

A person wearing a blue hooded jacket and light-colored pants stands with their back to the camera on a wooden pier. They are looking out over a calm lake towards a large, misty mountain range under a cloudy sky. The pier is made of dark wooden posts and planks, some of which are wet and reflective. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

*The*  
**Struggle**  
*for*

# INNER PEACE

*The Biblical Way to Overcome the Stresses of Living*

**DR. HENRY BRANDT**  
*with* **PHIL LANDRUM**

*The Struggle for Inner Peace*  
Revised and Updated

Dr. Henry Brandt

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## *Life's Many Stresses*

**R**achel was a bundle of nerves. She could not sit still for long. She would often pace the floor. She tossed and turned in bed at night, unable to sleep. Her family and friends wondered what was wrong with her. More and more, she would, for no apparent reason, suddenly break off a conversation, turn away as if angry, and refuse to say anything more to them.

She had gone to her physician because she was nervous and jittery. After a thorough examination the doctor assured her that her nervous system was all right, and that there was nothing physically wrong with her. He said some problem must be troubling her.

And so, at the advice of her physician, she came to our clinic for counseling. Knowing her history of “nervousness” from the referral, I proceeded to try and discover the reason.

“Are you experiencing any difficulties?”

Rachel was quite surprised. “That’s what my doctor asked me.”

“Are you?”

“No, I don’t have any problems.”

“How are you getting along with your husband?”

“Oh, fine,” she replied.

“Any problem with the children?”

“No.”

“Or with your parents?”

“No.”

“In-laws?”

“No.”

“Neighbors?”

“No.”

We were having a fast-moving conversation. She was answering my questions promptly—too promptly—without even giving them a passing thought. It is not unusual for a reluctant client to respond this way.

“Are you here because you wanted to come?” I asked.

“Frankly, no,” she said, “I’m here because my physician insisted. To be honest with you, I’m disgusted to be here. What can talking to you possibly do for my nerves? Does my physician think I’m a mental case?”

She answered my last question with a lot of emotion and more information than her previous terse replies. There was a lively person under that indifferent front after all.

“You must have an ideal life,” I ventured.

“Well, no,” she replied, smiling faintly. “I wouldn’t exactly say that.”

“Then what about it is not ideal?”

She thought for a few seconds, then volunteered: “Well, I’d be a little happier if my husband were more considerate.”

I encouraged her to be specific.

“To be truthful, there are a number of things he does that put a damper on the happiness of our home,” she said. She went on to explain that her marriage had not turned out just the way she thought it would. In fact, she said, there were many ways her husband failed to measure up.

“If his friends only knew the way he treats me!” By her tone and choice of words she was implying a selfish, heartless brute of a man.

“In what ways is he inconsiderate?” I asked.

She did not reply and was silent for nearly two minutes. Finally she said, “I can’t seem to think of anything specific right now.”

I asked her to think awhile longer. I knew it wasn’t necessary to talk just to fill a gap in our conversation. She sat quietly for several minutes. Eventually she spoke.

“I’m a little embarrassed—oh, it’s not anything I should bring up. I mean it’s kind of small, but anyway, you asked me to be specific, so I’ll tell you what comes to my mind.

“It started early in our marriage. You see we have a toothbrush holder in the bathroom. I’m left-handed so I’ve always liked to put my toothbrush in the slot farthest to the left. He’s right-handed, and he knows I’m used to that slot. But time after time, where do I find his toothbrush? In my slot!”

These are the kinds of things we hear cause issues in relationships, but

we never quite believe it. She really was frustrated over this simple thing; and it was a very real frustration.

She apologized again for bringing up such a trivial thing but said it did remind her of something else.

“It’s the sink in our bathroom. Do you think he’ll wipe it out when he’s through shaving? Never! And the towels—when I ask him to put clean ones out, he hangs them on the racks with a horizontal fold instead of a vertical.” And that, she indicated, was enough to upset anybody.

There was more. Her father had always gone down to the kitchen before the rest of the family and had the coffee ready when the family started their day. But not her husband. He never got near the coffee maker.

She continued. “I try and try to get him to match his tie with his shirt, but he goes to work looking like a rainbow if I don’t see him before he leaves the house.”

At the start she had presented her husband as an awful individual. But like many people who describe their antagonists in broad, accusing terms, she could come up with no more serious indictments than these when asked to be specific.

Often a person seeking counsel will describe a spouse as someone against whom the counselor should be protected by a bodyguard. But when the spouse turns up for an interview, he proves to be quite a gentleman (or lady)—and with some complaints of his (or her) own. This was the case with Rachel’s husband, Paul.

“She complains when I raise the bedroom window a half inch,” he said one day when it was his turn to speak. He also liked to watch the football game on television, but she always chose that time to talk to him.

“I’m not against talking with her,” he said, “but why on earth can’t she wait until the game is over?”

Her answer? “If he loved me, he’d put me ahead of his dumb ball game.” She believed that if he’d just stop his irritating ways there would be no problem between them. I asked him why he didn’t.

“Because she won’t change the ways she annoys me,” he said.

They were caught in a vicious circle, a pattern that had developed in their marriage because of the habits each had brought into it. Who would link a misplaced toothbrush to nervousness? Yet, add the dirty sink, and the towels, and the coffee, and the mismatched necktie, and the windows,

and the television sports, and you have battlegrounds in the bathroom, kitchen, bedroom, and living room, as well as at the front door. For most couples you can add on minor eruptions centering on the church, the neighbor's children, and the checkout clerk at the grocery store.

Some irritants are more exasperating than others. Take the skirmish over the football game on television. He knows she'll try to distract him the minute he turns on the game, so he is tempted to delay going home and to ask himself where else he can watch television. She thinks to herself, *Oh brother! It's almost time for him to come home and turn on that annoying game.*

Even before Paul and Rachel see each other at the end of the day, they are already sparring (and no one has yet fought a battle without raising a host of emotions). They brought this pattern of behavior into their marriage. The slightest issue becomes a debate. To lose a decision is considered a bitter defeat. To win a decision is sweet victory. But in victory there is always a loser and losing is an irritant.

The tiniest loss, even if it is a minor issue, can be extremely frustrating. A speck in your eye is not a serious problem, but it is so annoying that it takes all your attention until it is removed. A grain of sand is nothing, but put enough grains together and you have a ton of sand. So it is with one's response to conflict. Each aggravation becomes far heavier than its own weight. As one piles on another, they blend into a vague blob, and all the irritable person is aware of is "nervousness."

Rachel consulted her doctor because she was a bundle of nerves. He sent her to me because he believed that her "nerves" were caused by an emotional rather than a physical problem. In other words, she was not adjusting well to people or events in her life. This is commonly called a "mental health" problem.

*When our emotional  
wellness is out of kilter,  
we tend to be a nuisance  
to the people around us.*

George Preston, in his classic book, *The Substance of Mental Health*, said the essential quality for mental health is to live (1) within the limits of one's natural abilities, (2) with other human beings, (3) happily, (4) productively, and (5) without being a nuisance.<sup>1</sup> I love this last statement!



“Without being a nuisance.” How many people do you know that can go about their daily lives “without being a nuisance”? When our emotional wellness is out of kilter, we tend to be a nuisance to the people around us.

## IDENTIFYING WHAT IS REALLY WRONG

As we interact with friends, coworkers, spouses, and children, what is truly inside of us will be revealed. If we are constantly irritable, we may eventually experience body aches and pains, tiredness, nervousness, and/or more serious symptoms. The mind can become weighed down by burdens, real or perceived. The irritants may be small, vague ones or big, identifiable ones. A person may say, “I’m anxious,” “I’m angry,” or “I’m exhausted.” Maybe they can’t tell you any particular thing that is bothering them. But they know something is, and once in a while one particular sore will fester until it breaks open.

This uneasiness typifies our society today. The crime rate continues to grow; juvenile delinquency continues to increase; racial violence and dangerous international tension continue to escalate. Many hospital beds are said to be occupied by persons having mental or emotional difficulties. Record rates are being recorded for divorce, drug addiction, and alcoholism. But these are only bulges of a weak inner tube.

Millions of people are suffering from chronic worry, hypertension, prejudice, guilt, hatred, fear, and the fear of failure. In their struggle for inner peace, many turn to the quick solution of alcohol and drugs.

An alarming number of people suffering from these ailments are professing Christians. Unfortunately, the person who knows Christ as Savior is not immune to mental or emotional problems, they are as susceptible to tension and anxiety as the non-Christian working beside them at the office or living next door.

If you are struggling with a difficulty, you are not alone. You are not the only one facing a problem, even though you share your inner conflict with no one.

*My problem is so simple, you think. How can I talk about it? I can see that I’m mad at my wife. But when I think of the inconsequential things over which I’m mad, I get confused. Why should I lose my temper over an appointment she forgot to tell me about, or why would I leave the house upset because she decided to paint the dining room red even though I told*

*her I wanted it to stay the same? But the way I am—my reactions to life at home, at work, at church, and with my relatives—causes me to lose sleep at night, to lash out at the children, to say things I don't mean. I think thoughts that surprise me. I tell myself, 'This can't be me.'*

You can see the vague outline of your problem, but you cannot figure it out. You look at a skyscraper and may get the impression that some magician has had a hand in putting together this magnificent, massive structure. But if you had seen it being erected, you would know it was built of relatively small pieces of material—a length of steel, a pane of glass, a copper pipe, a bolt, a weld, a switch, the particles that make up concrete. The problems you face are constructed quite similarly.

While living in the shadow of your problems, you look on them as massive, unexplainable. As you dismantle them to see what they're made of, you're a little embarrassed to find their components are so simple and ordinary. So you do nothing. Nothing, that is, until the problems overwhelm

you. Then those who know you say, "He blew up," or "She's upset," or "He's out of control."

How widespread is emotional disturbance? Statistics tell us that for every person admitted to a mental health facility, at least a dozen are outside, groping in a half-real world.

*It is important that we address our emotional ills in order to be healed of our physical ills.*

Many people are sick. Ulcers are eating their stomachs; chronic headaches are driving them to distraction; chest pains have them frightened nearly to death. So not only are they mentally confused, but physically ill. And because they are ill, their conditions are assumed to be in the realm of the medical physician. After all, when people can't sleep because of the pain in their necks or their stomachs won't hold food, the help of medicine certainly seems called for.

Ours is the age of anxiety, the age of the tranquilizer. However, it is important to embrace the fact that it is possible that our physical ills are the result of some type of emotional ill. In the late 1950s W.C. Alvarez, of the Mayo Clinic, said,

Even after 53 years of practicing medicine, I still keep marveling at the fact that so many people whose discomforts are nervous in origin have failed to see any connection between their physical ills and the severe emotional crises that they have been going through. A thousand times when I have drawn from some nervously ill patient his story of sorrow, strain, great worry, or paralyzing indecision, he has looked at me puzzled and asked “Could it be that?” Like so many people he has never realized that many illnesses—even severe ones—are produced by painful emotion.<sup>2</sup>

A lot has changed since the 1950s in mental health care, treatment, and exposure, but one thing has not changed: the relationship of our physical health to our mental health. It is important that we address our emotional ills in order to be healed of our physical ills.

Orval Mowrer, atheistic psychologist and professor of Johns Hopkins University and the University of Illinois, one-time professor at Harvard, one-time professor at Yale, and one-time President of the American Psychologist Association, wrote,

The only way to resolve the paradox of self-hatred and self-punishment is to help the individual see he deserves something better. As long as he remains hard of heart and unrepentant, his conscience will hold him in the viselike grip of neurotic rigidity and suffering. But if at length the individual confesses his past stupidities and errors and makes what poor attempts he can at restitution, then the conscience will forgive and relax its stern hold and the individual will be free, “well.” But here too we encounter difficulty, because human beings do not change radically until they first acknowledge their sins, but it is hard for one to make such an acknowledgment unless he has “already changed.” In other words, the full realization of deep worthlessness is a severe ego “insult,” and one must have a new source of strength to endure it.<sup>3</sup>

This is a purely secular way to discuss the problem and it is interesting that several pages later in the same article, Mowrer says this,

For several decades we psychologists have looked upon the whole matter of sin and moral accountability as a great incubus and we have acclaimed our freedom from it as epic making. But at length we have discovered to be free in this sense to have the excuse of being sick rather than being sinful is to also court the danger of becoming lost. In becoming amoral, ethically neutral and free, we have cut the very roots of our being, lost our deepest sense of selfhood and identity. And with neurotics themselves, asking, “Who am I? What is my deepest destiny? And what does living really mean?”<sup>4</sup>

Mowrer is calling our attention to one of the great barriers to finding relief from anxiety and guilt—a sense of worthlessness that is indeed a severe ego insult. We tend to shrink away from the truth about ourselves. We do not want to acknowledge our sin. Mowrer clearly describes our tendency to wander away from sensible and righteous behavior. We all act stupidly and make errors. Dr. Mowrer sees our salvation in squaring our past stupidities and errors with our own consciences by making attempts at restitution. Unfortunately, human relief is not the same as God’s forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal.

## **GOD’S ANSWER**

The struggle for peace is just that—a struggle. And it requires that you recognize and deal with the sin that is causing your problem. Acts 3:19 tells us, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord.” Paul Tournier, a Christian psychiatrist in Switzerland, says everyone experiences guilt feelings and seeks to escape them by self-justification and repression of conscience. “To tear men from this impossible situation and to make them capable once more of receiving grace, God must therefore first of all awaken within them the repressed guilt.”<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes, Tournier explains, this “awakening” comes only through

severe dealings which are necessary to lead us to the experience of repentance and grace. He writes, “For a man crushed by the consciousness of his guilt, the Bible offers the certainty of pardon and grace.”<sup>6</sup>

The aim of “operation severity,” Tournier says, “is not the crushing of the sinner but, on the contrary, his salvation. For that, God must pull him out of the vicious circle of his natural attempts at self-justification.”<sup>7</sup>

The Bible reminds us that “everyone has sinned” (Romans 3:23) and “no one is righteous” (Romans 3:10). The Bible also says our sins are against God. As the psalmist so eloquently said, “Against you, and you alone, have I sinned” (Psalm 51:4). It is your sin that comes between you and God.

This is where the Gospel comes in. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). To the Ephesians, Paul exclaimed, “Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us” (Ephesians 2:18).

Jesus explained to his disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). He also said, “I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends” (Revelation 3:20).

If you sense a stirring in your heart and have never done so, ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins and to come into your life. He will forgive you, and give you access to our heavenly Father. Then, and only then will you be able to ask for God’s supernatural peace.

In coming to terms with yourself, you must consider your relationships to the people and events in your life. Because your mental health is related to your attitudes toward people, it is not a matter primarily for the medical physician. The Bible holds the key to experiencing peace. God’s Word deals with one’s relationships with others, with standards of conduct, with emotions, with the deep issues of life, with the heart of a man before God.

*The struggle for peace requires that you recognize and deal with the sin that is causing your problem.*

The struggle for peace is a spiritual matter, involving your soul or spirit and how you react to the things that come your way. The source of peace involves your relationship to God.

The Bible gives us a picture of a person who draws on God's strength for their emotional wellness:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Galatians 5:22–23)

You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. (1 Peter 1:22)

When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. (Romans 12:13)

Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. (Philippians 2:2)

It is time to address the issues in your life and to embrace the life and peace God has for you.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the stressors in your life that are keeping you from experiencing peace?
2. Who are the people in your life that are currently a “nuisance”? If you are honest, when are you a “nuisance” to others?
3. What physical symptoms are you currently experiencing that may possibly be from emotional issues?

4. What type of response do you have to the idea that some of your feelings and experiences may be because of the sin in your life?
  
5. On a scale of 1–10, how open are you to addressing the real issues in your life?

### **TAKE ONE ACTION STEP**

Ask God to open your heart and mind to the changes you need to embrace in your life.





## Self-Discovery

Jack and Ann met at a college football game and started dating soon after their initial meeting. In walking Ann to class and in taking her to parties and games, Jack discovered some things about this woman. He quickly learned that she was a very neat person. Her clothes fit perfectly and were never wrinkled. Her papers were always carefully written.

Her dorm room was always straightened and her closet in order, despite the fact that her roommate, Stephanie, didn't care much about neatness. Stephanie was inclined to let her bed go unmade and her clothes lie in a heap. But she did not remain messy for long. Ann kept after her about her responsibilities. Sometimes Stephanie complained to Jack that Ann was too fussy. But Jack had to admire Ann's stand. After all, how could he argue with someone who took the lead in keeping things neat, even to the point of doing the job herself when Stephanie failed?

Jack also had great respect for Ann's academic achievements, and even greater respect for the way she got her good grades. Ann was a serious student. Nothing came ahead of the books. He often wished he had just half her drive. He was too easily satisfied with just getting by. But things began to change after they became better acquainted. He felt she inspired him.

"Let's unwind over a pizza," he would say after classes.

"Let's work on your English literature paper first," she'd reply.

Jack never paid too much attention to his appearance until Ann opened his eyes to the holes in his shirts or his need for a haircut. He began consulting her on how to dress whenever they went out.

Also, Ann got him back into church. He had become lax, but now always went with her—and they arrived on time.

What more could anyone ask? When a guy improves his appearance, raises his grades, becomes more punctual, and gets interested in church, isn't it all to the good? Jack was quite intrigued that a girl had done so much for him, and only slightly annoyed that without her he had been unable to see himself as he really was.

Their courtship was casual, quite uneventful. They talked everything over and settled all issues. Once in a while, however, Jack had to admit to himself that he found relief in getting back to his room where he could relax, sprawl out, and pick things up only when he felt like it. Even so, he knew her way was better.

