed., text revision, pp. 456-63. As mentioned above, while I disagree with the unspoken premise that all the problems described in the DSM have a purely somatic cause, the detailed description as given in the DSM can help biblical counselors understand the scope and severity of the counselee's struggle, as well as to facilitate communication with others who are seeking to help the counselee.

Obsessions are "persistent ideas, thoughts impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate that cause marked anxiety or distress:⁵ More simply put, obsessions are "sticky thoughts" -thoughts that individuals can't seem to get out of their minds. These ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images are not simply excessive worries about actual, current real-life problems (e.g., concerns about finances, work or school). The individual with such an obsession experiences anxiety and attempts to suppress such thoughts or impulses or to "neutralize" them with some other thought or action (i.e., a compulsion). It is important to realize that the person with an obsession is distressed by its presence; it is an unwanted intrusion into his/her thought life.

Common obsessions include the following:

- Repeated thoughts about contamination. This fear of contamination is the most common obsession.
- Repeated doubts (e.g., wondering whether or not you have hit someone while driving or wondering if you turned off the iron).
- A need to have things in a particular order or a need to do a task "just right":⁶
- Aggressive or horrific impulses (e.g., to hurt one's child or to shout an obscenity in church).
- Sexual imagery (e.g., a recurrent pornographic image).
- An irrational and persistent fear of developing a serious life-threatening illness.

Compulsions are "repetitive behaviors or mental acts, the goal of which is to prevent or reduce anxiety or distress:⁷ The person does not carry out these behaviors or thought processes to gain pleasure. Rather, they feel driven to perform the compulsions to reduce the distressing anxiety that accompanies an obsession. So, someone having a contamination obsession might wash his hands thirty times a day. Someone with intrusive and unwanted aggressive impulses might count to twenty forward and backward for each aggressive thought. Compulsions are clearly excessive or are not connected in a realistic way with what they are designed to neutralize or prevent.

Common compulsions include the following:

- Repetitive behaviors (checking, washing and cleaning, requesting or demanding assurances, ordering and arranging, doing and undoing certain tasks in an exact sequence).

⁵APA, p. 457.

⁶ This may manifest itself as "obsessional slowness". That is, the counselee may take an inordinate amount of time to complete even simple tasks because he/she is obsessed with completing the routine exactly right. See Michele Tortora Pato and Joseph Zohar, *Current Treatment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., 2001), p. 6.

⁷ APA, p. 457.

- Mental acts (counting, repeating words silently).
- Hoarding.

The DSM description helps us acknowledge the reality of this group of suffering people and gives shape to the kind of data-gathering questions that might be helpful to elucidate the extent and severity of our counselee's struggle. At the same time we must remember that the description does not, in and of itself, explain why someone would struggle with obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. To begin to answer that, we need a review of biblical anthropology that will give us the foundation for a biblically rooted counseling approach.

WHAT CAUSES OCD?

Brief Review of Biblical Anthropology

The biblical view of the person affirms "inner" and "outer" aspects of our constitution, which function together as a unity to live before God and others. We live, spirit and body, before the living God and others, either in obedience or disobedience. One common designation that Scripture uses to describe the inner aspect of a human being is the word "heart.⁸ The heart, both in the Old and New Testaments, refers to the basic inner disposition of the person who either lives in covenant obedience or in covenant disobedience before God. The term expresses the reality that at our core we are all worshippers of something, either of the Creator (obedience) or of created things (disobedience), as emphasized in Romans 1.

God has designed us to express the worship mandate of our hearts in a tangible, "flesh and blood" context. Any thoughts we have, and emotions we feel, and any behaviors we carry out (all of which originate in the heart and are expressions of our worship)⁹ must happen in a bodily context. That bodily context in various states of health or disease makes either obedience or disobedience easier. While our bodies ultimately do not have the "final say" in whether our thoughts, emotions, and actions honor or dishonor God,¹⁰ the Scriptures do not ignore the real and often profound influences/pressures of bodily weaknesses and limitations that test the response of our hearts in these three areas.¹¹

⁸See Deut. 6:5; Josh. 22:5; I Sam. 13:14; I Sam. 16:7; I Chron. 28:9; Ps. 14:1 (and many other psalms); Prov. 4:23; Prov. 27:19; Jer. 24:7; Matt. 5:8; and Matt. 6:21. The Bible also uses other terms to capture this inner aspect of human beings, including spirit, soul, mind, will, conscience, hidden self, and inner nature (see Ezek. 11:19; Matt. 10:28; Col. 1:21; John 7:17; Heb. 8:10; Rom. 2:15; I Pet. 3:4; and II Cor. 4:16).

⁹See Gen. 6:5; Deut. 8:5; Prov. 2:10; Eph. 1:18; Eph. 4:18; Heb. 4:12 (thoughts); Gen. 6:6; Lev. 19:17; Prov. 13:12; Prov. 14:13; Prov. 24:17 (emotions); Ex. 25:2; Luke 6:45; Eph. 6:6 (actions).

¹⁰ This discussion is not meant to suggest an ultimate dualism in which one part of us sins or obeys (the heart) while one part of us passively carries out the desire for sin or obedience (the body). Yet, nowhere, does Scripture suggest that the genesis for obedience or sin lies within the bodily aspect of our personhood. That moral initiation is the domain of the heart.

¹¹ Here's a simple example: if I tend toward anger/irritability after several poor nights of sleep, the answer is not simply to examine and overcome the heart-based roots of my anger (which I should do), but also to get some sleep! I'm still responsible for my actions, but my approach includes addressing the bodily weakness as well (the physical "treatment" of sleep). But most ministry situations are not so simple or clear-cut!

In bringing wise counsel to bear on the lives of those who struggle with OCD, we want to differentiate between potential bodily pressures and the active responses of the heart. We will likely have the tendency to "overweight" one or the other, leading to unbalanced counsel that either addresses issues of faith/obedience/disobedience exclusively (the domain of the heart) or addresses bodily issues exclusively. To avoid these extremes we must ask, "What are the potential body (brain)-based influences/pressures and what are the potential heart (worship) issues in someone struggling with OCD?"¹²

Potential Brain-Based Influences

Familial and genetic studies of OCD have shown a higher incidence rate among identical twins rather than fraternal twins, suggesting that some predisposition to obsessional behavior might be inherited.¹³ While no definite conclusions can be drawn, it should at least put on our radar screens the possibility that a person is born with certain bodily predispositions to struggle in this manner. Right away, that possibility should increase our level of compassion. After all, how many times have we observed the suffering in another person's life and asked ourselves the question, "How would I respond if faced with that particular life provocation?" Exactly!

In addition, the worldwide influenza epidemic of the early 1900's provided some of the first evidence that obsessive-compulsive symptoms might be mediated by specific regions of the brain. Some patients developed not only Parkinson's like symptoms (muscle tremors, slowed movement), but also psychiatric symptoms including obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Autopsies showed damage in the basal ganglia, a set of structures deep within the brain.¹⁴ OCD has also been described to occur following head trauma.

One of the more compelling reasons to grapple with the biological or bodily factors that may influence the development of OCD is the sudden onset of OCD behaviors in children associated with a strep throat. Treatment with antibiotics not only resolves the strep throat but also usually terminates the OCD behaviors as well.

These examples suggest that perhaps there are subtypes of OCD that are more biologically weighted and we must take that possibility into consideration, just as we would acknowledge that there are certain medical conditions that can precipitate depression, such as a low functioning thyroid.

In addition, "live action" brain scans such as PET scans or functional MRI's show the functional neuroanatomy in OCD. There seems to be an over-activity in the basal ganglia and frontal regions of the brain of a person struggling with OCD compared to a normal person. This hyperactivity in the brain decreases with treatment.¹⁵

¹²Because of space considerations, I am not going to address in any depth interpersonal influences (e.g. the role of family upbringing) or societal-cultural influences, both of which may impact the development of this struggle, and are worth exploring in order for our counsel to be as biblically robust as possible.

¹³ American Psychiatric Association, The American Psychiatric Textbook of Psychiatry, 3,d ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 2001), p. 603

¹⁴ The basal ganglia mediate several phenomena including movement, cognition, and emotion.

¹⁵ Interestingly, the changes occur whether or not treatment is with medication or counseling.

Many researchers hypothesize that the neurotransmitter serotonin is involved in OCD. This hypothesis has been both generated and supported by the use of medications such as Zoloft¹⁶

for OCD symptoms. While altered neurochemicals (serotonin and others) may indeed be part of the "bodily pressure" in OCD, there is no current way to prove this as "the ultimate cause." Why? Because of the unity of the heart and body there will always be at the very least, biological correlation: a visible, measurable (more or less) connection between the spirit and the body. The brain scans reveal this correlation, but they cannot confirm body-behavior causation (i.e., that changes in the brain are the cause of obsessive thinking and ritualistic compulsions). While altered neurochemicals and neuroanatomic circuitry might predate and pressure us to respond in certain ways, it is equally possible that the state of our hearts-our thoughts and beliefs about God, ourselves, and the world around us-may influence and change the levels of neurochemicals in our brains.¹⁷

Current (secular) psychiatric thought sees the body/brain as the final common pathway for the disordered thinking and behavior that comprise the diagnostic criteria for OCD. Because psychiatry's anthropology is monistic-we consist of one material substance-the cause of the person's dysfunction must ultimately be assigned to body/brain. In other words, disordered neural circuitry in the brain is the culprit in OCD, even if it is acknowledged that the environment plays a role in modifying what happens at the level of neurons.¹⁸

¹⁶ Zoloft is part of a family of medications called "selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors: (SSRIs) which are hypothesized to affect the levels of serotonin in different regions of the brain.

¹⁷ Although secular models assume primary biological causation, one of the most successful secular treatments for OCD (a cognitive-behavioral model) is based upon the reverse assumption; i.e., I can change the pattern of my brain chemistries by first changing my thinking. Jeffrey Schwartz's book *Brain Lock* is representative of this popular approach. While a cognitive-behavioral model rightly sees the need for change at the level of thoughts and behavior, it does not do justice to the more fundamental God-ward aspect of our lives, which is the very wellspring of those thoughts and behaviors.

