

Handling Life's Problems by Barry Cunningham

1 - Anxiety

For this first study we are going to think about handling anxiety.

We read in Philippians 4 verse 6, "Do not be anxious about anything". Anxiety can cripple your spiritual vitality. It hinders your walk with God. Anxiety takes your focus off God and onto something else. Someone once said, "Stress and worry break us down. They are the unseen source of our headaches, backaches, heartaches and stomach aches. They give us sleepless nights, high blood pressure, and low morale. They cause indigestion, irritation, chest pain and muscle strain!" Clearly anxiety isn't good for you! So how can you handle it?

The Bible gives us the answer. First, develop a life of prayer. We read in verse 6, "In everything by prayer". You can only pray to God when you know him. You can only know him in Jesus Christ. Approach to God the Father is through Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John chapter 14 verse 6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me". Prayer is a reverent address to God. It takes the form of petition which is the humble cry of the supplicant for God to meet a need that is keenly felt. The antidote for anxiety is to pour out your heart to God.

The well-known composer Haydn was with some friends discussing how they each restored their mental energies when they were tired after long and difficult studies. One said that he drank a bottle of wine. Another said that he would lose himself in the company of friends. Haydn said, "My practice is to retire to my study and engage in prayer. Nothing exerted a happier and efficacious influence on my heart and mind than the power of prayer".

The second way to handle anxiety is to define your need in prayer. Philippians 4 verse 6 says, "present your requests to God". No matter what your problem is, you can talk to God about it. Tell him how you feel. Tell him what is bothering you. Unburden your heart to him. We read in 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 7, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you". David said in Psalm 55 verse 22, "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall". You might think God isn't concerned about a

problem you have. In verse 6 we are told “In everything make your requests known to God”. He is concerned about everything that is a concern to you.

Two men were talking and one said, “I’m in debt with credit cards, I’ve lost my job, my car, but I’m not worried about it”. His friend replied, “Not worried about it, I would be!” “No, I have a professional worrier. He does all the worrying for me so I don’t have to think about it”. “Fantastic”, the friend said, “How much does this professional worrier charge for his services?” “£70,000 pounds a year”, he replied. His friend asked, “Where are you going to get that sort of money?” “I don’t know - that’s his worry!” In a sense you have a professional worrier for you in Jesus Christ. One who takes your cares anxieties and worries and carries them for you. J. B. Phillips translates 1 Peter 5 verse 7 like this, “You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him for you are his personal care”.

The next way to handle anxiety is to determine its cause. Philippians 4 verse 7 says, “Let the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”. Notice the reference to “Hearts and Minds”. Anxiety is caused by fears concerning the world, the flesh, the devil, and all the pressures of daily living. They take over the heart and mind. They distract your thoughts so that your mind becomes preoccupied with worry about them. Our heart becomes agitated and overcome with dread. Find what it is that is causing you so much anxiety and then bring it to God in prayer. God will stabilise your emotions.

Jesus said in John chapter 14 verse 27, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”. God will also calm the mind. It is in the mind where we allow anxious thoughts to master us and spoil our walk with God. Anxiety is evidence that you’re walking by sight and not by faith. George Muller once said, “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety”. So what lies behind your anxiety? If there is sin there confess it and forsake it. If you are anxious because of your own foolish mistake, then put things right. If lack of faith lies behind it, then trust God afresh with your cares and worries.

In verse 7 God promises to, “Guard your hearts and minds”. The word guard here translates a Greek word that carries the idea of a garrison of soldiers surrounding a king for his safety. In the midst of your storm God will surround you heart and mind with his peace. Having left the care with him you will know calmness of spirit and composure of mind. You will sense his presence enabling you to face your trials with him.

The missionary Hudson Taylor was well known as a man of energy, patience and spiritual stature. He was calm and confident-what was the secret? Someone who knew him said this, "He drew from the bank of heaven everything for his daily income ... nothing ruffled his spirit. The serenity of the Lord Jesus Christ concerning any matter at any moment, this was his ideal possession ... he knew there was a peace passing all understanding and that he could not do without it".

The fourth way to handle anxiety is to discipline your thoughts. Philippians 4 verse 8 says "Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy, think about such things". Fill your mind with thoughts that encourage faith and godly living. How you think determines what you will be. Rid your mind of anxious thoughts. We read in Proverbs 23 verse 7, "As a man thinks within himself, so he is".

The final way to handle anxiety is to direct praise to God. Philippians 4 verse 6 reminds us to present our requests in prayer, "with thanksgiving". The proof that you've really left your burden with the Lord is that you'll praise him for what he is going to do for you. Someone said that "The evidence of a peaceful heart is a praising life". Thanksgiving will be within your praying for past answers to prayer and for present blessings. It will be at the end of your prayer for anticipated divine action.

A girl was near to suicide. She talked about it to a Christian friend. Her friend said, "Come and read the book of Psalms". As she did she saw how often the psalmist rejoiced and praised God even in difficulties. She met her friend again and said, "I now set aside one day in the week when I do nothing but thank God, and already I feel well again". Don't be crippled by anxiety. Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right.

2 - Loneliness

In the first book of Kings and chapter 19 we have the story of Elijah running away from Jezebel. He'd won a great victory for the Lord against the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Jezebel wasn't pleased. We find Elijah sitting at the foot of a Juniper tree and he's having a grumble. He says in verse 19, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me". Notice the words, "I am the only one left". Elijah felt alone, lonely. Other great people of God in the Bible felt that way sometimes. David said in Psalm 25 verse 16, "I am lonely and afflicted". Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 9, "Do your best to come to me quickly". Why? Because he felt alone and needed company.

Do you identify with Elijah? Do you feel lonely? According to statistics one in every six people doesn't have a personal friend. 40% of the population are shy and therefore isolated. 80% of people seeking psychiatric help say loneliness triggered it off. 50,000 suicides are the result of loneliness. One woman said to her Doctor, "When I die I want to be cremated and my ashes thrown over the local pleasure beach". The doctor asked, "Why?" "Well", she said, "then I can be sure my children will visit me at least twice a week!"

