

HOW CAN WE MAINTAIN 'PEACE OF MIND'?

SERIES: FREE AT LAST! THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Ron R. Ritchie

We are privileged to live in Silicon Valley, where the geniuses of our society are daily creating the new computers which are enhancing our business, social, and family life. The new breakthroughs in integrated circuitry mean lower-priced computers and software for consumers on the one hand, and, on the other hand, great wealth for their manufacturers. As a result, many among us are enabled to dig deeply into the “horn of plenty.”

But there is another side to the coin. The foundations of our society are being challenged on every hand in this day and age. Family values, children, the aged, even life itself are coming under increased scrutiny and challenge. All of this in turn is creating a high level of physical, emotional, and spiritual stress in today's world. Stress, the experts say, is a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily, mental, or spiritual tension, resulting in a sense of fear, overload, and inability to focus on a single issue; leaving one with a feeling that everything is out of control. This can at times play a part in the causation of certain diseases. It's not easy to understand stress. It's like the wind—we don't know where it comes from or where it goes, but when we feel it we're very much aware of it.

Stress can be an extremely damaging condition if we fail to understand it and deal with it. Family, business and social relationships can begin to unravel. As a result, many among us are forced to seek deliverance from it. “How do you spell relief?” could well be regarded as the question of the 1980's. Some seek relief in very positive ways—through exercise, for instance. Seven years ago I took up jogging, and since then I have experienced many worthwhile benefits. I don't know whether I'll live longer, but I do know I'm enjoying life much more and I'm feeling less stress since I began jogging. Unfortunately, there are also negative ways one might choose to seek relief—drugs, alcohol, and even suicide.

Others may turn to what are now known as “self help” methods. There are many books available with titles such as: *Go For It, Own Your Own Life, How To Take Charge of Your Life, The Sky is the Limit.*” One in particular I was tempted to purchase for myself was entitled: *How to Cope With Difficult People!* If you're not a reader, there are any number of seminars or retreats you can attend to learn these “self help” methods, or you can purchase video or audio cassettes. The ultimate aim of this movement, of course, as the titles themselves proclaim, is ego-massage. Recently I saw advertised the ultimate ego trip, *How to be a Winner.* Just what I've always wanted! This package proclaimed that you can be a winner by developing your ability for self-achievement, self-motivation, self-image, self-control, self-esteem. Self is the name of the game. But, don't be misled by the term “movement.” This is not a new idea; rather, this philosophy has permeated every generation since man first appeared on the face of the earth.

Take the “new age” movement. Its leaders promise to deliver you from stress by addressing your soul or spiritual nature. New age advocates have become disenchanted with secular ways of thinking. They seek relief by advocating so-called “new” perspectives, claiming “all is one,” and “all is God”—God being referred to as “It,” or, as in *Star Wars*, “The Force.” One new age writer claimed, “We are all gods whether we realize it or not. We need to awaken the god who sleeps at the root of our humanity.” This philosophy, of course, is but another name for Hinduism, Buddhism, and the ideas of self-appointed Eastern mystics. Some Christians, unfortunately, are being tempted to find relief from stress in the way these movements advocate. The diabolical voice is once again being heard, “... You surely will not die!

For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5). Christians need to ask themselves if it was God’s intent for humanity to respond to the stresses of life by claiming to be self-proclaimed winners or gods; or does God have a better arrangement for living, regardless of the stressful circumstances of our society and age?

To this question, the Scriptures respond, yes! A thousand times yes! The only living, true and wise God who has clearly revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ has, since the dawn of mankind, had a better arrangement for living, and that includes coping with stress. He has done so by providing power for man to endure under stressful conditions by bringing us into a condition of total reliance on him. Much of the stress Christians experience is actually designed by God specifically to bring them to a place of total dependence on him, not on themselves.

Jesus was certainly no stranger to stress and the struggles of life. The gospels record many accounts of such struggles, particularly his struggles in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46). The apostle Paul also experienced much stress in his ministry of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, as did the other apostles, disciples and followers of Jesus. In this series of messages, we will consider a section of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church in which he demonstrated God’s plan for living. We will learn from Paul’s life the secrets of our own humanity, and how God designed us to live under and deal with stress. Stress itself is not the issue; its how we deal with it that matters most.

First, let’s set the scene by looking at the background to the letter. In Acts 18 we learn that Paul, on his second missionary journey, arrived in Corinth in 52 AD. There he met Aquila and Priscilla, and together they worked as tentmakers. Every Sabbath Paul went to the synagogue to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth from Macedonia, Paul decided to devote himself exclusively to teaching the Word of God, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. But the Jews resisted his teaching and blasphemed, and we read in Acts 18:6 that Paul shakes out his garments and declares to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months witnessing to the Gentiles and the Corinthian church grew rapidly.