Shortly after graduation they were married. The ceremony went off flawlessly. Ann's mother had thought of every detail; the music, the procession, the vows, the reception—all ticked off with clocklike precision.

Having majored in business administration, Jack was soon hired by a large company as a management trainee. Ann got a job teaching fourth grade. Together their paychecks allowed them to rent a nice apartment and have money left over for many extras.

One night, at Jack's suggestion, they went out to look at cars. He wanted to see the new models; she thought they ought to limit themselves to a used car. He had long dreamed of someday owning a beautiful, powerful new car, and only reluctantly did he put aside the idea. Ann reminded him that they needed to save their money to buy a house, and he could see that she was right.

Jack had a habit of coming home from work, settling down on the couch, and kicking off his shoes. Quietly, Ann would pick up the shoes and put them in the closet. After a short nap Jack would jump up and feel for his shoes.

"Where are my shoes?" he would call, loudly enough for Ann to hear him in the next room.

Ann never shouted. She would come to the living room and say very evenly, "In the closet, dear."

Jack also routinely peeled off his suit coat and draped it over a chair. When he wanted it again—no coat.

"Where's my coat?" he would shout impatiently.

And again, Ann would come to the room and answer, "In the closet."

She was quiet, steady, dependable. How could you quarrel with her

way of life? Because she was the way she was, Jack always bit off the harsh words on the tip of his tongue. It was better that way.

They always ate dinner at 6 o'clock sharp. At times Jack would take a nap before and once in a while he would sleep right up to the dinner time. Invariably, Ann would be seated. He would mumble an apology for being late, and grace would sound a little forced.

By the second year of their marriage they had saved enough money to make a down payment on a house. They decided to have a home built, but it was difficult to decide on a neighborhood and even more difficult to agree on the floorplan. They came closer to an argument over those decisions than over anything in the past.

Once the house was built, they needed new furnishings. Jack wanted to buy what they wanted on credit; Ann convinced him that this wasn't wise. So they moved in the few pieces of furniture they owned. The living room looked empty to Jack, and he wondered how long it would take to make this house look like a home.

He wanted to have the yard sodded, but Ann called his notion extravagant. "You can seed it yourself after work," she said.

About this time a coolness began to develop between them. The usual hug-and-kiss greeting no longer provided the pleasure it once had. They kept up the ritual, but it became a chore. Because conversation at times threatened to border on controversy, long silences developed.

They were both glad to spend their evenings reading, watching television, attending church functions, or visiting friends—anything to keep from talking to each other. Each was afraid to ask the other, "What's wrong?"

Neither could put a finger on any real issue between them. Yet something seemed to separate them. They ought to talk more, they decided, since each knew that communication was important to a successful marriage. So they tried talking more. In one of their long talks they settled once and for all that there was no unresolved issue between them. They kissed, declared their love for each other, and agreed sincerely that they saw eye to eye. Yet each knew something was still wrong between them.

Jack and Ann felt frustrated. They were an educated, dedicated, ambitious couple who shared common goals, were active together in church, and were loyal to each other. What was this quiet, mysterious, sinister force

*You cannot wish trouble away. You must get at it by uncovering the cause and removing it.*

that threatened their marriage?

When they came for counseling, Ann said, “Dr. Brandt, we prefer to be together as we talk to you.”

“That’s right,” agreed her husband. “You see, we do everything together. We have nothing to hide from each other.”

That first session was a puzzling one. I could come up with no clue to their trouble. There were no issues, no unresolved problems. Only one suggestion occurred to me.

“Will you watch for any differences of opinion that may arise this week and pay attention to your reactions?” I asked. “And will you try to review your life together to see if there can possibly be any unresolved problems?”

Ann broke in, “I’m sure there are none. We love each other and solve any problem as soon as it comes up.”

“That’s true,” said Jack, right behind her. “Are you suggesting that we aren’t honest and open with each other?” Turning to his wife he said tenderly, “You are open with me, aren’t you, Ann?”

Her answer was to nestle in his outstretched arms. They looked at me as if I were an enemy seeking to drive them apart.

Surprisingly, they were back the next week. Neither had seen any sense in what I had suggested, and neither had anything to share. Yet that nagging coolness remained, and they had to admit that something *was* wrong, something they either could not or would not see. Gently but firmly I urged them to try again to discover it.

“If there is an ache in your body, something is wrong,” I reminded them. “No matter how reluctant you are to admit it, you must find and correct the trouble to get rid of the ache. Coolness between people is like an ache. Something is wrong. This may be a frightening idea, and you may prefer that it did not exist; but you cannot wish trouble away. You must get at it by uncovering the cause and removing it.”

The next week they returned. Ann asked to see me alone. She entered my office, closed the door, slumped into a chair, buried her face in her hands, and began to cry uncontrollably.

What had happened? She had made a discovery, and not a pleasant one. The past week had been rainy. Their lawn still wasn't in, so naturally mud had been tracked into the house. Tuesday was an especially trying day in her classroom, and she knew she had to go to a church meeting that night. She was tired, worn out physically, and fed up with the mud that seemed to be everywhere. As she stood at the kitchen sink peeling potatoes for dinner, she heard a car pull up in the rutted driveway. That would be Jack. The door opened and slammed.

"Take off your shoes on the landing!" she shouted, too tired to go to the stairs as she usually did. She heard one shoe fall, then the other. Jack came into the kitchen; absentmindedly she asked, "Did you take your shoes off?"

"Yes, I took my shoes off!" he yelled.

Ann broke into tears. "You don't need to shout at me."

"You don't need to shout at me either," he snapped. He was furious.

I learned from Jack later that he had wavered between two impulses. One was to take her in his arms; the other was to run. He chose to run. Into the bathroom he went, slamming the door behind him. Once there, he felt ashamed and confused. Not knowing what to do, he slipped into the living room and hid behind the evening paper.

Ann called Jack for dinner at 6 p.m. as usual. He went silently to his chair. They said a prayer together but with considerable strain. Jack looked up to see Ann's eyes were red and swollen. She looked so pathetic, but he was frozen in his chair. There was nothing he could think of to say. Ann had nothing to say. So they didn't talk about the incident. And they hadn't brought it up since, not until Ann mentioned it in her interview with me alone.

Later Jack came into the office for a private talk. I told him that Ann had shared with me the shouting episode. He was upset.

"She told you about *that*?" He had assumed she would keep such things to herself. He certainly would have. Then he assured me that their spat was only an isolated incident. Why make a mountain out of a molehill?

That was a good question. I turned it back to him. "You're right, why make a mountain out of a molehill?"

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"For an isolated incident, it seems to me that both of you are carrying this rather far."

Jack became thoughtful. Perhaps I was right, he said ruefully. This little incident had created a thick wall between them.

A week of silence followed during which neither exerted any effort to make up. At the next visit they again met with me individually. Ann had little to say except to remark that Jack seemed very distant. The whole situation was muddled to her. She just couldn't think.

Jack was more talkative. He had done some thinking, and he didn't like what he was coming up with. During the week his mind had wandered back to their courtship days. Yes, he had admired Ann's neatness. He had also entertained a thought or two in those days that maybe she was a bit too fussy. But he had never allowed so unkind a thought to linger. Now, by contrast, he noticed more frequently her fussiness, and he found himself dwelling on the thought and being annoyed by it.

He remembered how Ann constantly prodded her college roommate to be neat. *Now*, he was thinking, *she's keeping after me in the same way*. He realized that he resented the push.

Oh sure, Ann had changed his whole life for the better. But when she hadn't pushed him into a change, she had pulled him.

I asked Jack if he had shared his thoughts with his wife.

"Are you kidding?" He was amazed at my question.

"Why don't you?"

"No," he smiled, but not happily. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Jack apparently had forgotten that he had told me during our first session that he and Ann talked everything over and he had nothing to hide from her. No doubt they both believed what they were saying.

It is indeed true that a person can deceive himself. According to the Bible, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:9–10).

Evidently, when Jack and Ann said they shared everything, they meant sharing what they thought would not disturb the other.

I asked Jack, "How would Ann take it if you shared your thoughts with her?"

He didn't know and said he would not even consider talking to her as he had talked to me. In fact, he felt terribly guilty for having told me

such things. His wife was a wonderful woman. He owed a lot to her; she had inspired him to work hard, to set wise goals for his life, to take his responsibility as a Christian seriously. If it hadn't been for her, he might have drifted far away from the Lord. But after he said all that, the resentments of her fastidiousness, her bossiness, her pushing were still there.

Toward the end of our session, I called attention to the apostle Paul's goals as outlined in Philippians 3. Paul realized that he was not perfect. Still he was open to learning. This willingness to know and to be known was what he called perfection. He added that for anyone who would be perfect, God would reveal any reluctance to know or to be known. Look at his exact words:

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us. Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. (Philippians 3:12–15)

“Maturity,” I told Jack, “is not having arrived, but the will to see new light. Personal growth and development is based squarely on an honest look at yourself with the intent to correct any failings you may discover.”

## **AN HONEST LOOK**

So, how *do* you discover yourself? Quite often through relationships. Through their marriage relationship, Ann and Jack learned some things about themselves. Parents get to know their true selves through experiences with their children. Some people get glimpses of themselves through working for or alongside others. The intense competition of sports will mirror the character of an athlete. Your relationships with people and your responses to the events of life will bring into focus both your personal

strengths and your weaknesses. Are you willing to honestly take a look at how you are interacting with and responding to others?

Through the eyes of your family, friends, and coworkers you can learn a great deal about yourself.

For the purpose of perfecting his people God has also ordained pastors, evangelists, and teachers (see Ephesians 4:11–12). One who clearly exhibits the marks of his God-given call cannot only help you see yourself, but help you grow into maturity as you deal with the truth you discover.

However, if your self-discovery is to be meaningful, it must be measured against a standard. I truly believe that for Christians, regardless of the *means* to self-discovery, the Bible provides our *standard* for living. For example, if you discover bitterness in your heart toward others, you must measure

*Are you willing to  
honestly take a look  
at how you are  
interacting with and  
responding to others?*

yourself against the biblical standard for love found in 1 Thessalonians 3:12: “May the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow.” God’s Word is “alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires” (Hebrews 4:12). It is “inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our

lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Timothy 3:16). It “shows us how sinful we are” (Romans 3:20). King David said, “Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105).

You may be a Christian. That is, you have invited Jesus to come into your life as your Savior. He has forgiven your sins and you have experienced his peace. Now, however, he seems very distant. Perhaps a root of bitterness troubles you. Perhaps you are nursing hatred, resentment, malice, or anger toward someone who has misused you. There is something between you and God, and only biblical advice can clear away the fog that makes him seem far away. The prophet Isaiah said, “Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the LORD



that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously” (Isaiah 55:7).

The psalmist wanted to know himself, and he understood that ultimately it would take God to help him do it:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life. (Psalm 139:23–24)

It is one thing for a person to say in all sincerity that he wants to know himself, but the experience of doing so is quite another. A revealing glimpse of yourself is seldom an easy one. Self-discovery can be painful. Nevertheless, do not shrink from it. Jesus said, “Light has come into the world, but people love darkness instead of light.” Our human tendency is to prefer not to come to the light because the light exposes our sin.

For Jack and Ann, discovering their true natures was indeed a painful process. They considered themselves sincere Christians—and they were. They believed they were devoted to one another and dedicated to a like-minded partnership—and they were. To them, their sincerity meant that if their objectives were askew, God would have revealed this to them. God was at work in their lives, but it did not seem like it—not with this thick wall of silence between them, or Ann’s tears, or Jack’s temper.

What caused the buildup of their “crisis”? To get the answer, each had to want to know the truth about themselves.

As time went on, Jack gradually discovered that though he had given in to Ann consistently, there were deep-seated reservations in his heart and vague irritation over some of his decisions to go along with her logical arguments. He accepted her neatness and thrift and the pace she set for him in church activity. He accepted intellectually, that is—but not wholeheartedly. He was like the little boy who, when told by his father to sit down in the car, sat down but said that inside he was still standing up.

Jack’s experiences with Ann brought him to discover himself. Conditions in his job confirmed his discovery. He realized he was doing the same thing there—conceding to well-reasoned propositions outwardly, but not inwardly. As the apostle Paul put it, “Work *willingly* at whatever

you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (Colossians 3:23, emphasis added).

Jack had strong opinions and did not readily accept the views of others. With friends he could drift in and out of associations, which he did frequently in an effort to be comfortable. But when he married, he could not trade his wife for another when she annoyed him. The result was a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Since he could not escape from this discomfort, he tried to isolate himself from it by building a wall between himself and Ann.

On that rainy day his dissatisfaction suddenly flared, and he himself was surprised by it. Fortunately, that shouting episode brought his problem into focus. He saw that he was not admitting to himself that he was making concessions he did not want to make, even though he was agreeing verbally to what was reasonable, logical, and desirable. He discovered his selfish nature.

But what was he to do with this discovery? He could deny or ignore it and be like the man who looked at himself in the three-way mirror while buying a suit and was horrified by his double chin and bulging waist. The man’s response from then on was to stay away from three-way mirrors. Jack could also admit the truth of his discovery, but confession would not mean correction.

Ann found out some things about herself too. She had had her own way most of the time, thanks to her ingenuity and power of persuasion. It was true that her standards were fine ones. But Ann was also a very determined woman. This trait showed itself when she insisted on a neat room in college, even if she had to do her roommate’s share of the work. It was apparent in the way she kept after Jack to hang up his coat and put away his shoes. Ann thought of herself as determined, but Stephanie and Jack perceived her to be stubborn.

When Ann failed to win people over by logic, she broke into tears or lapsed into silence until her opponent gave in. She just couldn’t or wouldn’t back down.

Ann came to see this herself. What was she to do with this discovery? Now knowing her strengths and weaknesses, was she to manipulate them to further serve her own selfish ends? Or should she admit her stubborn nature with a view to changing? If she chose to defend her emotional ups

and downs, she now knew she needed to use the Bible as the standard by which to determine whether her defense was valid. If, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, she found she did not measure up to that standard, she had the grace of God available to change her.

## MOVING FORWARD

Self-discovery is painful because it uncovers streaks in your makeup that you wish were not there—but which cannot be wished away. It confirms what John wrote almost 2,000 years ago: “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth” (1 John 1:8).

The objective is not mere introspection, but an inward look for the purpose of moving on to higher ground. What causes me to be the way I am? I want to know because I don’t want to live like this any longer. Other people have come to this conclusion about me a long time ago; it is about time I catch up with them.

Marriage, parenthood, a social situation, or your job may be the means to discovering your true self. But do not look for the root of your problem in your marriage partner or children or uncooperative neighbor or boss; rather look for it in yourself. That which reveals a problem is not the problem itself. To treat the symptom is not to cure the disease.

For a life of peace, you must discover your true self. Then, to know what you have found, you must measure it by God’s standard. You will find yourself short—everyone does. “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (Romans 3:23). This is the reason you need the help which only Jesus Christ can give you. He alone can make you what you ought to be. Proverbs 28:13 encourages us with these words: “People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy.”

For Jack and Ann to change, they had to acknowledge their faults to themselves and one another, set aside their excuses, and truly seek forgiveness, cleansing, and spiritual strength on a

*Self-discovery is painful because it uncovers streaks in your makeup that you wish were not there—but which cannot be wished away.*

daily basis. For Jack, he needed to admit that he only pretended agreement, deceived people, and hid an angry spirit. For Ann, she needed to admit her selfishness, stubbornness, and resentment.

Jack and Ann also had to move from verbal agreements to mental and spiritual assent. As the Bible declares, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10, NIV). They needed to invite God into the process of helping them to overcome their divisions.

And so do you, to solve your problem. You need the help which only Jesus Christ can give you. He alone can make you what you want and ought to be.

Ask yourself these questions:

- What am I really like?
- What does a pat on the back do for me?
- In what ways am I offended by a rebuke?
- How do I respond when I am crossed? mistreated? misunderstood?
- In what ways do I need to allow God to change me?

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what areas of your life are currently experiencing frustration and unhappiness?
2. When do you experience the most irritation?
3. Honestly, are you willing to allow the Bible to be your standard for life?
4. What difference does the answer to this question make?

5. If you are going to experience true peace, what attitudes do you need to change?
  
6. Take a few moments to answer the five bulleted questions included at the end of this chapter.

### **TAKE ONE ACTION STEP**

Choose one way in which you can begin the process of self-discovery. Conscientiously pursue that one step and note what you learn.



## *After Self-Discovery ... What?*

**W**hat is your reaction when a friend comes to you and says, “I want to be honest with you, there’s something about you that I need to tell you”?

Most of us dread this type of interaction. If your friend has a compliment, you are only too glad to have him say it; you don’t even draw him apart from the crowd to hear it. But if he finds it necessary to share one of your shortcomings, you would really rather have him keep it to himself, thank you very much.

Many strategies have been developed as to the best way of dealing with a person’s faults. An often-used approach is to first give the person praise in order to soften the criticism that follows. Dale Carnegie proposed that if you want to win friends and influence people you should not criticize at all. He had a point. The average person resists facing up to their faults; quite likely they will reject the person who points out their error.

Jesus gave an explanation for this when he said, “All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed” (John 3:20). Each one of us possesses a natural dislike for rebuke. We have a built-in resistance to seeing our shortcomings. We react to reproof as we react to pain. The tendency is to shrink away, to protect ourselves from what we wish were not so. James bluntly described our sinful nature in this way:

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it.

You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. (James 4:1–3)

A man in our town suffered ill health for a year. He was one who didn't like to go to doctors; he was afraid they might tell him something he did not want to hear. When the man could no longer tolerate his pain, he visited a physician who informed him he suffered from a malignancy that would kill him within a few months.

