

How Can We Maintain 'Peace of Mind'?

by Ron. R. Ritchie

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

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

Stress can be an extremely damaging condition if we fail to understand it and deal with it. Family, business and social relationships can begin to unravel. As a result, many among us are forced to seek deliverance from it. 'How do you spell relief?' could well be regarded as the question of the 80's. Some seek relief in very positive ways--through exercise, for instance. Seven years ago I took up jogging. In those years I have experienced many worthwhile benefits through running. I don't know whether I'll live longer, but I do know I'm enjoying life much more and I'm feeling less stress since I began jogging. Others, however, seek relief through drugs; while yet others seek the ultimate escape from stress--suicide.

Meanwhile, two old friends have appeared under new names to offer relief and deliverance from this stressful society. I'm referring to the 'human potential' movement and the 'new age' movement. If you want to know what the human potential movement is, just go into any bookstore and check the books on display. The titles don't need any explanation: 'Go For It,' 'Own Your Own Life,' 'How To Take Charge Of Your Life,' 'The Sky Is The Limit.' Then there is the one I almost bought, 'How To Cope With Difficult People!' If you don't like to read you can learn how to do all these things at seminars or retreats, or through slickly packaged video or audio cassettes. The ultimate aim of this movement, of course, as the book titles proclaim, is ego--massage. Recently I saw advertized the ultimate ego trip, 'How To Be A Winner.' Just what I've always wanted! This package proclaimed that you can be a winner by developing your ability for self-achievement, self--motivation, self-image, self--control, self--esteem. Self is the name of the game. This is the philosophy of every generation since man first appeared on the face of the earth. It may appear under different names and guises, but it is still the philosophy that says you are the master of your fate; take control of your life and be a winner.

The 'new age' movement, on the other hand, promises to deliver you from stress by addressing your soulish or spiritual nature. New age advocates have become disenchanted with secular ways of thinking. They seek relief by advocating so--called 'new' perspectives, claiming 'All is one,' and 'All is God.' God is referred to as 'It,' or, as in Star Wars, 'The Force.' One new age writer claims, 'We are all gods whether we realize it or not. We need to awaken the god who sleeps at the root of our humanity.' This philosophy, of course, is but another name for Hinduism, Buddhism, and the ideas of self-appointed Eastern mystics. Some Christians, unfortunately, are being tempted to find relief from stress in the way these movements advocate. The diabolical voice is once again being heard, 'You surely shall not die, for God knows that in the day you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' Faced with the pressures and stresses of life, Christians need to ask themselves if it was God's original intent for humanity, faced with stress, to respond by claiming to be self-proclaimed winners or gods; or does God have a better arrangement for living, regardless of the stressful circumstances of our society and age?

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

In the gospels we see that the Lord Jesus himself experienced much stress in his days on earth. We only have to think of his struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane to see the reality of this. The apostle Paul also experienced much stress in his ministry of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. In this series of messages on his second letter to the Corinthians we will see how Paul demonstrated this new arrangement for living under stressful circumstances arranged by God. We will learn from Paul's life the secrets of our own humanity, and how God designed us to live under and deal with stress. Stress itself is not the issue; how we deal with it is the important thing.

First, let us set the scene by looking at the background to the letter. In Acts 18 we learn that Paul, on his second missionary journey, arrived in Corinth in 52 A.D. There he met Aquila and Priscilla, and together they worked at the trade of tentmaking. Every Sabbath, Paul went to the synagogue to preach Jesus Christ to Jews and Greeks alike. When Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth from Macedonia, Paul decided to devote himself full-time to the teaching of the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But the Jews resisted and blasphemed, and Paul declared to them, 'Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles.' The apostle remained on in Corinth for 18 months, and the church grew rapidly.

Then he went on to Ephesus, and then to Jerusalem. After five years had gone by, conflict broke out between the apostle and the Corinthian church over the issue of how to deal with sin in the body of Christ. (1 Cor. 5:9) Further, some false apostles had infiltrated the church (2 Cor. 11:15), confusing the believers and launching an attack on Paul's apostleship, his ministry and his personality. These events caused Paul much grief and anguish of spirit, so he wrote four letters to the Corinthian church, seeking reconciliation. The first letter he wrote we now call the 'lost letter.' In it he dealt with the issue of whether the church should fellowship with brothers who were living in sin. (1 Cor. 5:9-13) Then he wrote a second letter, which we now refer to as First Corinthians. This was a pastoral letter, in which he encouraged the Corinthians to avoid competition and flee sexual immorality.

