



CPSC Notes

COUNCIL FOR PASTORAL AND SPIRITUAL COUNSELLORS

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The names of God's children are engraved into His hands!

Dear fellow Pastoral Caregivers!

When nothing make sense, we are forced to look somewhere for guidance and direction. Usually it is in our engagements with each other and in encouraging conversations. Our strength lies in our communion with God and our spiritual brothers and sisters.

The lockdown came suddenly and isolated us from each other, sometimes to the extent that we may have felt abandoned by God and man, and that nobody cares. Now all the restrictions are making us feel vulnerable and powerless.

This is similar to the feelings of Israel in exile. Their environment was foreign and it felt like even their God had forsaken them. It was in this uncertain time that Isaiah (49:14-16) had to help them understand their circumstances through the knowledge of God's faithfulness towards His people.

It was for God impossible to forget His children, just as it was for a mother to forget her baby. The nation came to learn much more about God in their time of isolation. He is an omnipresent God and is not fixed to a building or a temple - He always is where His people are!

God will never forsake His children, the work of His hands, the centre of His heart. Isaiah used a new metaphor to explain God's unfailing love: The names of God's children are engraved into His hands and nothing can take it away. God is not fixed to a building or a country, He is inseparable from His children, living in their hearts.

Take note of this message in these weird circumstances, where nothing seems certain. We should proclaim this message to the people around us and give them hope. When the future looks dark and uncertain, we must remember that God is the God of



yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is with us and wherever we will end.

Our focus should not be on our circumstances, but rather on the eternal God who safeguards our future. Nothing and no one can take it away!

David proclaimed "Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me (Ps 23:4). Let us live with courage because we are never alone, and God is with us to guide, strengthen and comfort us – He is the True Shepherd!

Lockdown

Covid-19 has changed a lot of our plans for 2020 and we had to adapt towards all the restrictions enforced by government. Fortunately, our office stayed open and Anita is still in good health, keeping all systems up to date.

However, we had to postpone our conference to 2021 and hope to get a new date in due time.

Sadly, during this lockdown time, we lost one of our dear chairpersons of the past, Andre de la Porte, and our hearts goes out to his family.

As pastoral care workers, we are all exposed to compassion fatigue and need to take special care of ourselves. As we are an essential workforce in this time, we need to be a beacon of hope for the nation and have the privilege to bear God's promised love and care for everyone seeking Him. He will never leave us, nor forsake us, regardless of our circumstances. In His hands we are safe.

I pray that you will feel the comfort of God's presence in your life and work. May His light shine in you and through you.

God bless!

Dr Tertius Erasmus

CEO: Association of Christian Religious Practitioners and Chairperson of CPSC ■

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Breaking the cycle of deceptive brain messages

A journey of growth in a time of uncertainty and fear

Dr Hanlie Meyer takes us on a journey of growth to be liberated from deceptive brain messages rooted in childhood experiences. These messages from deep within you keep your poor self-image intact. They link nearly every negative incident in your present-day life to incidents from your past.

This monologue in our brain is not a reflection of our true self, but is scripted into a fixed neuronal memory circuit, insulated with myelin. A whole new cycle must be created and become habitual. Our True Self is the life of Christ in us and not these negative, faulty messages. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit to constantly convict us of the love of God.

Although this has been written in the time of the national Covid-19 lockdown, these eternal truths will always apply to us as believers.



By Dr Hanlie Meyer, Counselling Psychologist in private practice

Disclaimer

The ideas set forth in this series are not representative of any of the boards or organisations I belong to, whether Religious or Professional. The ideas never intend to be a replacement of therapeutic interventions or an encouragement to stop medication. To the contrary: for those who are seeking therapeutic support, please do so.

The ideas presented do not claim to be the best or the only answer. They do not pretend to be a cure for all mental health challenges. Please do not apply these ideas without the support of your therapist if you are in therapy. I do not want to create the impression that if you followed these steps, you can become problem free. Life is to be lived day by day.

Are you familiar with the traditional “Sunday afternoon blues”? In our household, children were not allowed to do anything on a Sunday apart from going to church and Sunday School. The rest of the day had to be spent in “silence and reverence”.

To me it just felt as if a hand was slowly being pressed down on my chest until I could scarcely breathe. It was a mixture of complete boredom, guilt, anxiety and depression. These feelings would wrap themselves around my chest and work their way deep into my being until I was just one ball of emotion. I was scared and convinced that I was the only one feeling this and that there was something wrong with me – that I must be deeply flawed and ungrateful.

Do you recognise these feelings? We all receive an endless stream of messages of hope, encouragement, humour, etc. So, what is wrong with me that I cannot just “snap out” of my sadness, fear, sense of impending doom and confusion about my own cycling feelings?

► Negative self-talk

The source of our negative self-talk is the faulty messages from our self-referencing centre, that is also the well-spring of our sense of loneliness. This monologue in our brain is not a reflection of our true self, but is scripted into a fixed neuronal memory circuit, insulated with myelin. The script plays out in our brains like a movie we watch over and over.

We often envy others who seem so “together” or who are secure in a family set-up. We may now feel that we are bad Christians, in danger of being punished by God. This sense of shame and inferiority is sometimes strengthened by the inability to internalize the well-meant advice of others and the comfort coming from so many preachers from so many verses in Scripture.

The deep sense of shame and failure and negative messages might stem from past experiences when well-meant advice might have aggravated the feelings of failure and guilt and might have given rise to fear of disclosure or exposure.

I often use the concept of *editors* and *commentators* to better discern the opinions voiced around me.



Editors and commentators

An **editor** is someone who is willing to walk beside me no matter what it takes or how long it takes. It is the person who sees the image of God in me from God's perspective and not from mine. This person will honour my privacy, struggle, failures, discouragement, confusion, secret dreams and longings. This person will not preach or offer generic words of encouragement.

They will listen to my heart, watch my behaviour and offer suggestions about course adjustments according to my goals, without giving up when I stumble again and again. They will help me fix my eyes and hopes on the goal and keep them fixed there. One can compare an editor to a coach of an athlete or a sports team.

Commentators, on the other hand, are exactly that: they are full of comments on what I should or should not do, feel, think or desire. They sit at a distance and love to use phrases like "I told you so", "Why did you?" "Do not come to me when...", "I cannot understand why you..." These people are obviously very nice but they should not get authority in your life.

Embrace the loneliness and allow it to tell you what you miss in your life. Look for an editor - also called a wise advocate - to guide you in the process.

Editors are few - there are much more commentators. The wise editor in your life might not be your spouse, parent, child, sibling or best friend. Sometimes these people are the worst commentators! Being related or close to us, we give them the authority to make all sorts of comments about our lives.

These commentators might not even be present in our lives any more, but their opinions linger in our memories, recalled in trying times. This might happen especially when you are alone and challenged by uncertainty and inner conflicts.

The authority to be an editor in your life has to be earned. You are free to choose who you will allow to give inputs into your life. An editor meets you where you are. This person does not make fun of you, threatens you with a sword of rejection hanging over your head, neither counts the number of mistakes you make, or prescribe to you what you must do as if they had the ultimate answer. An editor is someone who is willing to see that there is a true self in you which differs from your self-talk and autobiographical memories.

My brain - the commentator

The interesting thing is that our brains are also commentators and not editors!

In their book **You are not your brain** (Penguin Group, New York, 2012) Jeffrey Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding made the following statement: "Nothing is more confusing or painful than when your brain takes over your thoughts, attacks your self-worth, questions your abilities, overpowers you with cravings, or attempts to dictate your actions" (p 3).

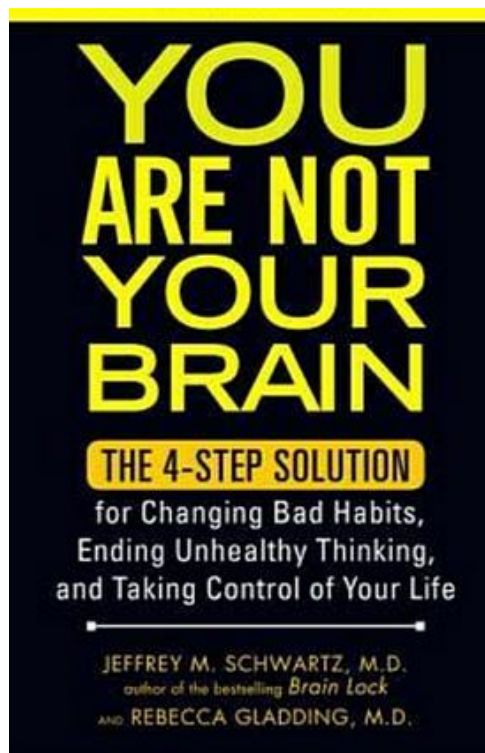
According to the authors, we can use our minds to not only change the way we feel, think or act when we are upset, but we can use our minds to actually change the programming and chemistry of our brains! This is called brain plasticity.

How can we know that the thoughts we have are active intended mindful thoughts or just messages our brains offer us? Normally brain-based messages come to our consciousness in the second person: "you are", "you are not", "you cannot".

These "faulty message" thoughts belittle you, compare you negatively to others and make you feel incompetent. This negative self-talk is recorded throughout your life.

The self-referencing centre

A baby has no reference to interpret experiences and peoples' actions. The brain has to learn from birth through interaction with people. This occurs first from our primary caregivers, all with their own histories, strengths and weaknesses.



These imprints are flawed and lack objective information about who we are and can become. Our memory circuits combine all incidents, interpretations, intense emotional sensations, by forming convictions and habits, that bring temporary relief from the intense distress experienced as a baby.

And there you go: a nice negative package to pop up from your brain when you are not consciously applying your mind to new creative problem-solving thoughts!

These debilitating, faulty messages well up from deep inside you and feel like the truth about you. This is the self-referencing centre in the brain - extremely subjective and selective. It only takes information on board that collaborates with the already existing convictions.

Fortunately, we have brain plasticity - we can rewire our brains...

For all of us who are so fed-up with the old brain messages of not being good enough, being compared to other people, having missed God's plan for our lives, always messing up, never being able to see something through, this new knowledge regarding how to renew the wiring in the brain and create permanent new habits can be life-changing.

What will it ask of you? You will have to pay attention to this moment by moment until the new habit has been formed. Just like your academic studies required repetition to form knowledge, the rewiring of the brain need dedication.

Focussed attention over time allows the activated brain areas to form a new memory circuit and a new habit that are stabilized and fused through the Quantum Zeno effect, described by Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p65).

Bear in mind that these neuronal circuits are insulated and protected with myelin when they have been sufficiently and consistently repeated. You cannot change, cut or destroy that memory circuit.

Brain renewal requires focussed attention. Use this time at home to start changing your self-talk and aligning it with your true self. Human beings will heed the instructions and commands of the faulty and deceptive brain messages to strengthen them and keep them nicely in place.

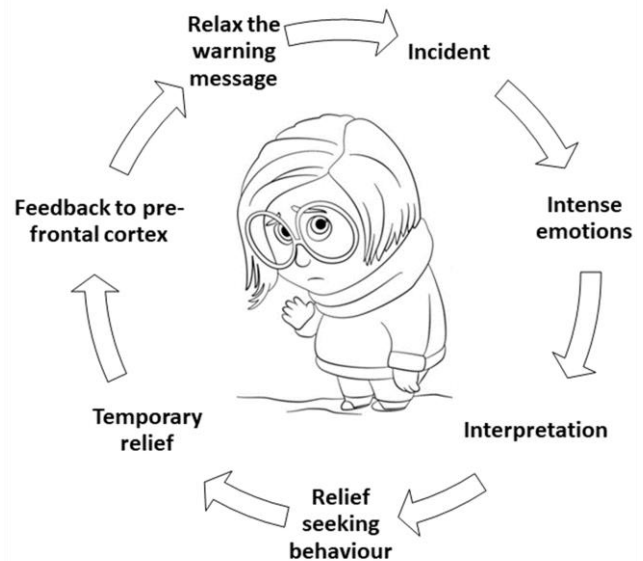
Whenever we are faced with a new situation or a challenging situation the brain scans the environment for clues it can use to recall already existing files. Our brain wants to help us cope with the situation but can only act on information already stored.

According to Schwartz and Gladding we cannot choose what our brains will offer us next - we can only choose what to do with the information. The next challenge is how do we know that the brain messages are really faulty messages. Should we not pay attention to them as warnings?

► The cycle of deceptive brain messages

You may have always used the messages that come from deep within you as warning signs that you should never think more of yourself than you should. They are effective in keeping your poor self-image intact. They have made you vulnerable to other peoples' opinions and /or successes. They constantly remind you of who you are and cannot be.

They link nearly every negative incident in your present-day life to incidents from your past warning you loud and clear not to make yourself vulnerable again or expose yourself to other people as people are untrustworthy and out to harm or hurt you.



The cycle of deceptive brain messages

The emotional sensations of negative self-talk scream for your full attention – exactly the thing that keeps them nicely in place to wreak havoc on another day.

To which of these thoughts may I then pay attention? How can something that feels so true not be true? Understand that these are not thoughts – they are memory circuits that have been hard wired according to the process:

Incident > Intense emotions > Interpretation > Relief seeking behaviour > Temporary relief > Feedback to the thinking and judgment part of the brain (pre-frontal cortex) > Instruction to the emotional warning system to relax the warning message caused by the original stimulus.

This represents the first complete cycle that started the formation of the initial memory including behaviour that provided relief from the intense emotional discomfort.

This cycle captured your attention and you reinforced the memory to become more complicated - including more and more people, opinions, incidents, assumptions, increasingly unhelpful relief-generating behaviours.

It is as if you argue with your brain in an unwinnable argument. Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p 11-12) refer to this as **the cycle of deceptive brain messages** – these emotional sensations are not based in the truth of where you are now.

To explain what they mean they quote the example of recently having lost a loved one: you will feel sad and if the person was very close to you, you might feel intense grief. This is a real emotion because it is aroused by an incident in the present. These kinds of emotions should not be avoided, denied or neglected.

In contrast to this: if you had the thought that you are stupid to feel this sadness and that you should just get over it, that people will like you less or think that there is something wrong with you because you have this emotion, you will immediately be overwhelmed by the emotional sensations that have been wired into the original circuit. These are not authentic emotions created in the here and now – they are wired into the cycle. The more you try to overcome these and make the feeling go away, the less you succeed. This is not because of who you are – it is the deceptive brain message circuit that is running on its own steam.

If you stood back from this you will be able to see that these emotional sensations suck you in, take up all your time, cause you to turn what people say around in your head to mean something negative regarding you and your relationship with the person. It automatically sets off the old routine of habitually doing what apparently brought relief way back when this circuit was formed. These behaviours are different for different people: procrastination, denial, anger outbursts, escaping in work,

over-eating, swearing, withdrawal, abusing alcohol drugs or medication, over-exercising, self-loathing and analysis, escape in sleep, gambling, and constantly asking forgiveness – the list is endless. We might even do more than one of these.

The test

Ask yourself: How do we know that they are deceptive brain messages? Did you sit down and apply your mind in constructive creative planning or problem-solving or did these just come up as “logical conclusions” based on your past or assumptions? Are they helpful in describing your true self and enhancing your goal directedness and goal achievement?

Your response to these questions will immediately show whether you are already in a deceptive cycle: if you think “I will never overcome this”, “This is maar me – so gemaak en so laat staan”, “this is too difficult”, “she is definitely referring to me” – then you are already in a deceptive cycle.

But take courage – there is hope!

► The biology of deceptive brain messages

We are slowly moving towards the practical suggestions on how to really rewire your brain. Please take note that this is not an indication that you may stop taking medication for anxiety, depression or OCD. Also bear in mind that these strategies will not clear up current emotions and traumatic memories. These you will still need to face and deal with. The strategies we will look at are effective for the old circuits regarding your self-image, your view of other people, the world – and God.

What follows is a simplified version of the Biology of this process that helped me to get rid of the stigma of “it is all in your head” – it is so useful just to know that this is actually a chemical-electrical process within physical circuits and brain structures.

How liberating to realise that I can rewire the connections within my brain - using my mind to employ my brain in my service, instead of allowing my brain to decide how I should feel and do.

Mindfulness means to distance yourself from your emotions - looking at them from “the outside”. To know that I am not my brain, empowers me - I can stand back and address the different areas like a conductor of an orchestra. It is fun to wait for the “old circuit” negative message to appear and be dispatched - “no, go away!”.

I now use my editors to grow an awareness of which old circuits are triggered easily. I had to let go of my sensitivity towards criticism. I became easier to allow inputs

from outside without having to defend myself the whole time!

My brain, my friend

Schwartz reckons that two parts of the executive brain (frontal cortex which is located in the front of the brain) are responsible for the formation of what he calls “error detection circuits”. The two areas are the orbital-pre-frontal cortex, the area behind the eyes, and the ventral-medial cortex that act as our self-referencing centre. This is the location of the autobiographical thinking about ourselves, our identity and worth, formed from childhood experiences.

Poorly defined values and dissonance to God’s character make the self-referencing centre more vulnerable to distortions regarding our identity and worth. Furthermore, the convictions we have about ourselves from an early age are influenced by care-givers’ attitudes and behaviour, and bullying. This centre will assess danger together with the warning system of the brain.

The second important area according to Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p 75) is the **Hypothalamus**, the drive centre – it is involved in hunger, thirst, sex and other basic bodily drives.

The following structures that come into play are the structures involved in the brain’s warning system. There are mainly three of these:

- **Amygdala:** this structure sets off alarms that influence the autonomic response centres in the brain-stem, the adrenal glands and other centres. This engenders the feelings of fear as well as the bodily sensations such as rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath

and sweating. The amygdala also assesses threats and sends signals that indicate whether something is a frightening situation/person and should be avoided. However, the amygdala is extremely subjective – it cannot think – it reacts to sensory input.

- **Insula:** According to Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p76) the insula is responsible for “gut-level” responses such as dread or what most of us experience as a knot in the stomach.
- **Anterior Cingulate** acts in close connection with either the amygdala or the insula. It is intimately involved with detecting errors and assessing risks and rewards. This creates the immediate sense of impending doom.

Together these three centres are labelled **the “Uh-Oh” centre** by the authors. When this overwhelming sensation arises, you experience an incredibly uncomfortable state in which you will do almost anything to get relief. This includes primarily falling back on your old habits. At this point the basal ganglia kick into action.