“There might have been good hope for your recovery if you had come sooner,” the doctor said.

This man didn't want to face the truth. He believed that by denying he suffered or by ignoring the pain he somehow would get by. However, because of his delay in seeking a diagnosis, his life came to an abrupt ending.

As we interact with a variety of people throughout the day, it appears more sensible—or at least easier—to ignore one's own fault or that of

another. But the results are strained relationships, strife, discord, and personal misery.

*We have a built-in resistance to seeing our shortcomings.*

A simple, effective alternative is, “If we are living in the light, as God is in the light,

then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

Humanly speaking, when you step from darkness into light, your first impulse is to close your eyes or turn away. I have found that when we approach the Bible and it reproves us, the response is similar. One wants to turn away because the feeling is unpleasant. But the Bible tells us that Jesus' words are beneficial to us! Jesus himself said:

“Blessed are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice.” (Luke 11:28)



“The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63)

Reading God’s Word and applying it to your life is a sure way to get at the truth about yourself. However, studying the Bible requires intentionality and no one can force you to take the time to actually do it.

## FACING THE TRUTH

A young couple stepped into my office. “How is it that at times we can be so cooperative, so loving toward each other, and fifteen minutes later so opposed, so hostile, so cold?” asked Ryan, the husband. “How is it possible that we can pray together and feel united in our faith, but when Sunday is past, or our time of morning devotions is over, we don’t even think of God and we battle each other?”

Ryan then opened the door on their lives to afford a glimpse inside. He remembered the day he and Grace, his wife, had driven to the city hospital and parked. As they glanced up to the eighth floor, Ryan breathed a prayer for their three-year-old son who hovered there between life and death. “Dear God, we love our boy and we want him, but may your will be done. Help us to be worthy parents and give Jimmy a happy home.”

At that moment Ryan and Grace felt closer to each other than at any time in their lives. Arm in arm they walked to the door and made their way up to the boy’s room. Jimmy was asleep. A fluid of some sort was being fed from a bottle into his arm. The parents looked at their son and their hearts beat as one for him. Ryan felt that he could never speak harshly to the boy again, that he could know no selfishness toward his son. Jimmy recovered. What joy for Ryan and Grace to bring him home! But after a week, the feelings Ryan experienced at the hospital had changed. In fact, antagonism toward both his wife and son crept into his heart.

The boy had been waited on night and day in the hospital. After he arrived home, Grace kept up the pampering. This provoked Ryan.

“You need to let him do things for himself,” he said to his wife.

One evening Jimmy was playing on the floor near the sofa where his parents were reading. Insistently, he said his mother should go into the next room and fetch his favorite truck. She put down her magazine and

started for the toy.

“Let him go for it himself, Grace,” Ryan said.

“I don’t mind getting it for him,” she replied.

Ryan nearly exploded. “You’re spoiling him! All he needs to do is point a finger and you jump.”

Ryan insisted that the boy get his own toy. The child begged and pleaded and began to whine. Grace became increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, she defied her husband and got the truck. Jimmy was happy, but his father was enraged.

After Jimmy went to bed, a silence developed between the parents. Ryan felt quite justified for having taken his stand. Grace felt Ryan was being too strict. Whereas in the car outside the hospital and by their son’s bedside they had shared the tenderest of feelings and identical goals, now they were distinctly opponents.

The associations of most people parallel at some time the fluctuating course in which Ryan and Grace found themselves. The details vary, but the theme is the same. What father has not pledged himself to being a great dad and a wonderful husband and then has not found himself so angry at both his children and his wife that he is capable of lashing out and hurting the very ones he loves?

The daily requirements of marriage, or the give-and-take situations that arise between college roommates, or the compromise necessary for members of a committee or an athletic team will always reveal our character.

The Bible describes this dilemma:

I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it ... I want to do what is right, but I can’t ... I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway ... it is sin living in me. (Romans 7:15–20)

As the truth about your behavior becomes clear, you will either face it directly or turn from it. You will mellow or harden, depending on what you choose to do about your discovery.

What is it that keeps Ryan and Grace from making good on their

commitment to live consistently? They must be saved from themselves. Just a few verses later, in the same chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul describes the solution to his dilemma:

I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 7:22–25)

Any person who would hit the target of consistency must be saved from the sin within that causes him to miss the mark. She must first discover and then face the truth about herself. He must realize that God alone is the only One who can help him. John sums this up very well when he says,

If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts. (1 John 1:8–10)

When the problem of their sin was brought to their attention, both Ryan and Grace responded negatively. “Are you calling us sinners?” they said incredulously. They found it hard to face the truth, even though they were fully aware that their behavior was causing serious problems between them. They knew they both missed the mark that they had agreed to aim at.

How thoughtful and compassionate and generous we intend to be toward others in our relationships. Husbands and wives, roommates and friends, or business partners and associates chart a course that

*As the truth about your behavior becomes clear, you will either face it directly or turn from it.*

each fully expects to follow. But somewhere along the way the trail is lost, one deviates from the path, and the target is missed. God says this waywardness is sin. “All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own” (Isaiah 53:6). The truth is, each one of us wants our own way.

Yet who wants to agree that such failure is sin? Rather than face the truth, a person makes excuses:

“I’m crabby today because I’m tired.”

“I yelled at my child (or my spouse) because their stubbornness makes me so mad I can hardly see straight.”

“I’m right on this one, they never listen to me.”

### **THE TRUTH REMAINS: SIN STANDS IN THE WAY**

Ryan and Grace left my office, assuring each other of their devotion to one another and to their son. They renewed their vows never to fall short again. But they were soon back. They couldn’t inspire each other to be consistent.

“How can this be happening?” they asked. “We are Christians, what can we do?”

In the Bible we read these words from John: “My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world” (1 John 2:1–2).

We must be careful with the word “sin”; we must be sure of its meaning. Sin is the inability to do the good God wants us to do; it is the drive within us that causes us to do what we don’t want to do (see Romans 7:14–19).

Ryan and Grace have moments when both agree that they are violently opposed to each other. Yet when they are confronted with the truth, they deny it and attempt to reassure each other that all is well. But it isn’t. They want peace, but they are fighting the process that leads to peace. They are failing to take advantage of one of the important benefits of marriage—self-discovery. Because the tendency is to fight against such discovery, many find marriage distasteful. They do not like to be reprovved, even if the criticism is true.

The same holds true regarding work, social, and church relationships.

My interaction with Josh illustrates the point.

Josh wanted to clear up the gnawing sense of anxiety and growing unhappiness that plagued him, hopefully before anyone found out his condition; so he sought professional counseling. He would rather have died than have his associates learn that he was bored with church and its activities, dissatisfied with his wife, and annoyed with his fellow employees at work.

But the counseling experience was a shattering one for him. The counselor he first went to see, who Josh eventually felt was a non-Christian, pressed him to share his antagonisms, and Josh did not like it. He insisted he had no antagonisms. He firmly maintained that since he was a Christian he loved everyone and was nice to all. Still the counselor probed. Finally, Josh blew his top.

Afterward he was ashamed. He had been a poor example of what a Christian ought to be. The counselor pointed out that Josh was filled with anger and hatred toward people, rather than with love. Josh left that counselor convinced that the guy simply didn't know what he was talking about.

Then Josh came to see me. He was confused. Was he a Christian, or wasn't he? He had asked God to give him love toward all persons. Hadn't he meant it? "Since this counselor forced me to blow up," he said, "I've been pretty nasty to a lot of other people." What evil thing, he wanted to know, had the counselor done to him?

What *had* the counselor done? He had led Josh to the truth about himself. What truth? That he was an angry man with hatred burning in his heart toward the people with whom he worshiped at church, toward his own wife and family, toward the people he worked alongside of at the office, and now, toward the counselor, who, he maintained, had caused him to blow his top.

Because Josh pretended to be a happy man, he wanted to believe that he was one. That was why, since becoming a Christian, he had always acted politely to everyone. His annoyance was his own secret. He controlled himself for the sake of his testimony. The psalmist describes such a man in this way: "His words are as smooth as butter, but in his heart is war. His words are as soothing as lotion, but underneath are daggers!" (Psalm 55:21).

Pretending to be happy didn't make Josh happy. Yet he believed that he was a happy man. He was only being true to human form. "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

Josh told himself that he was a nice, loving, happy man. But he refused to recognize the deceit of his heart. What the counselor had done was to expose Josh to himself, to lay open the falseness of his heart. He pushed

Josh to see that his smooth, soft words covered a bitter war of hate and malice raging inside his heart.

*Josh wants God to give him peace, but he doesn't want to live God's way.*

Through some reflection, Josh might have discovered this truth for himself. Like a fever that warns that all is not well in the body, the gnawing sense of uneasiness in his relationships with others ought to have

made him aware that all was not well between him and the people in his life. But Josh did the natural thing—he disregarded the symptoms, denying the truth.

Because he was a Christian, Josh did not want to admit to himself that there was anything in his heart but love. And this is where many Christians often encounter difficulty. Unlike non-Christians, who can despise others and unashamedly justify their position, Christians know they have a high and noble standard to measure up to. Non-Christians may settle for a less exacting standard. They know that if they fail, everyone else fails as much as they. So why not relax instead of trying to change the world? But for Christians, God's standard allows no bitterness and strife. Therefore, if they are not always what they know they should be, they at least can attempt to act like it.

Josh was proud of his acting ability. "Usually I control my anger," he said. "Don't I get any credit for that?" His ability to act lovingly toward others presented an impressive testimony; but it did not satisfy him. As he became aware that he was only acting, the truth shook him up; he began to lose the control that he had so tightly held.

"I'm confused. Why doesn't God give me peace?" he asked.

Though the truth told him that he was only acting, he found it hard to

admit it. How hard it is to help a self-righteous man! Josh wants God to give him peace, but he doesn't want to live God's way. He sees no need to turn to God for help. But the Bible tells us, "It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore" (Isaiah 59:2).

Repentance is hard. We tend to defend ourselves. Time after time Josh insisted he was an innocent man. He said the fault was with the people around him, including the counselor. Nevertheless, the facts contradicted him. His sin separated him from God and denied him God's peace.

When he finally did focus on the true picture of himself, he became not repentant but defensive, dismissing his own responsibility. "The counselor egged me on," Josh said repeatedly, insisting that the flare-up was not his fault.

One day he admitted that maybe he did lack love for certain people. But if he did, he asked petulantly, why didn't God give it to him? Now he blamed God for his anger. Josh refused to accept the truth of his sin, and peace continued to elude him.

When you get a glimpse of your true nature, it is to be expected that you will want to dodge the truth. But be aware that when you deny what you find in the recesses of your life, the result will be anxiousness and a vague unhappiness that slowly envelop you in their tentacles.

Fifteen-year-old Steve described himself as easy to get along with. But he came for counseling because of his temper. He had been thrown off the baseball team for fighting. Once at home, his mother demanded that he study instead of going outside to play a pickup game with his friends. Steve became so incensed that he threw his ball through the living room picture window.

When I asked him about this display of temper, he dismissed any responsibility for it with a shrug. "Oh, I only get mad with my mother," he said. "Anybody would around her."

"What about the fights you get into at school?" I asked.

"Well, if you'd been in my place, you'd have punched them out too. Anyone with guts would have. You'd defend yourself, wouldn't you?"

Steve was a self-willed boy. He had no friends because they refused to put up with his lack of consideration and his quick fists. In spite of all the facts, Steve still insisted that he was an easygoing fellow. He really

believed it; he was unhappy that others did not. He refused to accept the truth about his behavior.

Sheila came to my office because she was suffering from exhaustion. She was busy as a deacon in the church, made weekly calls on Sunday School absentees, served on the counseling team of the citywide youth rally, and headed the planning committee of the local Christian women's organization. Sheila hardly ever missed a meeting at church. She also played tennis once a week and faithfully followed her son's high school sports career.

Sheila was a young, active adult, and yet she was tired all the time. Her doctor could find no physical cause for her complaints.

In talking with her I learned that a year before, a trusted partner had cheated Sheila out of her half of their business. I also learned that the demanding schedule Sheila followed had started about the time of her loss. She had no explanation.

"I've got the time to do the things I've always wanted to do," she said. "I'm glad I can do them."

"You mean you are thankful that you lost your business?" I asked.

"I had committed the business to God," she replied. "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away."

"Were you as busy when you had your business as you are now?" I asked.

"Oh, busier. I was pretty much unstoppable," she smiled.

"Did you get exhausted then?"

"Not at all."

"So, you aren't as busy as you were before, but you're on the verge of a mental and physical breakdown. How do you explain that?"

She couldn't. I asked if she still had contact with the person who had cheated her. She replied that their paths crossed occasionally. "We see each other. I hold no hard feelings at all toward her."

"What was your reaction toward her when you first learned that she had cheated you?" I inquired.

"Must we go into *that*?" she said, obviously irritated. "The incident is past. I have forgiven her. Let's forget it!" Sheila was annoyed and the flush of her skin indicated that she was certainly angry.

In later interviews it became clear that Sheila was carrying a grudge



against her former partner. She didn't want to admit it, but she was a deeply bitter woman. Rather than face her reactions to an injustice, Sheila had tried to bury them in a flurry of activity. Though she maintained a good front outwardly, the inward decay had pushed her to a point of near-collapse.

## STOP STRUGGLING—COME TO TERMS WITH YOUR OWN FAULTS

The first step toward peace is to self-discovery. The second is to embrace the truth you find.

You will get fleeting glimpses of your true self, and sometimes a very clear picture, as you interact with other people, as you read the Bible, as the ministry of others touches your life. The natural reaction is to shrink away from your findings. But if you do not truly come to terms with your own faults, you will struggle against yourself in your quest for peace.

You don't need to run from yourself and thereby add more trouble onto the trouble you already have. The resources of heaven are yours to apply against the character defects you discover. Jesus died to forgive your sins! "He [God] has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins" (Colossians 1:12–14).

Furthermore, God will give you daily strength if you let him.

Offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace. (Romans 6:13–14)

*Embrace your sin,  
confess it to God,  
and then allow  
the Holy Spirit to  
change your heart  
and mind.*

But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. (Romans 6:22)

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

Take a good, hard look at yourself. Allow God to show you what is currently in your life that is causing you to be unhappy. Embrace your sin, confess it to God, and then allow the Holy Spirit to change your heart and mind.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is your typical response when one of your faults is pointed out to you?
2. Are there people in your life who are experiencing some of the difficulties presented in this chapter? What is your typical response to them when they share their life situations with you?
3. What is your reaction to the principle that your faults are actually “sin”?
4. As you consider your own desire for peace, what honest evaluation needs to take place in your life?
5. What are you willing to do to experience peace?

### **TAKE ONE ACTION STEP**

Ask God to show you what is currently in your life that is causing you to be unhappy. If it is your own sin, confess it to God, and ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to the ways in which you need to change.



## *The Impact of Our Emotions*

**T**hink for a moment about the different emotions you often experience in a day: happiness, fear, anxiety, anticipation, hope, envy, desire, love, contentment, pride, guilt, jealousy, anger, joy, sadness, surprise; you may even have a few others to add to this list. Consider how you express these emotions, and how others see these emotions affecting your interactions and decisions.

Aaron is a fun person to be around, but if you catch him when he's mad—look out!

"I can tell his mood by the way he shuts the door," his wife, Amber, says. "If the door almost comes off its hinges, I brace myself for his first gripe."

And come it will—followed by a host of other complaints:

"Why don't you make the kids keep their bicycles out of the driveway?"

"Turn off the TV. There's racket enough around here without that thing adding to it!"

"Women drivers! They should be kept off the highways after three in the afternoon!"

Aaron's emotions affect his behavior and his interactions.

Whether an emotion is positive or negative, it produces physical changes in our bodies: heartbeat increases, breaths are shorter, muscles grow tense, digestion is affected. Depending on the situation, we often perspire more and undergo glandular changes that put our bodies in a high state of alert.

Julie looked forward to her date with the young man she thought was the most popular in the entire school. All day long she was excited and

nervous. Her appetite disappeared. Even her memory became faulty. She couldn't remember what homework had been assigned that day or what chores her mother had asked her to complete. The doorbell rang. She heard his voice. Her excitement was at a high point. Her heart began to pound, her hands to sweat. Her face flushed. Making a last check on her appearance, she found that her hands were trembling.

Six-year-old Caleb begged his father to take him to watch the airplanes fly in and out of the airport. One evening his father finally told Caleb that he would take him to visit the airstrip viewing area the next day. Caleb was beyond excited. After tossing in his sleep, he was awake bright and early. His body was in such a high state of anticipation that he could hardly sit still throughout the school day. Every chance he got, he talked airport and airplanes to his classmates, his teachers, and anyone else who would listen.

After school he watched by the window for his dad to arrive at home. When his father's car came into the driveway, Caleb jumped up and down and clapped his hands. "Dad's here!" he shouted. He ran out of the house to the car. Before his father could get out of the car, he asked, "We're still going to watch the airplanes, aren't we, Dad?"

"Of course we're going," his dad laughed. Caleb ran back into the house with a shout. He only picked at his supper. He was too excited to be hungry.

Ethan was elated. He had a date, doubling with a buddy and his girlfriend. He whistled as he prepared to leave. His father had given him the car for the evening, and he had gladly cleaned it up for the occasion. But when he arrived home that night he was unhappy, frustrated, and tired. What had happened? His date had been late, the food bill had been high, and his friend and his friend's date had gotten into an argument. The evening had been a disaster. What a switch from the elation he had enjoyed as he was getting ready! His feelings had changed from pleasant to unpleasant, and his body was responding accordingly.