¹⁸ Current thinking in psychiatry is trying to create a synthesis between "nature vs. nurture." A recent proposal that attempts to combine the social and biological determinants of behavior is provided by Eric Kandel, "A New Intellectual Framework for Psychiatry," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 155, no. 4 (April 1998), pp. 457-69. Kandel proposes the following: (1) "All mental processes, even the most complex psychological processes, derive from operations of the brain." (2) "Genes and their protein products are important determinants of the pattern of interconnections between neurons in the brain and the details of their functioning." (3) "Altered genes do not, by themselves, explain all the variance of a given major mental illness. Social or developmental factors also contribute very importantly." (4) "Alterations in gene expression induced by learning give rise to changes in patterns of neuronal connections." (5) "Insofar as psychotherapy or counseling is effective and produces long-term changes in behavior, it presumably does so through learning, by producing changes in gene expression that alter the strength of synaptic connections and structural changes that alter the anatomical pattern of interconnections between nerve cells of the brain." At the end of the day, however, Kandel is saying that nature and nurture both find their final common pathway biologically. This kind of "soft" biological determinism is also espoused by Peter Kramer in his influential book, *Listening to Prozac*.

Potential Heart Issues

While it is important to consider the potential bodily pressures in this struggle (and at the very least the bodily correlations with the heart), it is absolutely critical to address the potential underlying dynamics of the heart that could lead to the experience of OCD. Did you ever wonder why someone struggles with anxiety in a more general way whereas someone else might struggle with OCD? Why is the former person's anxiety "reality-based" (e.g., worries about losing a job, caring for an elderly parent, etc.) and why is the latter person's anxiety less "reality-based" (e.g., worries that I might pick up my infant son and throw him through the window)? And why does the latter person respond to this anxiety with ritualistic, compulsive behavior? In part, the answer to that question can be traced to the motivational dynamics of the human heart. We are purposeful creatures made in the image of our God and are not merely robots responding to neurochemical events in our brains. We want, we desire, we hope, we yearn, we fear, we believe, we trust. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the spiritual dynamic behind OCD if such a person is to have hope for real and lasting change. As helpful as bodily symptom reduction is, the ultimate goal is a person who is forsaking the sinful inclinations of his/her heart, is embracing the transforming hope of the gospel, and who is growing in tangible ways to love God and others.

Having said this, what are some potential spiritual (heart) issues that may generate this struggle? Remember, not every person will have all of the following, but this overview should help to identify some of the major motivational themes in OCD.

- **Need for Certainty.** One of the major themes in OCD is the need for certainty. Other ways of describing this might be an inability to live with uncertainty, the need for total assurance, the quest for exhaustive and certain knowledge. OCD has been described as "the doubting disease: 'People with OCD characteristically "doubt" what they see with their own eyes is true. And so, there is an attempt to control the environment (e.g., the checking ritual) in order to erase doubts and to be certain.
- **Demand for Control or Mastery.** Thus, the need for certainty is allied with the demand for control or mastery. Ironically, their attempt to control their anxiety "bites back: ' They are mastered by their own struggle to gain certainty and control. For some, this standard of absolute certainty brings doubts about their salvation and even undermines their ability to speak (e.g., "How do I know that what I just said was accurate and true? Better to keep silent than to risk saying something that is not absolutely, certainly true"). And so, these struggles live in a Humean nightmare,¹⁹ having no absolute grounding for truth.

¹⁹The empiricist philosopher David Hume believed that the only knowledge we could gain about our world comes through our senses. Ultimately, however, this leads to a radical skepticism about the possibility of true certainty because his approach cannot explain what lies behind our sensory experiences to give them coherent meaning.

- **Need for Order.** Another facet of this demand for certainty or control may be a perceived need for order. This is not merely a preference for neatness but a demand for exactness, order, and symmetry, which catapults them into a never-ending organizing and arranging of their world. There's something about order that communicates, "All is well!"
- **Expectation of Perfection.** A related and common theme is the expectation of perfection. Other ways of describing this would be the desire to be or do things "just right;" the fear of being wrong or perhaps a "fear of unrighteousness."²⁰ The focus here is on the "works" orientation, the pressure to do everything "right." This particular heart dynamic may be especially active with regard to people who struggle with aggressive or horrific impulses. They cannot deal with the fact that this thought entered their mind. "How could I think such a thing? Could I really do it? It's outrageous to think I could do such a thing. But what if I did?" This hypersensitivity and the ensuing guilt and anxiety lead to a self-oriented mad scramble to overcome and neutralize the thought by some compensatory thought or behavior (the compulsion). "I can make things right; I can pay for this sin by doing this ritual, etc." OCD has an "it's all up to me" mentality, but the problem is, the performance (whether it be checking or ordering or whatever ritualistic behavior occurs) is never enough. There is always yet another hoop to jump through. In a sense, the compulsions are tangible "works." There is the false belief that "If I just do this one thing, my conscience will be clear and my anxiety will leave." Somehow, it seems safer: to live by a self-imposed ritual than to face the disturbing thought head-on.
- **Guilt.** The issue of perfectionism is closely tied to another common theme in OCD, namely guilt. When I speak of guilt, I am mainly referring to the obsessions that center on the fear of doing (or having done) something horrifically bad. Some secular OCD experts think a critical factor in the development of obsessions is "an inflated sense of personal responsibility, a deep-seated, automatic tendency to feel accountable for anything bad that might happen."²¹ But is this real guilt for real sin or is it guilt arising from potential sin? Is it not the latter?
- **Self-atonement.** But their experience of guilt is real and it moves them into self-atonement. In a sense, one aspect of OCD involves people trying to atone for their own (imagined) sins through their "neutralizing" compulsions. What follows is a cycle of self-righteousness and despair. The neutralizing effect of the completed compulsion lasts only for a short while (the self-righteous phase). This is replaced by a renewed obsession and its attendant anxiety and self-loathing (despair). The compulsion ("sacrifice") is made to atone for their obsession ("sin"). It is really a cultic, ritualistic system that they are creating, which bypasses the final sacrifices of Christ, and therefore, can offer no lasting hope.

¹⁹Interestingly, one pastoral counselor has described OCD as "phobia about sin." Robert Collie, *Journal of Pastoral Care* 51, no. 3 (Fall 1997), p. 294.

²⁰ Ian Osborn, *Tormenting Thoughts and Secret Rituals* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1998), p. 59.

- **Fear of Man.** Finally, one other dynamic often resident in the heart of an OCD struggler is fear of man. "What will others think?" is often a refrain that plays in their minds. This can be expressed as excessive ruminations about conversations and replaying personal interactions over and over again. Sometimes the fear of making a mistake before the eyes of others (related to preceding theme of perfectionism) will lead to increasing tentativeness in making decisions, answering questions, offering opinions. Once again, this ironically backfires, and their desire to "do right" before others leads to a self-focus that ends up disregarding the needs and concerns of others.

MINISTRY APPROACH FOR OCD

1. Remember Your Biblical Anthropology

OCD, as with all psychiatric problems (really, as with all human problems!), sits at the intersection of the physical and spiritual.²¹ Therefore, as I noted above, we must be sensitive to both aspects of our personhood in order to have a balanced approach. As body-spirit duplexes, the Scriptures address us as both sufferers and sinners. If there is indeed a biological "cause" (in the sense of applying pressure to the inner man), remember that there is always a spiritual receptivity or an active conscience in a believer. At the same time we must do justice to the bodily context if we are to minister the whole gospel to the whole person.²²

2. Enter into Their Struggle

Make sure that you have engaged with their story. If you don't, your words, however wise, will not strike a chord. It may be helpful to remember your own transient experiences with obsessions/compulsions. Doing so serves two purposes: It may give you a window, however small, into the force of their struggle. And it can be a part of "normalizing the abnormal;" that is, giving them hope that their struggle is not an isolated, unintelligible, and shameful experience.

²¹ Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1998), p. 107.

²² Remember that even the Bible is God's redemptive truth contextualized to God's people in specific situations in space and time. Likewise biblical counselors must seek to be fully aware of the situational (bodily, interpersonal, societal-cultural) factors that bear upon a counselee's life if we are to minister truthfully and compassionately. This article focuses on the intersection of the physical influences and heart to "parse" the experience of OCD, but it is critical to understand the broader situational context of someone who manifests obsessive thoughts and behaviors. For example, I want to take seriously potential interpersonal influences that might include controlling perfectionistic parents; a legalistic church environment; the lack of close friends; or an employer who will not tolerate mistakes. And I want to consider the impact of potential societal-cultural influences including a society where success and performance are expected and rewarded, a post-9/11 general uneasiness regarding security and safety, a culture that sees no benefit to suffering, or a dominant naturalistic, materialist worldview that increasingly views problems of living in biological categories. While none of these influences (nor the multiplicity of other life circumstances we face everyday) make someone "do" OCD, they may contribute in some way to the struggle. This requires biblical counselors to really know the person who sits beside them, in order to most compassionately, truthfully, and creatively contextualize the richness of the Gospel to their lives.

3. Identify and Address Heart Issues Biblically

First, remember that not all doubt is sin! It is certainly not sinful to have the mere thought, "Have I locked the door?" and to respond by checking it. In fact, doing so may be an expression of a godly desire to protect family and property. The issue is more clearly a sinful struggle when that desire to be certain becomes a screaming, demanding tyrant that erupts in anxiety and disrupts the God-ward and others-centered focus that the Scriptures would have for us.

Similarly, the transient experience of a graphic image or impulse may not be sin in and of itself. It may well be temptation to sin. How many of us have had such fleeting irrational thoughts, only to lay them aside without further reflections? What I do with that thought is more heart-revealing. Do I nurse and cherish it with pleasure? Do I respond, as in OCD, with displeasure, anxiety, fear, and dread, and engage in a ritualistic, cleansing protocol? These deeper dynamics are the target in OCD.

Realize that the following heart (spiritual) categories are not exhaustive and that there is much overlap between them. In addition some of these heart issues are more clearly associated with one kind of obsession or compulsion and so that what is helpful for one person may be less relevant for another.

- **Need for Certainty.** In one sense, the struggle with OCD raises some valid questions: What is the ground of my certainty? How can I trust my senses? How can I make a decision to act and then rest in that decision? How can I be sure of anything?