Loneliness has a number of causes. It can be the result of mobility as your job moves around the country. You never settle long enough to make lasting friends. There's a loss of community and trust these days. This brings about lack of association with others. Some slump in front of the television each night. They rarely have conversation with the family or go out and socialise. Shy people have trouble making friends and feel lonely. People who are away from home for the first time feel lonely such as Students, and Asylum seekers. Old age limits activity, and housebound people are lonely. Loneliness can affect widows, widowers, divorced people, singles, and teenagers who are bored at weekends. It strikes at different times, maybe through death or the empty nest when the children leave home. Loneliness has no regard for age either. Albert Einstein once said in his later years, "It is strange to be known so universally and yet be so lonely". At the other end of the age range, Marilyn Monroe said, "Sometimes I think the only people who stay with me and really listen are people I hire and people I pay". Loneliness has been the theme of many a popular song. Elvis Presley asked, "Are you lonesome tonight", and Roy Orbison sang, "Only the Lonely know why I cry".

The Bible provides a way out of loneliness and feeling alone. There's God's provision. Elijah wanted to die. It says in 1 Kings chapter 19 verse 4, "He came to a Juniper tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough Lord' he said 'take my life' ". Verse 5 tells us that he "fell asleep". There is God's natural provision! A good night's sleep does you the world of good! Worry keeps you awake. Sleep refreshes you and helps to put your troubles in perspective. You can then approach them with a refreshed and alert mind the next day. God also made sure Elijah had some food. Verses 5 and 6 say, "All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat. He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water". Loneliness can lead to depression and then to loss of appetite. Physical nourishment is vital for you to cope with the challenges you face in life. When you are weak, you are good for nothing. Work at getting yourself mentally and physically in shape. You will be more able to cope with the stresses and strains of life. Then we see God's presence as an answer to loneliness. In verse 11 God says to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord".

Jean Paul Richter the 18th century philosopher said, "We are orphans you and I. Every soul in this vast corpse-trench of the universe is utterly alone". That is not true for the Christian. Jesus said in John chapter 14 verse 18, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you". You can only ever experience the reality of this when you've asked him to forgive you your sins and to be your personal Saviour and Lord. From then on begins a living relationship with the risen Saviour. He enters your life, and is with you in all the situations you face, even those times when you feel alone. One day I visited an elderly lady living in a flat by herself. I asked her if she felt lonely at times. "Never", she said, "I've got Jesus here with me!!" You may feel lonely and abandoned in that hospital bed, or in that empty house, or as you stood by the graveside of a loved one. You're not alone God is always there with you.

Another way to cope with loneliness is to remember God's purpose. God still had some work for Elijah to do in his service. In verses 15 and 16 we read, "The Lord said to him anoint Hazeal king over Aram and anoint Jehu king over Israel". The great antidote for loneliness is active involvement in serving God. Someone once said, "Get your mind off yourself, there are emptier cups than yours". A woman known as Aunt Betty was a well-loved member of her church. Her children had grown up and left home. Her husband had died. Her home was empty of the noise and chatter she'd become familiar with. She could have sat at home bemoaning her lot, but she became everyone's Aunt Betty! She sang in the choir, taught in the Sunday

school, visited the sick, organised the annual Holiday Bible Club. She befriended the children in a nearby children's home, and sent each of them a birthday card every year. Active involvement with people and activities will fill your life with a sense of fulfilment whether you're young or old. Of course, age and infirmity can limit what you are able to do. If that's you, then you could write to missionaries and pray for them. You could send a letter of encouragement to your Pastor. A caring church will include you in its visitation programme.

God has also provided his people to help you when you face loneliness. God says to Elijah in verse 18, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel-all who have not bowed down to Baal". One mistake Elijah made as he fled from Jezebel was to leave his servant in Beersheba. He had no fellowship. God has provided the local church for you. It is there that you can make friends. When God created Adam he said, in Genesis 2 verse 18, "It is not good for the man to be alone". God made him a bride. God's remedy for your loneliness is the same. He's given you a "bride". The church is the "bride of Christ". Each Christian is there for others in the fellowship to provide encouragement and friendship. Psalm 68 verse 6 says, "God sets the lonely in families". The church is the family of God. You need never be alone whilst you have Christian fellowship to enjoy. So develop friendships with other believers. Have them round for coffee or a meal. Visit the elderly of the church. If you're feeling alone just now as you listen to this talk, then apply these lessons to your life and you will be able to deal with loneliness.

3 - Guilt

Guilt is a universal problem. It is also a spiritual problem. Paul Tournier said, "Guilt is present universally in the human soul, and we cannot deal with guilt without dealing with the religious questions it poses". In other words, guilt can't be understood apart from man's relationship to God his creator. The experience of guilt and release from it depends on this understanding. The Bible helps us to do this. Guilt, in the Bible, is a position before God before it's a feeling. Feelings arise out of the condition. Every person born into this world is guilty before God. God declares everyone in Adam guilty. We have all inherited Adam's fallen nature. We are in Adam positionally. Romans chapter 5 verse 19 tells us, "Through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners." Before we trusted Christ as our Saviour we behaved like Adam and we disobeyed God. We read in James chapter 2 verse 10, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point is guilty of breaking all of it". God's standard is perfect obedience. We have not given that to him, so we all stand guilty before him.

What brings about the inner feeling of guilt? It is the result of the work of conscience. Conscience is that part of man that's on God's side. Conscience condemns the bad things we do and commends the good things we do. It functions in that way because we are made in the image of God and reflect his moral standards and nature. Paul explains this in Romans chapter 2 verse 15 where he says of the Gentiles, "Even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them". It was this fact that resulted in the Christian conversion of C. S. Lewis. He wondered why it was he felt good or bad according to what he did. He came across the moral character of God and studied the Ten Commandments. He noticed that when he did good and felt good it was when he acted according to God's moral character. When he did bad and felt bad it was when he acted against God's moral character. This convinced him that he was really and truly made in God's image.

Maybe you are looking for relief from an accusing conscience; many people are. There are two ways to find relief. Some choose to silence the voice of conscience. The Bible calls this a seared conscience. We read in 1 Timothy chapter 4 verse 2, "... whose consciences have been seared with a hot iron"? By constantly arguing with your conscience, stifling its warnings and muffling its bell, you will arrive at the point where conscience no longer bothers you. The beneficial voice of the conscience is suppressed and ceases to function. This is

the soul damning way to respond to conscience. But there is another way. C. S. Lewis decided to find out why his conscience worked as it did and as a result he found Jesus Christ as his Saviour. You see, when you trust Jesus Christ as your Saviour you move out of your position in Adam, guilty and condemned. You move to a new position in Christ, guiltless and free. In other words, you move from a position of guilt to guiltlessness before God.