Basal Ganglia: A group of structures found deep within the cerebral hemispheres. It is responsible for your automatic thoughts and actions – in other words your physical and mental habits. Within the basal ganglia the *caudate* is responsible for automatic thoughts and the *putamen* – responsible for automatic actions like riding a bike. The authors refer to this as your *habit centre*.

In the presence of deceptive brain messages accompanied by intense discomfort this habit centre will play an important role in determining what you do next. These will be repetitive thoughts, actions, or inaction – anything that you do repeatedly that will take your focus off doing something that is beneficial to you.

When you engage in this temporary relief creating actions/thoughts a feedback loop is formed between the executive centre (frontal cortex) and the habit centre. A repetitive association between the uncomfortable sensation, action and relief is formed.

When this cycle is formed, the Quantum Zeno effect results in a habit being formed. The *caudate* is glued into the cycle and cannot automatically shift the gear!

The hope lies in the fact that we can now train the *caudate* by means of neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to renew) to manually shift the gear. Just to “think positively” never really worked in the past. You can now

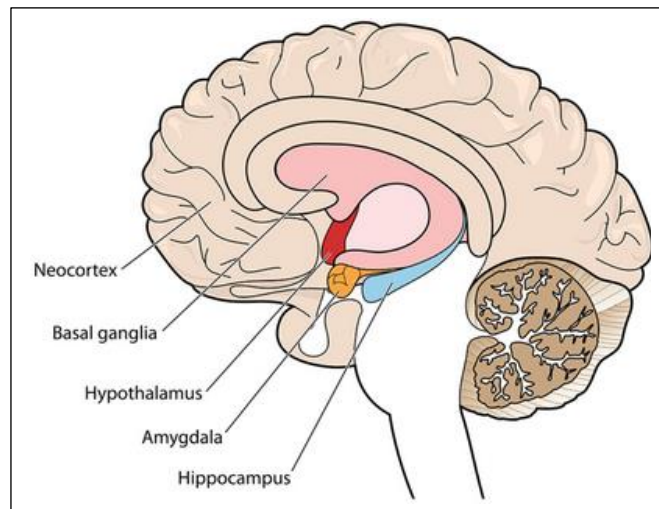
retrain the habit centre - visualise the brain process and instruct your brain to respond to a new positive cycle!

But please bear in mind that it takes dedication – active mindful attention to what you think but most importantly, to what you do. ■

► Breaking the negative cycles

Some people experience anxiety in the present crisis due to legitimate fears of job loss, business closedown, loss of investment interest and thus pension. These are authentic.

But the intensity of your current negative emotional sensations may be due to it being memorised into negative cycles hard-linked to old crises or challenges. They just use any opportunity to pop up! Do not be fooled by them. You cannot trust a single one of these messages as they are in no way helpful, creative, linked to active thinking in order to solve a problem or improve a relationship.



The cycle consists of thoughts, emotional sensations, habitual relief seeking behaviour and positive feedback to the cortex regarding the success of the past behaviour. It cannot be combatted with the mind alone.

As an example: I love walking. With the lockdown that privilege has been taken away (*hear the negative tone*) so I will have to sit the whole day (*hear the lie*) and I will get so frustrated (*another lie and part of an old*

cycle starting to pop up) and I will pick up so much weight. I am now firmly on the way to over-analysing, self-loathing and anxiety (*as I am a victim and a failure*). A huge depression is more or less unavoidable at this point.

This results in one or more relief-creating habits – sleeping, over-eating, self-castigation, aggression towards a loved one, irritability or over-doing whatever exercises I engage in. Sounds familiar?

Laying new patterns

To become the true self you really are, a whole new cycle will have to be created and become habitual. The two habit centre structures (*caudate* and *putamen*) must be “unlocked” to be able to shift the gear to new thoughts, emotions and behaviour. You need to engage in new behaviour to expand the Self-Referencing Centre: Actively seek new things to do and then interpret new situations in a fresh way.

For the walking example, I need to find new ways to exercise that is truly rewarding. Doing it in a place where I can enjoy music, or a television programme, or can pray for other people. Be creative.

Now I feel better for a few reasons – most importantly that I am no longer feeling like a victim. As you come out of the negative cycle, you form a new cycle based on authentic emotions, while thoroughly enjoying it.

In order for behaviour to stick and become a habit, we need to get something out of it. Schwartz points out that the *caudate* is in close contact with the *accumbens nucleus* that releases dopamine – the neurotransmitter that causes us to feel good. This gives the positive feedback to the cortex that the problem has been solved.

Addictive behaviours like smoking, drugs, eating, etc. stimulate the dopamine release by themselves or by kidnapping the dopamine receptors in the brain and mimicking dopamine. This positive feedback obviously encourages the unhelpful behaviour. The question is: Am I really willing to go through the discomfort of learning a whole new cycle while I can get a quick relief?

You hold the key to moving towards a new sense of self that will be aligned with the true self and learn behaviour that will be more satisfying than the old behaviour and will also enhance your relationships.

The interim period will be difficult but it can be overcome!

► Developing the True Self

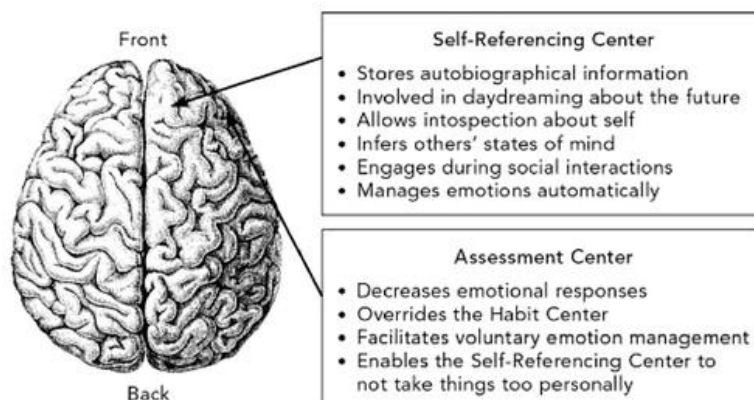
According to Schwartz and Gladding (2012, pp 84 – 90) the one important reason we cannot stop paying attention to these false brain messages, is that we have bought into these messages and have assimilated them into our sense of who we are.

The Self-Referencing Centre (SRC) focusses on internal processes relating to us:

- The front part of the brain called the Executive Centre is involved in planning, strategy, organization, detecting errors and making assessments actually has specialized regions that focus on information pertaining to self vs non-self.
- The middle part (medial prefrontal cortex) relates to thinking about ourselves – our self-talk or “inner monologue” that envisions our future, remembering our past and making assumptions about other people’s state of mind.
- The orbitofrontal cortex (the area behind the eyes) is involved in error messages and obsessions.

The SRC can act in helpful or unhelpful ways. When the contribution is unhelpful, we act in automatic unhealthy ways to emotions, including drinking, being too apologetic, withdrawing, crying, eating or taking things extremely personal. The helpful ways are crucial in choosing how to respond in a voluntary way to situations.

The Self-Referencing Centre is intimately involved in social interactions and relating to others. The helpful aspects of the SRC is used to grasp the inner life of other people as well as our own.



The outer part of the Executive Centre (lateral prefrontal cortex) voluntarily modulates the responses coming from the “Uh-Oh” centre and it overrides the actions that the Habit Centre wants to initiate. The authors call this the “Assessment Centre”.

This Assessment Centre helps the SRC not to take information too personally by using more objective information that regulates and calms other areas of the brain. It is distanced from our thoughts about ourselves. This is how the Assessment Centre and the helpful aspects of the SRC combine to give a clearer perspective on the deceptive brain messages.

This mean you have the ability to choose not to entertain a thought or take a certain course of action. That is when you can choose “what to”!

When the SRC is strongly tied to the “Uh-Oh” centre, it is difficult distance you from the deceptive messages and the intense emotions. When the “Uh-Oh” centre sounds the alarm (the unbearable anxiety or discomfort in your stomach) the unhelpful aspects of the SRC immediately causes you to believe that you are the problem! You experience these thoughts as who you *are*, thereby limiting your options and responses.

As a child you may have experienced lack of attention, or receiving an irritated answer: “Not now – can’t you see that I am busy!?” , accompanied by a scolding face.

The “Uh-Oh” centre came to experience it as dangerous and to be avoided. Eventually the brain formed the conviction that you are the problem and should not have needs or if you had, you should not express them

You will fiercely defend this conviction and stick to the behaviour that gave relief at the time – be it eating, avoiding people, procrastination, failing at new tasks, not risking anything new, distrusting those telling you that they really loved you and that you are important.

► Embracing your true self in Christ

For many years I battled with fear of rejection and failure – and a fear of success (like Jonah!). Try as I would, I would somehow find myself in anxiety, over-analysing, taking every single thing so personally that I would be paralyzed for days.

Thinking and thinking. Surprising and shocking people with the assumptions I made from what they said. I found that I constantly turned what people said around in my head to mean what my Self-Referencing Centre wanted it to mean. No matter how they would try to convince me of the opposite and of their good intentions, I fiercely defended my conclusions that I was not good enough. I would often not do this verbally but just in my heart.

There came a day that I just could not live like this one day longer. And then... there was JESUS!

I read countless books, listened to endless sermons on do not fear, do not be anxious, do not fret, you are a temple of the living God, God is in control, God loves you – on and on. To the extent that I started doubting my own faith and obviously came up with the answer that I just did not make the cut! I feared punishment (and read that perfect loves casts out fear) – but nothing helped.

What I am offering here is the culmination of years of searching and reading and praying for guidance... and renewal.

This knowledge of the neurobiology - which God created – finally caused the pieces to come together. We are indeed created in the image of God. That means we share His character. It does indeed not depend on how well built or beautiful we are but on HIM. He gave it and freely and still gives it (Himself). The true self which I have referred to in previous posts does indeed differ from our Self-Referencing Centre: this true self is the image of Christ in us.

On the night He was betrayed Jesus did indeed take the bread and wine and instruct His disciples to eat and drink of it and remember that it was His body and His blood – signifying a new covenant. Every time the Pass-over was taken in Israel it reminded them of the Exodus – which signified a new beginning. So Jesus inaugurated a new covenant – a new beginning that night: His disciples would from then on be His temple. There would no longer be a building where His presence would dwell – His people, His church, whom He calls His bride, would from then onwards be His temple. He would indwell

every person who agreed to it, with His Holy Spirit so that a new beginning was inaugurated for every person.

This is the true self – created in the image of God. Not that we have already attained to the fullness thereof. Not that I – or anybody else – am a perfect reflection of His glory. That has never been the point! The point is the hope that there is in Him. Every day is a new beginning.

You see friends, if we wanted to retrain our brains to overcome the deceptive/false messages – what would we want to achieve? On what authority would we be able to stand in the process of being renewed? Isn't this just another nice to know? Will it really make a difference?

In Scripture God invites/instructs us to be transformed by the renewal of our entire minds (Rom. 12: 1 – 2), to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10: 5) and to set our minds and keep them set on the things above where Christ is (Col. 3: 1 – 2).

Now, we know that He has given us the ability to be renewed through brain plasticity under guidance of the Holy Spirit. Now we know that a new life is guaranteed because He has given us His Holy Spirit whom He calls a pledge (2 Cor. 5: 5). This is the authority we stand on. This is the truth which will guide us in our endeavour to override the false messages. This is the truth which tells us that the messages are false: every thought that is not in accordance with what God tells us about ourselves, is a false message.

Please bear in mind that even our picture of God as a Father might be a false message as a result of a warped relationship with our earthly fathers. I remember how I feared/blamed God as a Father every time bad things happened to me – until I realised that my picture – my convictions - of who He is, depended on my warped image of a father.

I had to confess that and my fierce defence of Him not loving me. He did indeed give me a new heart and a new spirit as He promised (Ezekiel 36: 25 – 27). I now know that my own hurt and disappointment and bitterness hardened my heart against receiving His love. I insisted on being a failure and unloved – until by His grace and new knowledge I was willing to receive the truth about His heart.

If this is your true longing as well, join me on the journey of embracing your true self in Christ.

► Love vs fear

On Good Friday we commemorate and celebrate the day on which God proved that He became part of our suffering and brokenness. He did not come to give answers – He came to give Himself and to give hope. He came to set up a new Kingdom here on earth towards which we are building every day.

He came to give us a supreme purpose for life: to be citizens in this Kingdom and to carry His image wherever we go, so that hope can be infused into and restored to a crying dying world.

He came to give us new life – not to make us better people. He came to prove and demonstrate what real love is. He came to drive out fear.

Yet in one way or another His presence instils fear in many people: we manage to turn His loving acts into expectations of perfection – or is it just that from the beginning we wanted to be perfect ourselves? That we think others expect perfection of us while it is we ourselves who have the expectation? Why are we always ready to incorporate fear into our Self-Referencing Centre and not this all-surpassing love?

So, before I go into the four-step plan to overcome the faulty messages, I need to remind you what my goal with this is:

I want all to stand in awe of the miracle of God's creation in us. The fact that He knew we will be abused, ill-treated, believe lies about ourselves, judge ourselves and others, fear other peoples' opinions and grant them authority in our lives which they should not have had – in other words form warped self-images instead of embracing His image in us – and provided our brains with the potential to be renewed, is a miracle. It is evidence of His love! Further I want every person to be aware of the power of the Holy Spirit in us to do this renewal. Schwartz and Gladding (2012) refer to a wise advocate in us – the assessment centre in our brain that I referred to in a previous post. For the Christian this wise advocate is none other than the Holy Spirit – over and above the natural brain assessment area. If we would allow Father God to restore His image as a Father in us and receive the Holy Spirit, He longs to be our Wise Advocate. In fact, this is how Jesus referred to Him in John 14:25.

It is on the evidence of Jesus' having been raised from the dead physically that our hope rests. It is on the promise that He has already raised us from the dead with Him that we stand. Even if we died in this crisis, we will live. But we need to aspire to much more and expect much more of the life in us that He gave at the cost of His own life.

► Deception

We are on a journey to overcome false/deceptive brain messages in order to set our feet on the road of becoming who we really are – in Christ. Not merely created in God's image but now able to actively reflect the image of Christ as He walked the earth. To this end we are empowered by the Holy Spirit!

In the "Post-Truth" era there is no external point of reference as to what truth is.

How will I know which brain messages are deceptive and which ones are "true"?

How will I know what to think about God and His presence in this crisis? There is an enormous amount of teaching going around regarding the reasons for the pandemic.

If we do not know and trust the heart of God because according to the reigning world-view He is not involved with our suffering or wellbeing, or is unfair, unwilling to intervene, judgemental, cruel, a bully or a "delusion of our minds" how will we proceed in the midst of so much suffering and uncertainty?

How will we take ourselves forward so that other people can also have hope? How will we be able to discern where we as individuals need to help? How will we deal with our guilt-feelings, anger, depression and anxiety?

You might have asked yourself why these posts have not centred on providing answers to the big questions. As I see it, we need to answer the small questions first: who am I, how can I deal with **my** anxiety, anger, doubt, uncertainty, disappointment and disillusionment?

How can I deal with the changes in my house and life **at the moment**, can I get to know the heart of God better in these days and trust His goodness and faithfulness when thousands are dying of the virus, millions are losing their jobs and millions are in danger of dying of hunger?

These are the reasons why I thought it necessary to provide you with tools to take back your lives from the lies you came to believe about yourself and take back the authority over your lives that you might have given to other people to form your opinion about you.

Easter grants us the opportunity to rethink God but also challenges each one of us to do so. Some might have decided to "cancel Easter" in their lives – to cancel belief in the risen Christ as He allowed the global crisis and does not intervene supernaturally on a global scale to end the crisis. I urge you not to do this!

At Easter we confess with certainty that He has been raised from the dead to give us life. This is our hope: not that there will never be a pandemic, not that nobody will suffer, but that we will live eternally in His presence in His world where every tear will be wiped from every eye...

But while we are here we need to be all we can be in Christ so that we can as His body discern where to make a difference. It is love that changes the world: love that does not expect reciprocation, fear rejection, fear failure, or criticism, love that in this time does not do unwise things that can expose others to danger. But if we want to be able to love as Christ does with the precautions necessary in this time, we need to have sorted out our own insecurities.

Only in this way will we be able to believe that we can make a difference, be able to stand on what we believe and be able to allow the Holy Spirit to take us forward in

Making the life-changing journey

Hopefully you are now deeply motivated to embark on this life-long, yet life-changing journey.

I need to remind you that the first and most important effort is **not to get rid of the discomfort and intense emotional sensations of anxiety** – do not succumb to this temptation!

Also remember to focus on **different activities** – this is not only about your thoughts. Remember the principle of focussed attention over time. You need dedication to the renewal of your thinking and your life.

The four steps in this journey are:

- **Step 1: RELABEL**
Recognize that the intrusive intensely uncomfortable thoughts and urges are the RESULT OF false brain messages.
- **Step 2: REATTRIBUTE**
Realize that the intensity and intrusiveness of the thought or urge is caused by FALSE MESSAGES; it is probably related to a biochemical CIRCUIT in the brain. Attribute the messages to your brain and not to your true self. The true self is determined by the gift from God – the life of Christ.
- **Step 3: REFOCUS**
Work around the FALSE MESSAGE thoughts by focusing your attention on something else, at least for a few minutes: DO ANOTHER BEHAVIOUR.
- **Step 4: REVALUE**
Do not take the FALSE MESSAGE thought at face value. It is not significant in itself. From time to time you will need to step back and check yourself and realise that you have been fooled again!

such a way that we will be able to withstand our own suffering as well as the suffering of those we love and that of the broader community.

► Step 1 - Relabel

During this first step you will identify your deceptive brain messages and the intense uncomfortable sensations. You will call them what they are – deceptive/faulty brain messages coming from your brain.

They do not signify my true self. I recognise them by the fact that it feels as if they arise from deep inside of me – I have not actively thought them out. Another way to identify them is that I am addressed in the second person. The most important characteristic though is that they undermine my willingness/ability to take risks, to allow people close to me, to grow and to believe that I am more than these thoughts indicate. They have the power to convince us that nothing will ever change, we will never succeed, other people are better and have

things better under control and they do not mean it well with us.

God has created us with the need to attach. He Himself is a Social Being. In the Trinity there is already holy whole fellowship. He has created us in such a way that we will long for the same attachment, belonging and fellowship. So, we have legitimate longings for belonging, fellowship, acceptance and acknowledgement.

In the relationships with our caregivers we learned that we are loved and cherished, that they will protect us and they provided us with the security to explore and grow. From them we also learned how we should treat ourselves and the people around us. We learned how love is expressed and what we could allow and should not allow. We learned what to value and what our value/worth is. All this helps us to define our concept of who we are.

