

“...but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, ...”
Phil 3:13b

Stress—God’s Provisions (part 2)

Theme: Getting beyond toxic emotions and deadly memories.

Review of Lesson 19

We are designed with a wonderful stress-response system that helps us in times of danger and special need. The mind senses the danger or need and causes a release of stress hormones. Those hormones are powerful and act quickly. However, if constantly in our system at elevated levels, these hormones cause health problems; they were only intended for rare use. The problem is our thoughts and emotions can release the same stress hormones. Negative thinking and emotions release stress hormones just as if in real danger. Positive thinking and emotions do not. If we follow God's directions, we can develop correct ways of thinking and emotions—with reduced stress and better health. Pray for the Lord's help to: have positive thoughts and emotions; recognize God's control; treat your body well; and find time to relax, study, and meditate.



Bible Truth

Introduction

As noted last week, the mind is primarily responsible for stress levels, which means our thoughts and emotions tend to control our stress level. Life is full of problems, hurtful experiences, and disappointments. These things create powerful emotions with the resulting high stress. With physical stress the body can use the extra energy, but with emotional or mental stress there is no outlet for the extra energy. God did not design us to function under a constant state of elevated stress—it causes serious health issues later in life.

Our emotions (how we feel about people and events) and our thoughts (the things we think) are the key factors related to stress. Negative emotions and negative thoughts create a huge release of stress hormones. Positive emotions and thoughts do not release stress hormones, just the opposite, they tend to be healing (as verified by the Word).

Stress occurs whether the danger is real or imaginary. The mind cannot differentiate between the two; both are real in the mind. Many of the things we worry about or that occupy our minds are imaginary, but that makes no difference and stress hormones are released anyway. Similarly, our minds may be occupied with something that is negative but true (like being mistreated in some way); it does not matter if the thought is true or false, the stress reaction is the same. Thinking about being mistreated will not change the facts; it will only hurt a person in the long run.

Discuss: A big meal will sit "like a rock" in a person's stomach if they eat while very upset. That is because the body has directed its energies away from digestion in response to stress. Digestion cannot take place. Funny thing, no one has this problem because of great joy or peace. Why?

Eaten Alive

The Scripture says, "**Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, Than a fatted calf with hatred**" (Prov. 15:17). In other words, it is better to eat a simple meal where there is love than a banquet under severe emotional stress. Proverbs 17:1 further exemplifies this truth, "**Better is a dry morsel with quietness, Than a house full of feasting with strife.**" There is a consistent theme (a principle) in the Bible about negative emotions and how they have a detrimental effect on us; for example, eating and on life in general. Simple meals in a peaceful environment (one that calms our mind) are far better for our health than eating the best foods in a stressful environment. Recognizing this, it is important to quiet our mind (put aside the harmful emotions and thoughts) before we eat so that our food can digest properly. If the situation does not allow for quieting the mind, it may be best to avoid eating (temporarily).

In the book *Deadly Emotions*, Dr. Colbert notes, "The perpetual release of the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol can sear the body in a way that is similar to acid searing metal." Imagine acid searing or eating away solid metal; that is the picture we should have of negative emotions. They can "eat us up." The emotions that are most damaging include rage, anger, worry, frustration, fear, grief, and guilt. It becomes easier and easier to see why the Scripture is full of verses dealing with positive thoughts and emotions. A constant state of stress destroys our health; one of the ways it does so is by not allowing our body to properly digest what we eat.

Discuss: We often pray before eating asking the Lord to bless the food to the health of our body. However, there is the need to quiet the mind before eating, or the food may not promote health. Our prayers should also seek His help clearing the mind of stressful emotions and thoughts.

Deadly Memories

The human brain does not distinguish between a present upsetting event (a misunderstanding with a friend) and a negative memory. The stress reaction is the same. In fact, if a person keeps obsessing about an upsetting memory day after day, then the stress reaction occurs more quickly

each time. If a person allows the same negative thoughts and emotions to have room in her/his mind, eventually even a brief thought of the event brings back all the negative emotions and related stress. When past negative memories are thought about over and over for a long period of time, the constant stress can be one reason why disease occurs years later. In order to protect our mind and body, the Lord instructs us, "**...do not let the sun go down on your wrath**" (Eph. 4:26). We have to make a conscious effort not to hold on to negative memories; they are deadly. We are told not to let the sun go down (or in plain language, get over it) on our wrath (or any negative emotion). If we do not let the negative go but allow it to occupy our mind, it will eventually destroy us. So God tells us to make a practice of getting such events behind us, to make it a habit to forgive, and not to let the day end with our mind still upset about someone or something.