It appears Paul then made a quick visit to Corinth, and what he found there was devastating to him. Upon his return to Ephesus he wrote what we now call his 'painful letter,' which is also lost to us. In this letter, hand-carried by Titus to the church (While Paul awaited their reply in Troas, to be brought to him by Titus), he asked the Corinthians to deal with sexual immorality within the church; and he also sought reconciliation between himself and the Corinthians. In Paul's fourth letter, which we call Second Corinthians (his 'thankful letter'), we learn that the Corinthians did indeed accept his loving rebuke and they were reconciled to him. In this Second Corinthian letter, then, Paul shares with the church at Corinth his feelings as he awaited their response to his 'painful letter,' and also some of the things he learned as he awaited Titus in the city of Troas. That is the context of this 'thankful letter' of Paul, Second Corinthians.

In his account of this season of stress which he underwent as he awaited word from Corinth we will seek to uncover some of the mystery of Paul's relationship with Jesus, together with some of the spiritual principles that enabled him to cope with reality in a fallen world. (2 Cor. 1:8-10) Let us then address the question, 'How can we maintain peace of mind in the midst of a society that is bent on falling to pieces, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, a society being crushed under the stress of living in the computer age?'

1. Be conscious of the presence of the Lord 2 Cor.2: 12-13

Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

Troas, where Paul sat awaiting Titus, was a Roman colony, named Alexandria Troas in honor of Alexander

the Great. By 57 A.D. the city was a flourishing little Rome, basking in many political privileges given by the hand of Caesar. Paul was quite familiar with this city, located some 150 miles north of Ephesus, for it was here, some five years earlier, he had had a vision. Acts 16:9 tells us, 'During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" Paul at once set out for Macedonia, 'concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.' Beginning in Philippi, the gospel moved westward to Europe. So, having been in this city earlier, Paul knew there were some believers there, thus he went to Troas with a two--fold agenda, to wait for Titus, and to preach the gospel.

There he found, 'that the Lord had opened a door for me.' God had opened a door for him to preach the good news of Christ as he had done once before in that city. That was Paul's very heartbeat, to preach Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah who had come to take away the sins of mankind. Jesus was and is the only and final solution to man's sin, guilt and shame. As the perfect Lamb of God, he who knew no sin took upon himself our sins at Calvary. Then God the Father decreed that all who by faith believe that Jesus is his Son, and acknowledge him as Lord and Savior, asking him to forgive their sins, will henceforth be called his children, and they would receive the Person and power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to cope with reality. That was Paul's message everywhere he went.

Not only was he willing and ready to preach the gospel, he was keenly aware of the presence of the resurrected Lord going before him, opening some doors of opportunity and closing others. As he stood in the marketplace of the city of Troas, then, his heart must have been beating with joy and fear as he anticipated the Lord working through him. He was probably encouraged by his friends to make good use of the opportunity of the open door to proclaim the gospel of Christ. But, amazingly, despite the open door, despite the presence of the resurrected Lord and the assurance of his spiritual family, Paul says, 'I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there.'

In these words we get a glimpse of Paul's humanity. He is a man filled with the Holy Spirit, convinced that the Lord is at work through him, and yet he finds no rest in his spirit because Titus is not there at Troas to reassure him that his beloved Corinthian church is reconciled to him. He has no peace of mind, no rest in his spirit. Where is the use in starting a new work if his spiritual family in Corinth is still struggling over whether he was a genuine apostle of Christ? he probably wondered. Are they still angry at me or have they repented? Should I return to Corinth again and try to work out that situation before beginning a new ministry? There are always more opportunities to share the gospel than there is time or energy or Christians to meet. God is somehow behind all of that. He seems to place us in these situations of stress and tension in order to teach us something.

So, failing to find Titus at Troas, and finding no rest in his spirit as a result, what does Paul do? 'I said good--bye to them and went on to Macedonia,' he tells us. He is perhaps hoping that Titus will meet him there in Philippi. I'm sure he felt he had not made a mistake by not entering the open door at Troas. Rather he struggled over what was good and what, perhaps, was even better. Later in this letter he writes this, 'For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn--conflicts on the outside, fears within.' (2 Cor. 7:5) So we see that while he was under stress at Troas as he awaited Titus, stress was his lot once again on his journey to Philippi.