It is critical that we should have experienced this in a safe zone in childhood. This helped us to learn how to deal with our true emotions such as anger, sadness, grief, fear, happiness and anxiety in a constructive loving way. But what if this did not take place? What if one of our caregivers or both did not respond or responded in a negative way to our needs? What if both of them or one of them actively abused us? We would have suppressed our true needs and emotions. The more we did this, the more the deceptive brain messages would have been fuelled and the more the whole cycle would have been entrenched in our brains. This will then feel so true that we can no longer listen to our Wise Advocate or believe anybody else when they try to convince us of our worth.

The Wise Advocate is part of the Assessment Centre but whereas the Assessment Centre is a physical brain region that processes information, the Wise Advocate is a cognitive construct and a mental aide to help us determine what information is truly relevant and whether all possible explanations have been considered. It helps to discard erroneous messages. For the Christian the Wise Advocate can function under guidance of the Holy Spirit, Who will guide us into all the truth and set us free!

In order to identify the deceptive brain messages, we have to live mindful and pay attention to every thought – therefor God instructed us to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ. Now this does not merely mean to **not do** bad things, but to agree with what Christ says about us (2 Cor. 10: 4 – 5). The Lord's promise is that we will be transfigured from glory to glory (2Cor. 3: 17 – 18).

We tend to drift through our days and not take care to dedicate attention to constructive and creative thoughts and planned actions. Thus we are vulnerable to these deceptive messages to pop up and overwhelm us.

We need to learn to discern between true emotions and these wired sensations. In this time of crisis, we will have true emotions of fear, sadness, worry and even powerlessness. We now know that the old deceptive messages will cash in on these emotions due to the present crisis and want to get us involved in them. The focus is not on getting rid of the intense emotional sensations but not to give in to them and act on them.

Remember that if we constantly carry out the habitual behaviour associated with this negative cycle, we will strengthen the cycle. It will lead to brain lock! The Habit Centre will remain glued into this cycle and you will not be able to change thoughts or actions.

This will really take practice. It is not something you can do once or for one day. You will have to repeat the re-labelling over and over. In fact, you will have to do it with all four steps.

Please do not try to argue these thoughts and sensations – you cannot win the argument against your brain. You can only replace the cycle with a new one – for which you have the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit.

► Step 2: Reattribute

God will not coerce us as He has given us a free will. To the extent that we are free to choose and do good we are free to choose and do evil or not life-giving activities. We can do this to ourselves as well.

According to 2 Cor. 3:16–18 what we need to do is to constantly look at Jesus so that His image can become part of us – that is, His way of thinking, feeling and responding to ourselves. This is where the second step in the four-step plan becomes vital.

It is critical that we become aware of those thoughts and actions/habits that are not life-giving and are working against the image of Christ in us so that we can use our freedom of choice to decide whether we want to “entertain” these life-destructive things in our lives.

They isolate you and bring out those assumptions and actions in you that do not reflect the image of Christ in you. From the beginning of time we wanted to become heroes in our own story and become like God through our own efforts. This made us victims to comparison and competition.

However, this is not what God thought would be the best way to attain to His character. He knew that we would try it our own way and die in the process.

Clinging to these deceptive brain messages is to close your heart to the real-life God wants you to enjoy. No message that differs from who God says you are in Christ is worth spending time on. The problem is that we attribute some of these negative messages about ourselves to God: that He will not love **me** that He thinks **I am a failure**.

This is due to the warped image we have of God. He does not sit somewhere up in heaven and keeps a detailed account of all our failures and wrong-doings. He came into our world and committed Himself to us. We thus need to identify our true self as coming from the beautiful Being of Christ. We need to reattribute our true being to His Character in us.

What will help you to be aware of the deceptive message in all its intensity and not give in to it? If you could steadfastly reattribute two things to what they belong to:

- Reattribute your learned sense of self to the deceptive brain messages
- Reattribute your true self to Christ who died on our behalf and gave us the Holy Spirit as His indwelling presence to become like Him and be His living temple!

Every time you choose to do this you calm the “Uh-Oh” centre (add deep breathing to the process – it resets a certain structure in the “Uh-Oh” centre and allows the relaxing part of the autonomous nervous system to activate). This will also strengthen the Assessment Centre in the brain to consider more alternatives as possible explanations to what someone else may have meant or thought instead of just accepting/assuming the worst.

If you did not reattribute these false messages to the brain you will constantly take everything someone else says or does very personally. This will cause enormous social pain. This social pain activates the same areas in the brain that are activated by physical pain. Hence the emotional sensations accompanying the social pain are so intense.

The discipline needed to do this, is not to argue with your brain. Do not try to make these messages go away through endless discussions or analyses – that means that you are already sucked into their deadly trap and you will spin around in your brain like a hamster on its wheel.

Also do not try to make the intense emotional sensations go away by giving in to the habitual behaviour you have learnt. Resist this. You will only be able to do this if you can constantly remind yourself of the meaningfulness and impact of the exercise you are involved in. If you persisted in this, the Self-Referencing Centre will get in line with the True Self in Christ and will become an empowered enabler.

Bear in mind that the Holy Spirit is always inside of you eager, willing and able to accomplish this with you. Rom. 8: 26–27 and 1 Cor. 2: 10–16 are among a multitude of verses that emphasise the Spirit’s work in us to accomplish this task of reattributing the false messages to the brain (in Scripture language: the old self) and re-attributing the True Self to the image of Christ in us.

Easter and the resurrection

We have seen that for us as individuals it first of all holds a new life – there is now another “self” apart from the old ways of thinking about ourselves (Which Schwartz call the “sense of self from the Self-Referencing Centre) and becoming victims thereof. We focused on how the real self – what Schwartz calls the “True Self” is to be attributed to God (retribution) in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit making Him available to every person who wants to become this new person.

All of us are actually potentially this person because we have been created in the image of God. However, to take on board this “True Self” is a daily decision that nobody can force us to do. It is a free gift from God so that we can become more and more like Jesus in what we **do** every day and not merely in what we **say**.

Think about it like this: someone gives you a beautiful new garment as a gift. Do you fear that the giver will take it away from you as soon as you do something that the giver does not like? Are you only allowed to wear it when you feel good about yourself and feel like you deserve it?

No, as you wear this new garment daily, constantly, you will get used to it and your whole thinking about your “garderobe” will change to thinking about what you will buy to enhance the colour, style and message that you want to convey with this new garment.

You need to attribute the false deceptive brain messages to your old self – your old ways of thinking, speaking, feeling and acting about yourself and “keep them in the cupboard” of your memories. You should not indulge in believing any of them and trying any one of them “on” like an old piece of clothing.

In the same way you now attribute the new “True Self” to God as a gift from God and a reality to be embraced. It is indeed a gift to be empowered to live a Christ-like life with all that it entails without fear of failure, anxiety about what people will think about me, whether I am good enough, when they will reject me, what will happen to me, or that people do not mean it well with me. The same principles that we applied to the metaphor of the new garment are applied here. This is in essence what is taught in Ephes. 4: 22 – 24.

But his has to take place minute by minute. The new self has to be the focus of your everyday life.

This is what the third step in our four-step plan is all about.

► Step 3: Refocus

Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p 90) define this step as directing our attention toward an activity or mental process that is wholesome and productive – even while the false and deceptive urges, thoughts, impulses and

sensations are still present and intensely bothering and intrusive.

It is thus not sufficient to think “Oh I am in an old cycle” or “I am a new creature in Christ – I do not need to believe the negative things about myself any more”. It is not enough to recognise the patterns as false or deceptive brain messages and to acknowledge that there are new possibilities in Christ. We need to step into these possibilities created by Christ for us and in us through His Holy Spirit: think the thoughts that are in accordance with who Christ is, express these thoughts to other people as our own true desires and then do the deeds that are in accordance with these thoughts.

Here is an example: in the past you felt useless and that there is no meaning in your life. This was accompanied by intense anxiety, over-analysing, being overwhelmed and depressed. To ease the depression, you told yourself that you are an introvert anyway and do not want people near you. Whenever someone would ask you out, you would put on a sullen face and say no. They would back off; your brain would get the positive feedback that that the action was successful and Bob’s your uncle! You were ready to do it again!

Now that you have committed yourself to the four-step plan this is what could happen: you think your life is meaningless and has always been and you recall all the incidents where you proved it. Next the same old emotional sensations will come up intensely but now instead of doing the same things that gave temporary relief in the past (pushing people away or eating too much) you will now think: “But God has freely given me the gift of Holy Spirit which is His life in me – I **am meaningful now**. Holy Spirit please help me not to give in to the old emotional sensations! Please give me the insight to see where You want me to make a difference.”

Then you set your mind on thinking who in your immediate surroundings might need encouragement, a nice word, a cup of tea – and then you act on it. You could even switch your attention to watching a video on YouTube that is entertaining or outside of your area of expertise. You can do a crossword puzzle – any act that will cause you to refocus on something else. Exercise is obviously one of the best alternatives to refocus and at the same time help your brain to release healthy neurotransmitters.

Please remember that the first focus is not to get the discomfort and the intense emotional sensations away, but to relabel them as deceptive brain messages and to reattribute them to your brain instead of attributing them to your real self.

In order to this effectively, you will need encouragement and you will need to focus on Christ to get to know His Heart and His Mind. 1 Cor. 2:16 actually state that we have the mind of Christ – as His Spirit indwells us.

Even if you could initially put off the unhelpful activities for fifteen minutes at a time it will help. The difference lies not in trying to think or feel different but in **doing something different**.

► Step 4: Revalue

Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p 275) summarise this step as follows: "In essence, Revaluing encourages you to recruit and nourish your healthy, loving side on a consistent basis so that you can instantly see and dismiss the logic of the deceptive brain messages and make positive, constructive choices that emanate from your empowered, compassionate Wise Advocate".

You have constant contact with an editor to support you in this process. What is more, as Christians we have the indwelling Holy Spirit who will constantly convict us of the love of God and remind us that our True Self is the life of Christ in us and not these negative, faulty messages.

These faulty messages do not deserve our attention. As we become more mindful, we can immediately recognise them and choose to apply our free "Not to" so as to refocus. For instance: your deceptive messages will tell you that you do not have the strength to get out bed (that is when you are really well physically). Now you can apply your free "not to" choice not to give in to this message!

This process requires dedicated attention and constant mindful awareness. These faulty deceptive brain messages took years to form. We want to overcome them in a short period which is a challenge.

The crux here is to approach your experiences and feelings as a direct object of observation. At first it was difficult for me to stand back from my thoughts and

emotional sensations, as I did not know that I was more than my brain.

Now that I have practised my mind to rewire my brain into healthy thinking patterns, I can step back from deceptive brain messages like fear of rejection and fear of failure.

This process is called "progressive mindfulness". Rather than being absent-minded, mindfulness is to be actively aware of what I am doing, seeing, smelling, etc. This active thinking about what I am doing, contemplating and experiencing, will put me in charge of my brain! We tend towards wanting to be entertained instead of being active - the distractions of social media and television.

To be mindfully present in every moment, is to recognise passive brain messages and replace it with active thinking. This is where the Wise Advocate (and the Holy Spirit) comes into play. Mind that loving, nourishing part in us that tells us the opposite of what the deceptive messages tell us.

Repentance means to acknowledge that we have thoughts, emotional sensations and habits that are not aligned with what God offers us in Christ. Allow the Holy Spirit to empower you to discern more accurately what thoughts need attention and what thoughts need to be ignored.

► True emotions vs emotional sensations

I will again make use of the book by Schwartz and Gladding (You are not your brain, 2012, pp 281–282).

True emotions can be defined as those reactions or feelings that anyone would have in the situation.

► RELABEL

Recognize false brain messages from the old self. *Recognize* the temptation to get rid of the discomfort and intense emotional sensations of anxiety.

► REATTRIBUTE

Realize the source of the false brain messages is your brain and not your true self. *Reattribute* your true self to Christ through the Holy Spirit inside you.

► REFOCUS

Do something different. *Direct* your attention toward an activity or mental process that is wholesome and productive. *Dismiss* passive brain messages. *Refocus* through active thinking based on the mind of Christ.

► REVALUE

Refuse to be fooled by brain messages. *Make* positive, constructive choices emanating from the indwelling Holy Spirit. The true self is determined by the gift from God – the life of Christ.

The four steps in the life-changing journey

Emotional sensations are the result from deceptive brain messages and almost always arise from a thinking error or negative messages you learned in life and especially in childhood. They are not based in reality and are not representative of who you are. The Wise Advocate (a wise editor of the Assessment Centre) would consider them and tell you that they are not true and that you should not focus any attention on them.

The challenge is that for the most part of our lives we have equated the two. This is a result of the intense discomfort associated with the emotional sensations. When the deceptive side of you is in charge, it mimics what you have learnt as a child and causes you to ignore, minimize, and dismiss your true emotions and focus on the deceptive messages as the truth.

For example: if as a child you were unfairly beaten, your brain would most likely respond with a deceptive message that somehow you are to blame. This would automatically cause you to experience strong sensations of guilt and shame. On the other hand, if a caregiver were overprotective and wanted to wrap you in cotton-wool, you might have experienced true emotion of anger and a desire to be left alone. The deceptive brain messages are that “you were ungrateful” and that “you had so much to be thankful for”. This would obviously trigger guilt and shame as well.

It is very difficult to draw a distinction between a true emotion and an emotional sensation – we now need an editor and the Wise Advocate.

A helpful way to distinguish would be to ask yourself whether a reasonable person would experience guilt and shame in a similar situation, or anxiety, feeling that he has done something wrong if he did not live up to someone else’s unreasonable expectations, or would a reasonable person respond with anger or sadness?

Many of us have grown up thinking that it is sinful, wrong and selfish to be good towards ourselves or to love and nurture ourselves. Rather than nurture and love ourselves as adults, we would now rather castigate ourselves.

Another helpful distinction is to ask whether what we believe about ourselves is in line with the heart of God as revealed in the life of Jesus and His heart of love and servanthood. Take care to read the Old Testament within its historical context.

Consult a wise counsellor to help you make the distinctions – especially in the beginning when you are still “fused” with the deceptive messages and cannot stand back a bit.

► Three neglected emotions

When confronted with two voices, the voice of the Self-Referencing Centre (with its negative experiences and resultant deceptive brain messages) and the voice of the Wise Advocate (either from the True Self or a wise

editor) on the other hand, many people say “It feels as if the deceptive brain message overrides the Wise Advocate”. How can we overcome these firmly ingrained messages from our memory system?

We need to examine our emotions and try to discern when they are healthy and when they are unhealthy. Schwartz and Gladding (2012, pp 298 – 304) highlight three emotions that the brain can easily ignore, minimize, dismiss, neglect, or devalue when we grow up and experience relationships where the nurturing and attachment necessary for healthy brain development were lacking. These three are Anger, Sadness and Anxiety.

A. Anger

The first question that often arises is whether we are allowed to get angry. Normally this question is asked by adults who grew up in homes where the experiencing of and the expression of intense emotions were not allowed or framed as sin, ingratitude or rebellion. Often parents would have the monopoly on anger. They may express their anger in a very visible way but the child is not allowed to express anger. Threats often accompany the expression of anger – it becomes a power-play, an effort to gain or retain control over the child. The child never learns that she may get angry and is not taught how to regulate the anger or express it in a healthy way.

Anger is a normal emotion, but what it causes you to do may indicate healthy or unhealthy expression of anger. When anger encourages you to work harder on your own behalf in accordance with your true self, it is healthy and helpful, such as your anger that encourages you to work harder to overcome an obstacle and tackle new challenges. An example is mastering computer skills: Anger can be used as motivation and in the process the energy released from the warning system in the brain can be channelled into healthy motivation to take you forward.

However, if the anger is turned on yourself and you became the enemy in your own eyes, it becomes self-hatred with the old deceptive brain message that you are useless and that you do not deserve to be loved. This lie can be extrapolated to include that God cannot love me, as I am too much of a sinner...

The thinking errors cause us to minimize our progress instead of allowing the voice of our Wise Advocate to encourage us regarding our progress and become inappropriately angry. Inappropriate anger as an automatic action keeps us away from our goals as it has a paralyzing effect on our rational thinking.

In order to change these deceptive messages, we will have to uncover the original source(s) of the anger and allow our Wise Advocate and/or editor to ask the question: would any reasonable person experience anger at this as well?

Once the original anger has been acknowledged and validated instead of minimized or rationalized, can we be free to choose not to allow the disruptive deceptive brain messages again.

Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p 300) provide us with the following helpful summary regarding anger: "It is an emotion when it acknowledges some true harm that came to you and spurs you into action to care for yourself and it is an emotional sensation when it is based on deceptive brain messages that cause you to act in unhealthy ways."

In summary:

- Healthy anger recognizes that you were taken advantage of or were hurt and encourages you to take care of yourself in a respectful, compassionate manner. As such it becomes a mobilizing force for making a healthy change.
- Unhealthy anger clouds us by deceptive brain messages, thinking errors involving false expectations and "should" statements. Your perspective on people and their intentions is warped that leads you to act in destructive ways that hurt you and sometimes others as well. It alienates you from your true self, including your goals and values.

B. Grief and Sadness

The movie "Inside Out" portrayed an unhappy girl who ran away. However, she returned due to her feeling of sadness. Attachment represents the inborn desire to be long, to be nurtured and loved without conditions. The richness of the neuronal development depends to a large extent on the initial emotional non-verbal nurturing and unconditional love a child receives from birth.

Christians understand that this is as a result of God's interest in us being created in His Image. His love is the overarching attribute from which every other attribute flow, including the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As image bearers we reflect what is in the heart of God. As parents, we should love our children and discipline them in love.

However, whenever a child does not receive love in these early stages of life, they will react in ways that show their sadness or grief. Two of the most prevailing symptoms will probably be depression and anxiety. Underlying this will be self-hatred. This is what God does not want.

Realizing that our self-hatred, depression or anxiety might be the result of neglected unconditional love which is God-ordained, can set our feet on a new journey to learn self-acceptance and self-love. This could probably lead to a better controlled depression or anxiety. People who love themselves and have compassion on themselves can also love other people with compassion.

So, sadness can be a helpful and cathartic true emotion (as in the movie) or a damaging emotional sensation. Schwartz and Gladding (2012, p 301) draws the distinction as follows: "The difference lies in whether you are truly experiencing some form of loss (as in the present crisis) or whether you are beating up on yourself for who you are, what you have not accomplished, or what you believe about yourself because of deceptive brain messages".