Toxic Thoughts and Emotions

Resentment (strong displeasure) and bitterness (severe dislike) are the results of wrath (anger). Anger occurs initially, and then as it is entertained in the mind, it turns to resentment and bitterness. So if we allow anger to "fester" in our minds, we will enter a downward spiral. The resulting resentment and bitterness often lead to hostility and rage. Once emotions reach the stage of hostility and rage, other people may be harmed by your out-of-control thought patterns. When hostility comes into our mind and we entertain it (do not get rid of it immediately), that is the point when we lose total control. Then it is easy to get in trouble with the law (arrested), relationships are destroyed, jobs are lost, lives are ruined, marriages fail... We all have to pay attention to the Word because it tells us not to be angry for long or bitterness will result. Bitterness will surely lead to hostility and trouble, as sure as water runs downhill. "**Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the LORD: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled**" (Heb. 12:14-15). Bitterness will certainly lead to increasingly harmful thoughts and emotions (harmful to ourselves and others), and we will become defiled (bad reputation).

Envy is the emotion that desires to have the things or abilities of another ("I wish I had her clothes"). Jealousy is the resentment of another because of some suspicion of them ("I'm afraid he will take away my girlfriend"). Envy and jealousy are much alike and very subtle, tending to cloud most everything a person thinks. They rob a person of joy because they take control of the mind, poisoning a person's thoughts. They often lead to hostility and rage, just like bitterness. Envy makes a person self-centered and self-seeking; that is, always thinking of one's self or going to extreme lengths to get what is wanted. Jealousy makes us afraid someone will take something or get something we have or want, resulting in fear. Envy and jealousy can be life-changing sins. **"For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there"** (James 3:16). So these emotions lead to confusion of right and wrong and to evil things that have a toxic effect on every person.

Some additional thoughts the Bible has on envy are:

- 1) **"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are...envy..."** (Gal. 5:19-21). The very next sin listed in this passage is murder. Do you suppose there is a connection between the two?
- 2) **"A sound heart is life to the body, But envy is rottenness to the bones"** (Prov. 14:30).
- 3) **"For wrath kills a foolish man, And envy slays a simple one"** (Job 5:2).
- 4) **"... love does not envy..."** (1 Cor. 13:4).

Discuss: If you allow yourself to envy (or be jealous of) another person, it tends to take control of your life. Every thought is tainted by it. It often causes a person to desire harm to another person. James 3:16 is quoted above. Now read James 3:17-18 and discuss the wisdom from God.

Life Applications

Do Reasons or Our Own Attitudes Upset Us

Attitude is our way of thinking or feeling about events and people. In the Bible, Esther faced rejection just as most teens do. She was an orphan living with relatives in a foreign land. That alone would be enough to make a normal person sad or act out in poor behavior, but she did not. She was selected to be involved in the king's contest to find a queen; she had no choice about it. Instead of bitterness and whining, she exhibited an attitude of faith over fear of rejection or what may happen in the future. She was ultimately chosen as queen and obtained favor from the king because she was not demanding and had a good attitude, Est. 2:17. One day, in order to save her people from death, she dared approach the king unannounced. God used her daring, in fact her

entire life, in ways she had no idea existed. She always chose to be content and to not get upset over her plight. Because of her attitude of dependence on God, she saved her people (Jews) from sure death. From this we learn that our attitudes affect how we behave (good attitudes turn to good behavior and vice versa). No one makes us upset (negative emotions). Instead, getting upset is our own reaction to a situation and our own choice (we cannot blame others).

You may have been through some hard times, heartbreaking rejection, suffered unspeakable pain, or may have been treated like dirt. However, no person and no event can take away who you are on the inside unless you allow that to happen.