Part of the problem in OCD is the "self-contained" nature of the struggle. My internal logic and reason, even my actual sensory experience, seemingly cannot convince me to ignore my emotion (anxiety) as irrational. Ultimately, the grounding of certainty, of what is true, does not lie within; it comes to us from the outside, from our triune God as He reveals Himself in the Scriptures. Truth, assurance, and certainty are grounded in a covenant-making, promise-keeping God. And God's promises are not "naked;" They come clothed in the form of a person, the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ ... " (2 Cor. 1:20).

This is much more than a cognitive battle; it's a battle of trust. Do I trust that God has revealed enough that I can live with what might be "faithful" or "functional" certainty (which is not the same thing as possessing 100% exhaustive knowledge)? Or, will I continue to insist the grounding of certainty lies within me, in my "seeing"?

This is the problem with assurance issues, particularly assurance of salvation. The solution is not to marshal evidence in my favor (i.e., to build faith in my anemic faith) but to gaze long and hard at the person and character of Christ on whom my faith ultimately rests. It's not the strength of my faith that counts but rather, the One to whom my faith is directed.

If my faith is directed toward Jesus, then I am able to act, even if I still have some small measure of doubt. I don't need to be 100% certain to act in faith. Reliance

upon Jesus helps to conquer remaining doubt, just as it did for the father whose son Jesus healed (see Mark 9:14-32, especially 9:24).

In reality, even the OCD sufferer lives with "functional certainty" in most areas of his life. I recently asked a counselee struggling with incapacitating doubt why he was able to come into my office and sit down in the chair without a second thought. His response was, "I just knew the chair would hold me." In other words, he implicitly trusted the character of the chair without having to check its structure to be sure.

It is a similar trust in the person, character, and work of God that must inform and break the obsession-compulsion connection. In the midst of rising doubt and anxiety, I must relinquish the quest for "certainty" (fueled by the attitude that "seeing is believing"), choosing instead to trust God's oversight of my life (see below). It will bring great struggle in the moment to walk away from the compulsion to check to be sure, but with each resistance fueled by a realization of the multifaceted character and care of God, the drive for certainty becomes less.

Similarly, if my doubt is manifested as an unwillingness to answer questions until I come up with a "100% accurate and truthful answer," I must choose to speak out of love for the other person anyhow, believing that God's Spirit is in the process of ever-conforming my thinking to His own and being content that I won't have perfect knowledge of myself in this life.

- **Demand for Control/Mastery.** If the craving for certainty and the inability to live with doubt underlie much obsessional thinking, a quest for control, primarily to quell rising anxiety, manifests itself in compulsive behaviors. And so, to control my anxiety I seek to control/manipulate my environment: "If I bolt and rebolt the door three times, then I can be certain." But "shrinking" my world to a manageable area-checking the lock, cleaning the sink, reciting a ritualized prayer-does not calm/control my fear for long.

Mastery exists for but a moment. And just as once-snuffed trick birthday candles erupt in flame again and again, so the anxiety returns because the extinguishing power of God's real and loving care is not apprehended in the moment. Freedom begins to come as the OCD sufferer gives up the need to control his anxiety and his world and casts himself upon the grace and providential care of God.

Psalm 139 is a helpful place to turn because it reminds us of God's complete knowledge of us and His detailed oversight of our lives. It reminds us of the "guardrails of God's providence." Consider the following verses:

"You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely O Lord. You hem me in-behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me." (vv. 2-5)

"If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." (vv. 9-10)

"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (v. 16).

How does the psalmist respond to the realization? "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me" (v. 6). "Your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (v. 14). "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!" (v. 17) Although the psalmist recognizes the complexity of God's world and His oversight, he is content to leave that ultimate control in the hands of his God. In fact, praise erupts! Ultimately I am safe in Him. Safety is not found in my own reasoning process or ritual. I am called to live responsibly before God, but I don't have ultimate responsibility or oversight of my life. Other psalms that address this theme include Psalms 104, 121, 127, and 131. Apprehending God's sovereign and loving care over the details of life-my life!!-quells the anxiety and fear that results from the humanly impossible task of mastering and controlling my world.

- **Desire for a "Black and White" World.** This is closely related to the preceding two points, but needs some elaboration. OCD sufferers want to live in a "black and white" (all or nothing) world. Exhaustive knowledge, complete control, and being certain allow no room for ambiguity. Either I'm sure or I'm not; either I'm in control or I'm not; either I'm right or I'm not. Yet we must admit we live in a "gray" world: God reveals enough knowledge to live sanely before Him, but He doesn't give us full access to His mind (cf. Job 38-41). God gives us the ability to choose freely and to act, but we are not able to know and master all the details of our world. God gives us direction in His Word, but many issues are not so clear-cut. This shows the importance of the biblical category of wisdom. It's "safer" to live in a black and white world, because it requires no trust! Trust and wisdom go hand in hand (as Job found out!)
- **Perfectionism, Guilt, and Self-atonement.** Differentiate actual sin from potential sin. For people struggling with OCD, potentiality equals actuality. They react to the "what if" potentiality as though they actually have committed the terrible act that came into their minds. On the one hand, someone with OCD may have an over scrupulous conscience. On the other hand, because the volume of their conscience has been turned up so loud on potential sins (e.g., yelling an obscenity during the sermon), their consciences become hardened to the ways in which they actually do transgress the law of God (e.g. ignoring wife and children in the midst of a complex counting ritual). At the very least, they are confusing the temptation to sin from actually committing the sin.²³

²³In fact, you could really argue that the horrific and aggressive impulses are not true temptations in the biblical understanding of the word. While it is true that they are thoughts that could only happen in a fallen context, they don't meet the description offered in James 1:13-15. The person struggling with OCD is not enticed by the horrific impulse; rather they are repulsed. The true temptation is "Will I trust the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for me or will I take action to atone for my own actions (wrongly perceived as sin)?

More seriously, in responding to potential sin matters, they miss the "weightier matters of the law-justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23-24). "Cheer up, you're worse than you think." The fact of the matter is, apart from the sustaining grace of Christ, I am capable of atrocities far worse than have currently entered my mind. Why should I be so surprised by the content of a fleeting thought? Church planter and seminary professor Jack Miller coined the phrase, "Cheer up, you're worse than you think" to undermine the self-righteousness of someone who continues to wallow in their sin-in our case, potential sin-and refuses to grab hold of the righteousness of Christ.²⁴

Lay hold of the remedy for real guilt from real sin. This ties the preceding two points together. Forgiveness is available for actual sins, not imagined sins. Christ didn't die for potential sinners; He died for actual sinners whose guilt could only be taken away by His atoning sacrifice. And His sacrifice is enough. His work is not mere temporary "neutralization" of potential evil; it was and is a once for all, permanent overturning and destruction of the worst evil imaginable. This is where the entire book of Hebrews (particularly chapters 8-10) can be immensely helpful for the OCD struggle. As you gaze at the multifaceted character and work of Jesus Christ-His finished work on the Cross, His ongoing high priestly intercession for His people, etc.-the need to self-atone or establish a self-righteousness will diminish.

Self-cleansing, either for the true guilt of real sin or the "false" guilt²⁵ of imagined sins (in OCD) is never enough. All your penance, all your regrets, all your anxieties, all your sacrifices and compensatory duties are not enough. Only the blood of Christ is enough. And it is that very sacrifice that can embolden you to step into the light to forsake the real sin: the self-absorption in which an OCD sufferer is caught. Jesus has kept all the important standards. He has done everything that needs to be done and has done it right. Any additional standard we impose saps the vitality from that "restful reality." Let that joyful reality break the need to act out a compulsion and you will find that the guilty grip of your obsession will loosen.

Live as a son/ daughter and not as an orphan. The view of God that often accompanies someone struggling with OCD is that of a harsh taskmaster, a capricious deity whose demands are oppressive. A person with OCD often lives under a "film of displeasure." If you are a Christian, your identity is not that of an orphan (It's all up to me; I can't trust anyone; I must control my life and destiny"). It is that of a son or daughter on whom the Father's favor rests. That brings freedom from the tyranny of performance and perfectionism in the moment.

Two additional comments are needed in regards to addressing these heart issues. First, the road to change with OCD is filled with potholes, ruts, and switchbacks. In other words,

²⁴ The other side of the coin is that the mercies of God are far better than you think.

²⁵ By "false guilt" I don't mean the person does not have a real experience of guilt. I mean, rather, the guilt they feel related to the content of the obsession has no basis in the reality.

anticipate a bumpy country road kind of ride as you tackle these heart themes head on rather than a superhighway to success. Expect progress and regress in overcoming your obsessions and compulsions day to day. At the same time remember, with Luther, "we are not yet what we shall be but we are growing toward it: 'Never forget that He who has begun-and continues-a good work in you, will carry it on to completion (Phil. 1:6).

Secondly, change happens in a corporate context. Expect and solicit the help, counsel, and prayers of other believers as you do battle with entrenched obsessive/compulsive thoughts and behaviors. Often, those closest to OCD sufferers are frustrated because they have accommodated their friend or family member's obsessive-compulsive cycle in order to avoid the interpersonal conflict that might follow if they were to challenge those behaviors. And yet mutually agreed upon limits (e.g., "I will only check the locks once for you") and encouragement-in-the-moment (e.g., "I realize that your anxiety is rising over this impulse you have, but let's pray together right now and ask God to give you a clear picture of His complete and faithful care of you") are building blocks in an approach for change that cannot be individualistic. We are indeed our brother's keeper (Gal. 6:1-2).

IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS POTENTIAL BODY ISSUES

Concurrent with tackling potential heart issues is the need to consider potential bodily issues. Certainly if a normal child suddenly develops obsessive-compulsive behaviors in conjunction with a sore throat, it would be wise to seek medical help immediately. If indeed a streptococcal infection is present, the antibiotics given will cure the infection while it should at the same time decrease or terminate the OCD behaviors.

But what about in the vast majority of OCD cases, where the onset of the struggle is often insidious and progressive? How much should the potential bodily influences impact our approach? Remember that the content of the obsession (and perhaps even its frequency) may not be sin in and of itself, but simply a bodily provocation.²⁶

While affirming, as I did above, that the somatic aspect of our constitution (body/brain) is ultimately not the "cause" of sin, we must never underestimate the overwhelming tyranny of the bombarding thoughts these sufferers can face. To be sure, as the counselee addresses the underlying motivational dynamics of this struggle, symptoms (the frequency and severity of the obsessions and compulsions) should decrease.