This will suck you into a depressive self-dialogue that fuels self-hatred and physical inactivity and these emotional sensations will keep you away from seeing and embracing your true self. If you did not check these and label them for what they are, they can last for months on end keeping you focused on all the negative aspects and rob you of growth and moving yourself forward in love according to God's purpose.

Grief and sadness in changing times

Healthy grief and sadness are true emotions that allow us to experience and process loss and pain. This all of us are experiencing in some way in this crisis. We will have to prepare ourselves for more loss and grief still to come. It may be in the form of the loss of loved ones, a career or the loss of a way of life.

In the past we "had everything together". We will feel sadness about losing that illusion. But let us guard against the self-castigation and self-hate that accuse us of not being able to control our financial future.

Let us guard against self-isolation born from old faulty brain-messages. Let us learn now to ask help and learn to receive help. Let us learn to give love from a heart of love now already.

Guard against indulging in self-hate and isolation in anger or grief because of the faulty brain messages for so long.

Every person has the ability to love and connect. We just do not grant ourselves the freedom to do so because we dwell on the faulty brain messages. Allow yourself to feel the pain of the loss, but keep moving forward. This is the way to healing, recovery and growing stronger.

C. Anxiety

Did you stop today to experience the silence? Did you allow the tranquillity to penetrate your thoughts and emotions and bring you to rest? We have time to re-think and re-evaluate our expectations and plans now.

The Covid-19 crisis is yet to play out fully in terms of the economic devastation, loss of financial security and jobs, deaths, hunger and poverty. Our anxiety stems from the fear for an increase in crime, the loss of a provider, not being able to provide for our families or loved ones getting sick and not being able to be with them.

Many start doubting God and ask “where God is in all this?”

These are all very real concerns. Anxiety is caused by the warning system in the brain and serves a good purpose. For example, we will now have to co-operate and learn the value of community - there are no “lone ranger” Christians any more. We will have to let go of pride and shame to ask help and to offer help.

Now is the golden opportunity to get rid of all faulty and deceptive sources of anxiety, caused by shame, pride, feelings of inferiority, fear of rejection or the conviction that we are not good enough Christians.

Take comfort that not one person on this planet will not be affected by the Covid-19 crisis. No-one really knows what the future holds. So, stretch yourself a bit, say “yes” to the opportunity to grow and rid yourself of the old burdens.

The anxiety that results from deceptive brain messages linked to our past experiences where we have been humiliated or rejected should be labelled for what it is and dealt with by our brave four-step plan.

Some examples of this anxiety are a young child, scared of the dark, is told not be a sissy. Or a child fearing water is thrown into a swimming pool. Or a child who faulted is inappropriately and unfairly beaten.

Some believers fear punishment from God that is not Scriptural at all and may indicate a serious problem in our view of God. Scripture encourages us to love others, but does not demand perfection from us. People were drawn to Jesus’ teachings and His love.

It is Satan’s lie that we can become gods ourselves, causing an enormous amount of anxiety.

Now is the time to get reconciled to God our source of life. He is the One who rescued us from the evil path of performance we were on since the Fall. Jesus came to set us free and become what He intended us to be: His image, as we allow the Holy Spirit in us to reflect Jesus through us.

No matter how bad things get, He Who did not leave us in our fallen state but gave Himself up for us, is not finished with His creation. He has inaugurated a new beginning with the resurrection of Jesus. I am part of that new beginning. I am excited to see how He is going to see us through this!

I am willing to wait to see the outcome and how He will empower His Body and take care of His people – even in the suffering that is to come that I cannot even fathom now. Are you?

The skills we need

With this series I hoped to provide some information that might be useful for you to direct your thoughts and help you learn some discernment regarding unhelpful or helpful thoughts, feelings and actions. I hoped to

provide you with a structured process to overcome these unhelpful cycles of thoughts, self-talk, emotional sensations and habits to get temporary relief from the emotional sensations.

How will a person become motivated to overcome these negative cycles? I had to take a long, hard look at my own life and take ownership thereof. I had to realise that those who hurt me might be long dead and I am still smarting and I had to ask myself how long will I allow these things to rule my life? Why do we grant other people so much authority over our lives that they can determine what we think of ourselves?

We are not born with already completed files in our brains regarding who we are and can become. The files get “written” or wired through our interactions with caregivers who indeed did have authority over us. The way in which your brain was wired is based on someone else’s opinion from their own brokenness, selfishness, sinfulness, lack of knowledge or even cruelty.

It is mostly our perspective on and memory of past pain as expressed by the intense emotional sensations that bring about the fear. If we were willing to grant ourselves the freedom to make mistakes and could see other people as equal to us – which all people are – then we would ascribe less value to the negative behaviour and attitude coming our way.

Other peoples’ reactions, attitudes, habits and behaviour do not say anything about us – it reveals where they are in their own thinking and emotional sensations. But other peoples’ opinions and your own emotional sensations are so fused that you actually identify with those and take it into yourself. This will limit your ability to hear the Wise Advocate and pay attention.

Determine to set your mind on practising the four steps and developing new healthy thinking cycles. Get all the help you can and do not give up. Do not run this race like a sprint – it is a marathon.

Learning to live the new life of caring

For the Christians: we will only experience perfection and complete wholeness and peace in eternity and that not by our own efforts but by the grace and mercy of the One who gave Himself up for us so that there is the possibility of an eternity in peace and completeness. Let us not be under the impression that we create our new life through these steps. There is a new life possible because we have been resurrected with Jesus and filled by the Holy Spirit. We should however endeavour to appropriate this new life. God has created our brains in such a way that through neuroplasticity the renewal that He desires can be achieved.

The mistake that we often make is to assume that the main objective for the renewal is for us to be happy and comfortable – and to carry on as before with self-centred living. This is not a sustainable goal. The age-old

expression “It is in giving that you receive” still holds true. Learning to live the new life of caring, serving, acknowledging strengths with humility and using these to do business well or pursue a professional career with competence is acceptable and pleasing to God.

As we overcome the debilitating deceptive messages we become open to the needs of other people. We start seeing opportunities where we can show compassion and support someone. Please do not think that God wants us all to go to the ends of the earth to do missionary work. There are enough people around us who need support and help. God also does not expect of us to give every cent we have to other people nor to those who promise us prosperity should we be willing to give over and above what we can afford.

We may love ourselves as God loves us in Jesus through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we feel ourselves free to do whatever we wish and say whatever whenever to whoever to show that we are free!

The antidote to minimizing, ignoring, or ignoring our true emotions asks for dedicated attention to the process over a period of time. Bear in mind that if you have never been allowed or have never granted yourself the freedom to experience certain emotions neither to express them, you might feel guilty and uncomfortable when you do start recognising these emotions. The thing that might puzzle you the most might be how to deal with this newly experienced emotion. Here are a few tips –again please do not hear that I think that these are the best or only ones – but it is a good starting point:

- Pay attention to and be present in every living moment of your day. We often use mindlessness or mindless entertainment to avoid emotions or conflict or facing ourselves. Start changing this. When you become aware of an emotional sensation pause and ask yourself whether this refers back to a situation from your past or whether there really is a threatening situation in the present.
- Do not react immediately – verbally or non-verbally. Stand back a bit; breathe deeply to reset your autonomous nervous system and the warning system. This allows your brain not to be overwhelmed with chemicals so that you act impulsively and “just lose it”.
- Express the emotion verbally – do not act it out. It is not the intensity of the expression that makes the difference. We cannot control other peoples’ behaviour by the intensity of our emotional expression. We can however learn to regulate the expression of the true emotions when they are not superimposed on old emotional sensations. In fact, fewer situations will cause us distress as we learn to distinguish between the sensations and the true emotions.

- In expressing the emotion use “I” statements: “I feel sad when you watch so much TV as I miss the interaction between us.” “I get angry when you abuse me and I will have to take steps to prevent further harm if the situation continued.” When we do express an intention to take steps to stop the harm done to us, we need to make sure that we will indeed follow through on it otherwise the abuser will just laugh it off.
- We are allowed to take steps to prevent further abuse. However, to react in the same spirit and do the same as the abuser, is not liberating but unhealthy and unhelpful. In fact, it will just fuel the fire in the abuser. Only when we have overcome the old deceptive messages will we be able to withstand the threats and mockery of an abuser. As long as we believe we are unworthy, the other person will have power over us.
- Learn how to engage in relationships on a healthy basis. This could mean that you will have to visit a counsellor or coach or Psychologist. Without overcoming the deceptive messages, you may tend to give up and say “I can’t.”
- Allow yourself to enjoy small victories in overcoming old habits that gave temporary relief in the past. Even though the other person may still try to threaten you, you will experience relief and a sense of victory in yourself. This will strengthen you.

Identifying deceptive brain messages

The heightened emotions due to the lockdown crisis makes this the ideal time to identify the deceptive brain messages as they will most probably scream for attention due to the huge uncertainty and unpredictability.

Can we afford these deceptive messages? Once the lockdown has been lifted, we will need all the resilience and bouncing back ability we have to face and help create the new normal.

This scary uncertainty offers new potential for each individual. Consider the following negative effect of the deceptive brain messages:

- These negative brain messages obscure your reality so that you think they are true

This train of thought together with its memorized emotional sensations will paralyze you. They will force you to say that nothing matters, that in light of global negative political and economic conditions it is useless to even try to make a difference in your personal life. I would encourage you though to bite the bit and be willing to spend the same amount of dedicated focused attention that you used to spend on the deceptive cycles, on forcing the habit structures in the brain to manually shift the gear into new behaviours that will lead to new thought patterns and eventually new true emotions.

Speak to someone about these deceptive messages (obviously an editor or wise advocate not another commentator) and enlist the help and support of loved ones and/or technology to help you persevere with new activities that can break the habit cycle.

We can/my stay trapped in these deceptive brain cycles. It really is a choice. To be free from these slave-drivers however is such a liberating experience that I cannot envisage myself remaining there!

The thing I hear so often is why can't God just destroy these thoughts? Please bear in mind that these circuits are actual neuronal circuits. They cannot be broken. They can only be left as is and new ones can be formed.

I cannot over-emphasise the necessity to pay dedicated attention over time to new activities. The circuit will be renewed but then we need to take the time and even if we could resist the old behaviour for only fifteen minutes initially, according to Schwartz and Gladding (2012) it will start making a difference. I have constantly become aware of the fact that new emotions do not come first – new behaviour come first because we realise what we are doing and why we are doing it. The breakthrough will come. Just keep moving forward. God would not have said that we should be transformed by the renewal of our minds if He did not provide the way and means thereto.

As I was thinking about the lockdown and the experience we have of it, I wondered how much our view and experience of ourselves influence our experience of the situation. I mentioned in a previous article that some freedom would be nice – but now I wonder whether freedom is not something inside of us and that being free inside is a prerequisite for experiencing our environment differently. To make sense of this statement let us consider the last important effect of the deceptive brain messages that I would like to discuss:

- These deceptive brain messages keep you trapped and a slave to other people's whims, opinions, brokenness and expectations.

When we remain subjected to the deceptive brain messages our first question in the morning is not what can I do to make this day a good day? Nor is it how can I love my neighbour today? Our first consideration is not how we can prepare ourselves through prayer, intercession, reading and meditating on Scripture as well as some physical exercises to be resilient and a source of life and love during the day. Our first consideration is not of ourselves being a vessel in the Hands of God to bring a piece of heaven to somebody else's hell. Our first consideration is do I really need to get up? What will this day bring? How will I make it? Whom do I have to stomach today? What will people think of me today? The list goes on and on. Looking at these two opposite approaches to self, the day and other people, can you

“feel” the difference in your gut? The first one causes you to be exhausted and negative before you are properly awake. It causes you to immediately succumb to the deceptive brain messages of being a victim of other people, not able to face the day, unable to make a difference and many more deceptive messages. The anxiety you feel, will lead to over-analysis and depression will follow. The last question then is what is the point?

If you started the day this way it will reflect in the way you look at people, greet them; respond to their greeting and even to the way in which you **perceive** their attitude towards you. Your approach will primarily be to stay out of trouble, remain invisible and not make waves.

At the same time however you will hate it to be like this (ending up hating yourself). All of us are called to be sources of love and life to other people. God equips us through the death of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to be free from our slave-drivers – be it other people's opinions, their mood fluctuations or their expectations. Other slave-drivers most certainly are these deceptive brain messages that punish you day in and day out.

Freedom does not start with circumstances or people around you changing, but with changed attitudes and behaviour from the moment you become aware of yourself in the morning. If you have been subject to deceptive brain messages your whole life, you will not wake up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed every morning. You will most probably wake up with a sense of impending doom in your gut. We have seen that this is as a result of the one part of our warning system, the cingulate, being wired directly into the gut and that it has been “glued” into the deceptive cycle through probably years of repetition in the early life. It will not get “un-glued” by itself. When you wake up with this sensation in the pit of your stomach, immediately say there is no present threat that is not in God's inbox. How great the threat of the present crisis may be, it does not disable your ability to love yourself and other people. It does not disable you to pray, read Scripture, intercede for other people, exercise and take care of your body and being or to eat properly.

What everybody needs at this time and can give at this time as always, is a helping hand, a willing ear, an open and caring heart. Do not give in to the emotional sensations that grip your stomach in the morning. Leave them there – they are only the evidence that deceptive brain messages are present – they are not evidence that you are to remain in the old patterns and should try to argue with your brain in an effort to fix the deceptive messages from the inside. Remember the years of useless energy you have spent on this. Memory circuits cannot be “fixed” from within or destroyed. They need to be left alone even in the presence of intense

emotional sensations. New circuits have to be formed. This starts with new activities to force the habit centre of the brain to “unlock” and to shift a gear. Please refer back to the posts on the Biology of the deceptive brain message development. Remember that dedicated attention over time achieves the goal of forcing the habit centre out of the “locked” position.

The magnitude of the crisis places it so far out of our control that we only need to focus on who we are and who we are becoming during this time. Once the lockdown starts lifting and we can return to work and as the days unfold, it will be revealed what we need to do about our financial situation. For now make use of the opportunity to taste the inner freedom that you have longed for so many years.

Renewal in suffering

So why would one after all these posts decide to give it a try? As a Christian I would say because of Jesus. He paid the price for the hurt. He has created us with the brain possibilities to get up and be renewed. It might not be easy and mostly one cannot do it without the help of a wise counsellor / a wise advocate and definitely not without the power of the Holy Spirit Who will guide our efforts toward an obedient response. God created us as His image bearers. In Jesus He revealed what this image looks like in living form. We are not merely saved to go to Heaven one day – although it is a reality to look forward to.

However, the idea is not to “hang around” here and just wait for that day. God calls us to live a different life here – not focussing on our hurt and shame and abuse (although in His own suffering, humiliation and crucifixion He proved His entry into our hurt and shame and brokenness, our anger and frustration). He does not promise that no hurt or humiliation or abuse will take place here. He gives us Himself as an example of how to deal with it when it comes. He gives the Holy Spirit to us to empower us to go through the “valley of the shadow of death” – as we are experiencing right now.

But and this is very important: He has chosen the community of believers as a vessel through which He wants to make His love and caring real. This community of believers (to whom Jesus refers as His body with Him the Head) is imperfect. We fall short of what he would want us to be but we live standing on the meaning of the Cross. This is the foundation which empowers us and gives us perseverance to carry on in the suffering and disappointment.

As part of this community we are called to care and take care of others - to reach out in and with our pain and suffering to other people and not to withdraw and hurt all on our own. We often rob other people of the privilege to care for us and rob them of our caring. A new community way of living has to come from this crisis.

We often think that the suffering of this world is the result of being Christians. During this global pandemic it surely has become clear that this is not true? Suffering is part of this broken world. It strikes everybody and anybody. God is not the Engineer of suffering. He is also not a supernatural Magician who will wave a magic wand to prevent a death here, heal that sickness, and give money and prosperity here or there. He is not in the service of mankind so that everybody should just like Him because of His magical miracles. He is God. His goal is to create people to reflect His image no matter what the circumstances. To this end Jesus gave His life.

Those who really follow Jesus and have come to terms with the fact that suffering is part of a broken world, experience the suffering just as intensely as everybody else, but can deal with it in a different way: without losing hope or becoming cynical or bitter.

In my life I have found the greater miracle was not to heal me physically, give me money or prevent bad things to happen to me. The greater miracle was to change **me**. I think back on my life and shudder to think about the discomfort and hurt **I caused** those closest to me (and may even still cause in future) because I fell for the deceptive brain messages and allowed them to rule my life. So often people around me had to walk on eggs because they never knew how I would respond but could be sure of this one thing: my reaction would be self-centred yet creating the impression that they were wrong. On looking back, I realise that I often used normal everyday situations and weaved them into these messages because it suited my hurting heart. I often could not discern that the present moment was not a problem and not aimed at hurting or shaming me but I turned it around in my head to fit in with the deceptive brain messages.

Many people – like I did – think that it is because they are introverted that people will not be interested in them. I came to realise in my own life that this is not true. It was my **attitude** that made people avoid me or turn away from me. My face did not reflect the love of Jesus. My hands did not speak the language of caring and love. My eyes were often on the lookout of where I would be wronged and what would be “too much” for me. My ears were wide open to hear words and intonations that would confirm the deceptive brain messages and I realise I was looking for evidence that these messages were true instead of looking for ways in which I could become the person Jesus created me to be. To live in this way was such a struggle!

Thank God there came a day that the truth of Who He is and who He wants to be in me, sank in. The liberty from **me** that this brought is so enormous that it changed my whole life - to the extent that even at those times when I do still fall into the trap of one of these deceptive messages, I cannot wait to get out of it.

To be at peace with myself and in myself because of how He loves me and the tremendous awe-inspiring reality of His life in me that transfigures me into His very own image is such a privilege and honour; a source of strength and a continuous reason to carry on.

In summary

We should support people to turn a time of extreme testing into a positive experience. We have a golden opportunity here to choose what in ourselves and our immediate world we want to embrace going forward, and what we want to get rid of.

The global extent of the crisis lends itself towards a new way of looking at ourselves and our world and make decisions to influence our immediate world differently than before. It unfortunately also causes an enormous amount of loss. I wanted to highlight the positive aspects of a time of grieving.