For the Christian, guiltlessness is a position before it is a feeling. We read in Romans chapter 8 verse 1, "Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". How does this happen? First, you must ask God's forgiveness for your sin. You have fallen short of God's standard by failing to obey his Law. You then accept his provision of salvation in Jesus. You repent of your sin. This means you turn from your sin and tell God how sorry you are for it. Then you place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope for salvation, and welcome Him into your life as your Saviour and Lord. That is how the Christian life begins. At that moment God becomes two things to you: He becomes, as it were, a tailor and a judge. As your tailor he gives you new clothes. He clothes you with Christ's righteousness - his perfection. You have no righteousness of your own to offer God. You can never be perfect in yourself. Remember, you've fallen short of God's standard.

Imagine that I place a large sum of money into your bank account. You've not earned it. You may not have deserved it, but I've given it to you freely. That is what God does when you trust Christ for salvation. You didn't earn it because you have no goodness of your own that is acceptable to God. You certainly didn't deserve it because of your disobedience. God takes the perfect righteousness of Jesus and clothes you with it. He does that freely because of his mercy and grace toward you. After that He sees you in Christ standing holy and acceptable to Him. As your judge, God declares you forgiven and therefore guiltless in his sight. The Bible calls this "Justification". We read in Romans chapter 5 verse 1, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ". Jesus took your guilt and shame on the cross. He was punished in your place. When you receive Jesus as your Saviour, God turns his anger away from you. When you are clothed with Christ's righteousness and justified in Christ you are united with the One who is "the rock of ages", the One who is utterly dependable and sure. You are safe, and you are freed from guilt toward God. That's a real blessing!

But what about the feeling of guilt that troubles you from time to time after you have trusted Christ for salvation? God always requires an honest

admission of sin. We read in 1 John chapter 1 verse 9 that “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”. God is faithful because He will keep to his agreement that whoever comes to Him will find forgiveness. He is just because He has punished your sin in Jesus Christ on the cross, so He cannot and will not punish it again. Providing you’ve confessed and forsaken your sin, you don’t need to carry the feeling of guilt around with you any longer.

Whenever you’re inclined to feel guilty as you remember your past sins say to yourself, “I’m in Jesus Christ! His righteousness is my righteousness! God no longer sees me as guilty and condemned! I am justified and acquitted by God from every crime against his holiness! Who can lay a charge against God’s elect!”.

The answer to guilt is to believe the promise that God has forgiven you on the grounds of your repentance and confession. When you do that then the feeling of guilt is replaced with the feeling of peace and joy. Through faith in his promise you will experience the peace of God that passes all understanding. In Adam there is guilt and condemnation. In Christ you are free and guiltless. The feeling of joy will arise in your soul when you believe what God’s word says about your new standing before him in Jesus Christ your Saviour. I love the words of the hymn by Nicolaus Zinzendorf. Let me quote them to you as we finish:

“Jesus thy blood and righteousness my beauty are my glorious dress;

‘Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head. Bold shall I stand in that great day, for who aught (anything) to my charge shall lay? Fully absolved through thee I am, from sin and fear, from guilt and shame”.

4 - Burdens

In Psalm 55 verse 22 we read, “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you”. The word ‘cares’ carries the idea of burdens that we carry. Life brings many heavy burdens to us. Job said in Job chapter 5 verse 7, “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward”. He said in chapter 14 verse 1, “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.” The weight of our burdens and troubles differ from one person to the next. Some are carrying burdens unknown to us. But we all carry burdens of one type or another. They come in a variety of ways. Family life brings its own burdens. There is sickness, poverty, redundancy, and broken relationships. Holding your job down brings the burden of deadlines, expectations, profits and production. Working for the Lord has its burdens. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11 verse 28, “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressures of my concern for all the churches”.

Burdens can arise within friendships. In Psalm 55 verses 12 and 13, David says, “If an enemy were insulting me I could endure it, but it is you ... my companion”. We experience physical burdens because of weakness and infirmity. Paul speaks about his thorn in the flesh. He says in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 7 that it was, “A messenger of Satan to torment me”. God assures him in verse 9. He says, “My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness”. We carry temperamental burdens. We become prone to depression and worry. There’s the burden of bereavement. In John chapter 11 we read of the death of Lazarus. Verse 19 says, “And many Jews had come to Mary and Martha to comfort them in the loss of their brother”.

Disappointment can be a burden. We read in Luke chapter 24 verse 17 of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They are on their way home after the events of the crucifixion of Jesus. We read, “They stood still their faces downcast”. They thought that Christ hadn’t risen and were disappointed. The heaviest burden of all is the burden of sin. We read in Romans chapter 3 verse 23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. This burden has an impact on this life and the next. It separates you from God now, and will do for eternity unless you repent and turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness.

How should you respond to life’s burdens? We see in Psalm 55, first of all, some wrong responses. David says in verse 1, “Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea”. There is the danger of doubting God, that He is there with you when troubles come. You may be tempted to doubt He is listening to your prayers, and that he really cares about you at all. There’s no relief in doubt.

We can allow ourselves to despair. David did this. He says in verse 5, “Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me”. He began to feel there was no way out. There’s the temptation to complain about your burden. David says in verse 2, “My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught”. You won’t find help in wallowing in self-pity. There is the attractive proposition of giving up. David says in verse 6, “Oh! That I had the wings of a dove! I would flyaway and be at rest”. The problem is no matter where you go; you take with you the burdens as well. Peter Marshall once said, “When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure”.

Psalms 55 also provides us with the right response to life’s burdens. The first is acceptance. In the original Hebrew, the word “Care” or “Burden” in verse 22 literally means, “that which he has given you” or “gift”. That throws our burdens into a completely different light. I wonder if you have ever considered that burdens are a gift from God. Someone once said, “Our divine teacher has written lessons on the blackboard of trouble”. Your burden hasn’t come because you’re going through a patch of bad luck. Burdens come so that we are drawn closer to God through them. The Devil may be behind it, but only as far as he has permission from your heavenly Father. God’s purpose is to bring good out of it for your blessing and his glory.

When things are going well we may be inclined to forget God. Affliction has been described as “God’s sheepdog to drive us back into the fold”. David said in Psalm 119 verse 67, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word”. David saw the value in God’s gift of a burden. He says in verse 71, “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” Burdens rightly used become learning curves in our relationship with God. The ABC of spiritual growth is Adversity Builds Character.