A few years ago I was scheduled to preach with some of my fellow-pastors at our Good Friday service. Then on the morning of Good Friday I got a phone call telling me that a former student of mine had been killed in an accident driving home from college for spring vacation. This student had been part of a family whom I had poured my life into and who in turn had poured their lives into me. My heart was broken. I wanted so much to be with the family, and yet I had responsibilities here at PBC. I went back and forth in my mind, wondering what to do as the funeral was that very day. Finally I made my choice. I went to be with the family in Walnut Creek. It was a stressful time for me because I recognized my responsibilities at PBC. Although I found a substitute to take my place, I recognized that I should have been here. I had given my word.

At the funeral, however, I was very glad I had chosen to go. I had opportunity to minister to the family; and I also had a chance to meet many of my former students who were older now, with families of their own. All of us were sobered and shocked at the death of this wonderful young Christian woman. Then one of the pastors called and rebuked me for not being at PBC as I had been scheduled. I told him that one of my students had been killed and I felt I had to go to the funeral. We went around and around. I found myself under more stress

than ever. I asked the Lord what had I done wrong. Quietly he told me I had chosen between the good and the better, and although I thought I had chosen the better, some people did not see it that way. I had to depend on the Lord to work out the whole situation.

So again we ask the question, How can we maintain peace of mind in the midst of a stressful, fallen world? We should be conscious of the presence of the Lord. But we must also be aware that our walk of faith is not computer-programmed so that if we follow all the steps page by page we will experience immediate success. Paul illustrated in his life that he was keenly aware of the presence of the Lord. But he also was a man in the process of becoming mature in Christ, from one degree of glory to another. There was no such thing as instant spiritual maturity. Also, no doubt, there was some spiritual warfare involved in this situation he found himself in. So the key to maintaining peace of mind is learning to trust that God is at work. Even when we choose to walk away from open doors of opportunity God can still use our lives to bring great blessings to us and to others, as we will see.

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

2. Be conscious of the power of God 2 Cor.2:14-17

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

'But thanks be to God...' What has happened to Paul between verses 13 and 14 to make him utter this cry of thankfulness? It's obvious he's not thankful that Titus didn't meet him in Troas, or that the church in Corinth was being subverted by false apostles. Nor is he thankful for his conflict with the church there, for the lost opportunity to preach the gospel at Troas, or for the stress he experienced in that city and on his journey to Macedonia. What was he thankful for, then? We discover the reason in chapter 7 of this letter, which explains Paul's change of heart between verses 13 and 14 of our text:

But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever. (2 Cor. 7:6-7)

Paul was thankful that God was able to work above and beyond his stressful circumstances. Titus reported to him that the Corinthians had accepted the painful letter, they had repented of their attitude toward him, and they were dealing with the issue of sexual immorality in the church. Paul had no peace of mind in Troas while he awaited Titus, he was harassed at every turn on his way to Macedonia, but God was already at work changing the hearts of the Corinthians. No wonder he is able to say, 'Thanks be to God...' God can work in a much greater way than we can ever ask or think.

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

These processions were awe-inspiring spectacles. The whole populace of Rome flocked to see the parade of standard-bearers carrying the flags of the various military units; the reclining statue of Jupiter, the supreme

God of Rome, being carried along; carts containing the spoils of war; paintings and models of the conquered territory; musicians playing pipes; white bulls (which were later to be sacrificed to gods); prisoners in chains marching to their death; horn blowers; priests swinging pots of incense; captured kings and chieftains being carried in carts; other groups of prisoners; a golden chariot drawn by four white horses and driven by the victorious general, the wreath of Jupiter being held over his head by a slave; the general's family; the victorious army in full uniform, shouting, 'Lo! Triumph!'; and finally, the Roman hierarchy, senators and magistrates.

Here the apostle uses the spectacle of a Roman triumphal procession to illustrate the glory of the Christian's everyday walk in Christ. And this doesn't just happen once or twice in the Christian's life, unlike the victorious generals of Rome. Every day, come what may, even through what looks like utter and absolute defeat, Jesus Christ leads his followers in triumph as he wins spiritual battles over the enemy, over 'spiritual forces in the heavenly realm.' Remember that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' (Eph. 6:12) By his death and resurrection, Jesus has already defeated the evil one. Thus, even when things seem to be falling apart, Christians can cry, no matter what the circumstances--in the kitchen, at work and play, at the graveside of a friend and loved one, at the side of an abandoned family, when we find we've lost our jobs in this rapidly--changing valley--'Lo! Triumph!' We are in Christ, therefore all through our lives we are part of a continuing triumphal procession. 'Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.'