- This time would also bring more suffering in a year than we thought possible. Boggled down by emotional baggage from our past experiences can weaken our ability to deal with the suffering in a constructive way.
- I wanted to bring across findings from Neuro-Biology that can enable us in a structured way to deal with these negative experiences during this time.
- One of the major life-changing principles from this is the importance of attention. We spend hours going over the content our brains offer us to make sense of uncertainty.
- Some of this content is not true, yet we elevate it to gospel truth as a result of the intense emotional sensations that accompany it, due to the memories being wired into a permanent circuit.
- These sensations cannot be changed by focusing on them. They are too experienced, relabelled and reattributed to the memories that the brain feed us – and then the attention has to shift to new activities.
- If we spent the same amount of time per day contemplating the truth about ourselves we can overcome the lies that broken caregivers implanted in us which our brains now offer us as truth.
- To bring about change in yourself, apply the same level of attention to constructive activities – even simple things like weeding the garden or building puzzles. This forces the habit centre to “shift the gear” form new constructive circuits.
- Move from brokenness to wholeness by embracing the truth about yourself from the Word of God.
- This truth is available to all people - all of us are in the same position before God and His love reaches out to us all through the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Consider your picture of God: If any part of what you believe about God is not in line with who Jesus is, you need to reconsider that picture!
- Embrace the hope - the knowledge from neuro-biology ties in with God’s instruction that we have to be renewed by the renewal of our minds. This is possible due to neuroplasticity – the retraining of your brain.
- Endless self-analysis may stop. No memory can be changed from the inside by discussing it with the yourself. The only way to renewal is actual renewal, by forming new memory circuits.
- My desire is that everybody may rejoice in the fact that we can put our own efforts to rest by embracing the power of the Holy Spirit.
- We looked at the Self-Referencing Centre and how biased it is and how subjective its view of us is. This gives rise to the hope that we can actually become who God created us to be: not perfect beings, but people who are willing to reflect His Glory and His character in the ways we reach out to others in love and service.
- It is so critical that every person understands that once we stop feeding the monster of our own perceived uselessness and focus on Him from Whom we find our being, we will be able to love and serve.
- Resilience is not only meant for a special few – it is possible to become resilient if we are willing to let go of the deceptive brain cycles.
- Through dedicated attention we will build a track record of success and must allow ourselves to celebrate small victories. In doing so, the powerful urge to give in to the old well-known ways will weaken and the new emotions incorporated in the new circuits we build, will become an everyday mood.
- We need to seek help during this time if we suffer from mental health challenges.
- Never underestimate the importance of you as an individual. Neither age, youth, poverty or wealth, level of education or influence nor any other objection you or any person bring in against you changes the truth of what Jesus did for everyone.
- The decision lies with every individual to decide whether he/she wants to return to who they were before the crisis or want to challenge themselves with the question: “What am I going to allow this time to make of me?”

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Meditations in a time of lock-down

By Dr. Enrico Casaleggio of Dutch Reformed Church Fichardtspark, Bloemfontein

The Bible is not a book that is time driven. It is a book that asks that you read it carefully and meditate on it in silence. Reflecting on it night and day. Yes, meditate! When it comes to the Bible, read slower. Think about what you are reading. Apply it to every aspect of your life.

With all the frustration that the lockdown brings, we will probably never again have the time and opportunity to truly become so quiet with God. Seize this time to relax with the Lord and to reflect on His Word.

Psalms 148 is a call for all living beings to praise the Lord. The birds are singing noticeably louder in this lockdown, then shouldn't we, who are the crown of God's creation, serve the Lord with greater devotion? Let's praise the Lord!



The word of God cannot be shackled

26 March 2020 - One day before lock down

2 Timothy 2:9: *It's what I'm sitting in jail for right now – but God's Word isn't in jail.*

We are finding ourselves on the eve of a historical event. For the first time ever, all the citizens of our country (like the citizens of many other countries) are compelled to stay at home. Although it is a pity that this situation is caused by the Corona virus / Covid-19 pandemic, it gives us as the church of the Lord Jesus an opportunity to be seized by both hands.

We are getting the opportunity to be church in a new, resourceful way, within the limitations of the law (to which we are submitting ourselves). We might be bogged down in the boundaries of our houses, but God's Word can never be shackled. The spread of the Good News will continue – also by making use of modern technology.

Martin Luther, that lead the transformation and that had to take shelter in the castle in Wartburg, knew that the walls of that castle could not keep the gospel in. In his hymn "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" which we still sing in our churches today, he writes "And though this world, with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us."

Where believers were persecuted, killed and tortured, it never stopped the spread of the Gospel. Believers knew that no law or penal facility or jail could restrict the Good News. The words in our scripture were also a consolation for them and they saw the fulfilment of these words: "...but God's Word isn't in jail."

The world is in a crisis. This is the opportunity for the church to take courage and to encourage others. Let's roll up our sleeves and be God's representatives in this

crisis situation. Let us discover and utilise new ways in which to bring the gospel to a world whose problem is much greater than Covid-19.

Prayer: *Thank you so much, Lord, that we can meet this uncertain time head-on with you at our side. Thank you that we may know, that despite the limitations that we face, your Word can never be restricted or shackled. Help us to be faithful to you and to seize this opportunity to share the Gospel with the world. Amen.*

Once again: The word of God cannot be shackled

27 March 2020 - Day one of lock down

2 Timothy 2:9: *It's what I'm sitting in jail for right now – but God's Word isn't in jail.*

I read recently: "Churches are not being closed. Buildings are being closed. You are the church! You are to remain open". That is what the Lord expects from us and the truth that is found in our scripture. The following is told about John Bunyan (1628-1688), the author of the classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*: He was jailed in Bedford because of his faith.

His cell was behind a high wall, but crowds of people gathered outside the jail to listen to his sermons every day. His voice carried over the high wall and through the bars of his cell into the hearts of people. It illustrates the truth of our scripture: The word of God cannot be shackled.

Richard Wurmbrand (1909-2001) was in jail for 14 years in Romania as a result of his faith. It however did not deter him. He knocked against the wall of his cell, using Morse code, and delivered the Good News. Many of the prisoners that understood Morse code, got to know the Lord Jesus because of it. Once again, the word of God could not be shackled.

Today we find ourselves on our first day of a country-wide lock down. Although we are limited to the boundaries of our homes, the Gospel is free and the situation provides us with a fresh way to be church in this time. We can still hear it on the radio and the TV. The fact that you are now reading this pericope, is testimony to the freedom of the Gospel. But the freedom is about more than just receiving it. It is about the very reason of sharing it. You could for example share this inspiration with others, and also other videos or sound-tracks where the Gospel is preached. Call your family and colleagues' attention to the numerous church services that will be broadcasted on Sundays on the TV and YouTube.

This pandemic (with all the bad and the sadness it holds) is a wonderful opportunity for the church of the Lord to the salvation of the world.

Prayer: *Lord, help us to discover more and more ways to develop opportunities in this time to spread your Gospel. Amen*

God weeps with us

28 March 2020 - Day two of lock down

John 11:35: *Now Jesus wept.*

I just heard that the number of Corona virus infected patients has now exceeded the thousand mark. We have also just heard that the first two South Africans, two women, have died of it. About a week ago we heard statistics from abroad and now it is as if it has hit us: this illness causes people to die!

In this time people have many opinions about the part God plays in this illness, opinions which they proclaim from public platforms. Many of these opinions claim that this illness is God's punishment on mankind. Man is indeed morally and religiously corrupt. But we as humans cannot bear God's punishment. No-one will survive it. It will however come down on the unbelievers with the last judgment. We as believers believe that Christ has borne the wrath of God in our place. It is important that we as believers confess this, especially since it is not long before Good Friday.

Our scripture, John 11:35, is the shortest verse in the Bible. But it says so much – so much about God. In this reading about the raising of Lazarus, his sisters have many questions and accusations directed at Jesus (e.g. verse 32). What does Jesus do in this instance? Does He apologize? Does He give a long theological explanation of the will of God? No! He weeps. Yes, He is sad. He shares in Lazarus's sisters' brokenness.

That is what the God we serve looks like! He is sad with us. You haven't shed one tear in your life which He didn't shed with you. He suffers with us in this disease. Every person that has lost a loved one, also as a result of Covid-19, can know for sure that not only is God in

the situation with you, but He also weeps with you. He has real empathy for us.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you so much that we are never alone – especially not in our most vulnerable moments of sadness. We pray for the loved ones of those who died today of this illness. Assure them of our sympathy, but even more so of your sympathy. Amen.*

Light thumps atheism in the face of COVID-19

29 March 2020 - Day 3 of Lock down

Matthew 5:16: In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Dr Julian Urban is a doctor in Lombardy in Italy. He says that in his worst nightmares he never dreamt that things will go so wrong in Italy. It is the country with the most deaths as a result of Covid-19 (it stands on 9134 deaths today). He says it got so bad that they weren't being physicians anymore, but that they were sorting the sick into groups of those who have a chance of survival on one side and those who will most likely die of their misery and illness on the other side. He and his colleagues were all atheists that were ridiculing everybody believing in God.

They were however so overwhelmed by the situation in which they could only look on in helplessness and see how patients and also doctors and nurses die in huge numbers. They realized that the forensic medicine, though very advanced, was not the answer in this crisis. They bowed before the Lord and acknowledged that only He can intervene and reverse the situation.

There was something else than the enormity of the situation that caused them to change their opinion about atheism. He tells about a 75-year-old minister that was taken up in hospital due to Covid-19. All he had was a Bible. The way this unwell minister walked from bed to bed and read from the Bible and prayed for patients, made an indelible impact on them. The minister later died, but not before his actions won them over to the kingdom of God.

We will not be presented by exactly the same opportunity as this minister, but all of us will get the opportunity to be the light of the world, as he was: maybe as a believing doctor or nurse in the hospital; maybe as a paramedic; maybe as one patient to another patient. I might get the opportunity, as a sick person, to pray for other sick people. Maybe it is in the way I, as a healthy person, obey the laws of isolation, required from me in this time. Let us be the light in an ever-darkening world.

Prayer: Jesus, you are the Light yourself, but you also give us the opportunity to be the light of the world. We have never had a better chance than now. Help us to utilise it fully. Amen.

Salt or poison?

30 March 2020 - Day 4 of Lockdown

Matthew 5:13: *You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavour? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.*

A few days ago, when one could still drive around, I saw on the lamp posts a poster of the Volksblad saying: "5 of the Church makes the rest of the Free State sick". This refers to five foreigners who had Covid-19 and attended a church event in Bloemfontein. They infected others. Of course, this was not intentional, but it is still awfully bad that there is a close connection between the church and this disease. Yes, that in a way the church was the cause of it.

There is an ironic connection between this disease and the Black Plague which peaked in Europe during 1347-1351 AD. Ironically, it seems that the Black Plague also originated in China and spread throughout Italy to the rest of Europe. Between 30 - 60% of Europe's population died because of it. People took stones from mines and made crosses and then put them in their homes to protect them from the plague. However, the stones were infected by rats and this aggravated the disease. Thus, more people died because of the crosses. The church, as in the case of the church in the Free State, was therefore the poison for the earth rather than the salt for it.

Someone who has ties to the church in China (where believers are being persecuted) tells me yesterday how the Christians acted there during the pandemic. They all wore green jackets, so everyone knew they were Christians. This, of course, exposed them, but they were at the forefront of cleaning up and disinfecting the cities. They took care of the sick and the elderly. Thousands of Chinese were converted because China's persecuted Christians were the salt of the earth.

We as a church now also can be either salt or poison. We must not retreat in this situation. We do not all need to put on green jackets, but we must be salt to the earth in such a way that unbelievers will question their unbelief.

Prayer: *Lord, we - Your church - sometimes have a bad reputation: to be poison rather than salt. Help us to be the salt for the earth in these days. Amen.*

God is not Santam Multiplex

March 31, 2020 - Day 5 of Lockdown

Psalm 3: 3,4: But You, O LORD, are a shield around me; you are my glory, the one who holds my head high. I cried to the Lord, and He answered me from His holy mountain.

A woman informs me that a colleague of hers has been exposed to Covid-19 but refuses to be tested. Her

defence is that she is a Christian and that Christians, especially members of her denomination (cult?) Are resistant to Covid-19. Jesus ensures that they are covered against Covid-19.

If this is your image of God, you have a very distorted image of God. You are probably confusing the Lord with Santam Multiplex, whose slogan is: We cover everything. God is immeasurably greater than anything or anyone and He is not a short-term insurer.

Of course, it is true that the Lord can protect us from danger and that we can pray for it - including Covid-19. However, what happens more often is that *the Lord does not save us from danger but saves us in danger.*

David is awfully familiar with this truth. He went through terrible trials. A daughter of his was raped, he lost three sons to death, he was often in flight before Saul. He writes Psalm 3 while on the run for his life. Absalom, his son, wants to kill him. When he says in verse 3, "But You, O LORD, are a shield around me ..." then he says it precisely from the background that God did not save Him from danger, but in danger. In the world, there are many persecuted believers who experience this truth every day: God may not have saved us from danger, but He is protecting us in danger.

The English Marriage Form says that spouses must stay true to one another "in sickness and in health". Our relationship with the Lord also does not depend on Him protecting us from sickness (including Covid-19), but on enjoying our fellowship and faithfulness, whether sick or healthy.

We all have a picture of God and in times of crisis, as now, it becomes clearer what our picture of God looks like. God is not a short-term insurer, but maybe we can now prayerfully examine the other limiting ideas we also have about God.

Prayer: Lord, You are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. You are the One who is and who was and who will come again. Amen.

Pray for the first line

April 1, 2020 - Day 6 of Lockdown

Matthew 25:36: I was ... sick, and you nursed me; in prison, and you visited me.

It is significant that the Lord Jesus says that our mercy - the care of the sick, the poor, the prisoners, the orphans and the widows - will be on the agenda on the day of judgement. For good reason, we will not be allowed in hospitals and prisons at this time. It would also be a risk to allow visitors to homes for the elderly and children's homes.

Fortunately, this does not mean that our hands are cut off. We can still pray for the sick, the lonely, the elderly and the prisoners. Charles Spurgeon said on occasion: "Neglect of private prayer is the locust that devours the

strength of the church". If ever there was a time to address this scourge of prayerlessness in the church, it is now!

We see on TV how doctors and nurses talk about their concern and anxiety in dealing with this pandemic. This is not an unfounded fear - if you consider that by yesterday 61 doctors had already died in Italy. They are the first line between us and this disease.

A former member of my catechism class sends me a message. Her father works for Correctional Services. This is an essential service with potentially high exposure. She asks me to pray for him. She is very worried about him. On a small WhatsApp group of mine, there are two members of the SAPS. We as a group have undertaken to pray for them as a priority. Along with that, there are still ambulance personnel, the Traffic Department, and the Defense Force for whom we must pray.

May we as believers set the example of how patients (or family of patients) should behave. May we as believers set the example of how to act with respect to the Police and other authorities.

An old hymn from the hymnbook reads: "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war ..." Those who form the first line of our health absolutely rely on us to be the first line of prayer. Let us fight on our knees and dedicate all to the Lord who is exposed to this disease because of their work.

Prayer: Lord, You are the Great Physician. Our expectation is from you. We pray for your protection over the doctors, nurses, police, correctional services, traffic police, the military and others who are exposed to this disease at this time. Amen

Everyone will recognize him as a King

April 2, 2020 - Day 7 of Lockdown

Philippians 2: 10,11: ... that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Our church building does not have a clock in the true sense of the word. The sound of a ringing bell on a CD is broadcast through speakers on a Sunday morning. In this time of isolation, we use the speakers to broadcast a Christian song twice a day. It is a way of spreading the Gospel and honouring God, but also a way of reminding people who are in isolation that we are not alone. God is with us!

It was a touching moment yesterday when the sounds of the Hallelujah choir from The Messiah of GF Händel raved about our neighbourhood. The history of this Händel masterpiece is also heart-breaking. He composed the entire Messiah in just 24 days. He sometimes

did not eat for a day or two so he could finish this job. What makes it even more remarkable is that Händel had a series of strokes before. He eventually wrote (composed) the Hallelujah choir with his left hand, while he was right-handed. It was performed for the first time in 1742.

The first time King George II heard this, he rose with the words "King of kings and Lord of lords" to acknowledge that he (George) is not the most important king, but that Christ is the King of kings. To this day, whether in Beijing or Sydney, Johannesburg or New York, people stand up when these words are sung, following the example of King George II. Although many do not even know it, they also acknowledge (following George II's example) the Kingship of Christ.

Our text today says that every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Lord. How about you? Have you also bowed before Jesus Christ? Have you also confessed with all your heart that He is not only the Lord, but also your Lord?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You are the King of kings and Lord of lords. I also confess You today as my Lord and my God. Amen.

A sense of humour

April 3, 2020 - Day 8 of Lockdown

Psalm 126: 2: We were filled with laughter ...

Covid-19 and the consequences it brought is no joke. We would rather describe it with words like tragedy, or disaster, or pandemic. Even heart-breaking.

It is remarkable how many jokes and humour come from this situation. On Monday on a national radio station, they had a conversation with an academic from Stellenbosch about how people adapt to the situation and learn how to deal with it (coping mechanisms). She mentioned that humour is an important way and that we should not lose our sense of humour during this time. On March 27, 2020 (the first day of the Lockdown), *The Star* also published an article underlining it: *Retain sense of humour to stay sane*.

Those who know me will know that humour is especially important to me. It is a family disease. But what is a biblical outlook on humour? As for our text today, Psalm 126: 2, a commentator says, "*See the laughter clearly in your mind. This laughter is not a little tweak of the lips. This is not a polite living-room chortle. This is not a snigger behind your hand. This is not a mild happy laugh. This is a slap-your-thigh burst-out in laughter, LOL, giggle fit. 'Our mouth was filled with laughter' — wide open, yawning chasm, filled with laughter*".

Charles Spurgeon is considered the greatest preacher of all time. A woman once accused him of having too much humour in his sermons. A writer on the episode then says: "*His response to the woman who had button-*

holed him was classic: "My good lady, if you only knew how much I restrain myself."

Humour is also something that differs from person to person. When we hurt people with what we think are jokes, it cannot be considered healthy humour. However, we as believers can cheer each other up at this time with humour. I believe that our sense of humour is part of our "being the image of God". I believe that if we start recalling the people, we know with a good sense of humour, they are probably the people who remind us most of the Lord.

In a world full of tragedy, let us bring, as a believer, in a sensitive way, also the comedy.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for giving us a sense of humour. Help us to use it in this situation as part of our testimony in a hurting world. Amen.*

Do not believe everything you hear

4 April 2020 - Day 9 of Lockdown

1 Thessalonians 5:21: but test everything ... Hold on to what is good.

I remember when I was still at university, some students used this text to approve immorality such as alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity. The argument would be that the Bible instructs you here to put all things to the test, as long as you just end up with the good.