Then there must be the act of casting. The word “cast” in verse 22 means to “fling” or “hurl”. It is a word calling for effort on your part. God doesn’t want you to face the burdens of life alone. He wants to be your helper and comfort. He gives us the burdens so that we might look to him in them and prove his grace and strength. He allows burdens so that we might throw them back at him, and find that grace to help in time of need. How could we ever know God as the God of comfort if we were never uncomfortable? Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of verse 22 says, “Pile your troubles on God’s shoulders. He will carry your load, He will help you out”. The final thing is to leave your burden with the Lord. It’s right to pile your troubles on the Lord. The problem is when we leave the place of prayer we pick them up again! We need to learn the

lesson of actually leaving them with the Lord. God takes responsibility for our burdens the moment we cast them on Him.

The story is told of a plumber who was working on restoring an old farmhouse. During his first day he lost an hour because his tyre went flat, his drill packed in, and his truck wouldn't start when it was time for home. The farmhouse owner gave him a lift home. As he travelled the plumber looked down and dejected, and never spoke a word. The plumber invited his friend in to meet the family. As he approached the house he stopped at a small tree in his garden. He cupped his hands and touched the tip of the branches. When he entered the house he was transformed, he embraced his wife and kissed his children. He walked his friend back to the car who couldn't resist asking the plumber why he touched the tree on the way in. The plumber said, "Oh that's my trouble tree. I'm aware that I can't help having troubles in my job, but I make it a policy never to take them home to my wife and children. So I just hang them up on the tree every night and ask God to take care of them. I pick them up again in the morning, but often find they aren't as many there as I hung up the night before".

When you face life's burdens remember these truths. Also bring to mind these words of a hymn:

"Fear not I am with thee, O, be not dismayed for I am thy God and will still give thee aid; I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand."

5 - Depression

The book of Psalms reflects many human emotions. It's been described as the book of life. The Psalms depict life and show something of the difficulties that we face. In Psalm 77 Asaph, the writer is feeling low. He's depressed. In this Psalm we see some of the causes and cures for depression. Depression is something that we've all experienced at some time in our lives. To be able to deal with depression we need to know how it shows itself. There is often an overwhelmed spirit. Asaph says, "My spirit grew faint". Depression has been defined as a "lowering of spirit". It makes you feel down. The Psalmist says in Psalm 130 verse 1, "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord". Do you feel defeated and deflated? Memories of better days in the past contribute to depression. Asaph says in verse 6, "I remembered my songs in the night". There was a time when he could sing even in the dark hours, but now he finds it impossible. He wonders why and it adds to his low state of mind.

Depression also robs you of sleep. In verse 4 we read, "You kept my eyes from closing". You lie awake with your mind agitated about your circumstances. Depression can drive you to silence. Asaph says in verse 4, "I was too troubled to speak". Depression makes you isolate yourself. Your thoughts are negative, and you find it hard to have a conversation with anyone. You're totally consumed with your own problems. Do you identify with Asaph? Are those some of your feelings today? What can cause you to feel depressed? Pessimism is a key factor. Asaph says in verse 2, "My soul refused to be comforted". Some people have a pessimistic outlook on life. They dwell on the dark moments. Sometimes a guilty conscience will make you depressed. We read in verse 3, "I remembered you, O God, and I groaned". Asaph was troubled in his soul. There was some unconfessed sin in his life.

Are you depressed because you are holding on to some sin in your life? You must deal with that and seek God's forgiveness. Paul said in Acts 24 verse 16, "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man". Holding a critical spirit will lead to depression. Asaph talks about groaning and moaning. He says in verse 3, "I groaned". The person who does little else but complain will suffer from depression. Another factor is an unhealthy type of self-examination. Asaph says in verse 3, "I mused and my spirit grew faint". And in verse 6, "My heart mused and my spirit enquired". There's nothing wrong with looking into our hearts. There is such a thing as healthy introspection. David prayed in Psalm 139 verse 24, "See if there is any offensive way in me". Asaph's introspection caused him to grow faint. There is a form of self-examination that is morbid; when all you see is bad. This can

lead to spiritual, mental, and physical illness. A wrong attitude towards God in the trial can make you depressed. Asaph says in verse 9, “Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”

There are some natural causes for depression too. A time of illness can make you depressed. Bad news and difficult circumstances have the same effect. The missionary Adoniram Judson lost his wife. He plunged into depression, even to the extent of doubting God. He said, “God to me is the great unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not”. Your temperament can cause depression. You simply have a melancholy personality. Some feel depressed on a cloudy dark dismal day.

Failing to eat well can bring on depression. You don’t eat the right foods and miss vital nutriment. Sometimes a visit to the Doctor may be the answer to some of these problems that bring on depression. What steps can we take to deal with depression? From a purely practical point of view get plenty of rest and exercise. Remember the three “F”s: Fun, Food, and Fresh Air. We should live an all-round balanced lifestyle that will glorify God.

There are some spiritual remedies too. Asaph says in verse 10, “To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the most high”. He roused himself. He got a new purpose, and a fresh goal. Depression is not sin. It is a weakness, but we mustn’t pretend it is not there when we feel it. Paul admitted his infirmity. He says in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 7, “There was given me a messenger of Satan to torment me” It caused him some grief. He recognised it and asked God to remove it. That is a natural response to anything that we don’t like in life. But then Paul faced his problem, accepted it, and turned it around to make it a blessing with the help of God’s grace. He says in verse 10, “I delight in weaknesses ... for when I am weak then I am strong”.

Also, have a proper view of God as your heavenly Father. Asaph doubted God’s care. He said in verse 8, “Has his unfailing love vanished forever?” God always cares. He isn’t against you in your time of weakness. Trust him that he is working all things out for you good. Paul describes God in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 6. He says, “God, who comforts the downcast”. Look to God. Trust him. He will draw near to comfort you in those low times of life.

Learn to pray when you feel downcast. Asaph addresses God in verse 13. He says, “Your ways O God are holy”. Here he lifts his heart to God in prayer. Don’t forsake that secret place of prayer. Jesus said in Matthew 6 verse 6, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father”.

Tell the Lord in prayer how you feel. He's listening. He'll respond to you. He'll give grace sufficient for the need you have. Encourage yourself in the Lord. That's what Asaph did. He says in verse 11, "I will remember the deeds of the Lord". Think back to those previous times when you proved God to be your refuge and strength. Bring to mind previous deliverances and they will help you to trust God for present ones. If God brought you out of the depths before then he can do it now.