Notice that for biologically oriented psychiatry, curing the symptom cures the problem. In other words, obsessive-compulsive thoughts and behaviors are thoughts to stem from a disordered brain as the ultimate cause. Treat the symptoms with medication or with cognitive-behavioral therapy (both of which are thought to work by their effect on the brain, both directly and indirectly, respectively) and you have attacked the underlying

²⁶ However, I believe the more one attempts to deal with the anxiety induced by the obsession in an unbiblical way, the more intrusive and persistent the obsession may become. In that situation, the frequency of the obsession becomes part of the heart dynamic.

disorder. Both secular approaches may bring a measure of symptom relief, sometimes substantial. But our ultimate goal as biblical counselors is more than symptom relief. When we carry out biblical counseling, we are assuming that as the counselee grapples, applies, and is transformed by biblical truth at the heart level, his/her "disordered" brain patterns will also change and symptom relief will occur. How could it be otherwise given our biblical anthropology!

Having said this, there may be a time and place for targeting symptoms in and of themselves, particularly if the person's experience of his OCD is so severe that engagement with the counseling process is functionally prohibited. The decision to use medication is a wisdom issue and must be individualized for each counselee. Although there are biblical guidelines for making such a decision, there is not a "one size fits all" approach.²⁷ We must beware of dichotomous thinking that would uphold either the relief of suffering (whether physical or mental) or the benefit of suffering as the "more" biblical. The Scriptures speak positively to both the relief of suffering and the endurance/benefit of suffering. If medication is used, we must remember that it is relieving symptoms, nothing more, but nothing less. While that approach may be a wise adjunct in certain individuals with severe symptoms, we must never lose sight of the need to investigate the primary underlying heart dynamic that is invariably present in cases of OCD.

CONCLUSION

Remember that although it is helpful, even necessary, to differentiate between spiritual issues and bodily weakness in order to wisely counsel, this will not always be easy. We have to acknowledge a certain sense of mystery that remains as we seek to do this task. Accordingly, we must set about this ministry with humility. At the end of the day, we must ask, have we approached the person struggling with OCD as both a sufferer and a sinner, speaking and incarnating the truth and hope of the Gospel in love?

This is by no means the "last word" on a biblical counseling approach to obsessive-compulsive thinking and behavior. I consider it an "early word" and hope that it will be helpful even now and will also initiate additional questions and discussion that will bring further clarity. After all, even our counseling approaches have a "progressive sanctification" aspect to them!

²⁷ For a concise discussion of the issues to consider when thinking about medication see Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1998), pp. 108-9. Potential relief of symptoms with medication (which is less reliable for OCD than for some other psychiatric problems) must be balanced with potential negative effects of being on medication.

Reading #13 - WHEN PANIC ATTACKS

PASTOR, I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE!

Beth is a highly competent elementary school teacher-a seven-year veteran highly respected by her colleagues and the parents of her third-grade students. She and her husband, Bill, a floor manager for a local grocery store, are dependable, exemplary church members and have three elementary-age children of their own.

Beth is seriously considering giving up teaching because of increasing incidents of panic attacks at school. She relates the following to her pastor as she and Bill seek his counsel.

About three months ago, we were on a summer vacation in Alabama, visiting Bill's folks. We had gone out to eat as a couple and left the kids with the grandparents. On the way home, Bill stopped at a convenience store to buy a newspaper, and I stayed in the car. A moment or two after he left the car, my heart started racing. I couldn't catch my breath, and I felt as though I was choking. I got hot all over and was sure I was having a heart attack or something. Pastor, I thought I was going to die! Bill was gone only a couple of minutes, and I was still having a hard time breathing.

Bill didn't know what was happening and rushed me to the emergency room. He grew up in the town and knew right where it was. The doctor ordered an electrocardiogram and several blood tests, but everything was normal. The feeling passed, and I felt pretty normal again. They really couldn't find anything wrong. It was embarrassing.

The incident really bothered me, but I forgot about it after a few weeks. I was teaching one day and had just dismissed the children for recess. I was sitting at my desk counting out worksheets for math next hour when it happened again. It was just like the last time. My heart felt like it was going to jump out of my chest, and I couldn't get my breath. It passed after a few minutes.

A couple of days later, it happened again when I was grading papers after school. It happened three more times, so I set up an appointment with our family doctor. He checked me out and listened to my story. He said it sounded as though I was having panic attacks. He wrote out a prescription for an antianxiety medication and suggested I see a psychiatrist. Bill and I didn't think either recommendation was right, but we don't know what to do. If I'm going nutty, I don't know why. All I know is that I am afraid that I'll have one of these attacks while I'm teaching. I dread going to school. I can't go on like this.

Beth's experiences are not uncommon, and thankfully, there is something Beth and others like her can do to reverse the downward spiral.

Panic attacks are the result of an overstimulated stress response. Some ongoing fear-fear of failure, fear of losing control, fear of not measuring up, and so forth-keeps the stress hormones flowing, which in turn generate certain discomforting physical sensations.

They occur when anxiety triggers hyperventilation (rapid and shallow breathing), which results in too little carbon dioxide in the lungs. This changes the pH level of the plasma and leads to the tingly, light-headed, unreal, panicky feelings previously described. Because the subjects of attacks do not understand what is happening, they become frightened, and this further accelerates their hyperventilation. Eventually their bodies' natural mechanisms will compensate for this, and persons will momentarily stop inhaling or the rate of respiration will be slowed by fainting, yawning, or sighing.

An old and widely used technique for rapidly stopping hyperventilation is to have hyperventilating persons breathe into a paper bag whose top has been crumpled about the person's mouth. In a few moments this will increase the amount of carbon dioxide inhaled and thus eliminate some of the unusual and frightening symptoms. While very frightening, the attack itself will not injure the person.¹

Eventually, the person experiencing anxiety attacks begins to avoid all situations in which he imagines that he may have an attack. He may stop driving, sit only near the door on the aisle in the last row of any meeting he attends, or avoid going out in public altogether. As his life goes increasingly out of control, his anxiety builds and his attacks are more frequent. What can be done?

1. A physical workup by a medical doctor is the place to start.

Sometimes panic attacks are precipitated by a genuine physical problem but then are exacerbated by worry and fear. "Some physical problems that can produce panic attacks include hypoglycemia, hyperthyroidism, a variety of drugs and medications, heart valve disorders, and excessive intake of caffeine."²

When a legitimate physical cause, such as those listed above, is not found, be very cautious. Most medical doctors at this point will not deal with the underlying issues of fear and anxiety but will prescribe psychiatric medications.

2. If you are experiencing panic attacks and are just beginning the program, you need not start with session 1. You should jump ahead and listen to or view sessions 17-19, following along in the Seminar Syllabus.

You can wait to do all the exercises in this study guide for those sessions when you progress week-by-week through the study guide. By going through the recorded seminar sessions and the Seminar Syllabus outlines for sessions 17-19, you will gain an overview of why you are experiencing these feelings and why you do not want to treat them with medication.

3. When you experience a panic attack ...
 - a. Remind yourself, "This will soon pass and it will not hurt me."

¹ David G. Brenner, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1895), 787.

² Ibid

- b. Slow down your breathing. Breathe into a paper bag. If one is not handy, do the following:
 - 1) Inhale slowly through your nose for two seconds, counting one one-thousand, two one-thousand.

Be sure to fill up your lungs from the bottom by taking deep breathes; don't just breathe from your chest. If you place your hands on your stomach, you should feel them rise and fall with each deep breathe.
 - 2) Exhale slowly for four seconds counting one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one-thousand.

Completely empty your lungs by contracting your stomach muscles.
 - 3) Repeat this slow inhale and slow exhale about ten times.
- c. While you are slowing down your breathing, thank God that He is in control even if you feel that you are out of control and ...
- d. Use a STOP-Think card (see session 19, page 47 of the Seminar Syllabus) to refocus your thinking on God's promises to you and on something true about God. You must meditate upon certainties not possibilities.
- e. As soon as possible, get back to doing the thing you were supposed to be doing when the panic attack struck-driving, shopping, working, and so forth.
- f. Use the panic attack as a reminder that you have much work to do in finding that God is more than enough so that you do not have to be overcome by anxiety.

Highly analytical, perfectionistic people will try to find a direct cause-and-effect relationship between their current panic attack and what they were thinking just moments before. This will only increase their frustration because there is not likely to be any immediate cause.

Think of it this way. Usually a new car does not break down as soon as we drive it off the dealership lot. Only after miles of use does something fail-unless a part was defective.

Eventually the vibration of the road, the heat of the engine, and the disintegration of a part builds up to the point that we are sitting on the side of the road calling a tow truck.

A good mechanic can usually trace the path of disintegration that resulted in the failure. Perhaps a worn-out thermostat caused the engine to overheat, thus cracking the engine block, or a brake line rubbing on some part of the chassis eventually caused the brakes to fail. The mechanic can replace the failed part, but he also needs to remedy the underlying condition that caused the part to fail.

In a similar fashion, panic attacks are the uncomfortable feelings generated by stress hormones that have built up from extended worries and the intense "push" to keep life in control. The breathing exercises above and the STOP-Think technique can get your body

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calmed down fairly quickly. But you also need to take the time to seriously consider all the truths presented in this seminar so that your underlying worry and fear-generated by unbelief and discontent-can be addressed.

When they are addressed, panic attacks are completely "curable." You will experience them less and less. If you have been having several a week, you will notice at first that you are having only a couple. Then you will have only one a week and then one every other week or so. Eventually, you will not experience one for months.

Occasionally, one will recur out of the blue even though you haven't had one for several months. The attack may indeed be an indication that you have slipped back into your old ways of worry and fear. However, there may be no explanation whatsoever for the attack in light of the spiritual growth you have made in those months. Consider it a reminder from the Lord of how far you have come. On such occasions the worst thing you can do is to begin worrying that they are starting up again. Use the occasion to review what you have learned and to thank the Lord for what He has delivered you from. Then get back to doing the thing you were supposed to be doing at the moment the attack came.

WHAT ABOUT ANOREXIA AND BULIMIA?

If you understand the dynamics of obsessive-compulsive behavior as described in articles sixteen and seventeen and in sessions 17-18 of the seminar, you will understand the underlying issues in these two sinful eating practices.

Anorexia is deliberate starvation, which results in severe weight loss. While the self-starvation of anorexia has physical consequences, anorexia is not a physical disease. It is a mindset-a set of beliefs-that leads to destructive habits of excessive dieting and exercise, purging, or the misuse of diuretics and laxatives to lose weight.