However, in the context of this passage, Paul wants to convey the following message: Many preachers will come to you and claim to preach the gospel. Some of them bring a false gospel. Listen carefully to everyone. Those who preach the truth may be welcomed on your pulpits again, but avoid others like the pestilence.

Against this backdrop, I am amazed at this time about the false Gospel that is doing the rounds daily in the form of WhatsApp messages, emails, etc. It touches on a wide variety of matters, which include fasting and praying to enable God to deliver us from the evil that has taken hold of our city. Well, if we must give God power to do something, He is, by definition, no longer God. It demonstrates how we became God in our own eyes.

The examples are too many to mention, but they also include meeting again on the Sabbath (Saturday) and not on the Lord's Day of Resurrection (Sunday). That shofars are the solution to this pandemic and that this is a curse of God on us.

Albert Einstein said on occasion: "*Adversity introduces a man to himself*". Against that background, I would say this pandemic did not cause these misconceptions. It simply came to show us how many errors there are already in the church (in a broader sense, worldwide).

In Acts 17: 10,11 we read that the people of Berea listened to Paul and Silas. However, they said they would first measure their message against the Word of the

Lord. I would also like to ask you to please not believe everything you receive in this (or any) time, which has a Christian sauce. Test it by the Lord's Word.

Prayer: *Lord, You have warned us that wolves will come in sheep's clothing to harm Your flock. Help us to be vigilant for this at this time of vulnerability. Amen.*

The second coming: Convert, not calculate

7 April 2020 - Day 12 of Lockdown

Mathew 24:36: "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*"

The Lord Jesus gave certain signs that would remind us of His return. These signs included issues such as wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and pestilences. These were matters that He chose well, for these signs frequently appeared throughout the life of each generation. There is not a single generation that lived after Him who did not see or hear these signs. So, there is not a generation that will be able to excuse the fact that they have not been regularly reminded to repent.

Yes, these signs were given to remind us: Jesus is coming again! You must repent! Unfortunately, some people calculated rather than converted. Jesus says, "Even I do not know". These people say, "Don't worry Jesus! We know better! Leave the calculations to us".

So, I have been watching some questionable videos lately about the pandemic and the Second Coming of the Lord (some also add the rapture as well). One guy explains when the Lord is coming, linked to the horses in Revelation 6. His explanation sounds more like the Durban July. In a subsequent video, a microchip manufactured by Microsoft is linked to the sign of the Anti-christ in Revelation 13.

Lack of space means that I cannot fully explain the fallacy of these two videos (and other similar ones). It does, however, mean that Scripture interpretation is done with integrity when interpreting the text with the grammatical and cultural context in mind and then applying it to your world of life. In both of the above videos, through optical delusion the process is reversed, namely: Find something in your world of life (for example, Covid 19) that you want to paste into a Bible text and embed it in Scripture. In that way the Bible says something it never wanted to say, but at least it seems very creative and many mouths hang open because of your magic trick.

This time is a breeding ground for conversation about the Second Coming of the Lord. If the conversation is about repentance/conversion, listen to it. If it is in any way about calculation, avoid it and please do not forward it to anyone else.

Prayer: *Lord, help us to respect Your Word with respect. Help us to look forward to Your return in a spirit of repentance and to keep us from reckoning. Amen*

Extreme reactions in circumstances

April 8, 2020 - Day 13 of Lockdown

2 Thessalonians 3:13: *Do not get tired of doing good.*

Charles Dickens begins his book *A Tale of Two Cities* with the words: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...". We find ourselves in a time (especially with the state of lockdown) that is strongly reminiscent of the time Dickens writes about. A time of extremes. It brings out either the best or the worst in people.

A request for help came to me yesterday. Other community organizations have also received this request, creating the impression that it comes from people in need during this time. Upon closer examination, it appeared that these are people who want to use the time of lockdown to abuse churches and charities for their own gain. It's awful that people can be so selfish and insensitive.

Graciously, there is another side too. On the same day, we sent out a message asking for sandwiches for the homeless. Within about 45 minutes we get almost 45 loaves for sandwiches. A bread per minute. During this time, I also heard about a group of Christian women who have found a pattern for medical masks and make masks every day (which will, of course, still be sterilized) and deliver them to a hospital in their area, so doctors and nurses will not have to work without protective clothing.

When we hear about the cases where the situation is being abused, we can easily think it does not help to get involved in the distress of others. However, Paul (inspired by the Holy Spirit) encourages us in our text not to get tired of doing good. These extremes of circumstance encourage us to live our testimony to the limit.

Prayer: Lord, Your love for us is a love despite our sin and negativity and selfishness. Help us to love and help others in this time, too, despite reasons we might raise not to. Help us to not get tired of doing good. Amen.

Thomas

April 9, 2020 - Day 14 of Lockdown

John 20:28: *And Thomas said unto him, My Lord and my God.*

One of the most important news reports over the past few days is that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been hospitalized. He is seriously ill with Covid-19. Among other things, this brings us to the question of

whether we pray earnestly for world leaders in this challenging time. They have critical decisions to make. Do we in particular pray earnestly for our own country's leaders - especially for the State President and the Minister of Health?

However, what struck me particularly about the British prime minister's hospitalization is the name of the hospital he was admitted to, namely St Thomas Hospital. I was surprised to read that the hospital had been in existence since 1215 (obviously not the current building) and that it was initially named after Thomas Becket. In 1551 the Hospital was re-commissioned, but it was then dedicated to Thomas, the Apostle of the Lord Jesus.

The most famous story about Thomas goes precisely with the time of the ecclesiastical year in which we now find ourselves, namely Lent and then the Resurrection. Thomas was not with the other disciples during Jesus' first appearance to them. Thomas then said he would only believe if he could put his fingers into Jesus' wounds.

Still, I believe that through the ages the church was a little unfair to Thomas to remember him as "Unbelieving Thomas". After all, this part of his journey with Jesus ends with a *confession of faith*. In our text he confesses: "*My Lord and my God!*". Church history also teaches that, after Jesus' ascension, Thomas took the Gospel further than any of the apostles. He took it all the way to India. There he was stabbed to death with a spear because he did not want to stop professing his faith in the Lord Jesus.

Where we are in the shadow of the cross of the Lord Jesus, just a day before Good Friday, it would benefit us to reflect on our own confession of faith. How far, and without regard to the cost, am I prepared to carry the Gospel?

Prayer: Lord, here in the shadow of the cross we confess with all our heart: "*My Lord and my God!*" We also intercede for the leaders of our country and the world during this challenging time. Amen.

Good Friday

April 10, 2020 - Day 15 of Lockdown

Romans 5: 8: *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Today is Good Friday. The first time ever that we spend a Good Friday in isolation. Oddly enough, the first Good Friday also had a certain kind of isolation. Something that never happened before or after, namely, that the Lord Jesus was so intensely isolated that He cried out, "My God, My God, why did You forsake Me?"

The Lord Jesus experienced it so that we do not have to experience it. He experienced this isolation, or abandonment, in our place. He also died in our place.

A few years ago, there was an article in the National Geographic. It was a story about survival in nature. However, the article drew me a picture of Jesus' replacement death. It was about conservationists who walked up a mountain following a wildfire in *Yellowstone National Park* in the US to estimate the damage. One conservationist found a bird, which was completely charred, at the bottom of the trunk of a tree. He moved the remains of the bird with a stick. As he did so, three wild chicks scurried out from under the dead mum's wings. This caring mum, well aware of the impending disaster, moved her young from the nest in the tree to a hole at the foot of the trunk. She could have flown away from danger and leave her chicks on their own to die, but she sat on top of the hole in which she hid the chicks. Despite the heat and flames, she remained there. Her body was completely charred. She died, so her chicks, let's say, her "children" didn't have to die. It reminded me that Christ also died in the place of His children.

On this day when we commemorate the death of Christ, it is my prayer that in your isolation you will remember that He carried the worst of isolation, or indeed abandonment, for your sake. Remember that He not only died, but died in your place.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, in our situation of isolation we thank You for carrying the worst form of isolation - abandonment - in our place. We honor You that You died in our place. Amen.*

Holy Saturday: God behind lock and key?

April 11, 2020 - Day 16 of Lockdown

Matthew 27:66: *So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.*

With the Roman inclusive way of counting, the Friday, Saturday and Sunday were all counted to bring us to three days the Lord Jesus was dead. Saturday was the only day that He spent the full day in the grave. Throughout the ages, this Saturday has had several names, of which *Holy Saturday* is the most common. Other names include *Black Sabbath* and *White Saturday*. In Mexico they call it *Judas Day*. They make images of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus, who is then set on fire in public. For the children, small images are made full of sweets.

The pericope in which our text appears is a story of a conspiracy between the chief priests and Pharisees. They also involve Pilate. Their actions, while Jesus is in the tomb, only demonstrate again what Romans 3:12 says, that there is not one good man, not even one.

So between the seriousness and the sadness of the situation, there is also an incredible piece of humour. You could probably call it ridiculousness. The funny thing is that the Pharisees and scribes and Pilate think that a soldier and a sealed tomb are stronger than the Son of God.

The preacher and theologian David Platt write about this text: "*The most hilarious line in the Bible is Pilate on Jesus' tomb: 'Make it as secure as you can!' And then his sarcastic remark: 'Good luck with that!'*"

It is ridiculous to think that any lock or latch, any boundary or law, any situation or limitation can create a problem for God. There is nothing that is difficult for God. Yet, we often fall into the same trap as the conspirators in our text, thinking that our situation, whatever it is, is beyond God's reach. That my circumstances are too great for God. That the soldier and sealed grave in my life will limit God, beat Him.

On this Holy Saturday, it will benefit us to look for those matters in our lives that make us think that the Lord can be limited. It may be extremely painful business, but it does not take away from the fact that it is ridiculous to think that these matters can keep God locked out.

Prayer: *Lord, we confess today the ridiculousness, but also the unbelief in our hearts; that we can think that anything can keep you locked out. Amen*

Easter: Death is killed

April 12, 2020 - Day 17 of Lockdown

Revelation 1: 17b, 18: *Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!*

In his book *The Day Death Died*, Michael Green tells the following story: During the Communist regime in Russia, where many Christians were tortured and died because of their faith in Jesus Christ, a lecturer and member of the Communist Party spoke to a group of students about the resurrection of Jesus. He made a long speech with the purpose of proving that there is no truth in the resurrection. After he finished his talk, a priest of the Orthodox Church asked if he could respond. "Yes, but you just get five minutes". "Five seconds is all I need," answered the priest. Then he turned to the audience and greeted them with the traditional Easter greeting: "Christos aneste - Christ has risen!" To which the audience, like one man, said the traditional answer: "Alethos aneste - Christ has risen indeed".

For believers the resurrection of Jesus Christ has always held wonderful comfort for eternity, but also a wonderful comfort for the present. That audience in Russia felt it on their bodies as they suffered for their faith in the present. They also thought of how their loved ones, who died for their faith, inherited life eternal because of Christ's resurrection from the dead. In our text we see how the consolation of Christ's resurrection reflects on eternity, but also on the present.

Although the world has always been in dire need of this message, it is now, during the Covid-19 pandemic, more urgent than ever that we spread the Gospel of the Resurrection of Christ. The day before yesterday alone, more than two thousand people in the USA died of this

disease. Many of them are probably Christians. We live on this Easter Sunday, in the midst of this sadness, still with hope.

In a death-drenched world, with our faith in the Lord, we are comforted, because Christ took the sting out of death (1 Corinthians 15:55). Christ has killed death!

Prayer: *Lord we pray for all those who have lost loved ones at this time. Thank you that You have triumphed over death and that all who believe in you can have eternal life. Amen*

Resurrection, work, restriction

April 13, 2020 - Day 18 of Lockdown

John 21: 4: *Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.*

People often think that work was a punishment for the fall of man. Of course, this is not true. Since creation, even before the fall (Genesis 1:28), God gave mankind work. It is only the trouble associated with the work that is a curse after the fall (Genesis 3: 17-19).

At this time of lockdown, the issue of work is, for various reasons, paramount in our minds - most may not go to work; many work from home; many are afraid they will lose their jobs because of the economic effects of the pandemic, and so on.

As far as the church year is concerned, we are now in Resurrection time. What would the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead have to say for our work situation? It is striking that with the Lord Jesus' third appearance to His disciples, which we read in John 21, He goes to visit them at work. The disciples are still at their nets in the fishing boat when they see the Lord. After Jesus' crucifixion, they returned to their old profession of being fishermen. It is a work with its quota of stress and effort and even of danger and loss of life. Especially on that night there was disappointment. They were out at sea all night, with no success. At dawn, the Lord Jesus appeared to them, right where they were working. Where they practice their profession. It was no accident.

We know that even though our labor is sometimes difficult and disappointing - especially in this time of isolation - the risen Lord visits us in our labor as well. Of course, it is comforting to us that the risen Lord is closely involved in our work, our profession, our labor. My work and the way I do it is a form of worship. A way I worship the Lord. This also applies to this time of isolation which coincides with the Easter.

The risen Lord showed up at the disciples' work. Our work is also a crucial part of our worship. Let us glorify Him in it and with it.

Prayer: *Lord, Your visit to the disciples' workplace comforts me that you value my work. I want to glorify You*

with that. I also pray that You will ward off the crisis of job losses. Amen

Community of believers

14 April 2020 - Day 19 of Lockdown

1 John 1: 3: *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

In this time of lockdown, we try to support each other as believers in various ways. We send each other spiritual videos or watch sermons on YouTube. We may be forming prayer groups that agree to pray together at specific times or phone each other to encourage one another.

However, something that many believers miss at this time is the community of believers – where believers come together for the Lord's Word in a worship service or a Bible study or in a home group. In Hebrews 10:25, we are also admonished: “*not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*”

In our text John actually speaks of three forms of community that are all inter-related. He speaks first of the community of believers among themselves. Secondly, he says that this community they have is based on the community they have with God. Thirdly however, what is very important to know is that the community of believers is based on the community of the Persons of the Triune God.

God is three Persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in one Being. Three Persons, but one God. We read about the interrelationship between these three Persons in Genesis 1. We can too easily say that when believers are together, for argument's sake at a barbecue, then there is community of believers. This is not necessarily true. The question is whether believers together reflect something of the community that they have with God - even more so, if it reflects something of the underlying relationship between the Persons of the Divine Trinity.

This is also true of our worship services. We can only call it the community of believers if it reminds us of the fellowship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Prayer: *Lord, I miss being in a worship service with fellow believers. Help me to really appreciate it when I get the opportunity again. Let our worship services always remind us of the fellowship of You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

🌸 Make the most of the time

April 15, 2020 - Day 20 of Lockdown

Colossians 4: 5b: ... make the most of every opportunity.

"What are you doing during this lockdown with all the excess time?"

Some Bibles translate our text as "buy time out". First of all, it wants to say something about the opportunities one has to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, to collaborate on expanding God's kingdom - that we will not let these opportunities pass us by. But it's also about opportunities in general.

In Greece a sculpture was excavated, named "Opportunity". It was a man with a long fringe, but no hair on the back of his head. The message? Seize every opportunity. Once it's past you, it's too late. You will never have that opportunity again.

There are often opportunities to be equipped from God's Word that pass us by. We often waste our time with trivialities. John Piper says: "One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time."

What I will I be doing with my time to serve the Lord once this time of lockdown is over?

Alan Lakein said: "Time is life. It is irreversible and irreplaceable. To waste your time is to waste your life, but to master time is to master your life and make the most of it".

Prayer: Lord, You are God who rules over time and eternity. You are the Beginning and the End, the First and Last. Help me to spend my time wisely and to grab every opportunity I have to serve you. Amen.

🌸 How God is using isolation for his kingdom

April 16, 2020: Day 21 of Lockdown

Revelation 1: 9: *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*

The book *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written by John Bunyan - maybe the most important piece of theological fiction ever written in English. It is an allegory where a man with the name *Christian* moves through the world and meet up with other characters like Goodwill, Obstinate, Evangelist, Pagan and Faithfull. This book has been in print since 1678! Every Christian should read it at least once.

What many people don't know is that John Bunyan wrote this book while he was spending 12 years in prison in Bedfordshire, England, for preaching the Gospel. Many people stood outside the jail daily to hear Bunyan preach. His voice carried over the prison walls

and many people were spiritually freed from sin while Bunyan was in chains. So, the Lord used Bunyan's isolation to promote His kingdom.

John was in exile on the island of Patmos. Isolated. Away from the people he loved, because he preached the Gospel. Here he received the Revelation from the Lord, which ultimately becomes the last book in the Bible!

John could not have realized the wonderful way in which the Lord set him apart to provide comfort to the church through the ages.

We must also place our situation of isolation in the hands of the Lord, for Him to use it to expand His kingdom.

Prayer: Lord, I deliberately place my situation of isolation in Your hands today and ask that its fruit will contribute to the expansion of Your kingdom. Amen

🌸 When the goalposts are shifted

17 April 2020 - Day 22 of Lockdown

Hebrews 12: 12,13: *Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

I once watched a documentary about the training and selection of US Navy SEALs. The physical and emotional stumbling blocks they have to overcome are daunting, and maybe even superhuman. Very few of them complete the course. What eventually cracks a significant group of those who are still part of the course on the last day, is the moving of the goal posts. They are told that they have only one task left to qualify as a SEAL. However, when they subsequently congratulate each other excitedly for being the small group that successfully completed the course, they are given another superhuman task. Many of them simply cannot get themselves to the point again to carry out the last command. Shifting the goal posts is just too much for some.

Today is the day when the initial three weeks of isolation would have ended. Now another two weeks of isolation were added...

I hear of church members who are now starting to suffer. Parents long for their children. Some are worried about their elderly parents, the most vulnerable, whom they cannot visit. Grandparents miss their grandchildren. Others are suffering in other ways. They had to live with people who mistreated and abused them for three weeks. Three weeks have been too much, but now that the goal posts have been moved....

Let's pray for each other with new zeal. The Chinese character indicating danger can also be interpreted as an opportunity. Use this as an opportunity to testify of the Lord's love and grace.

Prayer: Lord, I thank You for carrying us in this time of isolation. Help us deal with the shifted goal posts in

honor of Your Name. Give us new strength for the time ahead. Amen

Having a cave experience?