Renew your mind. We read this in Romans 12 verse 2, "be transformed by the renewing of the mind". Fill your mind with the word of God and all his great promises. Bring them to mind when you begin to sink in despair. There's no doubt that the way you think has a major impact on how you behave and cope.

In John Bunyan's book Pilgrims Progress, Christian falls into the miry slough of despond. His travelling companion runs away and leaves him there. Help comes. The character "Help" is the person of the Holy Spirit. "Help" lifts him out. Christian asks, "Can't this be mended so travellers may pass on?" "Help" replies, "The miry slough is such that cannot be mended". You see, depression is one of those inevitable experiences of life we all pass through to some degree because we are fallen people in a fallen world. But we have the Spirit of God and the word of God, the Bible, to help us out of it. When you enter the depths of the dark times of the soul remember these lessons and work them out in your life. You will prove God to be your deliverer.

6 - Doubt

What is doubt? In the Bible the English word 'doubt' translates a New Testament Greek word which means, basically, "without a way". It's the condition of not being able to see a way out of your distressing situation. It carries the idea of perplexity and believing that we have no resources to help. For the Christian it happens when we take our eyes off Jesus. We see it illustrated in Peter when he walked on the water. We read in Matthew 14 verses 29 to 30, "Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord save me!'" The reply of the Lord Jesus is significant. Having lifted Peter out of danger he says in verse 31, "You of little faith ... why did you doubt?" You see, Peter had stopped looking at Jesus, and turned his eyes to the winds and waves. He panicked and sank.

This event shows us that Jesus wants to help us in our times of doubt. Doubt isn't unbelief. Doubt is little faith. Even in that moment of doubt and despair Jesus still talked to Peter. Fellowship continues between you and the Lord. To doubt doesn't suggest that you're not a true believer. It is certainly a weakness. It certainly isn't a commendable feature when you recall that God has called us to a life of faith. Doubt is actually a sign that spiritual life is there in your soul. The unsaved person doesn't doubt he just doesn't believe. Be sure that your doubt isn't in reality the evil heart of unbelief.

Make sure that you are truly a Christian and born again of God's Spirit. Doubt is part of the spiritual battle we fight as we seek to serve the Lord. God's will is for you to deal with your doubt. He wants you to enjoy assurance of your salvation. He wants you to be assured of his presence. Paul said in 2 Timothy 1 verse 12, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day".

There are certain things that will cause doubt to develop. We need to identify these and how to address them. It is possible to lack a good understanding of your salvation. The greater your grasp of scripture the stronger your faith will become. We read in Romans 10 verse 17, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ". Some Christians are like the couple who went on a world cruise. The Captain noticed they didn't turn up for their meals. He went to their cabin to see what was wrong. He found them there eating cheese and crackers and drinking water. They hadn't read their booking conditions carefully, and didn't realise that they had three five course meals a day! God says in Hosea 4 verse 6, "My people are

destroyed through lack of knowledge”. Be a student of the Bible. Study key words that have to do with your salvation. Look at God’s promises to those who believe. Meditate on the word of God and let its truths deeply affect your heart and mind. This will work against doubt when you’re in the storms of life.

Then, unconfessed sin can cause doubt. This is because it brings guilt and a lack of the sense of God’s presence. Make sure that you confess your sins and forsake them. We read in 1 John 1 verse 9, “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins”, God will forgive you, and you will experience his closeness in a new way. This will remove any doubt about the reality of your salvation.

Being inactive in Christian service can bring doubt. John the Baptist was alone in prison. In Matthew 11 verse 3 he asked this question to Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?” He began to doubt that Jesus was the promised Messiah. John was not in prison by choice, but there is a principle here. When you become less active in your service for Christ, and less occupied with the thrill of the adventure and wonder of serving God, you begin to dry up spiritually and you become inward looking and entertain doubts about the things of God. Be active in service for the Lord. Look for ways where you can serve him in the community and in the church.

Misleading theology can produce doubt. Maybe you were told when you first became a Christian that all your problems would disappear. So when trials come you doubt whether you are saved, or that the gospel is really the answer to your life’s emptiness. Someone once said, “Some people feel that God is nowhere if they don’t feel goose bumps an inch high!!” You must recognise from the outset that in the world you will have problems.

When you come to know Jesus it is the beginning of a relationship. When a couple are getting married they say, “I do”, not, “I’ve done it”. Why? Because they have just started on the ups and downs of married life. So it is when you first trust Jesus. You’ve begun a journey with its trials and joys. The Lord will be with you in both. Doubt can arise when you face distressing circumstances in life. Maybe you have faced bereavement, or have been made redundant, or have gone through a time of illness. You begin to doubt God’s love for you. Remember Romans 8 verse 28, “In all things God works for the good of those who love him”.

Maybe you have had disappointments relating to prayer. You doubt that God has heard you. God always answers prayer. Sometimes it’s a direct yes. Other

times its no and your request is denied. The answer may be delayed and you are made to wait a while. Sometimes there is a different answer than the one you expected. You may feel frustrated, but God has heard and He will answer in his own time and way. We read in Isaiah 65 verse 24, “Before they call I will answer and while they are still speaking I will hear”.

The greatest antidote to doubt is a thankful heart. It keeps you focused on God’s faithfulness. We are exhorted in 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 18, “Give thanks in all circumstances”. That means everything, even the not so good experiences of life. We can do it because we know God is our kind Heavenly Father who is doing all that is right for us.

So the Lord Jesus leaves us with the searching question, “Why did you doubt?”.

7 - Crisis

In 2 Chronicles chapter 20 in the Old Testament we read about Jehoshaphat the King of Judah. He faced a crisis. 2 Chronicles 20 verse 2 tells us that, "Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, 'A vast army is coming against you from Edom'". The dictionary definition of crisis is this, "A time of acute danger or difficulty, a catastrophe, disaster, emergency, predicament, problem and a turning point". That describes Jehoshaphat's circumstances well. Things didn't look too good as he faced this major emergency. Crisis comes to all of us from time to time. Christians are not exempt. Jehoshaphat was used in a revival. He destroyed the Idols of Baal. He sent teachers to teach the nation of Israel about the Lord. He was just, honest, and he revered God. He is described for us in 2 Chronicles 17 verse 3 like this, "In his early years he walked in the ways that his father David had followed. He did not consult the Baals but sought the God of his father and followed his commands." You may be a radiant Christian involved in God's work. You might be a shining example to others of Christian commitment. But you're not immune from crisis in your life.