Negative comments of family members to a girl about her body and our culture's preoccupation with thinness often trigger the first attempts of a young girl to control her body weight. A few snide statements about how nobody will want to date her unless she loses her pudginess or living with parents who place a high emphasis upon body image themselves will often start a young girl on a pattern of destructive eating habits.³

The crash dieting of young girls obsessed with thinness is just as destructive to their bodies as the obesity of the general population. In fact, many girls who have "religiously" removed fat from their diet in prepubescent and early teen years develop serious health problems during the young adult years. They have deprived themselves of essential nutrients during the development of their bodies and pay an enormous price in endocrine dysfunction, loss of stamina, and autoimmune disorders under the rigors of college and marriage.

Anorexia is not just about weight loss. It is more importantly about control. For some it is about the control of their weight as we have just seen. For others the issue is more complex.

Some girls who become anorexic have been raised by overprotective parents, where every need and action is excessively monitored and where rigid expectations are enforced but interpersonal conflicts are never resolved. "Keeping the peace" becomes the goal of the child. The child and parents appear "close" but are excessively dependent upon one another. Everything seems to be "controlled" for her. She is often an overachiever with a strong desire to please people.

Early manifestations of compulsive behavior may appear before compulsions about food: excessive cleanliness and orderliness, overachievement in sports or academics. She sets up her own "rules" for life and feels more secure when she keeps them-often ritualistically.

She is often the "good girl" who wants to please her parents and everyone else but feels as though she is constantly failing to measure up. She may rebel against the high expectations of those around her and assert her autonomy and "punish" her family by her sinful eating practices (e.g., "You can tell me what to do if you want, but you can't make me eat or make me keep it down"). She is asserting her own form of control.

³ Young men who practice anorexic behaviors are often interested in modeling, where body image is essential, or are engaged in sports such as wrestling, where being at a lower body weight gives them an advantage of being placed in a lower category.

In other situations the girl has been the victim of sexual abuse or has lived in a fear-filled, dysfunctional environment where she feels everything about her life is out of control. Focusing on her body image gives her a sense of control over something in her life. She has a sense of mastery every time she can trim off another pound. That lordship of some aspect of life—even if it is destructive—is intoxicating. It feels so good to be in control of something.

Others start anorexic behaviors as attempts to punish themselves for their failure to live up to the high expectations of themselves and others. High biblical standards are not the problem here. The undue pressure comes from how those expectations are enforced, why they are enforced, and how much support is given to the child under the weight of high expectations. Parents who create this kind of climate don't even recognize the child's need for support and desire for approval because she is such a "good girl" and "never seems to be a problem."

Bulimic behavior is characterized by excessive eating (binging) followed by some effort, usually purging (self-induced vomiting), to reverse the consequences of the binge.

Again control is at the heart of the issues. The bulimic woman often feels that her life is out of control. She finds comfort in eating—food is the one thing that feels good in a life spinning out of control. The eating practices also spiral out of control, and the fear of gaining weight tempts her to undo her overeating.

Bulimics are harder to recognize than anorexics because their body weight is often normal or slightly above normal. Overall health can degenerate even faster than for anorexics since a bulimic is regularly emptying her stomach of all nutrients. Blood sugar levels can greatly fluctuate between the binges on sweets and the purging that follows. Low electrolyte levels, which affect brain function, and other life-threatening imbalances can occur without noticeable weight loss. Thus, once her bulimic behavior is discovered, she should immediately be seen by a physician knowledgeable about eating disorders.

In extreme cases, hospitalization is required to restore the body functions that have been lost as a consequence of self-starvation. Most of these programs incorporate psychiatric medication and therapy aimed at behavior modification, anger management, and assertiveness training. Though these strategies are often unbiblical, parents may have no choice for treatment once the physical disintegration reaches emergency proportions. Hospitalization usually lasts as long as insurance coverage allows. The best strategy for parents is to learn to have quiet souls themselves so that they will recognize when their children are on "The Way Down."

This brief article obviously cannot cover the counseling strategies for helping someone overcome these life-dominating sins, but it is intended to alert you to the parallels of these sinful eating practices with any other obsessive-compulsive and self-destructive behavior.

The underlying components of "The Way Down" -unbelief, discontent, anxiety, anger, and despair—must be identified. The issues uncovered must be repented of, and a comprehensive discipleship effort to teach her the truths that God is more than enough must be started. Many applications to her life can be found in every session of Quieting a Noisy Soul, making it a starting point in her discipleship.

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Many counseling issues of anorexia and bulimia are covered in extended articles in this study guide, particularly "Obsessions and Compulsions: Breaking Free of the Tyranny" and "Self-Injury: When Pain Feels Good."

For more specifics on anorexia and bulimia, check out Love to Eat; Hate to Eat: Breaking the Bondage of Sinful Eating Habits by Elyse Fitzpatrick (Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999).

Reading #14 - SELF- INJURY: WHEN PAIN FEELS GOOD¹

By Edward T. Welch

If you have never purposefully hurt yourself, it seems impossible to understand those who have. After all, don't living creatures avoid pain?

But if you have purposely hurt yourself, such behavior seems necessary, normal, even right. In fact, like a diabetic giving herself an injection, it can feel like a temporary cure.

This article assumes that you feel trapped in a cycle of intentional self-injury. Some asides are directed to loved ones who are listening in. If you want to help, realize that cutting and similar behaviors have their reasons-and you even will find similar roots in your own heart. If you are the one who feels trapped by the behavior, know that the cure is much more attractive than you think. Right now, you may hate your behavior, but you also feel like you need it. Self-injury might be your way to protect yourself from something worse. To give it up feels like a huge risk. And it would be-if you had no other alternatives. But there is a better way.

ANYONE FEELING ALONE?

No doubt you feel alone and isolated. You are reluctant to talk to people who want to help. People just don't talk about purposeful self-injury. No one mentions it in normal conversation. Though the behavior thrives on silence, those who self-injure number in the millions.

Fiona Apple, Garbage lead singer Shirley Manson, and actresses Angelina Jolie and Christina Ricci are just a few celebrities who acknowledge past problems with cutting. But this human behavior has been around for a long time with a variety of motives. The Bible describes ancient idol worshippers who "slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed" (I Kings 18:28). They believed this would appease their god. The practice even appeared in Christianity during the Middle Ages, when self-flagellation and other harmful practices were common forms of penance. It continues among Shiite Muslims and devout Hindus with their very public self-mortification. Meanwhile, in the West, our openly indulgent culture looks, on the surface, to be too modern to support such forms of penance and asceticism. But people don't change that much from generation to generation, and cultures are more alike than different. Beneath American culture you will find encouragement for more private forms of self-denial and self-abuse.

You are not alone. That might offer little comfort, but if other people have had similar experiences, maybe there is hope that you can be known and helped.

¹ Journal of Biblical Counseling, Winter 2004, pp. 31-41. Copyrighted material. All rights reserved. Used by permission. The material in this article is available in booklet form from CCEF (Christian Counseling and Education Foundation) and can be ordered via their website at www.ccef.org.

WHAT IS IT?

Self-injurers do various things. Nail biters don't stop until their fingers bleed. Pickers pick and scratch until they damage their skin or inflame old wounds. Cutters always have a razor blade handy to score, mark, or slash their body. Others punch themselves black and blue or burn themselves with cigarettes. Some break bones.

Anorexia, or purposeful starvation, is a form of self-injury that can accompany other forms or act as a gateway to further self-abuse. Men and women who severely restrict their diet are perfectionists who can never be perfect. They also try to hide from their feelings, which creates an environment in which cutting and hitting can thrive.

All this sounds like a death wish, and self-injurers can be suicidal, but there is a difference between the two behaviors. Those who purposefully cut an artery are trying to kill themselves. They want life to be over. Cutters tend to be more careful about where or how deeply they cut. They just want to feel better. Self-abusers typically want to live; they just don't know how to live with turbulent emotions.

SLOW DOWN-CONSIDER YOUR WAYS

If friends or parents love you and think you are in danger, they set out on an immediate rescue mission. They panic. They hover. They feel they must do something like stand guard over you and stop you before you do something even more serious. They seem intrusive, but consider what they are witnessing.

They should panic! It looks like suicide to them, and you haven't given them reasons to believe otherwise. You need to talk with them. Maybe you could practice what to say with a wise friend before you speak to others, but at some point, you need to talk.

Of course, it is hard to talk when you don't know what to say, so you have to slow down and consider what is happening. The self-injury cycle has its reasons, but it quickly becomes automatic. Your emotions tell you what to do and you robotically respond. Lies become a way of life that distances you from people who love you and could help you. Yes, slowing down can seem dangerous when your inner screams are getting louder and you feel that your only escape may soon be blocked. But there is another way. It is a path of wisdom, and wise people begin it by considering their ways.

THE CYCLE

Anything that arouses unwanted emotions can trigger the self-abuse cycle. Trouble in relationships are common prompts. Also look for anything that provokes shame. It could be shame from something you did or something that was done to you. You might feel as though you have violated a personal, cultural or divine taboo. Perhaps you just don't tolerate your own humanness with its imperfections, weaknesses, dependencies, and sins.

These beliefs, personal experiences, and external circumstances mix into a stew of raw emotions that can include anger and frustration, anxiety, or a jumping-out-of-your-skin agitation. Without alternatives, self-injury gradually becomes the preferred response to

these feelings because it works. You regain control. Your emotions are back in check. The screams within have been temporarily silenced. The vortex that threatened to pull you under has calmed. You have diverted the torrent of feelings. You now have a focal point that can keep you in the present rather than get pulled into past images. In short, self-injury brings peace. But it doesn't tell you that when peace fades, the same circumstances and emotions are waiting to disrupt your inner world again, and the cycle continues.

WHY SELF ABUSE? WHAT IS THE BEHAVIOR SAYING?

It seems automatic, even instinctive, but there is logic to self-inflicted pain. You do it for a reason. Think, for example, if you were to hurt someone else. You would be saying that you don't like that person. You hit an enemy, someone who makes you angry. It sounds too simple, but you might be angry at yourself and think that you deserve to be punished. After all, anger is a moral judgment. It says that something or somebody is wrong. In this case it is you who is wrong. You might feel as though your body betrayed you. Perhaps you were sexually assaulted, and have started to believe, "My body is bad." As a woman, you could reason that if you had a male body, you wouldn't have been violated. Therefore, your female body is bad. Of course, the perpetrator is the real culprit, but you can at least understand the logic of the self-injury. These behaviors have a meaning. They are a kind of language that is saying something.