Further, Paul says, 'Through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.' Here the apostle is thinking of the priests in the triumphal procession, carrying pots of incense, the fragrance wafting over the whole procession. Paul compares Christians to incense pots: they carry with them everywhere the aroma of Christ so that those who come in contact with them experience the fragrance of the Lord. There is a man sitting here this morning who in the past employed some of our high school students. As he watched them and listened to them, as he observed their integrity, the sweet fragrance of Christ attracted and drew him to Jesus. In my office last week he told me exactly what a Christian is--one who has given his life over to Jesus as his Lord and Savior so that Jesus could live in and through him. That man is now one more incense pot who will spread the fragrance of our Lord everywhere he goes. (Make no mistake about it, however, there will very often be a negative response to that fragrance. Just last night as I sought to share Jesus Christ with a man, he resisted and changed the subject every time I introduced it. Paul speaks of that response too in these verses.) Christians will take that aroma of Christ with them into all kinds of situations. The fragrance will not disappear nor will it be restricted. It will linger long after they have left any group, any individual or situation.

Thirdly, Paul says, 'thanks be to God' because we are always acceptable in the sight of God. When God looks at the life of a Christian he regards us as totally acceptable because he looks at us through Christ. That's good news. I wouldn't want anybody to see the video tapes of my life before I came to Christ and my sins were forgiven. Yet when I come into the presence of God the Father and I tell him I'm sorry about the tapes, about how I lived my life before I came to him, he will look at me as one whose sins were forgiven in Christ and promise to remember my sins no more. We have been set free in Christ. That is why we are acceptable to God.

But that fragrance of the knowledge of Christ comes to the nostrils of two very different groups, Paul says. First, 'those who are being saved.' In the context, they would have been healthy and useful slaves--cooks, house servants, administrators, etc.--who were taken to the slave markets to be sold and scattered throughout the populus, many of them to be set free later. The second group Paul refers to are 'those who are perishing.' these were the captured kings and chieftains, riding in carts of humiliation along with the sick, the rebellious and the aged. All of these were taken to a tent following the parade and strangled. Thus the incense was to them 'the smell of death.' In the past year Ed Woodhall and I have seen sixteen people come to know Christ as Lord and Savior at a Bible study which meets in a nearby home. But at the same time we have also watched many people who have come to the study walk away from the fragrance of Christ because they found it to be 'the smell of death.' Everyone belongs in one group or the other. But we don't know who they are, so we minister in our communities expecting Christ to draw those who will respond to the gospel.

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

In light of these wonderful truths, as he seeks to encourage the Corinthians by what he was learning through both his struggles and the good news brought to him by Titus in response to his painful letter, there is stress evident in Paul's final words in this section: 'Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit.' False apostles had begun to peddle and huckster the word in the Corinthian church. Here Paul contrasts his Christ--centered ministry with their self--centered ministry. These false apostles (4:2) were watering down the Scriptures, trying to make them more palatable to the Corinthians. But Paul had already written to them, 'When I preached the gospel I offered it without charge.' (1 Cor. 9:18) I recently watched a TV preacher look right in the camera and snarl, 'I don't want tips. I don't want you to give unless you give for the right reasons. I don't want the church traffic, the \$5 givers.' Then he fixed his glare on the audience and bellowed, 'You're paying me for what I've already done. Pay up!' What a contrast was the apostle's word, 'When I preached the gospel I offered it without charge.'

Finally, Paul contrasts his ministry with that of the false apostles: 'On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.' He is saying to them, in effect, 'You Corinthians know that our life and power come from the resurrected Jesus working through us. We are always aware that our lives and words are seen and heard by God the Father, so we seek to live and speak righteously. As ambassadors of Christ our lives are not our own. We no longer live for ourselves. We are ministers of reconciliation.'

How can we maintain peace of mind in the midst of our hightech, fast-lane society? The voices of the human potential movement and the new age movement promise relief from physical, emotional and spiritual stress by telling us we can be winners, or by informing us we are gods. But the inspired apostle's answer is that the secret to maintaining peace of mind is to be conscious of the presence of our resurrected Lord who is forever with us as we grow in wisdom and knowledge; and also be conscious of the power of God who is able in and through us to defeat all our spiritual and human enemies as we walk day by day, trusting him in the midst of stress, not as winners or gods, but by being servants of the Living God.

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