Notice Jehoshaphat's initial response. We read in 2 Chronicles 20 verse 3 that he was "Alarmed". If we are honest that's the way we all respond at first when we face a crisis. When some people get alarmed they give in at the beginning. Jehoshaphat could have said, "The Syrian army is too big". He could have conceded defeat without a fight. Some decide not to face the problem. Jehoshaphat could have buried his head in the sand like an ostrich and hoped the problem would go away. Some try to find their own solution in crisis. Jehoshaphat could have called on the pagan nations like Egypt for help. In crisis we often panic and look for a quick way out of the problem. We are too quick at taking the matter into our own hands. Some try to drown their fears. One main motive behind the excessive drinking of alcohol and drug abuse is the attempt to cover fears. People talk about "drowning their sorrows". Fears do not sink. They are not like a brick in water. They are more like a piece of polystyrene. Try to push fears under and they pop up again.

So how are you coping with your crisis? What's the right way to respond to crisis in our lives? We see it in the response of Jehoshaphat. The first response is resolution. We read in 2 Chronicles 20 verse 3, "Jehoshaphat resolved to enquire of the Lord". Rather than panic in the crisis he resolved to be God focused. He stopped, took a deep breath, and, looked to the Lord. He purposed to seek God's help. He prepared himself spiritually to face the emergency. When crisis strikes, stop and bring it to God. Verse 3 tells us, "He

proclaimed a fast for all Judah". Fasting is an act of humility before God and it shows our dependence on him. Fasting enables us to concentrate on God. It reflects a real determination to seek God for an answer.

Prayer was Jehoshaphat's second response. We read in verse 3 that he, "resolved to enquire of the Lord", and in verse 4, "The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord". In crisis we need help. There's nothing better than seeking God's help. Jehoshaphat's prayer is found in verses 6 to 12. In it he recognised God's ability to help. We read in verse 6, "Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you". He appealed to God's special interest in the well being of his people. He says in verse 7, "Did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham?" God is concerned about your welfare, too - in your time of crisis. We simply need to recognise our inability and throw ourselves on the Lord's goodness. Jehoshaphat prayed in verse 12, "We have no power to face this vast army". Our extremity is God's opportunity to work on our behalf. In doing so He shows his grace and power. God is seen to be strong in our times of weakness as He comes to our help in answer to prayer. William Gouge said, "God's power is the best guard, the safest convoy, and surest castle that any can have". We need to pray together with other believers too.

The people of Judah came together. There is great power in corporate praying. Charles Spurgeon said, "We shall never see much change for the better in our churches in general till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem of Christians". Jehoshaphat was encouraged from the word of God. We read in 2 Chronicles 20 verse 14, "Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel ... this is what the Lord says to you". In crisis do not put your Bible on the shelf. Open it and read it. God will speak to you through its pages. He will build you up to enable you to deal with the emergency you are facing. You will cope when you expose yourself to God's promises found in his word. God will have just the right word for your particular situation.

Jehoshaphat was told by God what to do. We read in verse 16, "Tomorrow march down against them". He obeyed. God will bring a word to your heart in your crisis. It may come during your own personal devotions. It may be a word to you in Church as you listen to the preacher. When He speaks and challenges you to action, do it. There are some things only God can do and you cannot. There are some things God won't do and you must. He gives the word, and, as you obey, he gives the enabling. But you must act in obedience

before the word is fulfilled in your life. We crumble under crisis when we fail to do what God has asked of us.

Jehoshaphat praised and worshipped the Lord. We read in 2 Chronicles 20 verse 21, "Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness as they went out ahead of the army, saying: Give thanks to the Lord for his love endures forever". Is it possible to face your crisis with singing and a joyful heart? Yes it is! This is the praise of faith. It is possible because you've learned to move forward in obedience and trust, assured that God has gone ahead of you. If God is in your tomorrows on your behalf what have you to fear? The problem may be gigantic but God has gone before you. Praise God now in your crisis; thank Him for what He is about to do to help you. Scripture says in 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 17, "Give thanks in all circumstances". Even in crisis? Yes, because you have the Almighty working things out for your good. Paul says in Ephesians 3 verse 20, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. To him be glory".

Don't allow your present crisis to crush you or overwhelm you. Pray; trust God's promises; invite others to pray' for you and with you. Then be sensitive to God's voice to your heart through the word. Obey him; praise Him for the victories He will give you as you trust Him with your emergency situation. Remember, Jesus is the Christ of every crisis.

8 - Discontentment

The Apostle Paul said in Philippians chapter 4 verse 11, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances”. That is a priceless possession. One of the problems of a materialistic society is that it stirs up the desire within us for more of what it offers. So we become discontented with what we have because there is more of what we want around us. It is a danger we can all fall into. Jeremiah Burroughs said, “What a foolish thing is this, that because I have not got what I want, I will not enjoy the comfort of what I have! There is a great deal of folly in a discontented heart”.

How then may we avoid such a heart of discontent? We face two main challenges to contentment. The first is the ability to be content in adversity. Paul experienced great need at times in his life. There were times of struggle and uncertainty. He describes his experiences in 2 Corinthians 11 verse 27: “I have laboured and toiled. I have gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked”. The temptation when we suffer loss and hardship is to complain about God. We groan about his providence. We feel like giving up. You may be facing a need now. The challenge is to be content at such a time.

The second challenge is to be content in prosperity. Paul says in Philippians 4 verse 12, “I know what it is to have plenty”. Life is like that. It is up and down. Our circumstances can change rapidly. There were times in Paul’s life when he had adequate provision for his needs. The challenge we face in a time of plenty is to keep close to the Lord. It can stir up the appetite for more and distract you from your devotion to Jesus. Agur had it right in his prayer found in Proverbs 30 verses 8 and 9 verse “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you, and say, ‘who is the Lord?’. Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God”. Both poverty and riches bring their own temptations to destroy your walk with God. Now these rapid transitions from one state to another are designed by God to test your faith. The true state of our hearts is revealed in all the varied circumstances of life. Much is revealed about us in the way we respond.