From Corinth he went on to Ephesus, and then to Jerusalem. After five years had gone by, conflict broke out between the apostle and the Corinthian church over the issue of how to deal with sin in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:9). Further, some false apostles had infiltrated the church and began confusing the believers, launching an attack on Paul’s apostleship, his ministry and his personality (2 Corinthians 11:15). These events caused Paul much grief and anguish of spirit, so he wrote four letters to the Corinthian church seeking reconciliation.

The first letter he wrote (which was apparently lost) dealt with the issue of whether the church should fellowship with brothers who were living in sin (see 1 Corinthians 5:9-13). Then he wrote a second letter, which is known as 1 Corinthians. This was a pastoral letter in which, among other things, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to avoid competition and flee sexual immorality.

After writing this letter (1 Corinthians), Paul made a quick visit to Corinth, and what he found there was devastating to him. When he returned to Ephesus he wrote what he referred to as his “painful letter” (see 2 Corinthians 7:8), which also is lost to us, but in this letter (that was hand-carried by Titus to the church) he asked the Corinthians to deal with sexual immorality within the church; and, he sought reconciliation between himself and the Corinthians.

In Paul’s fourth letter, which we call 2 Corinthians (his “thankful letter”), we learn that the Corinthians

did indeed accept his loving rebuke and they were reconciled to him. In this 2 Corinthian letter, Paul shared with the church at Corinth his feelings as he awaited their response and also about some of the things he learned as he waited for Titus in the city of Troas.

In Paul's account of this season of stress brought on by having written such a difficult letter to this church that he loved and waiting for their response, we will seek to uncover some of the mystery of Paul's relationship with Jesus, together with some of the spiritual principles that enabled him to cope with reality in a fallen world. We begin this series by first asking the question, "How can we maintain peace of mind in the midst of a society that is bent on falling to pieces—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—in this day and age?"

Be conscious of the presence of the Lord

Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12-13)

Troas, where Paul sat waiting for Titus, was a Roman colony named Alexandria Troas in honor of Alexander the Great. By 57 AD the city was flourishing, basking in many political privileges given at the hand of Caesar. Paul was quite familiar with this city, located some 150 miles north of Ephesus, for it was here, some five years earlier, he had had a vision. Acts 16:9 tells us, "A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" Paul responded to that appeal and as a result, from Philippi (located in the Macedonian region) the gospel moved westward to Europe. So, having been in this city earlier, Paul knew there were some believers there, thus he went to Troas with a two-fold agenda; to wait for Titus, and to preach the gospel.

There he found "that the Lord had opened a door for [him]" (2 Corinthians 2:12) to preach the good news of Christ as he had done once before in that city. That was Paul's very heartbeat, to preach Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah who had come to take away the sins of mankind. Paul taught Jesus as the only and final solution to man's sin, guilt and shame. Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, who knew no sin, yet took upon himself sins of all at Calvary. And, that God the Father decreed that all who by faith believe that Jesus is his Son, and acknowledge him as Lord and Savior, asking him to forgive their sins, will henceforth be called his children, and receive the Person and power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to cope with reality. That was Paul's message everywhere he went. Not only was he willing and ready to preach the gospel, he was keenly aware of the presence of the resurrected Lord going before him, opening some doors of opportunity and closing others.

So as he stood once again in the marketplace of the city of Troas, his heart must have been beating with joy and fear as he anticipated the Lord working through him. He was probably encouraged by his friends to make good use of the opportunity to proclaim the gospel of Christ. But, amazingly, despite the open door, despite the presence of the resurrected Lord and the assurance of his spiritual family, Paul says, "I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there" (2 Corinthians 2:13).

Here we see Paul's humanity. He is a man filled with the Holy Spirit, convinced that the Lord is at work through him, and yet he finds no rest in his spirit because Titus is not there as he had hoped to reassure him that his beloved Corinthian church is reconciled to him. "What is the use in starting a new work if his spiritual family in Corinth is still struggling over whether he was a genuine apostle of Christ?" he might have wondered. "Are they still angry at me or have they repented? Should I return to Corinth again and try to work out that situation before beginning a new ministry?" Oftentimes it seems the opportunities to share the gospel far outweigh the time, energy or even witnesses required to meet the

need. However, God is somehow behind all of that, and he places us in these situations of stress and tension in order to teach us something.

Failing to find Titus at Troas, and finding no rest in his spirit as a result, what does Paul do? He tells us he said “good-bye” to them and went on to Macedonia. Perhaps he is hoping to meet Titus in Philippi. He may not have been concerned about passing up the opportunity presented him in Troas, but rather struggled over what was good and what, perhaps, was even better. Later in this letter he writes this, “For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.” (2 Corinthians 7:5). The stress Paul was feeling while waiting for Titus in Troas only worsened on his journey to Philippi.