Sometimes the language is simple—"I hate myself" Other times the language can be dense with layers of meaning. What is common, whether the meaning is simple or complex—is that all self-injury is an attempt to make life work without turning to God and trusting Him.

Here are some samples of the language behind self-injury.

"I am guilty. I must be punished." This particular logic actually reveals keen insight-to a point. The reality is that, before God, we all are guilty and deserve punishment. We have broken His laws and tried to make life work apart from Him rather than depend on Him. We followed our own desires rather than acknowledge that He is Lord. So, yes, you are guilty. The problem is in how you deal with your guilt.

First, realize that guilt is not as hopeless as you think. The Spirit of God reveals that we are all guilty. As such, if you experience guilt, God is on the move in your life. It is evidence that He is near.

Next, understand that God has a particular interest in our struggle with guilt. Knowing that we are powerless to cleanse ourselves from even a speck of wrongness, He shows us another way. Throughout Scripture you will find that God pursues people who are failures. When they finally stop running from God, they find that God is not looking for their blood to wash them from guilt and sin. Instead, He provides the sacrifice Himself. In the Old Testament, the sacrifice was the blood of animals, but it was never intended to be a permanent solution. After bringing a sacrifice, you soon had to bring another, then another, and it went on this way, day after day, year after year. The routine intended to prepare people for something much better. All the sacrifices anticipated the time when God would provide the better sacrifices through Jesus.

Cutters have much in common with those who lived during Old Testament times. Their sacrifice is never enough. They have to come back to the priest tomorrow and do it all again. The difference is that at least those living in the Old Testament could sacrifice animals. You, instead, use your own body.

You have it partly right: when you feel wrong or unclean, blood is the answer. Actually, death is the answer, and blood symbolizes this price that must be paid for our guilt. What you deny is that only Jesus' death is able to truly wash our souls.

"I am not perfect;" This is akin to guilt, but no obvious sin is involved and you aren't too concerned about God. Still, you sense that you have violated a standard, or are wrong. But these standards are your own. You didn't eat perfectly. Someone criticized your important project. You didn't look the way you wanted. Your feelings imitate guilt, and some kind of penance seems like the only answer.

"They are right; I deserve this;" If self-injurers were sinned against by others, their behavior can be a way to agree with, or approve of what was done to them: "Yes, you hurt me because I deserve to be hurt." It is a convoluted strategy to make sense out of the abuse. Blame yourself for what was done to you and you feel like you have more control. You can hurt yourself before someone else can.

If this resembles the language of your heart, you are still trying to make life work apart from God. At best, you are trying to make yourself OK before you approach him. You deny that he approaches you and says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20).

"I am angry;" Anger is frequently a message in self-injury. It can be a more aggressive way of saying, "I am guilty and deserve to be punished;" but it often includes anger toward another person. You have heard how some people take out their frustrations on a punching bag. Others take it out on the family pet. Self-abusers use themselves as the punching bag. "I hate you;" is the refrain. Sometimes you don't know if you are talking about yourself or someone else.

God is more a part of this than you think. Notice how it is all part of a larger system. You can't believe that God forgives you, so you have no reason to forgive others. You believe that you have to do something to rectify your relationship with God; therefore, other people have to do the same thing with you.

If this comes close to your experience, it means that you do not believe the gospel. The gospel, or good news, is that God forgives us because of what Jesus did-He was perfect-rather than what you do. "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Rom. 1: 17).

"I can't feel this way any longer. Hurting myself is the only way to stop my feelings;" When emotions seem overwhelming, you want them to stop. You need them to stop. Otherwise, they will kill you, drive you insane, or ... you don't know what will happen. You predict, however, that it will be bad. Self-injury temporarily relieves the pain, focuses your attention on the present, and leaves you feeling that you have regained control.

One problem is that each time you hurt yourself you isolate yourself further from other people, and the isolation is part of the problem. When you ask other people for help it breaks down barriers. When you try to do it on your own, and when your plan includes behaviors which prefer privacy, you become increasingly alienated.

"I feel out of control (and other people have been in control). This way I can gain control (and no one can stop me):" When self-injurers can find words, they often speak about "control:" They feel out of control and they want to regain control. They feel like other people have had control, and they want an area of life where they are in control.

Self-control is a paradox. Strive for it and you always miss it. Give up the quest for control, however, and trust the God who is in control, then the world no longer feels like a maelstrom that is sucking the self out of you.

Notice how the path keeps leading back to God. It naturally goes there. We were made for him. As Augustine said, "You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in You:'

"Words cannot express my pain:" Human beings usually put experience into language. When happy, we sing. When sad, we cry out. Emotions want to be communicated. But what if there are no words? Words are the first step to understanding. Before you learn the details about anything, you learn its name.

Self-injurers sometimes feel like they can't even get to step one. They feel something but it has no name. The experience is intolerable and its namelessness makes it worse. The only answer seems to be to subdue this nameless creature by inflicting other experiences that can be named. For example, if you cut yourself and it begins to hurt, you recognize the pain. You know its origin. It seems more manageable.

"Help!" Some self-injurers want to keep their behavior a secret. It adds to the meaning of the ritual. But many want help and don't know how to ask. Their self-abuse rituals are means of calling out for help. To ask in any other way is too great a risk. First of all, it is humbling to ask for help, and no one volunteers for humility. Also, what if you actually ask for help and no one answers? Or what if no one knows how to help?

If this sounds similar to the language of your self-injury, think even more deeply. Have you ever heard of wives who wanted something from their husbands but wouldn't tell their husbands what they wanted? Their basic belief was "if you really loved me you would know." Then, when husbands invariably fail the test, wives feel justified in feeling rejected or angry.

This is such a strange way to go about a relationship that it raises the possibility of other motives. Perhaps the real goal of such behavior is self-pity and anger, which can be its own reward.

This might not capture your particular experience, but you can recognize it as universally human. Dig around and you find a lot of "self" motivating our behavior. You don't injure

yourself for the good of others. Instead, it is about you and how you make your own life work.

Notice how this bridges the differences between yourself and those who don't understand self-injury. At the core of our lives we can easily find our common ancestry. We are all familiar with fear, anger, misery, and guilt, and we all have instincts that drive us away from God when good sense indicates that we should embrace him. Our problem isn't with self-esteem or self-love, although these often feel like our deepest problem. Scripture consistently alerts us to how selfish desires (James 4:1-3) pride and self-interest rule our hearts. When we really think about it we are too concerned about ourselves and are unfamiliar with what it means to truly and selflessly love others.

All this is an effort to slow down and think. Identifying the purposes of self-injury is a useful step. Your emotions can be like a newborn baby who cries non-stop; when you understand the meaning behind the cries, you can help. In self-abuse, the cries are sometimes highly expressive, revealing the complexities of the human heart. Other times they are fairly simple: "I can't handle this feeling any more and cutting eases the stress. If I don't cut myself, I will .. ." If this is all you understand about self-injury, you understand enough. There is a way out that will not destroy you.

GOING DEEPER: WHAT SELF-ABUSE REALLY SAYS

Even though we might nudge the knowledge of God to the margins of our lives, everything we do relates to Him, including self-injury. Self-injury is, at its root, about God. Avoid Him, and we miss true hope.

It works this way. Sometimes we can see the direct connections between God and ourselves. When we are in desperate straits, we might call out to Him. When we have violated His commands, we feel guilty.

Other times, the connection is less clear. Consider anger, for example. Anger is not simply a powerful emotion. Angry people declare an action to be wrong and pass a "guilty" sentence on someone else. In doing so, angry people either represent God and His justice, ultimately trusting Him as the righteous judge, or they set themselves up as judge, standing in judgment ultimately even of God.

Wanting to have control in our lives follows a similar pattern. It doesn't always seem to be about God, but it is just a matter of filling in the blanks. For example, "I want control because other people have had control and I do not want that to happen again. Yes, God is over all things, but He is the one who allowed bad things to happen, so I don't want to trust Him either."

What about all the standards and expectations that threaten to wreck our lives-our parents' expectations, our cultures: our friends', our boyfriends', our spouses'? "Be smart:' "Be attractive:' "Be successful:' "Be important to someone:' These are not God's standards but they certainly can control us. Ultimately, these too can be traced back to our relationship with God. These standards are more intentional than they seem. They are part of our own private religion in which we are the law-giver writing our own Ten Commandments on

Sinai. We determine the standards rather than let God judge the standards and expectations that multiply throughout our lives. Simply put, beneath these many standards is a desire to be your own god.

Contrast this with the perspective of the Apostle Paul.

It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself ... It is the Lord who judges me. (I Cor. 4:3,4)

Our behavior reveals our relationship with God. The reason God is foreign to so much of our conscious thought is that we want Him to be distant. Our sense is that He makes demands on us that we don't want. In our hearts, we want a kind of friendly divorce where God goes His way, we go ours, and no one is hurt. That however, is not how life really works.

God created us for Him, to be in reciprocal fellowship. For our part, this begins as we believe what He says and trust Him. To believe, of course, is not as easy as it sounds. To believe is to accept a lavish gift, and we are uneasy when we have nothing to give in return. We frantically look around for something to offer, such as our deep contrition or our self-loathing. This feels right at first, but it's not. A great gift calls attention to the generosity of the giver. It reminds us that we could not secure the gift on our own. This means that any response to God's gift, other than thankfulness and praise, demeans the generosity of the giver and exaggerates our moral ability to contribute to the gift's cost. It means that we are looking at what we do rather than what God has done. God tells us to come to Him with empty hands, but we want to wait until we feel more worthy.

PUT THE SILENCE INTO SPEECH

Even the simple and desperate cry, "I can't feel this way any longer; hurting myself is the only way to stop the feelings;" is about God. At first glance this too seems unrelated to Him-and that is just the point. When we cry, but not to the One who hears us, we are saying that God doesn't hear, care, or love.

Children who are hurt run to a parent who will listen and show compassion. As creatures in relationships, we share our pain with those who love us. If we do this with people like ourselves-imperfect lovers who are rarely powerful enough to do anything-how much more should we cry out to our heavenly Father, who loves perfectly and responds to our cries?