Our bodies always respond in some way to our emotions. However, those bodily changes must return to normal in order for us to be comfortable and at ease. When nature is not thwarted, this usually occurs with a minimum of effort. A child who has had an exciting day drops into his bed at night in sheer exhaustion. With adults, letting nature take its course is often not so easily done. However, returning to a state of balance is essential. Even the most tender emotions, pleasant as they are, must subside, allowing bodily

processes to revert to normal.

The fact that an emotion is pleasant does not necessarily make the quest for it desirable. The thrill of speed can be dangerous and deadly. The drive of sexual passion can lead you into deep trouble. The enjoyment of companionship can cause you to neglect important details and other relationships in your life.

It is the unpleasant emotions, however, that often lead to the greatest troubles. Unpleasant emotions compel us to act. In the case of anger, the typical impulse is to fight, either verbally or physically. The ultimate aim of fighting is to kill or destroy, either physically or emotionally. Perhaps John had this in mind when he wrote: “Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don’t have eternal life within them” (1 John 3:15).

The difference between mild anger and murder is only a matter of degree. If you accept the truth of this, then you should consider anger and its related emotions as deadly cancers and treat them as such.

Of course, it takes a lot of anger to carry out an impulse to harm someone. But who at some time has not thrown something in disgust? Watch two schoolboys fighting. Neither means to stop until he has conquered the other. Take a look at the news headlines and you will be reminded that angry nations, movements, and ideologies are engaged in deadly struggles. James warned, “For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind” (James 3:16). For anyone who treasures envy and self-seeking in their heart, the impulse to hurt or to destroy is not far off.

## **ARE YOU RULED BY WRATH?**

Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, wrote, “However sweetly we may interpret the fact, the human child usually begins his life in anger ... the cry of the child just born has the tone not of lamentation, but of wrath.”<sup>1</sup> Many people never lose this natural tendency toward anger.

José was an angry man. He moved from job to job because “worldly people” irked him. Finally, he landed at a firm with an owner who was a Christian. Here was a man he felt he could work for; he looked forward to a happy relationship on the job.

But things did not turn out that way. José was made general manager,

having a number of foremen to supervise. One of the foremen used a great deal of profanity. One day José could stand the man's talk no longer. He called the foreman aside and ordered him to stop swearing when he was on the job. The foreman ignored him. So José warned him again, "Stop it—or you'll be fired!"

The company president heard of José's ultimatum. He called his general manager in. "Dave's got a foul mouth, I know," the president said. "But he gets more work out of his crew than any of our other foremen."

He told José to leave the man alone. José was not to impose his private standards on Dave or any other employee. Reluctantly José accepted the president's directive. But from that day on he felt he was constantly being overruled by the president. One day he stormed into the president's office.

"Am I the general manager or not?" he shouted.

"Of course you are, and I am the owner of this company," replied his boss.

José saw red. He continued to shout at his superior. He was furious—from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

*Frustration tends to expose  
the inner life of a person.*

Telling of the incident later, José said, "It takes a lot to get me mad, but when I am, the fur really flies. There we stood, toe to toe, yelling at each other. And both of us profess to be

Christians. But you can be sure of this—no non-Christian ever made me more miserable than that man."

I asked José if his boss had caused him to lose his temper.

"Who else?" José demanded. "The last time he crossed me was the very last straw. I don't lose control of myself unless I'm forced to."

Here was a man who claimed to believe the Bible, which includes these words: "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Was this grace available to José? Yes. First, however, he had to take an honest look at himself. When he did, he saw that he brought a spirit of antagonism to his job. He didn't like to be crossed—whether by the foreman who violated his standard of speech or by the president who refused to



let José impose his standard on the other workers. The frustration of not getting his own way exposed the wrath within him. Frustration tends to expose the inner life of a person.

In looking back over his life, José could see that he had possessed an antagonistic spirit since childhood. It had come out at home with his siblings, at school with his friends, in his marriage with his wife and his children, and toward anyone who thwarted him. He did not blow up very often, but when he did, everyone got out of his way. He controlled things pretty well by simply threatening to blow up. At times, however, he met persons who just let him blow. This was true of the people he worked with; and this explained why he moved from job to job. By such moves he was able to dismiss his own problem, saying that his reasons for moving were the worldliness, selfishness, or cantankerousness of others. He always had a good reason for his tantrums.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians we are instructed, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26, ESV). What was José doing? He was letting the sun go down on his wrath every day, and every day it accumulated. He even denied that he himself had anything to do with it.

His situation could be likened to a sink with a dripping faucet. Put the plug in and eventually the sink fills up. One more drop and the water will run over. Is it the last drop that spills the water onto the floor? No, it's the last drop *plus* all the rest of the drops. José allowed all of his irritation to accumulate. Tiny irritations at home, at church, at work, and on the way to and from work all slowly accumulated. At the same time pressure was building inside of him. Usually he could work off some of the frustration and drain away some of the irritation. But occasionally he was trapped; the last drop, or "the last straw," would cause him to blow up.

*The people in your life may never change their ways. Circumstances may be beyond your control. However, you can open your heart to God, who is able to fill it with his bountiful grace.*

For a long time he could not and would not admit that he was an angry man. Therefore, he had no need, no occasion, no desire to pray for forgiveness or grace.

“I get along fine unless someone else is unreasonable,” he said. “And is it my fault if someone else is unreasonable?”

But the Bible says, “Do not let the sun go down on *your* wrath” (italics added).

When José accepted the fact that the wrath was in *him*, he was able to find help in dealing with it. And that is the good news for everyone filled with wrath and bitterness. The people in your life may never change their ways. Circumstances may be beyond your control. However, you can do something about yourself. You can open your heart to God, who is able to fill it with his bountiful grace.

But whether you allow God to give you his grace is your decision. Strangely, most people who seek counsel will argue that they have the right to be angry. “Under my circumstances, can you blame me?” they will say in their own defense. Of course they have the *right* to be angry, but as long as they argue in defense of their wrath, they will see no need nor have any desire to change their own response to their frustrations and thus be delivered from the unhappiness of anger.

Sometimes people ignore their anger by becoming preoccupied with a problem. Julia is a case in point.

“When I get up to sing in church, my chest tightens and I struggle for breath. I am afraid I will fail. Lately I’ve been overcome with a sense of inferiority.”

But she was not inferior. She was, in fact, the best vocalist in the community. What then was wrong?

A closer look revealed that the church in which she sang had a policy that all soloists should rotate Sunday by Sunday, it didn’t matter who was more accomplished. There were many “wanna be” soloists in the congregation. Many of them were not very good singers, but they were put into the rotation anyway. Because of this, Julia had the opportunity to sing only a few times each year. It annoyed her to listen to those who were far less competent than she. When she did sing, it was to people who irritated her.

She had another problem. A women’s circle in the church excluded

her because of her age. Though she tried hard to build relationships with members of the group, she was not accepted—only reminded that she belonged in another circle. Here again, whenever she had the opportunity to sing, she sang to the women who angered her.

Julia was not an inferior woman, but she was angry, and her anger led her to also be bitter and resentful. Day after day, week after week, the sun went down on her wrath.

When she looked at herself honestly and faced the truth, she was able to deal with her real problem—her selfish reactions to not getting her own way. She asked God to help her to accept what she could not change. She realized that she had named her feelings of nervousness inferiority, when in reality it was bitterness and wrath.

## FEELINGS OF LEGITIMATE GUILT

Anger receives a great deal of attention in mental health clinics and counseling centers all over the world. So does guilt. A mother feels guilty because she screams at her children. A young man feels guilty because he no longer adheres to the behavioral standards by which he was raised. A young professional has been sexually involved with a woman at the office and feels guilty but cannot seem to help himself.

Some writers in the mental health field suggest that guilt feelings are the result of unreasonably high standards of conduct. People feel guilty because they are rejected or criticized. Therefore, they say, we need to accept one another as we are.

Commenting on this point, Orval Mowrer, says:

*Our* attitudes, as would-be therapists or helping persons, toward the neurotic are apparently less important than *his* attitude toward *himself*, [which] in the most general sense is a rejecting one. Therefore, we have reasoned, the way to get the neurotic to accept and love himself is for us to love and accept him, an inference which flows from the Freudian assumption that the patient is not really guilty or sinful but only fancies himself so ... and that we are all inherently good and are corrupted by our experiences with the external world.

But what is here generally overlooked, it seems, is that recovery is most assuredly attained, not by helping a person reject and rise above his sins, but by helping him accept *them*.

This is the paradox which we have not at all understood and which is the very crux of the problem. Just so long as a person lives under the shadow of real, unacknowledged, and unexpiated guilt, he cannot (if he has any character at all) “accept himself”; and all our efforts to reassure him will avail nothing. He will continue to hate himself and to suffer the inevitable consequences of self-hatred. But the moment he (with or without assistance) begins to accept his guilt and his sinfulness, the possibility of radical reformation opens up; and with this, the individual may legitimately, though not without pain and effort, pass from deep, pervasive self-rejection and self-torture to a new freedom of self-respect and peace.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, many people cause their own misery. Their guilt is not imaginary, but real. The mother who blames herself for losing her temper with her children and the young people who are ashamed of their behavior are not, Mowrer would point out, struggling with imaginary guilt. Their guilt is real. They will find no relief from it until they face the truth and accept their sins as their own.

But to say, “I am like that,” is going only halfway. Admission leads nowhere unless it implies a desire to change. This means that the mother sincerely wants help with her temper and the young people with their conduct. It also means they must turn to God for help.

How precise 1 John 1:9 is on this point: “If we confess our sins to him [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” The person who confesses this way—having faith that God is able and willing to help them and having a desire for God’s help—is well on the way to peace. The person who admits, “I’m like that,” but does nothing about changing, will not find genuine inner peace. Nor will the person who denies responsibility for the wrong they know they have done.

## FREEDOM FROM FEAR

Another condition that plagues many people is fear. However, the key to freedom from fear is often a backward look.

Carter was filled with a vague fear. “I drive my tractor all alone in a field and find myself gripped with fear. I break out in a cold sweat and I tremble all over.”

A study of his life brought out the answer to his problem. He was racked by smoldering hatred. He and a neighbor had quarreled over who would maintain a fence. He and his wife kept up a running battle over the discipline of the children. He was bitter toward his brother who was a better farmer than he.

*Do not shy away from self-reflection. It is the real work of experiencing true peace.*

Why was he afraid? Because he might lash out at his neighbor and lose the respect of the people in the community. In an angry moment at home he might harm the children or cause his wife to leave him. In his fierce

competitiveness with his brother he might make a rash business decision that could ruin his own livelihood.

Carter had reasons to be afraid. Most people do. But the loving person is not afraid. The Bible tells us:

God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7)

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. (1 John 4:18, ESV)

If no backward explanation for fear can be established, some inward reflection often reveals emotions that we would rather not acknowledge. What James wrote in his short letter may apply: “For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind” (James 3:16). What is causing the fear in your life?

A backward look and an inward evaluation can help us identify

what is causing our dissatisfaction and point the way to peace of mind. Unfortunately, when a person discovers hatred in their heart, they usually find other sin as well. The self-discovery process can resemble an iceberg. Perhaps only anger shows, or fear, or jealousy. But submerged are other emotions that deny them peace. Typically, one emotion can hardly be dealt with singly; it must be dealt with in conjunction with other emotions that affect our everyday lives. Every emotion must be exposed to the light of God's Word. Do not shy away from self-reflection. It is the real work of experiencing true peace.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you express your emotions? How do others see your emotions affecting your interactions and decisions?
2. What are some of the physical responses you have with your own emotions?
3. "Ruled by wrath" can seem like a strong statement. However, if you are honest with yourself, where is there wrath/anger in your life?
4. In what ways is God trying to get your attention through your (legitimate) guilt?
5. In what ways is fear keeping you from experiencing true peace?

## TAKE ONE ACTION STEP

Choose one emotion that is currently interfering with your peace to focus on for a one week. How does this emotion affect you on a day to day basis? Are you willing to own it? Are you willing to confess it to God? What steps do you need to take to deal with this emotion in a positive way?

## *Embracing the Truth*

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul explained that God has given the church various skilled people to help it grow up—like evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Because of their ministry, he reminded the Ephesians:

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. (Ephesians 4:14–15)

Later in that same chapter, he stressed, “So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body” (v. 25).

Deception has become commonplace in our world and we have become experts at rationalization, the process whereby we justify our conduct. This means we like to think we have good reasons for doing bad things. And so, we use the words “tact” or “diplomacy” to describe what is in reality “lying.” Obviously, we all need to be tactfully or diplomatically or lovingly honest. But when our tact and diplomacy are in deception, it is a sin. It is easy to convince oneself that to do right is wrong, and to do wrong is right. Isaiah wrote, “What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter” (Isaiah 5:20).

*Deception has become commonplace in our world and we have become experts at rationalization.*

Who has not faced the desire to do something he or she knows is not right, but still does it anyway? Here is an example many of us can relate to: exceeding the speed limit. “I’m late getting home and I don’t want my family to worry,” a speeding driver will say. It is a good enough excuse. But

looking squarely at the facts, few persons would accept this reasoning as valid for breaking the law.

Many of us are at least vaguely aware of the inconsistencies in our lives. It is hard not to rationalize them. How difficult we find it to get down to reality and face conflicts, or to harmonize disagreements. We dislike being shown up, having our pride injured, or having our true selves exposed.

After the last of their children was married, Eric and Linda sought counseling for Linda’s incurable loneliness. As we looked into their story, we found more than a yearning to be with the children. Eric and Linda were at war with each other.

They had been unfriendly toward one another for years, having a long series of unresolved conflicts between them. Because they found no companionship with each other, Linda gave herself wholly to raising their children and Eric buried himself in his work. The children provided the buffer zone that allowed them to live fairly peaceably under one roof for a long time. In the children they found a way to tolerate each other. They rationalized their failure to resolve their conflicts: they each believed they were giving their all solely for the children.

Even when they sought help, they thought Linda’s problem was loneliness. Eric was very concerned. He said he would do anything to help her get over her loneliness.

Once they faced the real problem—their cold-war that could now no longer be ignored because the children as their buffer strip had been removed—they started to work on the solution. It was not easy. They had developed so strong a habit of camouflaging the truth that they needed a



great amount of help in breaking out of their almost automatic pattern of self-deception.

As an example, for years Eric thought nothing of telephoning his wife to say that he had to take a customer out to dinner. The truth was, however, that he at times almost begged a customer to eat with him because he did not want to go home.

Rationalization often becomes a subtle habit of the inner life. Dishonesty and deception can in time become so easy to live with that we fool ourselves into believing whatever we want to believe.

## DECEIVING OURSELVES

Renee was anxious and restless. She found it hard to concentrate. When she sat down, she could never relax, so she got up frequently to pace the floor, to get a drink of water, to check the time, to look out the window. Cordial and friendly though, Renee was the type of person who made you feel that in her you really had someone who cared about you and your problems.

“Give me a call anytime,” she would sing out cheerfully to everyone visiting her office. Or, “You’ve got to come over to my house and tell me more about it.”

Some persons took her up on her offers of hospitality. And there was the rub! Her friendliness was an act. She didn’t really mean for business associates to call her—let alone drop in at her home. She was just making conversation.

Whenever trapped, she always found a way of getting out.

“I would love to stop by some night,” a client would say in response to her invitation. “How about Thursday?”

“Sounds fine. But let me check my personal calendar and call you,” Renee would say. However, not for a minute did she intend to have this person take up her evening. The next day she would telephone the client to apologize.

“Sorry, but I’m scheduled to attend a meeting at school Thursday night. Let me contact you later.” But Renee had no intention of following up. Why did she invite people to call or visit her? It was the polite thing to

do. Why did she then lie to the one she had invited? She did not want to hurt anyone's feelings.

But occasionally Renee could not get out of her self-made trap. She

*Through rationalization it is possible to persuade yourself that an actual weakness of your character is a virtue.*

would have to play the role of genial hostess to people she did not like. Her acting was superb, but she always felt intruded upon. What a distasteful way of life! Is there any wonder that she was an anxious, uneasy woman? The Bible describes

this scenario well: “Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel” (Proverbs 20:17).

Renee imagined herself a cordial and polite individual because she sounded like one. But she was covering up a basic dislike of people and had fooled even herself into thinking she was congenial. She needed to face the fact that her geniality was only a front. But to deceive even herself was easier than squaring up with the truth. Yet she could not get away with her duplicity.

Renee had to make up her mind what she wanted in life—whether to be around people or not. If she wanted to accept others, she would need a change of heart. Whatever her decision, if she was to be free of her anxiety, her behavior had to be changed to match the desire of her heart.

Justin experienced his failure to be honest in another way. A senior in college, he received word that he would not graduate because he failed two subjects. He came close to passing in both, but narrowly missed the needed grades. In both cases, the professors were known to be sticklers for utmost accuracy, allowing no leniency in their grading systems. Both were particularly hard on athletes—and Justin had played four years of football.

This was a simple retaliation, according to Justin. But the fact was that 95 percent of the students in these classes passed and Justin failed because he had neglected to study. He didn't want to admit that he had seldom cracked a book and had taken his chances on passing or failing.

It is natural to dodge the truth and come up with an excuse that sounds reasonable. Through rationalization it is possible to persuade yourself

that an actual weakness of your character is a virtue. A white-hot temper can become, in your thinking, an instrument to produce righteousness in others. A real difficulty can be regarded as a big joke. Good deeds can be a mask for an emotional appetite that thrives on praise. A spirit of revenge can be cast in the framework of a search for justice. You can make yourself appear better than you really are and by your effort mislead others.