What was Paul’s secret so that he could be content regardless of his circumstances? Notice carefully what he says in verse 12, “I have learned to be content”. Contentment is learned. It is a process. It does not happen immediately you become a Christian. It needs to be worked at and developed. Left to yourself, and if you follow your heart, you will be unhappy in adversity

and greedy in plenty. The secret of contentment is not looking on the bright side of life in some sort of psychological exercise. It is not the result of positive thinking. It is not even the stoical stiff upper lip where contentment is brought on by self discipline. The secret of contentment in all the ups and downs in life is knowing Jesus. Paul says in Philippians 4 verse 13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength". Not simply Jesus the figure of history, but Jesus the saviour of the soul. It is the result of Jesus Christ living in your heart by faith.

Eugene Peterson in the "Message" Bible paraphrase of this verse puts it like this, "Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the one who makes me what I am". For the believer Jesus gives strength for every situation life throws up. There is grace for every need. There is grace to weather the storms, and grace to respond appropriately in calmer waters and better times. He gives strength for it all. A contented heart is the result. The words in verse 13, "Who gives me strength" is in the present tense in the Greek text. It indicates what is constantly happening. It could be paraphrased something like this, "Through Christ who is strengthening me and does continually strengthen me." It is by his constant and renewed strength I am enabled to act in everything. I wholly depend on Him for my spiritual power."

The believer can be calm in adversity because Christ's peace floods the heart. Philippians 4 verse 6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, bring your requests to God". As you bring your needs to the Lord in prayer He assures you of his presence. Verse 7 says, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus". You can be humble in prosperity because you acknowledge him as the source of every blessing and provision. You worship him with a grateful heart. You use it for him and in his service. Jesus takes away the worry when you have little. We read in Hebrews 13 verses 5 and 6, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you never will I forsake you'. So we may say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid'".

A new minister visited a poor member of his church for the first time. He noticed that she had very little. She had just a chair, a table, a candle, a bed, and a few food items in her cupboard. The minister asked, "How do you manage to cope?" "Oh", she replied, "I have all this and Jesus too!" The Bible says in 1 Timothy 6 verse 6, "Godliness with contentment is great gain". What is desperately needed in the materialistic part of our world is a return to the

simple lifestyle and firm faith in God. That is an unbeatable combination for real deep contentment of the soul. To a society caught up in the rat race and the scramble to win the lotto God says in 1 Timothy verses 7 to 10, “For we brought nothing into the world and we can’t take anything out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil”.

The blessing of knowing Jesus is that He provides us with self control which is part of the fruit of the Spirit. In times of prosperity He enables us to exercise self control and avoid extravagance; in times of need he quietens our heart by his presence and his promise to sustain us. In both He brings his peace that stops that endless and futile struggle for more, or the temptation to be bitter in difficulties. In Christ we can do everything as it relates to the shifting sands of time, and the changing events in our lives. We can face any trial in Him. We can perform any duty, and resist any temptation, as we draw strength from Him. Paul relied on Jesus Christ. He didn’t trust in his own ability, or any mental or physical skill. It was through Christ that he triumphed regardless of the circumstances. So can you!

9 - Temptation

Someone once said, "You needn't worry about avoiding temptation after you pass sixty years of age, that's when it starts avoiding you!" That is far from the truth. Temptation is a fact of life and part of the Christian's warfare. We will face temptation until our dying day. It has been rightly said that the only Christians without temptation are dead ones!

Temptation is not sin. You may be troubled today because of wrong thoughts and wrong inclinations. The Devil suggests to you, "How can you be a real Christian when you think like that?" Temptation is only sin when it is given in to. Remember Jesus Christ was sinless, yet we read this about him in Hebrews 4 verse 15, "We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet without sin". If temptation itself were sin then Jesus would have been sinful. A wrong thought or inclination entertained is sin. Playing with the temptation in your mind is sin. Putting it into action is sin.

Temptation comes to us in three ways. We read in 1 John 2 verse 16, "For everything in the world -the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world". The Devil tempted Jesus in all three areas. We read about this in Matthew chapter 4. Jesus was tempted to fulfil his cravings. In Matthew 4 verse 3 the Devil says, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread". In other words, satisfy your own personal cravings at the expense of obedience to God the Father. Satan tempts us in the same way. He suggests that we throw off the restraints of God's law. He tempts us to do our own thing, and to live for ourselves. He encourages us to eat, drink and be merry, or to be promiscuous, or to get high on drugs. Jesus was tempted to proudly demonstrate who He was to the world. He was taken by Satan to the highest point of the Temple. The Devil says in verse 5, "If you are the Son of God throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands". In other words, take pride in your position as the Son of God. Satan tempts us to seek position and influence in life above seeking God's will and pleasure. Jesus' third temptation was the lust of the eyes. We read in verse 8, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this will I give you', he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me". Satan appeals to what we can see. He tempts us to pursue the passing visible things of this life, at the expense of the more important spiritual and invisible blessings we can enjoy in knowing Jesus. Never forget that Jesus has promised to meet our daily material needs when we put him and his kingdom

first in our lives. We do not need to be anxious about that. There are also three enemies that work against us as we seek to do God's will and live for Him.

These are key influences in temptation.

The first is the world. We read in 1 John 2 verse 15, "Do not love the world or anything in the world". The world is this fallen world system that works against God and his people. We face worldly temptations daily. You know when a thing is worldly because it does not promote righteousness. It leads you away from God. It weakens your love and devotion to Christ.

The second influence is the flesh, or the sinful nature. We read in Romans 8 verse 5, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires". Our sinful nature is the traitor within. When an appealing temptation comes along from the devil our sinful nature wants to follow it. To be godly means we have to say no to the appetite of the sinful nature.

The third influence is the devil. We read in 1 Peter 5 verse 8, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour". Satan tempts us to bring us down. He wants us to be ineffective for Christ. He will use all his skill to oppose our progress in the things of God. God permits temptation in our lives to test our faith and our resolve to please Him. Through it God builds us up.

Let me share with you some foolproof ways of dealing with temptation:

1. Read your Bible daily. We read in Psalm 119 verse 11, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you". William Plummer once said, "Weak doctrines will not be a match for powerful temptations".
2. Spend time in prayer. Jesus said in Matthew 26 verse 41, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation". It's less likely that you will fall into temptation after falling before God in prayer.
3. Be aware of your weakness. We read in Hebrews 12 verse 1, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that easily entangles us". Identify that sin that ensnares you so quickly and fight it every time it appears.
4. Christian fellowship will help you in your fight with temptation. Get amongst Christians who will encourage you. We read in Hebrews 10

verse 24-25, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another". Is it your habit to meet together with other believers? Do you support each other in your trials and temptations when you do?