When His people experienced trouble, the Lord said, "They do not cry out to Me from their hearts but wail upon their beds ... They do not turn to the Most High" (Hos. 7: 14-16).

God is talking about (and to) hurting people, inviting them to turn to Him, but they prefer the isolation of crying on their bed. This self-oriented posture pervades history. In our misery we are simply not inclined to turn to the Lord. As a result, human history and our individual stories are cycles of turning toward the Lord and turning away from Him. "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress;" is the recurring chorus of the Hebrew people (Ps. 107). Our wandering hearts don't turn once to the Lord. They stray, then return to Him, over and over again.

One reason we would rather turn to another human being is that there are fewer strings attached: we call out; they listen. But when we turn to the Lord, our fundamental allegiances change: we call out, He listens and acts, we follow Him. Turning to the Lord leads to our very lives finding residence in Jesus Christ. For people who want independence and personal control, as some self-injurers do, this is too high a price. But, even then, the Lord invites us.

The invitation comes with a promise: "For the Lord will not reject his people" (Ps. 94:14). If you feel as though you are not good enough to come to Christ, you have met the standard for coming! The invitation goes to people who feel like they can't measure up. But if you feel as though you are worse than the worst, be careful. You might be minimizing the love that Jesus has already demonstrated by suggesting that God's love has human-like limits. You might be making a religious-sounding excuse that gives you a clear conscience about avoiding Jesus. If you reject an invitation to a wonderful party by saying you aren't worthy, very likely you just did not want to go.

CRYES OF THE HEART

Let's assume that, on some level, you are reluctant to turn to the Lord with your pain, confusion, and self-absorption. You aren't willing to give up the behavior that seems to work for you. Even if this is how you feel, Jesus speaks words of grace to you.

When we have experiences that are hard to put into words, it helps when someone can identify with them without needing you to explain them. You feel blessed, more hopeful, and less isolated. This is what the Lord does. As He invites us to turn to Him, He describes our experience. When we don't have the words, He speaks them for us and invites us to speak them with Him.

You find these words in the Psalms. If you read them, it will be like hearing your own soul speak.

- "Answer me when I call to You, 0 my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer:' (Ps. 4:1)
- "Give ear to my word, 0 Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to You I pray." (Ps. 5:1, 2)
- "My soul is in anguish. How long, 0 lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3)
- "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied. Free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins:' (Ps. 25:17, 18)
- "O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You. My soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water:' (Ps. 63:1)
- "Out of the depths I cry to You, 0 Lord. 0 Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy:' (Ps. 130:1)

Why did God include psalms in the Bible? Certainly, they teach us how to worship the Lord, but there is more. Do you notice that God actually wants us to speak to Him when we struggle, so much so that when we are speechless, He offers us words to speak? In one psalm after another, He invites us to cry out to Him rather than cry on our beds alone. The psalms teach us how to talk.

With this in mind, find a psalm to call your own, one that captures your experience and turns you to the Lord rather than to self-injury. Start with phrases or sections of the psalm to get started. Speak them from your heart to the Lord. Talk out loud. God is a real person: "Hear my cry for help, O Lord." Don't forget that these words are not simply those of a human poet expressing His sorrow or isolation. They are divinely authorized words that Jesus Himself used to call out to his Father. They teach us how to call out to the God who delights to hear us.

This is exactly what you need. All other paths loop back to yourself. It is as if you can't get away from you and your swirling emotions. The Psalms come down, describe and name these swirling emotions, then take us outside of ourselves and to the God who gives hope.

WORDS OF CONFESSION

Once we are accustomed to calling out to the Lord, more words are available to us. Some of the most important are words of confession.

Confession of sin sometimes has a bad reputation. It evokes images of punishment, shame, and someone's anger against us. The reality is that we all sin every day, and conviction of sin is evidence that God's Spirit is working in our lives. Sin is against God, but an awareness of sin is a gift from God. So confession should be natural. What really makes it attractive however, is that God promises mercy and forgiveness to all who confess their sin to Him (I John 1:9).

The goal of confession is not to come up with a long list of individual sins. The goal is to confess that your sinful behavior and thoughts were against God. For example, selfishness is sin because life is not about us; it's about the glory of God. Gossip is sin because it speaks against people created in God's image, and it violates God's character: He is the author of love and speaks words that build up rather than tear down. Everyone can acknowledge that they do wrong things sometimes. Many can admit they are sinners. But it is less common to remember that sin is against God. Scripture even says that the ordinary conflicts of life are actually evidence of hatred against God (James 4:4).

Our confessions might sound something like this: "Father, I confess that, in hurting myself, I ignore that You were wounded for me. I doubt Your promises, even though I know that You speak truth."

"Father, I confess that I prefer to turn inward than to turn to You. Forgive me. Yet I am so overwhelmed by the things I feel. Please help me."

"Father, I confess that I do this because I want to control rather than trust in Your control."

The freedom to confess comes from knowing that, through Jesus Christ, "where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Rom. 5:20). No matter how much sin we discover in ourselves, there is more than enough grace and mercy to forgive and change us. God takes joy in forgiving us. It makes His name great to offer forgiveness that goes beyond anything in human relationships.

After confession, Scripture gives us more words to say. "If You, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness" (Ps. 130:3). Be sure to end with thanks, not guilt! "Thank You for loving me, even with this struggle!"

SHAME, MEMORIES, AND VICTIMIZATION

Forgiveness is our deepest need. It goes to the depths of the struggle with self-injury. But forgiveness doesn't always connect as clearly with the shame that can motivate self-injury.

Failure. Shame comes in several forms. Sometimes we feel like we haven't measured up to our own or others' ideals. We aren't pretty enough, we didn't achieve enough, we feel below average in everything, or we go unnoticed by important people. These can be deep hurts that self-injury can express. It can also be a way to punish ourselves for not being better than we are. Such self-injury is a way to hold onto the idea that we are unique.

Some of these struggles with shame can be responded to with simple wisdom. For example, if you want to hurt yourself because you did poorly on an exam, decide instead to learn from your mistakes, then ask for help and prepare well for the next one.

But if you feel that other people will be smarter no matter what you do, what are you saying about your relationship with God? Sometimes self-loathing is rooted in pride, although it certainly doesn't feel that way! On the surface, the problem seems to be just the opposite that we need think better of ourselves. But if you search your heart for pride, it is usually there in some form.

In this case the pride is evident in the way we want more for ourselves. We want to be great in something. We want recognition, reputation-some kind of personal glory-and we aren't getting it. We want it more than we want God. We want to be a god rather than trust the true God.

What's the alternative? We confess what's going on and turn to the God whose glory and holiness leave us in awe, and whose humility leaves us with a different model of true humanness.

Dashed Hopes and Rejection. Another kind of shame comes when we have been rejected by someone significant. Perhaps a boyfriend sinned against you; perhaps you wanted a relationship that he didn't. Since rejection can trigger a compulsion to self-injure, this is a time to slow down. Call out to the Lord rather than cry on your bed. Face your doubts about God's plans for your life. Right now, it feels like misery; but if God sent Jesus to die so we could live, why would He be uncaring now? God's plans include hardship and disappointment, but He proved His love already in Jesus, and it is more sophisticated than

we know. Even in our hardship, He is doing good. Sometimes the good is that He is teaching us to trust Him. It is a spiritual response with eternal value.

Victimization. A profound kind of shame comes when you have been physically or sexually violated. Betrayal is agonizing. The language of self-abuse has multiple layers, expressing anger, self-loathing, pain, guilt and self-punishment. With so much inside, victims feel like it is the only way to get temporary relief.

Victims can find words to express their pain in the Psalms. So often they are the cries of the innocent and oppressed. But God's words to the victimized go beyond the Psalms. The entire Bible speaks to those who have known injustice. You don't have to read far to find comfort and encouragement.

"Woe;" the Lord says, "to the shepherds who only take care of themselves. You have ruled [my people] harshly and brutally. Therefore, I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock" (Ezek. 34:2-10). Then the Lord searches for His flock, rescues them, and leads them personally to rich pastures.

The prophet Isaiah anticipated a time when there would be no more shame. He addressed the women who suffered the most shame in his day. "Sing, O barren woman. Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth. For your Maker is your husband-the Lord Almighty is His name-the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer" (Isa. 54: 1-6). In Christ, this time has come.

THE ROAD LEADS TO JESUS

Isaiah points us to the true destination. Crying out to God, confessing sin, and trusting God's promises are critical steps that all lead to Jesus. Jesus is the focal point of Scripture, and true hope can be found when we pursue the same goal.

Isaiah could announce this blessing because he had prophetically witnessed the sufferings and resurrection of Jesus (Isa. 53). He saw that Jesus would be rejected, shamed, victimized, and crushed for our sins so that His offspring could prosper. We are His offspring if we turn to Him.

We still have a tendency to draw a sharp distinction between the wrath of God and the love of Jesus. But Jesus is the full expression—"the exact representation" (Heb. 1:3)-of God's being. If we see and know Jesus, we see and know the Father-they are one. The cross reveals God's anger with sin and His love for His people. It reveals Jesus' humility to serve even to death and His greatness, power, and exaltation in that death has no power over Him.

When you know Jesus you have found the better way that changes everything. Even when you know human love it affects your other relationships, your work and your recreation. In fact, if a potential marriage relationship does not change us for the better, it is probably wise to discontinue it.

Expect to be changed by a relationship with Jesus. When we don't change, then our attitude toward Him has more in common with a casual date than with a transforming marriage to

someone who deeply loves you. What you are looking for is a relationship that gives you a new way to live.

- If you really believe that you have been loved by God, you will notice that you are more aware of others. You will begin to love others more deeply. You will notice that whereas you once needed the approval of others, you now need their approval less and you seek to love them more.
- If you know that you have been forgiven because of what Christ did rather than what you did, you will begin to release the debts of others. Instead of holding their sins against them you will forgive as you have been forgiven.
- If you know that you have received mercy, you will be quicker to confess your own sin. Not only will you begin to notice joy after confession, you will also notice that you are less apt to stand in judgment of others, because you know that your sins are at least as great as theirs.
- If you know that God has been generous in giving you Himself, you will find that you are more generous with your time and money.