Rationalization starts when you are unwilling to admit the unpleasant truth. Isabella and Jeremy, just out of high school, were very much in love. Their parents said they were too young to get married. Jeremy needed to get more schooling, and Isabella needed the maturation a job would bring. But the young couple saw the future differently.

Jeremy had a part-time job as a pizza delivery man. He didn't make much money and didn't even have regular hours, but the couple was convinced that somehow, they'd get along on his paycheck. So, despite the pleading of both sets of parents, they were married. They found a dingy house in a part of town that neither was used to living in, gathered up some odds and ends of furniture, and began life together.

Theirs would be the most romantic of marriages. They would rise from rags to riches. Then in their third month of marriage Isabella got pregnant.

How thrilled they were that soon they would be parents! But one day Jeremy came home after work to find Isabella crying. She actually had been crying most of the day. The dingy apartment depressed her.

Jeremy's heart was touched. He decided to surprise her. The next day he ordered a new stove. As if by magic, Isabella was transformed into a radiant person. She enjoyed life again. But not for long.

The contrast between the new stove and the rest of the kitchen was too much for her to take. So Jeremy went out and ordered a complete makeover of the space with more new kitchen appliances. She became happy again—for a while.

When they came for counseling, they had a newly decorated home and all new furniture—and debts that had all but drowned them. And Jeremy had an unhappy wife again.

Both wanted to believe that their only problem was a matter of what their home looked like. On the basis of this rationalization they plunged in over their heads in debt. Their problem however, was much more involved.

Both were willful persons. They had paid no attention to the advice of their parents who had cautioned them not to enter marriage hastily. They simply were not able to afford marriage, but they had refused to look at this fact. They could not stand their tiny house on the wrong side of the tracks. Isabella resented her pregnancy. Jeremy despised her cooking, having assumed that all girls could cook as well as his mother and finding out that she was the one great exception. Neither Jeremy nor Isabella could even shop wisely. But they desperately sought to rationalize their problems by covering them with paint on the walls and new appliances.

Their unwillingness to recognize the root of their unhappiness and conflicts caused them to turn to self-deception, which led them into a new set of problems that was as frustrating as the old.

Both were basically selfish. When their wills coincided, there was no problem. But when Isabella wanted a nicer place to live and had to admit they could not afford it, she became difficult. Jeremy went into debt to avoid being the one to receive the brunt of her misery, but he resented having to do so. And all the time they told each other that if only their parents would stop nagging them and Jeremy could just make a little more money, they would be supremely happy.

## TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCE

Deception violates a biblical standard. “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth” (Proverbs 12:22). The word “detests” is a strong one. We can’t imagine that our heavenly Father actually hates it when we lie! The psalmist tells us, “May the LORD cut off their flattering lips and silence their boastful tongues” (Psalm 12:3) and Paul exhorts us to “speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church” (Ephesians 4:15). Truth is a rugged hill to climb. It is natural to deceive. It’s much harder to tell the truth.

But there are always consequences to our lying, either personally or relationally. Eventually our wrongs always catch up with us. The biblical standard of dealing only in truth is not designed to be a nuisance. Rationalization will thwart your progress in life. Truth is the pathway to peace.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. On a scale of 1–10, how important is it to you that you tell the truth?
2. How important is it to you that others tell you the truth?
3. When are the times in your life that you negatively use “tact” or “diplomacy” to actually get around telling the truth?
4. In what situations do you most often find yourself not telling the truth?
5. In what area of your life do you need to be honest, even brutally honest, with yourself?
6. What negative behaviors, relationships, or situations are you currently experiencing where you are actually rationalizing your behavior?

## TAKE ONE ACTION STEP

For the next week, pay close attention to your words and actions. When are you not being truthful? And what difference is it making in your life?



## *Behaviors that Stand in the Way of Your Peace*

**T**he person who progresses steadily from childhood into adulthood, and experiences peace along the way, learns to shift gradually and quite normally with the situations of life. Sometimes, however, a person will meet rebuffs, disappointments, failure, or tragedy with a variety of behaviors that are not only childish, but real deterrents to experiencing peace.

### **REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR**

To regress is simply to revert to childish ways of reacting to unpleasant situations.

Think for a moment about how children get their own way. They resort to tears, screams, whining, temper tantrums, or sulking to get what they want when they want. They will break things, fight, throw up, refuse to eat, or become hard to manage. Unfortunately, children often find that such methods work amazingly well. And because of past successes with this type of behavior, they are often reluctant to give up these tried and proven means to an end.

But, as they grow, children are taught that these techniques must be abandoned or at least restrained. They learn that other people have rights that must be respected. They (hopefully) discover that to live happily, they must accept the fact that they cannot always satisfy their own wants and desires. They learn, for example, that honor, respect, praise, and love come not from demand or by force but because they are earned by work, honest

effort, and continuous adjustment to changing circumstances.

Janet is meticulous about her home—but her method for keeping it looking pristine is to sulk if someone walks across the carpet with their shoes on. Her husband, who is not so fussy about how the house looks, has learned that he is better off if he spends his spare time watching television in the basement instead of sitting in the living room. He doesn't want to run the risk of upsetting his wife. Janet rules the roost; she controls a big, strong, rugged man by the simple device of resorting to a childish form of behavior—pouting.

Scott appears to be a calm man. But those who know him intimately are fully aware that if things go against his liking he will lose his temper.

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His associates typically give in to his demands, and it appears that they agree with him, but all they are doing is preventing a nasty storm from developing. Hence, he controls a situation by merely threatening to regress to childish behavior.

Jarod is a business executive who travels a great deal for his job. In typical fashion, he came running down one of the long corridors at the airport in an attempt to catch his plane.

Breathless, he approached the agent at the gate and presented his ticket. “That’s my plane out there, isn’t it?” he said breathlessly, pointing to a jet on the concrete apron. Yes, it was his plane. But all preparations had been made for departure and the jet was beginning to taxi away from the boarding site.

“Maybe you don’t know who I am,” Jarod yelled. “I travel on this airline extensively for my corporation.”

The agent said he was sorry but there was nothing he could do. With a crowd of other travelers looking on, Jarod exploded. “I warn you, if you don’t get me on that plane, I’ll see to it that you have a job handling baggage and my company will never book another flight with this airline.”

Jarod had worked himself into a frenzy and embarrassed himself (and his company). But his blustering behavior did nothing for him—except to



chip away at his own self-respect and reputation.

Sometimes regressive behavior works; most often it does not. But even when it succeeds in achieving an immediate objective, it leaves the one who uses it with at least a vague sense of disappointment in himself.

Many of the unhappy people who seek the help of a counselor are accomplishing a great deal; but they have an idea that their childish behavior is costing them something. They sense that people avoid or ignore them. They understand that their friends or business associates are putting up with them for the sake of politeness, or because they have something to gain for their tolerance.

Getting your own way by hysteria, bullying, vengeful silence, cleverness, or scheming does not give you peace. These behaviors surely are options for getting what you want, but they will always leave you dissatisfied.

## **SUPPRESSION**

Another behavior that a person may use to achieve peace is suppression. In literature on psychology, suppression is referred to as a conscious, deliberate, purposeful forgetting or submerging of unpleasant childhood experiences and negative reactions to people and circumstances.

To illustrate: Ethan's father was a demanding, dominating, cruel man. As a boy, Ethan had been required to perform a long list of chores letter-perfect. If he slipped up or stepped out of line, his dad lashed out at him with severe verbal whippings. Sometimes his father required a form of penance, such as extra chores or missing a desired activity.

Ethan grew up hating his father. As an adult he repressed the memories of his childhood most of the time. When anyone gave him a direct order, however, he saw the image of his father in that person and reacted negatively.

Suppression is not limited to experiences of the childhood. In the growing-up process everyone has known what it is to have desires, emotions, and natural inclinations that are at variance with the demands of society. Unfortunately, the usual way of dealing with non-permissible thoughts is to relegate them to the back of your mind.

## REPRESSION

Repression also involves submerging or forgetting unhappy past experiences, negative attitudes, aspirations, or feelings. However, it differs from suppression in that by repression the unhappy experiences or attitudes are pushed out of the mind *unknowingly*.

One's collection of gripes, complaints, hates, and suppressed desires and actions can become so great that many of them disappear from memory. Though they no longer come to mind, they are nevertheless there. The fact that they lurk in the shadows is evident by frequent eruptions in the form of touchiness or anxiety. One becomes tense, irritable, uneasy, subject to long silences, sensitive, tired for no explainable reason, or full of aches and pains that cannot be corrected by medical treatment. It is obvious that a person who is always in danger of being "upset" or "disturbed" can hardly have a peaceful mind or feel in tune with the people around him. Such persons are not only subject to "upsets" but are in danger of "breakdowns."

Over the last several years many psychologists have warned of the harm in repression. Some have said that a child should be allowed to grow up as he pleases so that he will not have any negative memories. If left to himself, the child will arrive at a way of life that makes him a happy person and an asset to society. However, such management of children, has only illustrated the truth of the Bible's warning: "A child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Proverbs 29:15). Children left to themselves do not typically learn important lessons necessary for successful adult living. We *do* need a standard to live by.

Repression would be a wonderful way of escaping if simply forgetting a problem actually removed it. But such is not the case. Harsh, bitter, unforgiving emotions and attitudes are stored up, not eliminated, as long as they remain harsh, bitter, and unforgiving. Every so often something happens that springs open the trapdoor to the dark attic of the mind, and the negative things we thought we had forgotten come rushing out to cause misery to ourselves and others.

The Bible offers the solution: "Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). It is possible for you to look on the behavior of others and on their treatment of you in a non-condemning, forgiving spirit. To do so is not to whitewash the evils toward you, but to have an attitude

toward spiteful persons that will free you from their hurt.

What about the guilt and remorse that stem from memories of the past? Recognition of your sins need not cause you anxiety, for on the heels of recognition is forgiveness and to be forgiven is to find release. “In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:14).

## **EXTROVERSION, INTROVERSION, COMPARTMENTALIZATION, AND PROJECTION**

Other inappropriate ways people seek to cope with the pressures that build up within them can only be touched on here.

*Extroversion.* Extroversion in this sense is used to describe behavior that flees into a constant round of activity in the community, church, club, or place of employment. A person is always on the go, always talking, always planning—using activity as a refuge from personal conflict. It is extremely important here, however, to not judge another’s motives. You may think you can distinguish between the one who serves and the one who is merely fleeing from his problems, but you may be completely wrong.

*Introversion.* Introversion describes the process of building a wall around oneself. In an attempt to experience peace, a person engages in behavior that results in his world being entirely his own. Many an individual would do well to withdraw from the crowd for serious thinking, to reflect, and to consider before making a decision. But this is not what introversion is all about. People engaging in this type of behavior are not pondering in order to make a wise move. They are dodging issues, avoiding decisions, and hiding from the world. They are enclosed in their own private thoughts and dreams, many of which may likely never happen.

*Compartmentalization.* In a sense, this approach to conflict is to not let the right hand know what the left is doing. A business example of this is the person who as a church board member is careful to see that the church bylaws are upheld, but who has no problem utilizing questionable business practices in his own office, because to do so is good for his bottom line.

*Projection.* This is a subtle form of self-deception in which one sees his own faults as belonging to someone or something else. This is the person who has a long list of complaints about the pastor at his church and is

*Honest self-evaluation is necessary to identify what behaviors you are engaging in that are truly keeping you from a fulfilled, happy life.*

very sure that people don't like him or want him to serve on the church board. He is the one who is always sure of his own ethics in the office and who is critical of anyone who uses the copier for personal projects. He is the individual who is secretly having an affair and in guarding it, thinks that everyone is looking at him suspiciously or is talking about him.

All of these behaviors result in a continued struggle for peace. Honest self-evaluation is necessary to identify what behaviors you are engaging in that are truly keeping you from a fulfilled, happy life.

## THE ROAD TO MATURITY

Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and personnel directors all agree that any one of these behaviors can be a hindrance to wholesome relationships and a sense of self-respect. The answer? Behavior that is firmly grounded in God's Word! The Bible clearly tells us, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior" (Ephesians 4:31). Clearly this is a description of childish behavior with its excessive emotions and careless, hurtful expression.

Verse 32 goes on to encourage us to "be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." This is a description of a Christian who is "grown-up."

Most people who seek counseling say they want to experience peace. They want to earn the honor, the admiration, the respect, the faith of others. Not all, however, are willing to recognize that to become such a person is to exercise reasonable self-control, to seek to behave in a mature way. The apostle Paul charted the route to maturity in writing to the Colossians. He told the Christians of that city that "now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him" (Colossians 3:8–10). He reminded them of

this important truth: “Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults and forgive anyone who offends you” (3:12–13).

What is the truest sign of maturity? “But above all these things,” Paul continued, “put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful” (3:14–15).

The Bible describes man’s heart as “deceitful” and “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). Thus, you need a resource *outside* of yourself. The qualities that come from the Holy Spirit will keep you from faulty handling of truth. They can be yours when you let Jesus Christ implant them in your life. Use God’s Word to instruct you in how you can experience true peace.

*Use God's Word  
to instruct you  
in how you can  
experience true  
peace.*

In comfort and consolation:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)

In patience and joy:

We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better. We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy. (Colossians 1:9–11)

In wisdom:

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. (James 1:5)

In righteousness:

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. (Philippians 3:7–10)

In peace and hope:

I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Honestly, what childish behaviors do you sometimes engage in?
2. As you consider your struggle to experience peace, are there things in your life that you are suppressing or repressing?

3. Do you ever engage in extroversion, introversion, compartmentalization, or projection as a way of dealing with difficulties in your life?
4. In what ways can the Bible help you in your struggle for peace?
5. In what ways can you implement one principle discussed in this chapter into your everyday life?

### **TAKE ONE ACTION STEP**

Memorize one of the five Bible passages included at the end of this chapter and focus on it each day for a week. Note how the passage applies to your situations, relationships, and interactions.





## Mind and Body

**T**he body, host to the mind, can influence its invisible partner. I was reminded of this when traveling with a missionary friend in Africa. During our trip, he was stricken with malaria. Over several days, this normally articulate individual was frequently delirious. At such times it was impossible for me to discuss anything of a serious nature with him.

Most people need a given amount of sleep or they become irritable. Induction of a narcotic or alcohol into the body decreases the ability to think clearly. Even food can affect the mental process.

Though the body can influence the mind and one's emotional state, medical science asserts that the mind holds even greater mastery over the body.

One day I encountered a highway accident just after it had happened. Three badly injured bodies lay motionless on the pavement. A survivor simply sat on the roadway and stared unseeingly at those who had been members of his family. Another who had lived through the crash stood beside the overturned car and screamed, "I killed them! I killed them! They told me to slow down. Why didn't I listen?"

I walked away from that scene literally sick to my stomach. In driving off I noticed that the muscles in my arms and legs were tense. I sighed frequently. My body had undergone distinct changes that were the result of my reaction to not only that bloody scene, but the intense ways those involved were experiencing it.

Matt came to see me because he was not only experiencing problems at home, he was not eating well. Most days he would arrive home in a good mood and would be hungry for dinner. Then his wife would begin to

air her complaints. Perhaps he had slammed the door when he had come in. Or he might have been a few minutes late. Or he had forgotten to run an errand for her on his way home. So just before dinner was ready, his body would become tense and he would lose his appetite. His reaction to his wife produced drastic bodily changes.

*Though the body can influence the mind and one's emotional state, medical science asserts that the mind holds even greater mastery over the body.*

Emily reported she suffered from severe headaches. As we discussed her symptoms, we discovered that they always occurred when her fiancé failed to call when he said he would. A further look back through her life showed that her headaches started about the time something went wrong with her plans to attend college.

Alex sought counseling at the recommendation of his physician. “How can *you* help me get over a stiff neck?” he asked, truly puzzled. As he told his story, it became clear that life was to him one big pain in the neck. The tenseness of his neck muscles gave him the pain. He was tense because he approached the problems in his life as if he were a football lineman charging his opponent.

Nicole was a beautiful, well-educated woman. But in certain situations, she was having difficulty swallowing her food. As we talked, I learned that these times of difficulty came in connection with appointments with me that her husband demanded that she make and keep. She resented his demands. She actually could not “swallow” them.

Think of the common expressions that unite mind and body:

- My heart was in my mouth.
- I was so frightened I nearly jumped out of my skin.
- I was scared stiff.
- He makes my blood run cold.
- I was shocked.

These expressions indicate the relationship that truly exists between the mental/emotional state of a person and the workings of his body. This is not new information! For a better understanding of how this relationship functions, we must turn to the physician.

## CLINICALLY PROVEN

Dr. O. Spurgeon English, one of the first psychotherapists to write about the connections between mental and physical health, was a practicing psychiatrist when he was appointed a professor of clinical psychiatry at Temple University. In the 1940's (!), with Edward Weiss, who was also an M.D., he co-authored the book *Psychosomatic Medicine*, the first medical text to make the connection between stress and physical ailments, and a book that is still available in hard cover copy. Starting in the 1950's, he led a Temple Hospital department created to treat people suffering from depression and stress-induced illnesses. One of his colleagues described him as "one of the great American psychiatrists of the 20th century." He frequently spoke out about the role of emotions in mental and physical health. His research was so foundational that it is still relative today.