April 18, 2020 - Day 23 of Lockdown

Psalm 34:18: *The Lord is close to the broken-hearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.*

You can probably not get a stronger experience of isolation than in a cave - totally cut off from the outside world and without the most basic necessities. It is in such a situation that David finds himself when he writes the Psalm from which our text comes. He fled from Saul and initially tried to find shelter at King Abimelech (verse 1), but he also chased him away. Now he is sitting in the Cave of Adullam and writes this Psalm.

It is notable that when he describes God in this situation, he does it with reference to a specific word, namely deliver. In our text he says: "*The Lord is **close** to the broken-hearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed*". No matter how secluded David is; how isolated, broken and despondent he is; nothing can prevent God from delivering him.

Some people still fare relatively well in this time of lockdown, but I am getting aware every day of more and more people who are struggling. People who are alone, people who are lonely. Some who have been separated from their loved ones by provincial borders and even national borders. It is becoming very long.

What we realize anew in this time is that God's protection is in the first place not located in the absence of adversity. It is found in God's presence in our adversity. Our security lies in God's closeness - like David says in our text: "the Lord is **close** to the broken-hearted."

A Bible interpreter, Arthur Weiser comments as follows on this text: "The true happiness of a Godly life consists in the nearness of God and in the living experience of his help and not in being spared suffering and affliction".

If you feel that you are in a cave because of the lockdown, the Lord may perhaps not make the cave disappear. What you can indeed be sure of, is that the Lord is with you in the cave. The last words of the Gospel of Matthew then get new meaning: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20).

Prayer: *Lord, thank you are always with me: in the green pastures, in the valley of the shadow of death, and also in the cave of isolation. Amen*

Physical touch

April 20, 2020 - Day 25 of Lockdown

Psalm 131:2: *But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.*

I once read an essay from a girl I knew well, about how her father often brutally assaulted her and her mother. Physical touch can sometimes be painful and despicable.

But we as humans have a real need for physical contact. The psychologist Frederick Harlow experimented on the babies of rhesus monkeys. He put them in cages with fake mothers built of wire. To some of the "moms" he attached a bottle of milk and on other "moms" he put on soft woollen clothes. The baby monkeys invariably preferred the soft "moms" over the "moms" with food. From this, he deduced, among other things, how critically important touch is to people.

The masterful artist, Michelangelo is best known for his paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. One of his most famous works is where he portrays how God created Adam. What is particularly striking is the contact between God and Adam. God touches Adam's finger with His finger. In doing so, God creates life in Adam, but through this touch God also creates the platform for the relationship between Him and man. This touch also creates the platform for people's underlying relations.

We are now complying with "social distancing", for our own benefit. We, however, also become aware of the lack of human, physical contact.

It is a time when we should thank the Lord for our need for contact He has created in us, as well as the healthy ways He has put forth to express this need of us. It is also a time to pray for people who are abused through physical contact, for example, in cases of domestic violence.

Prayer: *Lord, in this time of social distancing I miss (and again appreciate) the privilege of having physical contact. I pray for Your protection over people who, during this time, but also otherwise, are being abused through physical contact. Amen*

From your birth

21 April 2020

Day 26 of Lockdown

Isaiah 46: 3b, 4: *... you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you...*

I believe most of us would agree that the Lord has carried us in this time of isolation. What's more, it is actually the story of my life that God has always carried me. For some, as our text says, to their age, to their old age.

Funerals are always difficult. In this time of lockdown, it has become a cold, clinical exercise: no comforting handshake or hug. Funeral attendants wear masks and sit two meters apart.

I buried a baby yesterday. She was only twelve days old when she passed away. It struck me deeply when I walked into the church and saw the small coffin in front of the pulpit. After the service, the two grandfathers carried her little coffin. Graciously, the words of our text comfort us: "you whom I have upheld since your birth ...".

Almost all that is on her resumé is that she was born. And in God's economy, that's enough. She was born and God carries her - still.

Psalms 139 carries the message that God has already established a relationship with us before our birth. We read there in verses 13, 14: *"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."*

There are few things that have comforted me at this time as much as the events surrounding the baby's funeral. The God of grace who does not expect an achievement from us; the God who does not set a list of what we have to achieve in order to be His children; who has knit us together in our mothers' wombs; He walks in grace with us in this time of isolation. Yes, even those who had nothing but a birth count among His gracious ones.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for knowing and loving me from before my birth. That You have carried me since my creation. I trust You to carry me through this time of isolation and also through all that may come afterwards. Amen

Sing among each other

April 22, 2020 - Day 27 of Lockdown

"... speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord." Ephesians 5:19

Yesterday one of our worship leaders called me. He called to say thank you for the way I serve the congregation at this time through the electronic media: sermons on YouTube, daily devotions on WhatsApp, voice messages, and so on. What he also wanted to highlight with his call is that the electronic media cannot replace the gathering of believers. He misses it terribly! And then, probably because of his gifts, he especially misses the worship. He cannot wait to praise the Lord with everything in him through music and singing.

Of course, we can sing in the shower or in the car, or wherever. We can also sing to the Lord there. However, it is not for nothing that Paul writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "speaking to one another with psalms ...".

This text tells us that in a church service there is a horizontal and a vertical dimension, both of which are very important. The vertical dimension is about God. After

all, the service is there to glorify God, as everything in life should do (Col 1:16). He is the centre of our lives and during a service we need to become more aware of it.

However, a church service also has a horizontal dimension, or an "each other" part. And it is precisely here that believers experience frustration during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Seeing a sermon on YouTube is good, as is the ability to read a daily devotion. However, there is a great lack of fellowship that we as believers experience; the "each other" part. And the biggest frustration or lack in this "each other" part is the lack of worshipping together - which, of course, is also aimed at God's glory.

Yes, I am looking forward to fellowshiping again with believers in the church service to honour God. I am also very much looking forward to worship with believers. We could lift the roof, but God is also with us under the roof.

Prayer: Lord, I want to honour You with all my life. I especially want to focus every moment on You in a church service. Thank you that part of that focus on You can also be through worshipping with fellow believers. Amen

The doubting believer

April 23, 2020 - Lockdown Day 28

"If you can't?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9: 23, 24)

It is not strange for believers to go through times of grave doubt. The Bible is full of examples. Go read Psalm 13 about David's doubt and Psalm 73 about Asaph's doubt. Elijah, the faith hero, whom the Lord used to deal with the priests of Baal in an unprecedented way, lay under a bush a day or two later, thinking that God had left him.

During this time, it often comes my way: believers who doubt. It's as if this time of isolation forces them to ask questions of faith, questions that they cannot answer so easily for themselves. Diseases and disabilities and trials that come from before the lockdown are brought to the surface by the lockdown and statistics of the sick.

In our text, we see how a father desperately brings his sick child to Jesus' disciples first and then to Jesus himself. After Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief, he asked the father if he believed. His classic answer is "I believe! Help my unbelief".

Faith does not exclude doubt. This is often part of our faith. We are often doubtful believers. Madeleine L'Engle (29/11/1918 - 6/9/2007), an author who in her works did not shy away from her faith in Jesus Christ,

was at one time asked if she believed without any kind of doubt.

She replied, *"No, I believe in God with all my doubts. Those who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself."*

If you experience at this time that you doubt God's goodness, that you doubt God's good intentions with you and doubt God's plan with the world, realize that doubt does not necessarily stand against faith. This is often part of it. Bring it to the Lord and confess to Him, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!"

Prayer: *Lord, I have been struggling lately to accept that You have good intentions with me and with the world. I bring this doubt to You, along with the confession "I believe! Help my unbelief!" Amen*

Oh my world!

April 24, 2020 - Day 29 of Lockdown

You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet. (Psalm 8:6)

Earth Day was celebrated worldwide on April 22. The fact that in many cases it has passed so quietly is indicative of the situation of the pandemic in which we find ourselves. Although scientists are still puzzling over how exactly the Covid-19 disease originated, the abuse of nature and the environment (including bats and food maggots) seems to have played a role in this.

What is certain is that nature has benefited greatly from the global lockdown enforced in most countries. A reporter in *The Guardian* states that pollution in the world has dropped to levels when The Beatles were still wearing shorts. Photos are posted on social media of swans swimming in the clear waters of Venice and of the blue sky in China, that is almost always heavily polluted. Jalandhar residents in India recently posted photos of the Himalayas 193 km away. Something that was possible thirty years ago.

Ironically, it is the maintenance of the economy that results in this destruction. Ironically, because the word 'economy' is etymologically derived from the Greek word *oikos* and *oikonomia*, meaning home and household.

For us as believers, this would mean the maintenance of God's household, or the fulfilment of the cultural instruction God gave to man in Genesis 1 and 2. Our text, *Psalm 8:6*, also speaks of God submitting the earth to man, with the idea that man will cultivate and care for it. The destruction of nature is a witness to how man has failed.

Dr Dolf van Niekerk writes in *Beeld* in an article "*Creation must be utilized and cared for*" that the most

startling experience for him was the awareness of the enmity between man and the environment. He says *"what man does with the macrocosm around him is a mirror image of what it looks like in the microcosm of his soul"*.

In this time of lockdown, nature has the opportunity to recover. With what seriousness will we fulfil the cultural mission after this time?

Prayer: *Lord, I confess that I do not guard and care for the earth as You expect me to. Help me to be a good manager of Your household. Amen*

Relax with the Lord

April 25, 2020 - Day 30 of Lockdown

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law, day and night. (Psalm 1:1,2)

It seems to me that most of the population at this time is mainly divided into two groups. The first group is people who work harder now than usual. These are mainly people who work from home and whose managers are like taxes. They don't know when it is enough. This includes some students and scholars who struggle to categorize and process the masses of work given to them. The other group of people is well described by a man on a video about lockdown, where he says that he is so tired of rest that he had to sleep before he could rest further.

My concern is whether any of the two groups have some quiet time with the Lord and meditate on His Word. Our text says the Bible is not a book that is time driven. It is a book that asks that you read it carefully and meditate on it in silence. Reflecting on it night and day. Yes, meditate! There are so many books these days that teach you how to read faster, but when it comes to the Bible, read slower. Think about what you are reading. Apply it to every aspect of your life.

People who are too busy rush past it. People who rest too often never get to it. Someone once said that *SILENCE* is God's mother tongue and that anything else is a poor translation. Mother Theresa agrees with this when she says: *"We need to find God, and He cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence ... We need silence to be able to touch souls"*.

With all the frustration that the lockdown brings, we will probably never again have the time and opportunity to truly become so quiet with God. Seize this time to relax with the Lord and to reflect on His Word.

Prayer: *Lord, I thank You for Your Word that I can meditate on. Forgive me for not coming to You in silence - whether I'm too busy or too lazy for that. Amen.*

🌸 Looks at the scoreboard

April 26, 2020 - Day 31 of Lockdown

"... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11)

During the Springboks' tour to the British Isles in 1931-32, a critical British reporter commented on the unattractive rugby the Springboks were supposedly playing. Boy Louw's simple reply in his broken English was: "Looks at the scoreboard!"

However, there are some issues that cannot be scored on a scoreboard. I remember being stunned at a meeting of ministers about how two ministers were arguing with each other about which of the two would have had the most angels in their respective worship services the previous Sunday. One supposedly was not even able to climb onto the pulpit, as there was no room for him with all the angels.

I read a story in *Church Leader's Daily News* yesterday where a preacher, Nick Hall, claims that during his sermons and programs of his organization, *Pulse Team*, 100 000 people were converted during Easter weekend. He calls it "*The Great Quarantine Revival*".

As for people's repentance, the Lord Jesus said that the angels rejoice over every person who repents - and so do we! However, in His explanation of the parable of the sower (Luke 8: 11-15), Jesus also made us understand that repentance **cannot** be levelled into an item on a scoreboard.

Today, God's Word is proclaimed all over the world. Due to the lockdown rules, it will be mainly through You Tube, television and other social media. And without attaching it to a scoreboard, we can know (and pray for it) that many will repent and come to know the Lord. Many will look back on this time of Covid-19 and remember that this is the time they converted. We know this because the Lord assures us in our text that His Word will never return to Him unfinished.

Prayer: *Lord, I pray that many people will come to know You on this day as their Savior. We know the proclamation of Your word today carries Your blessing. Amen*

🌸 Real religion

April 27, 2020 - Day 32 of Lockdown

James 1:27: *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

There are different types of spirituality. Each of us worships the Lord in a different way. It does not mean that we each create a God to our liking or that we develop and adhere to our own teachings. Rather, it is about how I know and worship the only true God in my own way and how I incorporate the teachings found in God's Word into my personal relationship with Him to worship Him with my whole being. My spirituality type is also not detached from my personality and temperament.

There are mainly four spirituality types. First, one gets a *mind spirituality*. Believers with such spirituality love the "sermon part" of a church service. Especially if it is doctrinal in nature. They also love Bible study and Bible school. Then there is a *heart spirituality*. These believers will especially love the singing and witnessing during a worship service. Then there is a *mystical spirituality*. These people love to seek the Lord in silence and meditate on His Word. Finally, there is also a *hand spirituality*. These believers may have no feelings for something like the Bible School, but are always at the front when arranging the bazaar or handing out food parcels.

Yesterday I was very frustrated again because there was no church service to go to. However, what is good at this time is that we can develop a new appreciation for the last two types of spirituality: A *mystical spirituality* and a *hand spirituality* to seize the opportunity with both hands to serve the Lord.

The congregation last week gathered two loads of food and a boot full of sandwiches and distributed it to the needy. It reminds me that not only the church service is true religion. As our text reminds us: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows "

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that Your body, the church has many parts and that we also differ and complement each other in our spiritualities. Thank you that I can also worship You in a unique way, as You made me. Amen*

🌸 Mission work during lockdown

April 28, 2020 - Day 33 of Lockdown

"... The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9: 37,38)

William Carey (August 17, 1761 - June 9, 1834) is considered the father of the modern missionary movement. Among other things, he said: "*Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.* " He sailed to India with his family and William Ward and Joshua Marshman in 1793. Just four years later, Carey completed the New Testament translation into Bengali.

Eight years later, the New Testament was translated into eight more dialects. By the time of his death, Carey and his two friends had founded 26 churches and 126

schools. They also translated the Bible into 44 languages, and established India's first medical station, a bank, a seminary and a newspaper. It had a dramatic impact on India and the establishment of the church there.

However, this is not how his involvement in missionary work began. Carey was a poor, crippled shoemaker. The minister who baptized him even mentioned his poverty as a comment in the baptismal register. He glued a few papers together and drew a world map on it. In many of the countries he indicated what the population was and what religion they practiced. Importantly, however, Carey then prayed daily for those countries - praying that the Lord of the harvest would send laborers there.

We are in a situation where we cannot cross national borders, or even the street, to preach the Gospel. However, what we can still do is pray, like William Carey, for laborers for the harvest. To pray that the Lord will send His children to the unreached in the world, to pray that the Lord will use our gifts and money to reach a lost world.

Get a prayer list from organizations like Open Doors (<https://www.opendoors.org.za/afr/>), SAAWE (<https://saawe.org.za/what-can-i-do/pray/>) or Jericho Walls (<https://jwipn.com/jericho-walls-prayer-app/>) and pray daily for missionaries and mission fields. Mission and prayer always go hand in hand and this lockdown time may well bring home this lesson, more than it would otherwise.

Prayer: *Lord today, I pray for all the missionaries around the world. Help me to pray for them in a more structured, purposeful and faithful way. Amen.*

Goodness from unexpected sources

May 2, 2020 - Day 37 of Lockdown

Romans 12:21: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

A friend of mine brought a Jan Spies writing, Pilate to Molshoop to my attention. In it he writes a short story called "December story". This is a story about the 1918 Spanish flu that Spies got from the widow of one Sergeant Marais about their experiences of that plague. The parallel with our situation today is striking.

The disease was so widespread among the population that there were no longer enough nurses and doctors to care for the people. The prisoners later had to help the police to bury the bodies, after first covering the bodies in blankets. Every policeman and prisoner were given a pipe and tobacco each day, as it was believed that smoking would keep the disease away.

So many of the police got sick at that time that the prisoners started to take care of the police. The jail was set up as a hospital and boarding house and the keys were handed to the prisoners, who then started an

unprecedented love service. Spies then ends the story: "After the flu was finally eradicated, all these prisoners were... still in prison - not one of them escaped. Everyone stayed true and did their job well. And then they were all set free - regardless of their transgressions and sentences ... Sergeant Marais said that it was heart warming when they were set free, but that it took this brutal epidemic to calm the Cape for a short while to get something so beautiful from the people you least expect it from".

In these times I hear of people going out of their way to do good to others. Maybe it takes this epidemic to get the best out of people. And maybe it is the person I least expect it to be. Maybe it should be me who is doing good at this time and forgive others.

Prayer: *Lord, the situation we are in, demands so much from me. Thank you so much for giving me a wonderful opportunity to be that benefactor who helps those in need, but who also forgives others for their wrongdoings against me. Amen*

Praise the LORD!

May 3, 2020 - Day 38 of Lockdown

Psalm 150: 6: *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 148 is a call for all living beings to praise the Lord. There is a fairly long list mentioned in that Psalm, namely angels, celestial beings, the sun, the moon, the stars, sea creatures, wild animals, rulers, cattle, everything that creeps or flies, and so on. The reason why I also include Psalm 148 in this case is to emphasize the word "everything" in our verse. So it's not just about all people who are called to praise the Lord - not just everyone, but everything. The whole creation. Everything that breathes.

Against this backdrop, I recently read an interesting article "*Coronavirus: Birdsong seems louder and the ravens are more relaxed*" in the *Irish Times* of April 17, 2020. Reporter Colm Keena wrote it following a conversation with Matthew Jebb, the Director of the Dublin National Botanical Gardens. It mentions that the lockdown has made people focus more on the environment.

For example, interest in programs on the Internet with a nature conservation focus increased by 350 percent. Jebb mentions that the crows are more relaxed due to the reduced noise and pollution. The birds are also singing louder lately. Although the noise of vehicles has fallen dramatically, it is not only the reduced noise that makes the birds more audible. Research has shown that birds actually sing louder in this lockdown than normal.

For humans and birds, singing is obviously not the same thing. However, a lack of space prevents me from going into it extensively. However, to re-join our text (Psalm 150: 6) and Psalm 148, as mentioned above, I have no

doubt that the singing of birds proclaims the praise of God. Though it is only in the hearts of people who see and hear it and honour God for His wonderful creation - even for the singing of birds.