A relationship with God means that your life is not simply your own. Being people who want independence, this is more than you bargained for, but independence is not natural to the human condition. You have already tried it and seen its inadequacies. Not only that, you have found it impossible. You will always be dependent on something or someone—the love of one, the approval of another. You have been dependent on cutting to deal with run-away emotions. All these dependencies lead to slavery. A relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, means that we have been set free from those things that held us captive (Gal. 5: 1).

ACTION STEPS

The gospel of Jesus Christ can sound good, but we resist it. We don't immediately like the idea that we belong to God. Independence has been the goal, not humble service and a relationship with strings attached. Our resistance becomes more apparent when we are asked to put faith into action. With this in mind, here are some practical suggestions that are examples of faith in action. If you are reluctant to implement them or others like them, they will expose your allegiances.

1. Do you want to change? The usual answer is "yes" and "no." Change is hard, in part because we don't want to change. Our behavior creates inconveniences, but it still serves a purpose in our lives. So ask this question regularly. It will remind you to confront your motivations and bring them to the Lord. It takes time to realize that the path with Jesus is better than the path of self-injury.
2. Allow other people in. Self-injury likes privacy, but God's path is one of light and openness. If you don't speak openly and honestly to someone you trust and who can help, it probably means that you aren't yet willing to change. Ask for help.

3. Grow in honesty. Lies come in many forms, from whoppers to silent cover-ups. Every day, think about how you have tried to hide your behavior. Confess these things to God and consider confessing to the person you misled. When lies pile up in relationships, we feel more shame, isolation and hopelessness. It is one of the Devil's favorite strategies.
4. Feed yourself with Scripture. Psalms, a Gospel and Ephesians are good places to start. Journaling can help you meditate on Scripture. Your goal is to be surprised by the character of God.
5. Find good books that communicate clearly about God's grace. Consider The Cross Centered Life by C. J. Mahaney, Discipline of Grace and Transforming Grace by Jerry Bridges.
6. Anticipate situations. Since your self-injury follows a pattern in which you can anticipate the situations, times and places when you are most vulnerable, what alternative plans can you make when those situations arise? Remember, you must choose these alternatives (calling a friend, reading at a public place) long before your emotions reach their crisis point.
7. Search the Psalms to give voice to your heart.
8. Write out the meaning and purpose of your self-injury. What are you saying by it?
9. When you fail, don't give in to hopelessness. All human beings sin and fail. It is what we do! But when we turn to Jesus and receive His Spirit, nothing is hopeless. We have forgiveness, deeper wisdom, and power to walk another path. If you are stuck in hopelessness, is it because you want to stay stuck?
10. If you keep moving back into self-injury, notice how your behavior is more intentional than it seems. You are doing what you want to do. If you are not learning from past self-abuse you don't want to change. For example, are you putting barriers between yourself and your self-abuse strategies?
11. Now that you know God's mercy, you are free to consider the way you have sinned against other people. Some of these people may be the very ones with whom you are angry. Don't weigh whose sin is worse. Instead, if you sinned, ask their forgiveness.
12. Now that you love others more, find ways to show it. How can you move towards others and help them? How can you give to someone else? God will help you become like Jesus. In particular, how can you help others who injure themselves, so they also can find freedom?
13. Attend a church that worships Jesus Christ. During the singing, notice how this is exactly what your own heart needs to focus outside yourself. You need to set your allegiance on Jesus rather than yourself. During the sermon, take notes and make the connection between what is being said and your own heart.
14. Pattern your personal reflections after the Psalms: they are honest, not always pretty, yet consistently end with praise and thanks. If you can find time daily to honestly praise

God for who He is and thank Him for what He has done in Jesus, you are definitely on the right path. And it is the direction of your path more than how perfect you are on it that makes the difference.

Reading #15 - DEALING WITH THE DEVIL

C. S. Lewis in the Preface to The Screwtape Letters warns, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They [the devils] themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."¹

Today in some circles whenever the topic of an addiction, bizarre behavior, or life-dominating sin arises, someone asserts that the "bondage" of the demonic forces at work must be "broken" before progress can be made. Various tactics from warfare praying to exorcism are then suggested as the solution. We certainly don't want to take the position of a "materialist" - believing that the Devil and his emissaries do not exist-but neither do we want to be taken by the unbiblical-and almost superstitious-mindset espoused by some when faced with hard cases. It is not the purpose of this article to set forth all that the Bible teaches about God's archenemy, Lucifer, but I do want to set forth some cautions in light of the errors taught in some Christian circles.

CONFRONTATION OF DEMONS: BINDING AND REBUKING

The first error assumes that believers are often engaged in turf wars with "territorial demons:' By various means of "warfare praying" they must bind the power of demonic forces assigned to nations, cities, subdivisions, and even houses. Proponents teach prayers of rebuke to clear out demon "strongholds;" prayers of cancellation of "ancestral spirit" influences and of "transference;" and prayers of recovery of "lost ground" given to the Devil by disobedience.

Believers are taught to "plead the blood over" and "pray hedges of thorns around" loved ones and ministries they want to protect. Sometimes these phrases are legitimately used by believers who merely are petitioning God for protection in metaphorical language. Others, however, imagine that their prayers invoke some kind of spiritual "force field" that is impenetrable by evil spirits-almost as if they were invoking a Christian "hex:'

Frank Peretti's fiction books This Present Darkness and Piercing the Darkness have popularized some of these concepts. While his books provide some good insight into the New Age movement, too many people have taken their theology of angels and demons from the fictionalized accounts he presents. Readers have forgotten that although the books present the idea that the prayers of saints empower angels in their warfare against satanic forces, and though he presents the idea of territorial demons, Peretti is writing fiction, not theology.

Ephesians 6 teaches that demonic forces are organized, and Daniel 10 speaks of a battle between angelic beings and demonic forces, but the war in Daniel was fought in heaven not on earth and not with Daniel's help. Nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to fight territorial spirits either to evangelize anyone or to help him overcome sin on his way to

¹ C. S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, originally published in 1942), ix

spiritual maturity. In fact, Jude tells us that even "Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil ... about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee" (Jude 9). The Scriptures teach us to speak to God, not other spirit beings-good or evil.

EXORCISM OF DEMONS: CASTING OUT

The same proponents of the previous deliverance tactics usually espouse that believers can be demonized (possessed) and offer various tests of demonization and various means to exorcise the evil spirits.

When dealing with evil of any kind we must not forget that the Scriptures themselves are the only valid source of information about the spirit world. In the Gospels and Acts exorcism is a messianic and apostolic sign gift. It is never presented as a method of ministry for the New Testament church. Some proponents try to dismiss this fact with statements such as, "If casting out demons was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me. I want to follow Christ: I would invite them then to feed the multitudes, command the weather, raise the dead, pay their taxes, fish, and heal the sick the way Jesus did. These all were part of His ministry methods.

From Romans 1:1 to Revelation 22 there is not one word of instruction or command to engage in exorcistic ministry. Paul did not teach Timothy, the Ephesian elders, or Titus how to do this. Paul did not use deliverance tactics himself to bind the "messenger of Satan" that "buffeted" him (II Corinthians 12:7-10) or to "bind over" the evil spirits that hindered his coming to Thessalonica (I Thessalonians 2:18). The Scriptures are clear that the Devil and evil spirits exist and seek to hinder the work of God, but the Bible does not teach that exorcistic methods should be used by the church.

If these methods are to be employed, why did not Christ Himself teach these procedures to the seven churches of Asia who were in the heart of pagan, occult influences? The churches of Smyrna (Revelation 2:8) and Philadelphia (3:9) were afflicted by those who were "of the synagogue of Satan." The church at Pergamos was founded "where Satan's seat is" (2:13). The Lord Jesus speaks also of those who have known "the depths of Satan" -the doctrines taught by a "Jezebel" tolerated in the church (2:24). Yet nowhere in His instructions to these assemblies does the Lord Jesus tell these believers how to directly confront the forces of evil that obviously existed and obviously hindered His work in these cities.

Instead the Lord calls these believers to repentance, service, endurance, and sound doctrine-the "normal" means of sanctification and growth in the Christian life. Even the "armor" of Ephesian 6 is made up of components of the Christian walk that are essential to sanctification: faith, righteousness, the gospel, truth, and so forth. Ephesians 6 is not a list of esoteric armor for some sort of magical warfare with spirit beings. And the call to "resist the devil" in James 4:7 is followed by instruction about how to resist him. We are told in the next verse to "draw nigh to God" and to "cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded." Again, we see divine instruction to be engaged in the normal means of sanctification-confession of sin and heart dependence upon God by prayer.

The topic of Satan is discussed in every epistle-sometimes in great detail-and in the book of Revelation. The biblical support for these various deliverance methods, however, is simply not present.

Please do not misunderstand the thrust of this article. It is not a denial of the powerful forces of Satan and his fallen angels. Nor is this article an attempt to answer every question about how Satan should be resisted in our lives. Other books. have done that in sufficient detail and offer much biblical help in countering these errors and in biblically dealing with the Devil.² This article is a call to be cautious when dealing with sins that seem deeply entrenched.

These unbiblical methods are part of a theology of "crisis sanctification" in which problems are solved by some sort of crisis or event.³ The Bible teaches "progressive sanctification" - that problems are solved as we grow in our likeness to Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Word to us by the Holy Spirit as we obey Him.

A good rule of thumb to remember when dealing with hard cases is this. When the normal things don't work, don't jettison the normal things—intensify the normal things.

By that I mean that when the "normal" things of Bible reading, repentance, prayer, listening to preaching, accountability, and so forth do not seem to be working to extract someone from his besetting sins, do not abandon these "normal" things. These are the means whereby God has instructed us to grow out of our double-minded stubbornness into obedient, holy living. These means should not be abandoned; they must be intensified. This means that the sin-dominated believer needs more Bible reading, more confession, more prayer, more exposure to biblical preaching, and more accountability. This means that the church must equip its members with the knowledge and with the endurance necessary to stay with the hard cases until they come to maturity in Christ.

² Alex Konya. Demons: A Biblically Based Perspective (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1990). John MacArthur. How to Meet the Enemy: Arming Yourself for Spiritual Warfare (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992). David Powlison. Power Encounters (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).

³ Proponents of the methods I have described would probably not use the term "crisis sanctification" to describe themselves. I use the term here to contrast their methods with the biblical method of "progressive sanctification":