"The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it. ...the single most significant decision I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll, my successes or failures, fame or pain, what other people think of me or say about me, my circumstances, or my position. Attitude keeps me going or cripples my progress.... When my attitudes are right, there's no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for me."

—Charles Swindoll in
Strengthening Your Grip

Events and people cannot make you respond in a negative way; you have the choice of how to respond. It is your choice how to respond to life's trials; you respond as you determine in your heart and mind (so don't blame someone else by saying they made you respond that way).

God wants you to have a constructive and positive attitude—one with the desire to move forward in life. That means leaving hurtful events behind you (getting them out of our mind). "... **forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead**" (Phil 3:13b). This means you cannot dwell on the past and cannot let past hurts control your present life (even if those past events are true). Your attitude has to be that God is in control and has something great in store for you in the future. The believer is Christ's son/daughter and should have full confidence in Him—reaching forward in faith to what He has in store (Eph. 3:20). As you reach forward, be confident that no one or no thing can take away your salvation.

Discuss: In Phil. 3:13b (above), Paul is saying you cannot run a race looking backward. Similarly, you cannot live your life by looking back at the past. You can't change the past. Constantly looking back will only create negative emotions which will destroy your health and relationships. What does it mean to reach "forward to those things which are ahead"?

Don't Give Your Health Away

Nelson Mandela learned that it is a terrible mistake to give your heart and mind away. How can you possibly do that? Well, by bitterness and hate you can give your physical and emotional health away. The person who is the target of your negative emotions feels nothing, but you are destroyed from within by your own thoughts and

emotions. By negative thoughts and emotions you give your own life away by choosing a path that leads to poor health and misery. Refuse to give away your health—whether emotional or physical. Instead, choose to follow God's will and see how He will lead you into realms unknown.

Clearly, God's desire for each of us is to walk as His dear child. He makes it very clear what thought patterns, attitudes, and emotions lead to good health. "**Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor (loud quarreling), and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you**" (Eph. 4:31-32, parenthesis added).

"Bitterness only hurts one's self. If you hate, you will give them your heart and mind. Don't give those two things away."

—Nelson Mandela, former South African President

True Desires

Desires are the things you want in life. The correct, or true, desires can only come from one source. In order to have the desires the Lord wants, the Christian must allow God to transform his/her mind (Rom. 12:2). The good news is He wants to do this so that you have the will (determination) and desires that conform to His plans. As He

changes what your desires are in life, you will be changed on the inside in a meaningful way. Wrong attitudes, negative thoughts, harmful emotions, and misguided desires will be changed. He will work in your heart and mind to create the true desires that come from God. You will be changed for the better since He works for your benefit and for His good pleasure. "**For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure**" (Phil. 2:13). This is how lasting joy and confidence in the future are obtained. Once you have true, God-given desires, it is easy to do the Lord's pleasure because those desires are now part of who you have become in Christ.

Take 2 Heart

Summary

The mind is primarily responsible for stress levels; our thoughts and emotions tend to control our stress level. Life is full of problems, hurtful experiences, and disappointments; however, we cannot let our thoughts about these things control our minds. Memories of negative events (whether true or not) can be deadly, and each time we "fret" about a past hurtful event, the quicker our stress reaction occurs. Thoughts and emotions can eat us up, that is why we are to not let the day end while still upset; we have to get the event behind us and not allow ourselves to think of it. It is really our own attitude/response, more than what others do, that upsets us. We are responsible for our own attitudes and can't blame them on others--they are our choice. We should not give our health away by harboring hate and bitterness. Ask the Lord for help in letting them go. God will give us the correct desires in life if we follow His Word.

Gospel

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes..."

(Rom. 1:16). Simple, child-like faith in Christ is all that God asks. When you have that faith (belief), God will freely give you Salvation by His grace.

Encouragement

When the "Life Applications" of this lesson and Lesson 19 are practiced regularly, they will help reduce everyday stress levels. Recognizing what harm excessive stress can do in your life is very important. Your maturity and desire to honor the Lord in this important area of life is vital since it can provide the joy and health you need to serve Him better. Controlling your thoughts and emotions will be a witness to others of Christ living in you. You can be sure He is able to do things in your life beyond what you think are possible. Adults can celebrate the teen that follows the Word because they are a testimony of His grace and a source of encouragement to all.