He wrote that there are certain emotional centers in the brain that are linked to the entire body through the autonomic nervous system. Charges of emotions are relayed from the brain, down the spinal cord, and through the autonomic nerves to the blood vessels, muscle tissues, mucous membranes, and skin. Under emotional stress, all parts of the body can be subject to physical discomfort because of a change in blood nourishment, glandular function, or muscle tone.<sup>1</sup>

You may be thinking, *How can thoughts and feelings going through my mind cause pain in some part of my body far from my brain?* Dr. English explained that emotions such as fear can cause the mouth to become dry. This means that the blood vessels have constricted and the blood supply and glandular activity have been reduced. This dryness will occur, for example, in someone who must make a speech and is afraid. Various emotions which have their source in the brain find their way through definite pathways to the stomach.<sup>2</sup> When a troublesome person can't be coped with, we say we can't "stomach" him—and that may be literally true.

Laboratory tests have shown that under emotional stress the same decrease in glandular activity occurs in the mucous membrane and various

parts of the digestive tract. Not only does the blood supply change markedly, but secretions of various types increase or decrease in an abnormal manner. Changes in muscle tone in the digestive region can occur, causing painful cramps. It has also been proven that emotional stress will increase the size of the blood vessels in the head: this change in turn produces pain because of the stretching of the tissues around the blood vessels and their pressure on the nerve endings.

Of the heart, Dr. English wrote:

Without the presence of any heart disease whatever, psychosomatic patients are prone to increased heart rate, irregularities of rhythm, unusual sensations about the heart such as oppression, tightening, pain, and numbness sometimes accompanied by shortness of breath and the feeling of faintness and weakness, possibly giddiness. Along with this so-called “spell” there may be a general “all-gone” feeling, free perspiration, accompanied by a sinking sensation and the feeling as if the patient would fall in a heap.<sup>3</sup>

Joe collapsed at work and was rushed to a hospital. His coworkers thought he had had a heart attack. But the hospital evaluation revealed that he had not had a heart attack. His body was stressed in other ways. Apparently, he had been experiencing problems in several areas of his life. He and his wife were not getting along. His neighbor had acquired a dog that barked all night. A recent promotion had put him under more pressure than his previous position. And, as an only child, he was trying to help his elderly parents find an appropriate care facility. Why did he collapse? Because he was not adjusting well to his life situations.

Dr. English points out that interpersonal conflict can be the reason for disorders of the digestive tract:

For decades it has been known that an [interpersonal] problem which cannot be solved by the mind itself is prone to be “turned over” or “taken up” by some other part of the body. When an irritating friend or a troublesome family member cannot be coped with, the patient becomes

“sick,” he simply can’t “stomach” it. The physician knows that the cause of these gastrointestinal disturbances is emotional conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible describes many emotions which cause physical symptoms: hatred, resentment, quarreling, rage, jealousy, self-centeredness, envy, sorrow, fear. Many of these words describe reactions to someone or something. Such reactions are not pleasant to acknowledge in one’s life and so we tend to deny their presence and perhaps deceive ourselves.

Actual disease or injury of the nervous system is easily observable under the microscope. Structural changes can be seen. If you have a viral infection in a nerve, you feel pain and tenderness along the course of the nerve. If you sever a main nerve running to a muscle, you are unable to move the muscle. But a “nervous” person has no physical impairment.

And so we see that a person can have a disease of the nerves without being “nervous” or, on the other hand, can experience “nervousness” or anxiety and have an apparently normal nervous system. The complaints of the “nervous” person are usually lodged in their stomach or intestines or heart—organs that are not a part of the nervous system.

Paul drove several hundred miles to reach our clinic. He came because he had stomach pains that the physicians he had seen said were “functional.” “That means,” he said with a wincing grin and a report from the Mayo Clinic fresh in his memory, “that my stomach pains are all in my head.”

Functional pain is characterized by pain that has no physical explanation or findings. It essentially means that the pain that is being experienced is not caused by a disease. It also usually implies that the individual is not meeting his emotional problems in a wholesome way.

“They asked me if I was having any problems,” he said. “What does that have to do with my stomach?”

When we first started talking, the idea of his getting well by talking to a counselor seemed like a big joke to Paul. But life to Paul was no joke. Especially his employment. As we talked, it became apparent that two events of several months ago were still “grinding” him. Paul worked in a factory and he had been transferred from one machine to another without any discussion as to whether or not he even wanted to

work in that specific spot. Then a company safety officer came along and ordered him to wear safety glasses. Paul refused, saying, “I never have and I never will.” The company left it up to him—wear the glasses or quit. He put on the glasses.

As we talked, he was angry when we discussed his work situation. It was hard for him to admit it, but he hated his work, his boss, and the safety officer. He literally burned within. He was tolerating a distasteful work situation, and now he hated going to work. As far as his stomach was concerned, he was sure cancer was eating it up.

*The Bible points the way to a cure: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior."*

What was really eating up Tom was a long-term, slow-burn of hate. Paul said the physicians at the Mayo Clinic had called it nervous exhaustion, resulting from mental cross-purposes. He was defeated by a personal problem. He held grudges against his boss and the safety officer. He could not express his resentment openly and keep his job, so he hid it. But

in the effort, he experienced muscular pain as well as heart palpitations and stomachaches. The interesting thing was that he could switch from the anguished details of his physical suffering to a cheerful, animated discussion of other parts of his life. Turn the conversation back to his work and he would grimace. “I didn’t realize how much I hate those men,” he finally said.

Physician S.I. McMillen, a medical missionary to Africa, wrote of the devastating effects of hatred:

The moment I start hating a man, I become his slave. I can’t enjoy my work anymore because he even controls my thoughts. My resentments produce too many stress hormones in my body and I become fatigued after only a few hours of work. The work I formerly enjoyed is now drudgery. Even vacations cease to give me pleasure. It may

be a luxurious car that I drive along a lake fringed with the autumnal beauty of maple, oak, and birch. As far as my experience of pleasure is concerned, I might as well be driving a wagon in mud and rain.

The man I hate hounds me wherever I go. I can't escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind. When the waiter serves me porterhouse steak with French fries, asparagus, crisp salad, and strawberry shortcake smothered with ice cream, it might as well be stale bread and water. My teeth chew the food and I swallow it, but the man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it ... The man I hate may be many miles from my bedroom; but more cruel than any slave driver, he whips my thoughts into such a frenzy that my innerspring mattress becomes a rack of torture. The lowliest of the serfs can sleep, but not I. I really must acknowledge the fact that I am a slave to every man on whom I pour the vials of my wrath.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, the Bible points the way to a cure: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31–32).

Strecker and Appel have an additional comment on the relationship of emotions to the body:

If aroused to a high pitch, shame, distress, hate, envy, jealousy all strike to the very core of our being. They leave us worn, tired, incapable, and almost helpless. The blush of shame, the haggard countenance of distress, the consuming burning of jealousy and envy, and the facial and vocal expressions of hate are striking testimonials to the deteriorating effect of these emotions upon the body. We may jump with joy or droop with sorrow.<sup>6</sup>

Notice that there are many of the same words in this paragraph as Dr. English uses to describe hurtful emotions.

## RESPONDING BIBLICALLY

S. I. McMillen says the stress of living does not cause big or little problems to adversely affect the body. Rather, it is our reactions to our problems. Stress can be beneficial. It is the spirit of retaliation that calls forth emotional and physical toxins.

Is it not a remarkable fact that our reactions to stress determine whether stress is going to cure us or make us sick? Here is an important key to longer and happier living. We hold the key and can decide whether stress is going to work for us or against us. Our attitude decides whether stress makes us ‘better or bitter.’<sup>7</sup>

Patients experiencing physical symptoms brought on by mental pain believe they need the kind of medicine that comes in a box or bottle. But they fail to recognize, say Strecker and Appel, that the medicine they need is mental peace. “It is almost axiomatic that in the presence of a clear, honest, and conscious understanding of the conflict, a neurosis cannot occur.”<sup>8</sup>

This does not mean that you are taking responsibility for very real pains that have been committed against you. But, it does mean that you are taking responsibility for your own responses to situations that are causing you to be angry, or bitter, or jealous. The Bible tells us to confess *our* sin in order to experience God’s peace. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Admit to God that you are holding on to resentment, and then cleansing—fellowship with the Lord and inner peace—will be yours.

Only the refreshing cleansing that comes from God is capable of washing away all aches and pains brought on by troubled emotions.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What ideas in this chapter are new to you?



2. What physical responses do you have when you experience excitement, anxiety, stress, or disappointment?
3. In what ways have you seen the principles of this chapter working themselves out in peoples' lives?
4. Do you currently have any on-going physical issues that cannot be specifically tied to an injury or illness?
5. In what ways are you harboring bitterness or resentment or disappointment (or some other negative emotion) in your heart?

### **TAKE ONE ACTION STEP**

Take some time to reflect on your own negative emotions. Are you holding on to some past experience that could potentially cause you to experience physical symptoms because you are refusing to honestly deal with your own emotions about it? Talk to God about it!



## *There IS Hope*

**T**here is a reason why so many people are unhappy, why there is so much conflict between individuals. Isaiah pinpointed the trouble long ago: “All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own” (Isaiah 53:6).

We like our own ideas, plans, aspirations, and longings. Thus, when we encounter resistance to our wishes, or face demands that are not to our liking, we tend to rebel, to attack, to run, or to defend ourselves. Our natural reaction is to be resentful, bitter, stubborn, full of fight. It is easy for us to think that our own desires are the reasonable ones. We will find a way to make a selfish drive seem selfless, deceiving even ourselves.

Furthermore, it is natural to shrink away from a glimpse of oneself. To back away from reproof is as human as shielding our eyes from a burst of light in a dark room. Jeremiah’s assessment of the heart, “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?” (Jeremiah 17:9), and Jesus’ statement that “people love the darkness more than the light” (John 3:19), are as up-to-date as the current psychology literature that describes the many ways we have for evading the truth.

The patterns of deceit and self-defense have become so systematized that their names are common dictionary words. If we do not face our pains, we can develop psychoses requiring hospitalization—or, at the very least we will experience broken relationships, devastating hopelessness, or even murder or suicide.

Such is the heart of man. One shudders to contemplate its potential for evil. The Bible and literature on psychology alike paint an oppressive

picture of this.

How difficult it is to face the truth we have uncovered! As we look up, however, a comforting shaft of light pierces the darkness. It promises the hope of escape.

Our hope comes in our relationship with God and his message of hope in his Word, the Bible. In the pages of scripture is a path away from our disturbances, neuroses, and psychoses and toward peace that passes understanding.

“Those who love your instructions have great peace and do not stumble,” said the psalmist in Psalm 119:165. Is this really possible?

Many people turn to a counselor for help because they are in circumstances that are causing them to stumble. They are dissatisfied, irritated, unhappy. Either they flee from their vexing situations or attack them.

One would think that people would rush to buy a book (the Bible!) that pointed out the path to peace and freedom from offense. People *do* buy it by the millions every year (it continues to be the bestselling book of all time). However, it is a book that is quickly laid aside.

Though our hope lies in God and his Word, many people quickly turn aside from the Bible ... because it reproves and corrects. And correction is difficult. We simply do not like facing the truth about ourselves. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “The word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.” Having our innermost thoughts and desires exposed can be painful.

Today, churches are criticized because their ministers upset people when they preach about the sinfulness of man and the inflexible standards of the Bible. People have often turned to me as a counselor because their pastor has upset

*In the pages of scripture is a path away from our disturbances, neuroses, and psychoses and toward peace that passes understanding.*

them. Having listened to a sermon about sin, these people feel guilty and inadequate. As they relate the details of their stories, it invariably turns out that they were much happier people before they began attending church and studying the Bible. Therefore, isn't it reasonable to conclude that their problems are being caused by what they heard and read? To remove the cause would seem to relieve the person's anxiety.

And this is exactly what is now being advocated. There is widespread pressure on ministers to preach only "positive" messages and to emphasize the good in man. But the message is not the cause of the problem.

### **CALLING SIN WHAT IT REALLY IS**

Perhaps a look at the methods of several medical professionals will help us understand and embrace the value of pointing out the "negative."

Consider the dentist's approach. I remember making an appointment with my dentist and showing up to have him examine my teeth. He chatted amiably throughout the examination. As he looked at my x-rays, I still remember him saying, "There is a cavity, and there is one, and there is another. You have three cavities." How negative can you get? He did not even mention the good teeth!

Then he prepared to stick a long needle into my gums—not a pleasant experience at all. The drilling was no picnic either. In fact, there is nothing about going to the dentist that I like. It makes me a bit anxious to think about going, and decidedly annoyed when the bill comes. But yet we all go to the dentist. We respect this person who subjects us only to discomfort. Why? Surely not because of the process. The results are what we want. The dentist could give us medicine that would cut the pain of our decaying teeth and make us feel comfortable as long as its effect remained. But unless the dentist goes to the source of the problem, the decay will continue, and someday the pain will be even worse.

Consider the physician. As he diagnoses you, he has only one basic question: "What is wrong?" This is certainly a "negative" approach!

If 99 percent of your body is well, your doctor is interested in only the 1 percent of you that is not. If you have an infected fingernail and the rest of you is healthy, he concentrates on the fingernail. If you have a pain in your abdomen, he does not look at your ears. Instead he examines your abdomen thoroughly, even if the examination brings you pain.

Why do you put up with such treatment? Because the objective is to restore your health. The doctor may save you from death by subjecting you to great pain and even the risk of your life on the operating table if necessary. It is positive to focus on the negative. It is healthy to eliminate disease. It is good to eliminate evil.

A neighbor in good health went to see her physician because she had developed a slight pain. Investigation revealed a tumor and abdominal surgery was called for. The doctor's announcement of what was needed not only upset the woman, but her whole family and some people in the neighborhood as well. Why would a man want to subject this fine woman to such an ordeal? Why didn't he give her a sedative to help her forget the pain? No one would have gotten upset. But instead of prescribing a painkiller, he sent her off to a hospital, where her surgery confined her for five weeks.

Think of the effect of his diagnosis and prescription on the woman's husband, their children, their budget. But not a single person condemned the doctor. Quite the contrary, they were all grateful to him. They were appreciative of this person who had delivered such drastic, disturbing news and who had subjected her to the pain of a knife and her husband to such great expense. The doctor would have done this woman a great disservice to have acted otherwise.

The diagnosis did not depend on the knowledge of the physician, but on the condition of the patient's body. The doctor could not be guided by what the patient wanted to hear; rather he had to follow the course of his findings. How does one make an announcement of the need for major surgery a happy occasion? There is no way. The important thing is that the proper diagnosis be made and the patient be told. The patient will get over the shock of the announcement. My neighbor did. Then it was up to her whether she would submit to the prescribed treatment. She could have tried to ignore the pain, kept busy, and attempted to forget about her condition. She might have tried to kill the pain with medicine. Her other alternative was to accept surgery, which she did.

An accurate diagnosis of a physical ailment is a matter for the physician. But the patient's future health is really his own decision.

To miss the mark of perfect health is common, but to deny that one is sick when he is, or to give up the quest for health, is foolish. Wisdom calls

for trying to discover the cause of ill health; for the physician to give an accurate diagnosis despite the guilt, anxiety, or worry it might cause; and for the patient, for his own best interest, to follow through on the doctor's advice.

Now back to the point that ministers are pressured to emphasize the good and the positive because talk of sin and the negative is upsetting and causes anxiety and worry. Of course the knowledge of sin produces such results. But the immediate comfort of a person is of little value if there is, in fact, sin in the person's life. To diagnose sin as the reason for a lack of peace in a person's life, however disturbing it may be, is a positive act.

I do not determine what my client brings to me. If there is selfishness, irritability, stubbornness, rebellion, hate, or deceit within the person, it simply is there. I didn't put it there, but it is my responsibility to point out its presence. This may be upsetting. But I have found no other way. I have never known a person to discover the sin that is causing his trouble by my dwelling on his good qualities. And I have never found a way of pointing out a man's sin to him that makes him clap his hands with glee at the news. The truth is often offensive.

*To diagnose sin as the reason for a lack of peace in a person's life, however disturbing it may be, is a positive act.*

Once, after Jesus had addressed the Pharisees, his disciples said to him, "Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?" (Matthew 15:12). What had offended them? This is part of what the Lord told them:

"It's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth." (v. 11)

"The words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you." (v. 18)

"For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery,

all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you.” (vv. 19–20)

Though the words of Christ offended his listeners, their response did not change the truth he spoke. And herein lies tremendous hope. You may not be able to control what your wife or husband, father or mother, or anyone else does, and you may not be able to change your environment, but you don’t need to, because the real source of your problem is not the people around you or your environment, but you. The things that defile you come from within *you*. And this, in a sense, is good news because *you* can be changed. But *you* must decide whether to let God change you.

### THE BATTLE WITH THE WILL

To come to the decision that will lead you into the pleasant valley of peace is to struggle with your own will. To illustrate, note the experience of Eric, a successful businessman.

Eric was department foreman of a manufacturing firm. One day his boss called him into the office and said, “Eric, as you know, things are a bit slow around here. I realize you have worked hard and run one of the best departments in the company, but my orders are to cut one supervisor, so I am letting you go.”

Eric was stunned. He was the only Christian among the foremen. The other supervisory personnel, including his boss, liked to go out drinking and had some pretty wild parties together. As a result, their work sometimes suffered and Eric had to step in to rescue them. He had worked hard. This was his reward.

Eric now faced a major financial difficulty. He had been making payments on a new home and a car. When his salary was suddenly cut off, he was in trouble. He lost both his house and his car and had to move in with his parents, who lived in another state. While with them, he had nothing to do but sit in a comfortable chair and mull over his experience.

*So this is the reward for hard work and clean living*, he would say to himself over and over. The more he thought, the more bitter he became. He found it hard to eat and even harder to digest what little he did eat. He suffered from painful cramps. His physician told him that his condition stemmed from his emotions. However, most of his friends reassured him



that he had a right to have some emotional problems.