A few years ago I was scheduled to preach with some of my fellow pastors at our Good Friday service. That morning I received a phone call telling me that a former student of mine had been killed in an accident while driving home from school for spring vacation. This student had been part of a family I had poured my life into and who, in turn, had poured their lives into me. My heart was broken. I wanted so much to be with the family and to attend the funeral that afternoon, and yet I had responsibilities here at PBC. I went back and forth in my mind, wondering what to do. Finally I made the choice to be with the family in Walnut Creek. Even though I was able to find a substitute to take my place at the Good Friday service, I was still stressed out about not being there; I had given my word. However, once there I was glad I made the choice to attend the funeral. I was given the opportunity to minister to the family, and to see many of my former students who were older now, with families of their own. All of us were sobered and shocked at the death of this wonderful young Christian woman.

That wasn't the end of it though. One of the pastors from PBC called later and rebuked me for not being at the Good Friday service as scheduled. I explained the circumstances and the choice I had to make, but this pastor didn't agree with my choice and we went around and around. I felt more stressed than ever. I asked the Lord what I had done wrong. Quietly he told me I had chosen between the good and the better, and although I thought I had chosen the better, some people didn't see it that way. I had to depend on the Lord to work out the whole situation.

We need to be conscious of the presence of the Lord. But we must also be aware that our walk of faith is not computer-programmed so that if we follow all the right steps we will experience immediate success. Paul illustrates in his life that he was keenly aware of the presence of the Lord. But he also was a man in the process of becoming mature in Christ, from one degree of glory to another. There is no such thing as instant spiritual maturity. Also, no doubt there was spiritual warfare involved in the situation he found himself in. But key to maintaining peace of mind is learning to trust God. Even when we choose to walk away from open doors of opportunity God can still use our lives to bring great blessings to us and to others.

Paul goes on to give us some more insights into his relationship with the Lord, which enabled him to look at his stressful situation and still be conscious of the presence of God, and the power of God which can overcome what on the surface looks like failure and weakness.

Be conscious of the power of God

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the

sight of God. (2 Corinthians 2:14-17)

“But thanks be to God....” What has happened to Paul between verses 13 and 14 to make him utter this cry of thankfulness? It certainly wasn't because Titus didn't meet him in Troas, or that the church in Corinth was being subverted by false apostles. Nor was he thankful for his conflict with the church there, for the lost opportunity to preach the gospel at Troas, or for the stress he experienced in that city and on his journey to Macedonia. So, then, what was he thankful for? We discover the reason in chapter 7 of this letter: “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more” (2 Corinthians 7:6-7).

Paul was thankful that God was able to work above and beyond all of these stressful circumstances. Titus reported to him that the Corinthians had accepted the painful letter, they had repented of their attitude toward him, and they were dealing with the issue of sexual immorality in the church. Paul had no peace of mind in Troas while he waited for Titus, and he was harassed at every turn on his way to Macedonia, but God was already at work changing the hearts of the Corinthians.

“...Who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ....” In these words, Paul illustrates the truth that, no matter what the circumstances, Christians are always victorious in their walk with Christ. He even compares the Christian's victory with the spectacle of the triumphal processions which were awarded to victorious Roman army generals of that day. These processions were awarded to generals who: 1) were supreme commanders in the field of battle; 2) had successfully concluded the campaign, the people had been pacified and his troops brought home; 3) if 5,000 of the enemy had fallen in one battle; 4) new territory had been gained; and, 5) the victory had been over a foreign power (in other words, not a civil war).

These processions were awe-inspiring spectacles. The whole populace of Rome flocked to see the parade of standard-bearers carrying the flags of the various military units; the reclining statue of Jupiter, the supreme god of Rome, being carried along; carts containing the spoils of war; paintings and models of the conquered territory; musicians playing pipes; white bulls (later used to make sacrifices to their “gods”); prisoners in chains marching to their death; horn blowers; priests swinging pots of incense; captured kings and chieftains being carried in carts; more prisoners; a golden chariot drawn by four white horses and driven by the victorious general, the wreath of Jupiter being held over his head by a slave; the general's family; the victorious army in full uniform, shouting, “Lo! Triumph!”; and finally, the Roman hierarchy, senators and magistrates.

So he uses the spectacle of a Roman triumphal procession to illustrate the glory of the Christian's everyday walk in Christ. And this doesn't just happen once or twice in the Christian's life, unlike the victorious generals of Rome, but every day, come what may, even through what looks like utter and absolute defeat. Jesus Christ leads his followers in triumph as he wins spiritual battles over the enemy, over “spiritual forces in the heavenly realm.” Remember, “...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). By his death and resurrection, Jesus has already defeated the evil. Therefore, even when things seem to be falling apart Christians can cry out “Lo! Triumph!” We are *in Christ* and are part of a continuing triumphal procession.