5. Resisting the devil is vital in times of temptation. We read in 1 Peter 5 verse 9, "Resist him standing firm in the faith". You must make your stand and say no to his temptations. We read in James 4 verse 7, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you". You resist the devil by using the Bible against him. That's what Jesus did in the wilderness. He said three times in Matthew 4, "It is written". In his great hymn, "A safe stronghold our God is still", Martin Luther said this about the devil, at the end of the third verse, "Look grim as e'er he will, he harms us not a whit; for why? His doom is writ; a word shall quickly slay him".
6. You must avoid temptation. You must not walk into its path. Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6 verse 11, "But you, man of God, flee from all this". In the book of Genesis Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. We read that "He left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house".
7. You must be careful what you allow into your mind if you are going to avoid temptation. Philippians 4 verse 8 tells us the best way to employ our minds. We read, 'Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things'. No ungodly temptation will find room in a mind filled with godly thoughts.
8. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Follow his example, and live as he did. He was tempted regularly but never gave in. Look forward to his coming. This will motivate you from yielding to temptation. We read in 2 Peter 3 verse 11, "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God".

You will overcome temptation when you live in the light of the coming of the Lord.

10 - Suffering

Suffering is a universal problem. Everyone faces it at some time. The Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 1, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me". There has been much discussion about what this "thorn in the flesh" could have been. One theologian said it could have been spiritual temptation. Another felt it may have been an eye disease. Yet another said it was persecution. Paul gives us a clue in this chapter. He says in verse 10, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then am I strong".

The thorn in the flesh appears to be the many trials and difficulties he faced as he served the Lord. The messenger from Satan was one of his demons sent to make life troublesome for the Apostle. One of the blessings of being a Christian is that we can put suffering in perspective. We can see its purpose. Suffering for the believer, although it is never nice, is never seen to be pointless. As we consider Paul's words here we find that suffering is permitted by God. God never inflicts suffering personally, but He does allow us to experience it. Notice that Paul says in Verse 7, "There was given me a thorn in the flesh". The word "given" is significant. In verse 8 we read, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me". God said "No". The implication of this is that suffering is from Satan, but God is in control over its duration and degree.

Satan could never have attacked Job if God hadn't permitted him to do so. Satan accused Job of following God for personal gain. He wanted to tempt him to deny God through a time of suffering. We read in Job 1 verse 12, "The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger". Jesus said to Peter in Luke 22 verse 31, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail". Soon after that Peter faced a trial. Again it came from Satan but only as far as God allowed it.

Not all suffering is directly from Satan. We experience suffering because we're in a fallen World. The Christian can suffer the same thing as the non-Christian. Both may be made redundant; both might have to face a worrying operation; both may face a life threatening disease. The difference between the suffering of the believer and non-believer is put well in the words of the hymn writer who says:

“When through the deep waters He calls you to go, the rivers of grief shall not you overflow, for He will be with you in trouble to bless, and sanctify to you your deepest distress”.

Whether Suffering is from Satan, or caused by the daily storms of living in an imperfect world, they are times are growing and learning. Isobel Kuhn said, “God does not waste suffering. If He ploughs, it is because He purposes a crop”. In 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9 Paul says, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me”. Positive results arise out of the suffering of the child of God. So when you face suffering, recognise that you are in the hands of your loving heavenly father. He has permitted this time of suffering not to torment you, or tease you, but to bring good out of it for his glory, and your spiritual development.

Paul would never have experienced the power of Christ in his life had he never faced this torment from the messenger of Satan. Paul describes his suffering as a “Thorn in the flesh”. The word “Thorn” translates a Greek word which means “Stake”. Paul’s suffering was not a mere pin prick. It was painful, as though a large stake had been plunged into him. There was relentless pressure. Paul had a stormy ride to glory! He says in 2 Corinthians 11, verses 23 to 29, “I have been in prison ... flogged ... exposed to death ... beaten with rods ... stoned ... shipwrecked”, and the list goes on. The problems were so great and frequent that Paul sensed his own weakness and his inability to continue.

What do we need in times of suffering? Our own personal resources will fail. God’s provision in suffering is grace. Paul asked God three times to remove the thorn. God’s reply to Paul’s prayer was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. Have you reached a point in your suffering and trials that you feel so weak that you can’t go on? There is sufficient grace to enfold you; to uphold you; to strengthen you.

Robert McQuilkin, President of Columbia Bible College, tells how he reacts to suffering when it comes. He said, “The answer must be to take God at his word though there is fighting without and fears within, and though circumstances of outward things and inward life seem to say needs are not being met. His grace is sufficient. So I go forward doing the next duty and resting in faith not in feelings”. When you suffer, trust in a gracious God who will sustain you. In your times of weakness rest on his grace. You will see God’s power at work making you an over comer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are a few habits to develop that will be a great help in suffering. In verse 8 Paul prayed. He said, "I pleaded with the Lord". Suffering drives you to prayer like you have never prayed before! It makes you really pray! Take your burdens to the Lord in prayer. Talk to Him about how you feel. Ask for his help. Then Paul developed patience. He had to endure the suffering. Charles Stern said, "Our impatience only learns patience through the thorns of delay and darkness".

Look for the value in your suffering. Paul's suffering gave him greater insight into God's grace, and how he works in our lives for our spiritual good. Use your time of suffering to grow in the Lord. Paul ended up gladly bearing the suffering because it deepened his experience of God's power. Suffering brought him closer to the Lord. The ABC of spiritual growth is Adversity Builds Character.

True spiritual maturity isn't rushing to God and asking for a pain free, healthy, prosperous life. It is learning to see God's hand in the affliction, and asking him to use the suffering for your spiritual growth. Paul arrived at the point in his suffering where he could actually delight in it. He says these remarkable words in verse 10, "I delight in weaknesses". Why? Because in his weakness he is made strong, but not through his own ability. It is because of the ability he receives from the indwelling Christ. He says in Philippians 4 verse 13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

In suffering Christ is seen in us as our sustainer, supporter, helper, comforter, friend, and saviour. The onlooker asks why it is that we are calm and peaceful in our times of suffering. We give testimony to the keeping power of our Saviour. One of the great blessings of being a Christian is knowing experientially Christ's friendship as we journey through life. He is there for us in the good times and the bad.

Do all you can today while it is here. That gives purpose to every new day. The changing scenes of time can change tomorrow's plans.