Twelve years later, time seemed to have healed his wounds. Eric found another job and was quite successful in it. He was, in fact, the manager of a manufacturing outfit with eight plants. One day while he was inspecting one of the plants, the personnel director asked him if he would like to meet the plant's new chief engineer. Of course he would. Eric followed the personnel director to the man's office and found himself face-to-face with the man who had fired him twelve years before. Here working for him was the person who had caused him so much grief, pain, and embarrassment.

"I made a terrible mistake back when I let you go," the engineer said to Eric when they were alone. "Will you forgive me?"

"Oh, certainly. Forget it," Eric replied.

Eric said he forgave the man, but within himself he nursed a gnawing bitterness. His stomachache returned. He began reliving those confusing, awful days of long ago. He had thought this period of his life was long forgotten, but he found himself fuming in his plush office, wanting only to get even.

Eric related all of this to me when I went to visit him at his office. He then asked how he could work with a person who had treated him so poorly.

What would have been your reply?

I pointed out several Scripture passages to Eric. One was 2 Corinthians 4:7–10:

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

The apostle Paul spoke here of trouble, perplexity, persecution,

rejection. All these had happened to Eric. But Paul also said there is a power that will enable us to face such treatment without distress, despair, self-pity, or ruin. It is the power of God. I discussed this with Eric, but at the time it seemed to mean little to him. I spoke of the end products of anxiety, pointing out that definite bodily changes, such as blood pressure, respiration, and digestion, can be affected. Freedom from anxiety means that the body will function normally. But his body was upset and exhibiting many of these symptoms.

“Are you suggesting that I am my own problem?” he asked. “Are you saying that you would have acted differently had you been fired?”

I assured him he was his own problem and that he needed to take control of his response. Then I reminded him of one of Jesus’ statements: “I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44, NKJV). This, I said, should be his attitude toward the man who had fired him.

Eric became furious with me. How could I be so lacking in sympathy and understanding? Now he was upset not only at the engineer, but at me as well.

Who was Eric hurting when he carried his grudge around within himself? Who was affected when he sat in his chair and seethed over a man who had hurt him long ago? Obviously, he was hurting only himself.

Who is hurt when you get upset over someone who isn’t even in your presence? You, of course.

There is a power that will enable you to face your circumstances without distress. It is the power of God, made available to you by the dying of the Lord Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit working in you. God’s power—and his alone—can make you want to forgive one who has misused you.

But Eric did not want to forgive that engineer. He wanted to get even. He argued that he had a right to be bitter.

Eric did have a right to be bitter. Each one of us has a right to be angry and unforgiving over a wrong done to us. It is our privilege to be upset. But then we must also live with the misery that comes along with it. As long as we insist on retaining our unhappiness, we will have it.

However, if we want to be free from our misery, we must be lifted out of our sin. And there is only one way to do that. To submit ourselves to God’s perfect plans and desires for us. Simply identifying our anger, or

bitterness, or resentment, will not eliminate it or any the problems that it causes. We must actually confess it to almighty God and turn away from it. Wise is the man who heeds the advice of the apostle James:

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. (James 1:22–25)

Eric said he wanted relief from his upset condition, but when I told him that he needed to let go of the situation, he became all the more upset. One would think he would have seized the opportunity to shed his spirit of bitterness and hate. But that's not human nature.

For many persons, to yield bitterness and hatred in exchange for a tender heart toward someone who doesn't deserve it is not blessed relief, but great sacrifice. Like Eric, untold numbers of persons would like to be free from their aches and pains, but if to be rid of them means to relinquish a long-standing grudge, they would rather be in pain; mental, physical, or both.

There in his walnut-paneled, softly lit office Eric and I were locked in a struggle. If I had told him that his grudge was normal and that I would have acted the same way, he might have enjoyed some relief, but the inner sore would have continued to fester and spread its poison.

### **WILLING TO YIELD**

It is a mystery how a person

*Simply identifying our anger, or bitterness, or resentment, will not eliminate it or any the problems that it causes. We must actually confess it to almighty God and turn away from it.*

finally quits fighting and turns to God for a spirit of love toward someone who does not deserve it. All we know is that there is generally a struggle before a person yields.

But when he does yield, his problem is nearly over. The Bible says it is *your* move. “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).

One day, Eric did turn to God for help. He asked God to forgive him of his anger and bitterness. He let go of his grudge. His digestive disorder disappeared, his aches and pains went away. Finally he is at peace with himself and with the man who mistreated him. He is now enjoying God’s peace, the fruit of the Spirit, in his life.

How did this change come about? By confessing (or acknowledging) that *he* had done wrong, that *he* had sinned. King David wrote, “Finally, I confessed all my sins to you [God] and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, ‘I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.’ And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone” (Psalm 32:5).

When Eric paid attention to *his reaction* to the other man’s sins, instead of concerning himself with the man’s sins, he found himself on the road to peace.

To see your own sin is disturbing only if you fight what you discover. If, instead, you admit it and seek help from God, the result is not guilt, but an overwhelming sense of forgiveness, cleansing, renewal, and peace.

The pathway to spiritual peace is a struggle. Discover the truth about yourself and you will naturally shrink from it; become offended and defensive and you will be bound in the strong fetters of your sin. But what a difference you will find if you heed the promise of Jesus: “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32).

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is your response to Dr. Brandt’s assertion that “Our hope comes in our relationship with God and his message of hope in his Word, the Bible”?
2. On a scale 1–10, how willing are you to let the Bible instruct you?

3. What is your reaction to Eric's story?
  
4. Why is the critical step of confessing *our own* responses to life situations critical to experiencing true peace?
  
5. How open are you to truly acknowledging your sin and confessing it to God?

### **TAKE ONE ACTION STEP**

Ask God to show you the sin in your life. Confess it to him and leave it behind.



## The Responsibility Is Yours

**H**ow do you achieve and maintain true peace? Must you be at the mercy of your circumstances? Is it inevitable that a chance meeting can plunge you into the depths of despair?

Eric was a happy, successful man—he thought. Then by meeting someone he hadn't seen for twelve years he was, as if by magic, transported backward in time. Even though he sat at his expensive desk in his plush office, with the words "General Manager" on his door and several secretaries at his call, in his mind he was back in the chair at his parents' home, a bitter, aching, confused young man who had been fired as the reward for working hard and living a clean life. He was reliving those days in which he lost his car and house and underwent the humiliating experience of living with his parents because he was broke. Sitting there now, in air-conditioned comfort, this man who ran eight plants and directed the work of hundreds of men had only one thought—*revenge*.

However, the Bible clearly says,

Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord. (Romans 12:17–19)

Eric knew about these verses. We also discussed the words of Jesus:

“Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44, NKJV)

Were these words a challenge to Eric? Not at first. They were in the Bible, to be sure, and Eric was a sincere and consistent Bible student. But at that time, Eric could not see how these words applied to his situation. To fire his old opponent was a thought that gave him much pleasure. Years of time to get over his pain, success, a plush office, money, power—these had not changed his vengeful heart.

He had nearly forgotten the lean years more than a decade ago. But now the memory of that time came flooding back, and he had to choose to forgive or retaliate. The decision was up to him. It was *his response* to the past that would tip the balance.

He could not control some of the events of his life. He was the victim of someone’s decision twelve years before, no question of that. Now it appeared he was again a victim, this time of a personnel director’s decision to hire a person who had wronged him. Suddenly, there the man was, and successful, happy Eric was plunged into the depths of bitterness and hate.

*The key to peace is  
receiving from the Lord  
the power to forgive.*

It appears that circumstances and people dictated Eric’s problem. But *he* was the one who did the reacting. His problem was *within* himself. Would he forgive or get even? Deep within himself, Eric knew that retaliation would not bring him peace of mind. The key to peace was his receiving from the Lord the power to forgive.

## PEACEMAKER OR FLAME FANNER?

Eric’s situation illustrates the struggle all of us go through to find peace. Bitterness, hatred, and revenge are natural responses to troublesome people and events. And often, we fan the flame of our emotions. But how much better it is to think in terms of making peace, rather than planning someone’s destruction. Jesus said, “God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).



Who would think Eric weak if he forgave the engineer who had wronged him? To forgive is a mark of maturity. And spiritual maturity brings peace, as the psalmist indicated, “Look at those who are honest and good, for a wonderful future awaits those who love peace” (Psalm 37:37). “Work for peace,” “love peace,” these words place the responsibility for your decision squarely on your shoulders. This is the essence of peace—*it depends on you*. You reap the results of your own decisions, your own reactions, your own responses.

To get out of the gloomy pit of despair, bitterness, hostility, jealousy, and the accompanying aches, pains, and misery, you must take personal responsibility for your own character, no matter what someone else does—or did. If a person is miserable, it is their choice. Our difficulty is not the result of our background, or the people around us, or our environment, but of a choice, either deliberate or vague, to continue in the direction that we have been heading.

Eric had the opportunity to either forgive or to seek revenge. His misery or peace was to be determined by *his* choice, which came from within.

People are miserable when they do not take responsibility for their own inner life, their own reactions, and their own behavior toward the people and circumstances that come their way.

Jesus stated an obvious truth: “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows” (John 16:33). We all have our share of trouble and always will. But the presence of trouble does not alter personal responsibility. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, “Each of us will give a personal account to God” (Romans 14:12), and then to the Corinthians, “For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

*People are miserable when they do not take responsibility for their own inner life, their own reactions, and their own behavior toward the people and circumstances that come their way.*

The Bible contains the guidelines for Eric regarding his reaction to the people and events of his life. Jesus said,

“Do to others as you would like them to do to you. If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return. Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High.” (Luke 6:31–35)

The struggle for inner peace, as far as Eric was concerned, centered on his *response* to the engineer and what he was going to do about him. When he realized that there was a choice to be made he was well on the way to peace. What good news it was that he could have inner peace if he wanted it, that the decisions were his own to make. He need not be a helpless victim of people and events. He himself determined whether or not he would have peace of mind and heart.

## DEALING WITH OUR PAST

There is no doubt that past life experiences shape us. In counseling, I generally find that the unhappy person who has been rejected rejects others; the victim of mean, angry, hateful people is also mean, angry, and hateful; the person who grew up in an atmosphere of suspicion is suspicious of others. People seem to reproduce in themselves what they are exposed to.

A person's circumstances definitely make an impact on their life responses, thereby giving them cause for happiness or discomfort. There is the mark of parents, experiences with brothers and sisters, relationships gained through church and school activities. We are the product of our family's economic status, our education, our bodies, our talents, our opportunities.

People who are unhappy have often been mistreated. A woman who

is withdrawn and sullen often had a mother who was withdrawn and sullen. People appear to be caught up in a circle, a vicious one, forged by generation after generation of example.

Mark and Victoria were seriously at odds with one another. Among other things, they fought over the issue of going to church. Victoria insisted that they go for the sake of the children. Mark flatly refused.

“My father was a mean, selfish, two-faced man,” he said. “Yet he was looked on at church as a saint. He made us go to church twice on Sunday and every Wednesday. When we asked him why, he always told us it was the right thing to do.

“Sometimes my father and mother would get into a terrible argument at the dinner table—less than an hour after dismissal of the Sunday School in which they both taught classes. I vowed that I would abandon church as soon as I got out on my own, and I’m sticking to my word.”

As a boy, Mark had witnessed some frightening conflicts between his parents. Here he was, carrying on similar quarrels with his wife. The subject was different, but the spirit was the same. He was as inconsiderate of his wife as his father had been of his mother. Despite his protests otherwise, Mark didn’t go to church because he didn’t want to go—not because of his father.

Emily was extremely “nervous.” Her “spells” came on whenever her husband or children ignored her wishes. As we talked, it became apparent that Emily was a selfish woman. She had been pampered and spoiled all her life. Her explanation: “I was raised this way. Can I help it if I have this kind of personality?”

Another woman, recalling her past, remembered how frustrated and angry she became as a child because her mother refused to help her button up her jacket. “I would always end up with an extra buttonhole on top and a button at the bottom,” she said. “Ever since, I have gotten mad when people force me to do something. My husband insists that I put his vitamin pill on his plate for breakfast and I just rebel at this. He can do it himself.”

This woman is angry when anyone crosses her, all because she was “buttoned up wrong,” or so she believes. She takes no responsibility for her fiery temper. She dismisses it with a shrug, “It’s the way I am. My husband knows it, and I get upset if I’m pushed.”

These people do reflect their backgrounds. Mark is like his father. The woman who was pampered and spoiled is like her mother. The other, the one who was “buttoned up wrong,” came from a home where tempers flared when anyone was crossed.

It is true that a child tends to absorb the atmosphere in which he was raised. It is also true that people tend to keep on going in the direction in which they are headed. But the Bible says, “You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are con-

demning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things” (Romans 2:1).

*An unhappy person must come to terms with the people in his past, forgive them, and seek to understand the effect they have had on him.*

An unhappy person must come to terms with the people in his past, forgive them, and seek to understand the effect they have had on him. But this Bible verse reminds us that he has no grounds for reproducing the pattern, once he understands it.

There are happy, contented people who are considerate of others who also have had difficult pasts.

They too have been mistreated and rejected, but they have come to terms with their pasts, forgiving people who did not deserve forgiveness, charting their future courses as persons responsible for their own conduct. They have not produced the kinds of lives they have been exposed to.

## OWNING OUR OWN BEHAVIOR

It has become acceptable to turn to some type of sedative, whether it be alcohol or medication, rather than learn to adjust to life. In addition, it has become popular to excuse the behavior of someone who is nervous, or maladjusted, or upset, or from a dysfunctional background. How can we expect anything of someone with these kinds of issues? We have embraced the idea that a person who is at war with him or herself must be nursed, favored, carefully handled. What is the result? We tend to reject personal

responsibility for our conduct. But the fact of it remains.

Responsibility for our own behavior can be illustrated in the area of physical health. The medical books explain the laws of good health. If you don't want to be tired, you must get enough sleep. If you wish to control your weight, you must not eat large quantities of certain foods. Often these rules interfere with our plans. We have too many interesting things to do to make time for enough sleep. You like your potatoes covered with gravy, sandwiches with high-calorie sauce, and fancy desserts too much to push away from the table.

Living a life by which you make healthy decisions is your choice. The medical books do not create your problem of tiredness or excessive weight. They only provide the description. It is futile for you to complain about such rigid rules. They may upset you, or cause you to suffer, but the physician cannot repeal them. He can only state them.

“Why am I built so that I must get so much sleep and eat properly?” you may demand to know. “I want to change the rules.”

Can you eliminate your problem by ignoring the laws? Of course not. The person who transgresses the law of sleep is tired; the one who disobeys the rules of proper diet is overweight. Granted there may be other causes of fatigue and being overweight; when these are present, the medical books will help you discover them. But if the medical books do not make a man tired or fat, neither does the Bible create anxieties and frustrations by setting a standard for living. It only describes the standard.

Why must we live by the principles outlined in the Bible? The rules are so upsetting you'd like to change them. But the Bible warns us: “Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please

*You can disregard the principles of biblical living and enjoy yourself, but don't be surprised when you experience anxiety, tension, worry, unhappiness, conflict, or misery.*

the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit” (Galatians 6:7–8).

You can enjoy a busy life and a lavish table of food. The process will give you much pleasure. But expect a tired and overweight body. You can disregard the principles of biblical living and enjoy yourself, but don’t be surprised when you experience anxiety, tension, worry, unhappiness, conflict, or misery. We have not freed ourselves and found a life of ease and relaxation by ignoring the Bible.

But, you say, there are other causes of my painful symptoms. Of course there are. Your physician can help you discover the symptoms that can be corrected by medical means. If the symptoms remain, however, consider a way of life that is charted in the Bible.

The Bible tells us that we are responsible for the way we treat others and for our own attitudes and conduct. You may be tempted to neglect your health because of the people around you. But you, not they, will suffer illness if you do. You may have been mistreated in the past and are tempted to hate, to rebel, to refuse to forgive, or to insist on your own way, but it will be *you* who will be miserable and at cross-purposes with others.

Transgression of God’s laws is called *sin* (1 John 3:4: “Everyone who sins is breaking God’s law, for all sin is contrary to the law of God”). This word often disturbs us. It simply means that you have violated divine principles of spiritual living, just as the word *sick* means you have disobeyed medical rules of physical living. You may always be aware of the rules, but the results of your transgression do not take into account your ignorance. Any amount of reassurance of your innocence will not change the results.

The Bible tells us that it is personal sin, or wickedness as the Bible often calls it, that causes misery, not the unrighteousness of someone else.

But those who still reject me [God] are like the restless sea,  
which is never still but continually churns up mud and dirt.  
There is no peace for the wicked. (Isaiah 57:20–21)

The wicked run away when no one is chasing them, but the  
godly are as bold as lions. (Proverbs 28:1)

People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

The wicked are far from rescue, for they do not bother with your [God's] decrees. (Psalm 119:155)

We are no more free to chart our own course for personal peace than we are to lay out the road to physical health. No one condemns the people who get sick because they unknowingly exposed themselves to disease or were unaware that they had violated the rules of good health. But we are less sympathetic and call them foolish if they deliberately risk sickness by poor life choices. No one condemns people because they were exposed to mean and hateful treatment. But deliberate violation of biblical principles is another matter.

There are degrees of wickedness (not in the eyes of God, but definitely in terms of impact and consequence). Obviously, to steal a dollar out of your mother's purse is not the same as robbing a bank, but both actions are cut from the same cloth. For a child in a temper tantrum to hit her playmate on the head is not the same as a woman holding a grudge against an enemy and murdering her, but the spirit is the same. The high-schooler who tells his parents he is going to the library to study, but who sneaks out on a date with his girlfriend instead is not the same as the man who tells his wife he has an appointment and slips away to see another woman, but they are closely related.