Further, Paul says, “Through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.” Here the apostle is thinking of the priests in the triumphal procession, carrying pots of incense, the fragrance wafting over the whole procession. Paul compares Christians to incense pots: they carry with them everywhere the aroma of Christ so that those who come in contact with them experience the fragrance of the Lord. There is a man sitting here for the first time this morning as a result of employing some of our

high school students. As he watched them and listened to them, as he observed their integrity, the sweet fragrance of Christ attracted him and drew him to Jesus. Last week, while sitting in my office, he told me exactly what a Christian is: one who has given his life over to Jesus as his Lord and Savior so that Jesus could live in and through him. That man is now one more incense pot who will spread the fragrance of our Lord everywhere he goes. (However, there will very often be a negative response to that fragrance. Just last night as I sought to share Jesus Christ with another man, he resisted and changed the subject every time I introduced it. Paul speaks of that response too in these verses.) Christians will take that aroma of Christ with them into all kinds of situations. The fragrance will not disappear nor will it be restricted. It will linger long after their encounter with anyone under all sorts of circumstances.

Paul also says “thanks be to God” because we are always acceptable in the sight of God. When God looks at the life of a Christian that person is acceptable because he looks at them through Christ. That’s good news! I wouldn’t want anybody to see the video tapes of my life before I came to Christ, before my sins were forgiven. Yet, when I come into the presence of God the Father and I tell him I’m sorry about the tapes, about how I lived my life before I came to him, he will look at me as one whose sins were forgiven in Christ and promise to remember my sins no more. We free at last in Christ.

As mentioned earlier, the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ comes to the nostrils in two distinct ways. First, Paul says, it comes to “those who are being saved.” In this context, those being saved would have been healthy and useful slaves—cooks, house servants, administrators, etc.—who were taken to the slave markets to be sold and scattered throughout the populace, many of them to be set free later. But, it also comes to “those who are perishing,” referring to the captured kings and chieftains riding in carts of humiliation along with the sick, the rebellious and the aged. These were taken to a tent following the parade and strangled. So to them, the incense was “the smell of death.”

There is a Bible study group that meets in a nearby home, and in the past year alone Ed Woodhall and I have witnessed 16 people who have come to know Christ as Lord and Savior. Sadly though, during that same year, we have also watched many walk away from the fragrance of Christ because they found it to be “the smell of death.” Everyone belongs in one group or the other, but since we don’t know who belongs where, we minister in our communities expecting Christ to draw those who will respond to the gospel.

“Who is equal to such a task?” asks the apostle, addressing both the Corinthians and himself. He will answer this question in detail in the next chapter of the letter.

In light of these wonderful truths, as he seeks to encourage the Corinthians by what he has learned through both his struggles and the good news brought to him by Titus, feelings of stress are still evident in Paul’s final words in this section: “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit.” False apostles, hucksters if you will, had begun to peddle the Word of God in the Corinthian church, and Paul draws attention to the contrast between a Christ-centered ministry and their self-centered ministry. These false apostles (4:2) were watering down the Scriptures, trying to make them more palatable to the Corinthians and more profitable for themselves. Paul had written previously concerning this in 1 Corinthians 9:18: “When I preached the gospel I offered it without charge.” Hucksters like those in Corinth are still at it today. Recently, I watched a TV preacher look right into the camera and snarl, “I don’t want tips. I don’t want you to give unless you give for the right reasons. I don’t want the church traffic, the \$5 givers.” Then he fixed his glare on the audience and bellowed, “You’re paying me for what I’ve already done. Pay up!”

But Paul says, “On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.” He is saying to them, in effect, “You Corinthians know that our life and power come from the resurrected Jesus working through us. We are always aware that our lives and words are seen and heard

by God the Father, so we seek to live and speak righteously. As ambassadors of Christ our lives are not our own. We no longer live for ourselves. We are ministers of reconciliation.”

So, how can we maintain peace of mind in the midst of our high tech, fast-lane society? The world promises relief from physical, emotional and spiritual stress by telling us we can be winners, in and of ourselves. The apostle Paul, through divine inspiration, tells us the secret to maintaining peace of mind is to be conscious of the presence of our resurrected Lord who is forever with us as we grow in wisdom and knowledge, and to also be conscious of the power of God who is able, in and through us, to defeat all our spiritual and human enemies as we walk day-by-day, trusting him in the midst of stress, not as winners or gods, but as servants of the Living God. So, again, “How do *you* spell relief?”

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Catalog No. 530
2 Corinthians 2:12-17
1st Message
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March 3, 1985

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