Just as a slight cold is a warning that all is not well in the body, so unrighteousness, however slight, is a warning that all is not well with a person's morality. "For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind" (James 3:16). This is why such emotions within a person should be noted and taken care of. These emotions are *within* us. Even though they were stimulated by some circumstance, situation, or person apart from us, they can lead to great evil.

We tend to ignore or excuse our inner life. In the Old Testament we read, "They come to you [Ezekiel] as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with

their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain” (Ezekiel 33:31, NKJV). Our “own gain” is often influenced by our unhappiness, or anger, or bitterness, or resentment.

Fortunately, God has provided a solution for our dissatisfaction. We can confess our sin, acknowledge it before the Lord, look at it the same way he looks at it, turn from it, and experience freedom. David admitted his sin before God and asked for cleansing from it (see his entire prayer in Psalm 53):

Wash me clean from my guilt.  
Purify me from my sin.  
For I recognize my rebellion;  
it haunts me day and night. (vv. 2–3)

Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Oh, give me back my joy again;  
you have broken me—  
now let me rejoice. (vv. 7–8)

Create in me a clean heart, O God.  
Renew a loyal spirit within me. (v. 10)

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and make me willing to obey you. (v. 12)

You cannot erase the past. You cannot decide what your marriage partner will do. You cannot control the conduct of your associates or the turn of world events. But you can do something about your sin, which cuts you off from personal inner peace. This is indeed good news! It is not someone else’s wrongs toward you that are causing your anxieties and tensions. It is your own sin. And you can do something about it by coming just as you are to God for his forgiveness and cleansing.

The choice is yours.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you feel as though you are at the mercy of your circumstances?
2. What is Dr. Brandt suggesting in this chapter about achieving true peace?
3. In what ways are you a peacemaker? In what areas of your life are you a flame fanner?
4. What is your reaction to Dr. Brandt's assertion: "This is the essence of peace—*it depends on you*"?
5. In what ways does our society promote a lack of personal accountability?

## TAKE ONE ACTION STEP

Based on the information in this chapter, what steps do you need to take to truly experience healing and wholeness?



## *Help for a Hard Journey*

Once you have accepted responsibility for your life, you will be tempted to backtrack, to again lay the blame for your ups and downs, your troubles and defeats at someone else's door. But don't become discouraged here—or misled. Temptation is something you hold in common with all people. And it too is something you must meet with whatever resources you have and be responsible for your response to it.

What is temptation? Many years ago, Smiley Blanton, a noted psychiatrist, offered a good definition:

Every day of your life, no matter how sheltered you are, you face some choice in which the wrong action is so seductive, so plausible, so pleasurable that it takes a conscious effort of will to reject it. Temptation is universal, as old as the Garden of Eden. Much of your happiness or unhappiness depends on your ability to handle it—instead of letting it handle you.<sup>1</sup>

You are driving down the highway in your new-to-you car. The speed signs limit you to 70 miles an hour. But the way is clear, no one is around, and you know the car really cruises at 85. The temptation is to step on the gas.

As a Christian, you are committed to tithing your income to the Lord, but the furniture is shabby and the sales are on. You are tempted to rationalize withholding your tithe “just this one time.”

You have promised to spend the evening with your family. A fellow

worker, however, has two tickets to the deciding ball game of a crucial series. He wants you to go with him. You are tempted to go.

*Temptation is something you hold in common with all people.*

Temptation does not always appear as a terrible, undesirable, evil thing that you won't want to do. You may have little or no problem saying no to something that you aren't interested in doing. But you may be greatly tempted to say yes to something you want to do but know you shouldn't. (Or it could be the reverse—something that you should do but don't want to.)

Elisabeth Elliot observed:

Choices will continually be necessary and—let us not forget—possible. Obedience to God is always possible. It is a deadly error to fall into the notion that when feelings are extremely strong we can do nothing but act on them.<sup>2</sup>

At the moment of temptation, the thing may seem so right. An impulsive purchase that wrecks the household budget seems so right at the time. To teach someone a lesson who deserves a punch in the face, or at the very least a verbal lashing, seems so right in the passion of emotion. So right—except that the emotion that is telling you, “it’s the right thing to do,” can be so deceitful.

Ruby had the day off and was preparing for evening guests when her cell phone rang. Some friends were meeting downtown for lunch and wanted to know if she could join them.

“I’d love to meet you, but I really have so much yet to do before my company arrives this evening.”

“It’s just a quick lunch.”

“Well, I don’t know.” It was a difficult decision. She certainly wanted to join her friends, but she really did have a lot to do yet. What should she do? She faced temptation. This was not a critical choice, but it was a choice all the same.

Monica and her neighbor were golfing. It was a beautiful morning and they were about to tee off for the third hole when two men approached the

women and asked if they could play through. Monica and her friend readily agreed. But before the men went on, one suggested that the women join them in their game. The women looked at each other. Monica had never faced this situation before. She was quite uneasy about the suggestion, but her neighbor agreed before she could think much about it.

The men proved to be great company—and most attentive. One of the men teed up Monica’s ball for her, pulled her bag, and offered some great advice on how she could improve her iron shots. Perhaps he was a bit too friendly, yet she enjoyed the attention.

After the game the foursome drank iced tea in the clubhouse. As they were about to leave, one of the men suggested they all have lunch together at a nice little restaurant nearby. Monica was tempted—the morning had been so much fun. To refuse took a definite act of her will, but she did it.

At home, as she reflected on her morning, she was upset that she had responded so warmly to this strange man. The morning had been filled with temptation, and she knew she needed to tell her husband. She found out—as you probably have—that temptation can pop up in the most unexpected places and in the most unusual ways. It can make you aware of desires that take you by surprise. The Bible tells us,

And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, “God is tempting me.” God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. So don’t be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. (James 1:13–16)

The temptations that bother most people are not those that clearly lead into sin. Not many people struggle with the temptation to steal. But the semi-visible testings are something else. It was not perfectly clear what choice Ruby should make. At what point should Monica have declined interacting with the two men? Each one of us has our own personal standards that we have chosen to live by; to fall short is to cause ourselves personal anxiety. If Ruby has set for herself a goal of having everything prepared for her guests, and then drops the project, it is likely she will

not enjoy the luncheon or get her work done either. The apostle Paul said, “You may believe there’s nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don’t feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right” (Romans 14:22).

Everyone faces tempting circumstances. While I was writing this book, I was tempted to walk away from my writing for a day and attend a professional golf tournament that was playing in town. To take a break might have been all right, but I had committed myself to a deadline for finishing the manuscript. I resisted the temptation every day but one.

It was an exciting tournament. My enjoyment of it, however, was dampened by the fact that I had left an unfinished task behind. I constantly condemned myself for the thing I had allowed.

## PREPARING FOR THE TEST

In *advance* of a temptation you must make up your mind not to yield to it. Nevertheless, when temptation comes, you must reaffirm your previously made decision, and this will require a definite act of the will.

Character is forged from encounters with life that tempt you to do wrong. The erring attraction is always present. Paul reminded the Corinthians: “If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

It is good for people to share their experiences with one another.

*We are all tempted  
to please ourselves,  
but the pathway  
to inner peace is to  
lose ourselves in  
God's way, to follow  
him and do his  
will at all costs.*

You may feel that no one faces the same temptation you do, but they do! As a counselor, I see this constantly. Someone struggles to tell of his temptations. At times, he relates, he overcomes them; at times, he fails. In telling his story he feels that he is revealing something that no one else has ever experienced. However, in almost every circumstance, I am able to assure him that I have heard his story before.

Logan, a sincere Christian and deacon in his church, cannot keep his eyes off a woman who recently joined

the church.

Jack has an impulse to slip that irresistible candy bar into his pocket.

Paula would like to give her neighbor a piece of her mind because the neighbor won't keep her children out of Paula's yard.

The person who thinks they are the only one to face a particular kind of temptation is inclined to justify yielding to it. However, the words of Paul challenge and encourage us:

The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Choosing the way of escape is always a choice, and God is always ready to help you make that choice, but you must remember that your decision on whether or not to yield to temptation comes in the guise of a wrong action that is “so seductive, so plausible, so pleasurable that it takes a conscious act of the will to reject it.”<sup>3</sup> The desire to do what you want to do, even though it is wrong, is always strong.

Jesus gave us a strange-sounding formula to help in these types of situations:

“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.” (Matthew 16:24–25)

We are all tempted to please ourselves, but the pathway to inner peace is to lose ourselves in God's way, to follow him and do his will at all costs. Inner peace comes to those who “seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously” (Matthew 6:33), to those who “pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11). To enjoy God's peace, you must “pursue the things which make for peace” (Romans 14:19, NKJV).

## WHEN TEMPTATION PURSUES YOU

Temptation will pursue you even when you seek to determine in what, or in whom, you will put your faith. If you choose the Bible as your guide, there will be those who will try to divert you from it.

In my early 20s I went through a period of rejecting the church, the Bible, and anyone who claimed to be a Christian. It was easy to find people who encouraged me in my rejection. I read educators and psychologists who made it quite clear that man was capable of taking care of himself without crutches such as church and the Bible. Scientific research, they said, would save us.

But God has his “persuaders” too. If you reject the Bible, there will be those who will challenge your decision and seek to “tempt” you to return to God’s Word and the things of the Lord. There were people in my life who knew me and who had been helped by the church, the Lord, and a study of his Word and they were not content to let me rest in my decision to walk away from God. They called me frequently and exerted great effort to get me to reconsider my position.

It was a long process, but after several years I returned to the church and renewed my faith in God and the Bible. During college and graduate school, I purposed in my heart, by faith, to use the Bible as my standard for conduct and for evaluating what I heard or read.

However, just as my friends in the church had not been content to let my rejection go unchallenged, so my fellow students and professors did not let my decision to accept the Bible as my guide go unchallenged. “How can you possibly explain putting your faith in the Bible and at the same time be a student of psychology?” they would ask. They tempted me greatly to again reject my faith. I wanted my friends and professors to respect and like me. But to have their full respect meant to put my faith where theirs was—in the idea that man is in a process of evolution, in the belief that with our own hands we can build a world of peace.

They never let me forget that every man has a right to choose how he will spend his life and that it is not right for one to impose his standards on another. But as I understood it, the kind of life a man will live is not a matter of his own opinion. Everyone will be judged someday, and the standard for judgment is the Bible. Holding to such a view, I stood alone.



How great was the temptation to be like the people around me and embrace their ideology!

There are writers and speakers, some of them ministers and seminary professors, who are not convinced that the Bible is entirely the Word of God. To consider what they say is to court temptation to give up your reliance on the Bible. Something you read or hear on the radio, or in a speech, or in a conversation, or see on television, can tempt you to deviate from what you believe. This will be true whatever course you follow. Having chosen a way for yourself, you will be tempted incessantly to turn from it. And tempting you will be people you admire.

John came to see me with a sincere question that troubled him. “Some of the finest people I know are not Christians. They openly spurn the Bible. Yet they seem to be happy and get along well with other people. Some of the leading people in my church are much harder to get along with and do not appear to be as happy as those who are not Christians. If God’s way is the only way to peace, then why are these non-Christians happy with life and the Christians that I know are not?”

That’s a good question. It brings out the point made that one’s conduct does have an impact on others. This young man’s faith was being shaken by the behavior of professing Christians. According to his observations, it did not seem to matter if he did or did not place his faith in Christ and God’s Word.

John’s observations were correct, but you can become confused by observing others. The Bible tells us, “The LORD doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

As a counselor, I see many people who are woefully unhappy individuals, but who never give any out-ward indication of it. A person’s outward behavior does not always give a measure of what is going on inside them. God “gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just

*Where will you place your faith? In the conduct of another person? In the words or writings of an individual? Or in God and his Word?*

and the unjust alike” (Matthew 5:45). We must be careful about making judgments based on what we perceive to be another person’s happiness or contentment. Paul said, “So let’s stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall” (Romans 14:13).

Where will you place your faith? In the conduct of another person? In the words or writings of an individual? Or in God and his Word? You alone must make this choice and then face the ceaseless temptations to change your choice.

When John had questions about the conduct of Christians and their experience with life, it seemed reasonable to turn away from the Bible and to take the viewpoint followed by those who appeared happier. This young man had to make a choice.

## YOUR GUIDE TO PEACE

Now it is my privilege to “tempt” you with my viewpoint. It is that I have discovered, and have helped others discover, that the Bible is your sure guide to peace.

I have learned that the man who violates biblical principles will be unhappy, whether he appears to be or not, just as the man who disobeys the rules of health will be sick, whether he looks like it or not. I say this by faith, but I also say it from experience. The unhappy, tense, anxious, miserable person who comes to a counselor for help is usually knowingly or unknowingly violating some biblical principle.

How do you approach the God who can give you inner peace? “It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). The writer of Hebrews also tells us, “Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see” (11:1).

You must approach God by faith. You must trust him fully, with your mind set on him and his ways. “You [God] will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you! Trust in the LORD always, for the LORD GOD is the eternal Rock” (Isaiah 26:3–4).

As you trust God, he will give you assurance that you are on the right path. However, trials, troubles, conflicts, other viewpoints, and unexpected failures on your part and on the part of people you admire will challenge

your evidence. Allow these things to throw you back on faith alone.

## A CHALLENGE AND REWARD

Let me “tempt” you one more time. I want to invite you to a one-year test of studying and applying to your life what you find in the Bible. It takes time to study, to ponder, and to test what the Bible says. After all, a student who chooses a psychology career spends four years just getting a bachelor’s degree. At that point, the student is only a beginner in the field even though he has studied and tested many principles. It also takes time to study and test the guidance the Bible offers to those who trust God, its author.

Paul tells us, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2). We do not propose a simple, easy approach to inner peace. It is a struggle, with a starting point based on simple faith. There will be many temptations along the way to draw you aside. It is a pathway that is rejected by many serious, dedicated, sincere people.

*God is waiting  
for you to  
turn to him.*

The reward is still there for those who choose God’s way, in spite of the difficulties. And there is help along the journey. God is waiting for you to turn to him.

Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. (Hebrews 4:16)

Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

Jesus said, “Ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it!” (John 14:14)

And he followed that invitation with these words:

“If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate [the Holy Spirit], who will never leave you.” (John 14:15–16)

If you want your prayers for help answered, become familiar with the commands of God in the Bible. Verbalize your longings before God, then wait to see what he will do. John 14:13 tells us, “You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father.” If you have asked according to *his* will (that is, if you have prayed with the sincere desire that God’s will may be done and not your own), you will have what you asked for. It is yours if it fits into God’s plan. However, God’s plan is often not our plan! Isaiah 55:8–9 remind us:

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

And so we trust in God’s goodness, for “loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

My challenge to you is to accept the Bible as your guide and to obey God’s commands fully. If you do, you will find that the Bible is a mirror in which you will see yourself as you really are. And when you see yourself, you will have a choice as to how you are going to respond. You will be tempted to look away and forget what you have seen. And in looking away you will soon become absorbed in counterattractions that will not let you return for a second look.

James 1:23–25 tells us,

For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

If by faith you choose to address the issues in your life, you will find inner peace along the way as well as at the end of the road.

Peter wrote,

If you want to enjoy life and see many happy days, keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn away from evil and do good. Search for peace, and work to maintain it. The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right, and his ears are open to their prayers. But the Lord turns his face against those who do evil. (1 Peter 3:10–12)

In closing, consider two beautiful promises God makes to his people. They can be yours if you obey him:

And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.” (Jeremiah 29:11–13)

Be assured that God will do his part when you obey him ... and your struggle for inner peace will be won.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When and where do you most often experience temptation?
2. How can you begin to more easily recognize the temptation in your life?
3. Who in your life are you currently sharing your life experiences with?
4. In what ways are the people you identified in question three helping you to live a more God-honoring life? Do you need someone else in your life to help you in this area?
5. In what ways does the Bible currently guide your life?

## TAKE ONE ACTION STEP

Begin the one-year test of studying and applying to your life what you find in the Bible. Study, ponder, and test what the Bible says. Apply it to your life and experience the peace that God is offering you.

# Notes

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# The Struggle for INNER PEACE

- Does worry, fear, guilt, or temptation threaten to drag you under?
- Are you trying to cope but losing the war?
- Do you feel as though your mind will never be free?

## Inner peace is within your reach!

The struggle for peace is just that—a struggle. And it requires that you recognize and deal with the root cause of your problem. It would be wonderful if simply forgetting a problem actually removed it. But such is not the case. Harsh, bitter, unforgiving emotions and attitudes are stored up, not eliminated, as long as they remain harsh, bitter, and unforgiving.

The struggle for peace is a spiritual matter, involving your inner spirit and how you react to the things that come your way. The source of peace involves your relationship to God.

Inner peace may be a struggle, but victory is certain when you daily acknowledge your weaknesses and surrender yourself totally to the promises and commands of God.

Mixing case studies with practical, biblical advice, Dr. Henry Brandt offers hope to the hurting and peace to the perplexed. It is time to address the issues in your life and to embrace the life and peace God has for you. Lighten your emotional load. Breathe easier and enjoy life more than ever before.

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Dr. Henry Brandt is often called the “Father of Modern-Day Biblical Counseling.” As a sought-after international consultant, biblical counseling pioneer, author, and conference speaker, he possessed a unique background combining multiple degrees in psychology with a keen understanding of biblical principles. For decades he personally counseled individuals to evaluate their heart attitudes and behavior in the light of biblical teaching and guided them to a godly solution in the midst of their challenging circumstances. In 2003, the American Association of Christian Counselors presented Henry with their Care Giver Award for his lifetime achievements in counseling.

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