If, then, birds are noticeably singing louder in this lockdown, then shouldn't we, who are the crown of God's creation, serve the Lord with greater devotion? Wouldn't our praise to God also be noticeably louder? If you can sigh, you can sing too. Let's praise the Lord!

Prayer: *Lord, to everything that breathes I also want to add my voice and sing Your praises. I choose to sing rather than sigh. Amen*

Witness with clarity and conviction

May 4, 2020 - Day 39 of Lockdown

1 Corinthians 14: 8: *Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?*

A day or so ago, I saw a newspaper poster saying, "This is how Transport works now". I laughed out loud when I saw it. Anyone who says they know how the transport system works especially doesn't know. First only three were allowed in a minibus, then before the press release was finalized there came a late message that said the number had been changed to seven. The following day, the press reported that there could now be twelve in a ten-seater. Provided everyone wears masks.

I often wished last week that government spokespersons would at least get a basic course in public speaking. If you did not understand a matter, you were doomed to total confusion after one of them spoke. Cigarettes are out, then in, then out again. Not to mention some Freudian glitches about ventilators and toys.

This daily devotion does not aim to hit out at the government. On the contrary! I think our government, especially the State President, is doing better than most governments and we should pray for them regularly. However, these examples have led me to question whether we really convey the gospel with conviction and clarity?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the most celebrated preachers, specifically points out how the church's lack of convincing testimony is hindering the legacy of God's kingdom. He says: *"People are bewildered when they face an alarming situation. What is about to happen? ... they don't know. ... Then suddenly they hear someone speaking with authority, and they are ready to listen ... It explains why the cults are succeeding today, why certain freak religious movements are succeeding today ... They speak with authority; they speak with certainty. The Protestant churches, on the other hand, are fumbling and hesitant and doubtful. The people in their bewilderment, when they hear a word of authority, believe it".*

We have a golden opportunity to proclaim the Gospel with certainty and clarity in this time of uncertainty,

and to convey the truth of God's Word. We have a golden opportunity to bring the consolation of the Lord to people.

Prayer: *Lord, I often leave opportunities to testify of Your love. I confess that even when I do tell others about you, it is half-hearted, obscure and apologetic. Help me fix it in this time. Amen*

Wax or clay?

May 5, 2020 - Day 40 of Lockdown

Acts 17:32: When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'

The same sun that shines on wax and softens it, shines on clay and makes it hard. This is also the effect that the gospel of Jesus Christ has. Some people listen to it and it softens their hearts, they come to the realization of sin and repent to the Lord. Others listen to it, and rather harden themselves into their sin and, like a pig who enjoys rolling in dirty mud, find their deepest pleasure in breaking God's law and breaking God's heart.

I have realized it again now that I play a spiritual song every day (10:00 and 17:00) on the sound system of the church through the church tower. The song reminds those who can hear it that we are not alone in this time of isolation, but that God is with us.

A woman recently told me that when the song is playing, her neighbour comes out of her house and screams in the direction of the music for its duration: *"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"*. The Gospel is clearly disturbing to her.

However, I also had the opposite experience. As I was playing the song one day, a man came up behind me in the church. He is not a member of our congregation. He then told how he heard the music every day and then started driving around to find where it came from. He then told me that he was actually very indifferent to God, but that the Lord was using the church tower music at this time to change his life. He always had an answer ready for people who spoke to him about his indifference, but he had no defence against the music. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he told me how the Lord's grace became a reality for him for the first time. He asked me if I would please play *Amazing Grace* over the church tower for him. Later, with the last notes of *Amazing Grace* fading, we greet each other with a lump in the throat.

Prayer: *Lord, continually soften my heart through Your Word and Your Spirit. Thank you for the gift of song and music. Thank you for Your Amazing Grace. Amen.*

A Meaningful Life

May 6, 2020 - Day 41 of Lockdown

Psalm 119: 37: *Turn my eyes from worthless things, and give me life through your word. (NLT)*

In Volksblad of May 5, 2020 there is a beautiful article "This Bible still provides comfort after 86 years". It concerns Auntie Bettie Bredenkamp of Bloemfontein who received a Bible belonging to her grandmother as a gift on her third birthday. This Bible has a very special history, because it was stolen by a British soldier from her grandmother during the Anglo-Boer War. Thirty years later, the thief's conscience bothered him so much that the Bible was returned to the family.

She describes the specific value of this Bible in the lockdown: *"It reminds me that my ancestors survived difficult times like wars and the Great Flu in 1918. Just as we are struggling with the coronavirus again"*. She draws meaning from the Bible. It adds value to her life. She says that after 86 years, the Bible with its rich history continues to comfort her each year on her birthday.

Only people who are severely disturbed will not want to live a meaningful life. None of us will want to look back on a useless life. Psalm 119, from which our text comes, deals entirely with the Lord's Word. In that context, our text also reminds us that we can only be saved from a useless life if we organize it according to the Lord's Word. To put it positively: we can only live meaningfully when we live it according to the Bible.

At the creation we find God speaking over man. He has authority over man. He rules over man. We acknowledge His rule by acknowledging His Word's authority over us. So if we say that we only experience meaning in our lives by accepting God's Word as authoritative, then we also say that we accept God as Lord over our lives. That is the very purpose of our lives: to accept God as Lord of our lives. To glorify God. Then alone our lives have meaning. Paul says in Romans 14: 8: *"If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."*

Prayer: *Lord, I desire a meaningful life. Help me to build my life around Your Word so that it will glorify You and bless others. Amen*

Human dignity

7 May 2020 - Day 42 of Lockdown

Genesis 1:27: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

Peter Baker writes in The Guardian of March 31, 2020: *"Disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of*

normality". Disasters show what the true state of affairs is. This also applies to the view you have of man.

World culture tells us that some people are worth more than others. We put some on a throne: the rich, the famous, the intelligent, the successful. And if God did not exist, then it was understandable. People's value would be determined by criteria as mentioned above. However, the Christian view of life (and of man) differs drastically. It proclaims that all people are extremely valuable, for God loves all people and man was created in the image of God. Our value, our merits, biblically speaking, are based on the bottomless grace of God.

Back to Barker's comment above: If we experience in this state of emergency that aid to the poor and needy is provided by the government on the basis of race or political conviction, it will expose the separation in the country completely. It may have been artificially disguised in the past, but disasters bring to light the true state of affairs. The tragic thing is that people in South Africa, according to such a view, are not first seen as image bearers of God, as beloved ones of God, but first and foremost belonging to a particular race or class.

Our response to that cannot be one of revenge. Christians cannot say, *"Well, in that case, we help the race(s) that are not helped by the government"*. Then we are guilty of exactly the same immorality and it also exposes a view within ourselves that does not recognize man as the image of God. Our charity is not influenced by people or dictated by ideologies. Every human being is an image of God and we will feed every one we can with love and dress every destitute person when the opportunity arises. The only ones we will skip are those whom God does not love. And I have never encountered any.

Prayer: *Lord, we confess the plight of our nation's people exposed by this pandemic. Help me treat every human with dignity and help them wherever I can. Amen*

If you have forgotten: Education is important

May 8, 2020 - Day 43 of Lockdown

Proverbs 22: 6: *Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.*

There is constant discussion about the situation of education in South Africa. It is especially with the release of the matric results that debates flare up on issues such as the quality of education and whether the pass rate is an accurate account of the state of the exam.

Danie van Wyk writes in an article *South African Education in Crisis*: *"... but I do not believe we realize what the real extent of the crisis is. If South Africa's public education was a patient today, we would find it in the intensive care unit of a hospital, keeping it artificially alive*

with a ventilator." However, I think the tone of the conversation about education has changed during this lockdown.

I read a report about police in Utah in the US that pulled a car off the road. The driver was a five-year-old boy. His explanation was that he was on his way to buy a Lamborghini because his mother did not want to. This story was part of a larger conversation about parents who were discouraged with their children and couldn't wait for the schools to start again. Parents said in newspaper reports that they did not realize that it is so difficult to teach a child Afrikaans or English or Mathematics. They gained a lot more respect for teachers and also realized that their children are not always right and teachers are not always wrong.

Our country's education system, teachers and learners should always be high on our prayer list. During this time when children are at home and in many cases are receiving home-schooling, we should pray for them even more often. Won't we also pray more for decision-makers about education? They need a lot of wisdom. Will we not pray more for teachers? I believe we have realized during this time that they are extremely valuable. Someone once said of them: "A teacher takes a hand, opens a mind and touches a heart".

Prayer: Lord, today I want to pray for everyone who is part of the education system - from the Minister of Education to the smallest child in kindergarten. Give wisdom for important decisions and ensure that there is always respect between teachers and learners. Amen

A proper biblical lockdown

May 9, 2020 - Day 44 of Lockdown

2 Kings 7: 9: *Then they said to each other, 'What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves! ... Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace.'*

We are dealing with a real lockdown in 2 Kings 6, 7. The Arameans are besieging Samaria, the capital of the Northern Empire. This is a desperate situation. In chapter 6:25, for example, we read: "There was a great famine in the city; the siege lasted so long that a donkey's head sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a quarter of a cab of seed pods for five shekels". Then one reads the disgusting story of parents who cooked and ate their children. When Elisha in verse 1 announces that the Lord will bring salvation and deliverance within a day, the king's confidant mockingly says in verse 2: "'Look, even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?'"

We see that Elisha's words do come true. The Lord made the Arameans flee, and we read about that in verse 16, namely, "So a seah of the finest flour sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley sold for a shekel, as

the Lord had said." It is striking that the heroes in this story are neither the king nor the soldiers. No, the people who stand out in this story are the lepers. It is they who realize that the Arameans have fled and in the words of our text they tell each other that they should share the good news that the siege, the lockdown, is over.

The Lord can also deliver us from tight situations. Our text shows how God intervened in the midst of people's unbelief and even ridicule. It is a great comfort to us, who do not believe each day equally strongly. God can intervene and give surprising outcomes. This is true of the situation in our country and also the world caught up in this pandemic.

Without making this passage a blank check, it is also true that God can intervene in our lives in surprising ways. That He can turn desperate situations that torment us around in the blink of an eye. As far as we are concerned, let us not be on the side of scoffers. Let us trust that God can open the windows of heaven to us, no matter how desperate our situation may be.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for intervening in my life and my crises despite my disbelief. Thank you that You can change my circumstances in the blink of an eye. Amen.

Mother's day

May 10, 2020 - Day 45 of Lockdown

1 Samuel 1: 20, 24: *So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, 'Because I asked the Lord for him.' ... After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was ... and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh.*

My mother was the goodest person I have ever known. Yes, I know "best" is the superior step of "good", but it will not really convey the inherent goodness of my mother as well as "goodest". The fruit of the Spirit was evident in her life.

In 1 Samuel 1 we find the story of another special mother, namely Hannah, the mother of Samuel. (It would be good if you read the whole chapter). When you read this chapter, you are deeply impressed by Hanna's crisis. Her childlessness was a great ordeal. Children determined a woman's standing in society. Boys were especially important. They were also a parent's pension plan. Without children, you were pushed out of society and became an outsider.

Furthermore, we read that Elkanah's other wife, Peninah, also harassed Hanna. The word used in verse 6 is the word used for a storm. It is the only place in the Bible where a person is described as a storm. Tim Keller writes about this exception described in this text: "It is amazing how much destruction one person can cause".

We then read in verse 9 the words that Hannah stood up. These words are the turning point in the story. In Hebrew, it is described as a very deliberate act, brought about by an inner change, a change in outlook on life. Realising that she does not need a son in the first place, but that she needs God. That it is only God who can quench her deepest thirst.

This is an extremely important lesson that every human being must learn in his or her relationship with the Lord. Let us thank the Lord on this Mother's Day, a day where many cannot be with their mothers. Let us be grateful for this life lesson, but also for other lessons our mothers taught us. In particular, let us thank them for the lessons we have received from them on the faith path, yes, we can say, with mother's milk.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you very much for my mother and the lessons of faith she taught me. Please make this day very special for every mother. Amen*

Faith's geographical connection

May 11, 2020 - Day 46 of Lockdown

Romans 15: 19b: *So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.*

Jerusalem was in the most south-eastern corner of the Roman Empire and Illyricum in the most north-western corner. Saul says that he has preached the Gospel to the whole known world of that time. There is always a geographical connection between the preaching of the Gospel and geography. Acts 1: 8 also signifies it when the Lord Jesus tells His disciples that they will preach the Gospel in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, to the very corners of the earth.

What most people do not know is that, geographically speaking, almost all people's faith can be taken back to two cities, namely Jerusalem and Benares (now also known as Varanasi). For Jews, Jerusalem is the place where the Temple of Solomon stood, the core of their cultic animal sacrifice. For Muslims, Jerusalem is the first place they bowed to in prayer before they started praying in the direction of Mecca. They also believe that Mohammad ascended to heaven from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. For Christians, Jerusalem has great significance because it is the place where Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead.

As far as Benares is concerned, it is the religious capital of the Hindus. The Golden Temple in honour of Shiva, their main god, stands there and Hindus come to bathe there in the Ganges River. Benares is also the place where Gautama Buddha delivered his first sermon. Adding these five religions makes up 77.7% of the world's population.

At this time, we are becoming aware in a strange way of geography, perhaps rather locality. We are in one place all the time. Not just the same town or city, but also the same house. God is not bound by space. Although He is

omnipresent, He also chooses to be where His children are. It doesn't matter how long the lockdown will last; we can be sure that the Lord will not grow tired of staying with us in one place every day. In fact, He takes joy in being with His children.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that You, who are not limited by time and space, were with me day after day in this lockdown. Thanks for never getting tired of me. Amen*

Our relationship to culture

May 12, 2020 - Day 47 of Lockdown

Exodus 36: 1: *So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the Lord has commanded.*

We as humans are relationship beings. We are in relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves, with nature, with structures and also with culture.

Art (whether visual arts or performing arts) is one of many concrete structures that form part of man's multiple cultural activities. In art we see how man has an influence on culture, and how culture has an influence on man in the relationship in which they interact. The artist must, according to the commandment of love, love the people for whom the artwork (in whatever form) is intended. He must love the material he uses, the subject he chooses, and the Lord he serves.

In our text we see how the Lord equipped Bezalel and Oholiab (and others) to artfully decorate the tabernacle. The gifts and talents that artists have in our day were also given to them by God.

I heard on radio yesterday that they will restart recording certain TV shows, such as soap operas. Hygiene in particular is addressed and the screenplay must allow for social distance between actors. We have recently often heard about artists and actors who are struggling financially. They are, knowingly or unknowingly, developing this relationship of ours with culture. Culture, or rather those who build on it, contributes to the expansion, or the ignoring of God's kingdom. Richard Feynman, for example, said on occasion: *"Religion is a culture of faith; science is a culture of doubt."*

We can also pray more often for those in the entertainment world. Pray for God's children in this industry. Pray that they will glorify the Lord through their art and performances. Pray that God will provide for them in their daily bread. Thank God also that He created you as a person who finds meaning in some form of culture and grows through it.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that I can live the culture, that I can relate to it. I pray for faithful artists, actors and singers. Provide them with their daily bread. Amen*

☼ The third glass changes into a solution

May 13, 2020 - Day 48 of Lockdown

Philippians 4: 7: *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Eric Jacobsen, a Washington minister wrote a book *Three Pieces of Glass: Why We Feel Lonely in a World Mediated by Screens*. He writes how three different forms of glass have created a problem in the last century. The first was with the rise of the car and a culture where a car became a necessity. People started treating each other differently. The other car's driver was seen as competition rather than a human being. The first form of glass in question is therefore the car's windshield.

Shortly on the heels of this development, another development followed, namely the TV screen. Due to the fact that people drove rather than walked, they no longer walked in their neighbourhoods and talked to their neighbours. Neighbours also no longer sat on the front porch. A culture developed where people would rather sit inside and watch TV. People rather built "relationships" with TV characters than with people in the neighbourhood. Today, people still follow series on TV about the lives of celebrities, without even knowing their neighbours. The destructive impact of these habits should not be underestimated.

The effect of smartphones has been the most destructive of all. It is a combination of the worst elements of the first two forms of glass. You could also be mean with others now. We can look at stories around the world that warm our hearts or break our hearts, ignoring a person in need who is only a meter from you.

Meanwhile, this third form of glass, the cellphone, has become part of the solution in this time. Although smartphones can isolate us, it has become the solution for isolation in our current context - the same goes for spreading the gospel. You wouldn't be able to read this message if it wasn't for your phone. The evening time of prayer also comes to you over your cell phone every night. Yes, so the third glass has turned into a solution. Won't you forward today's text to someone's phone today?

Prayer: *Lord, thank you very much for the connections that can be made by cell phones and other electronic media at this time. Help me to use it to tell others about Your peace. Amen*

☼ Dreams

May 14, 2020 - Day 49 of Lockdown

Matthew 2:12: *And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

There are reports on various forums that people around the world are dreaming more than usual at this time. Many of the dreams are clear, so people can remember them in great detail. Often it is nightmares that affect the person who dreams or a loved one and for some reason it often has to do with water.

An article in The Guardian of April 19, 2020: "Last night I was James Bond: The vivid world of Lockdown Dreams, reports on the research psychologists are doing in this regard. Part of the report reads: 'Dr Nick Blackburn, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, says his patients are also reporting more vivid dreams since the lockdown began and remembering them more often. Breaking the rules and being punished by others is a recurrent theme'."

As someone who has immersed himself in the analytical psychotherapy of Carl Jung (1875-1961), I also believe that dreams have meaning. Nor is there a "one size fits all" meaning when it comes to dreams. Books that explain what it means to dream of a particular object are useless. We as humans create meaning and an object may have a different meaning to everyone.

We believe that the canon is closed, that is, the Lord's Word extends from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 and that nothing may be added. We must, however, keep in mind that the Lord does not speak to us in dreams, as it was before the canon was established, as in biblical times.

It still leaves us with the question of how we as believers should think about the fact that we, and the rest of the world, dream so much more at this time. A friend of mine who is a clinical psychologist, dr. Danie Hoffman tells me the following about dreams: "Dreams make one think of the idea of rest - to rest in God as well. In a busy world, one dreams little. Now people dream a lot. One's brain never shuts down and when you sleep it seeks answers. Possibly not only for the current circumstances, but also for what is in your subconscious. Dreams teach us to trust in God. He is not bound to the conscious or the subconscious. He never sleeps."

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that you do not slumber or sleep and that when I dream, I am also safe with you. Amen.*

✿ The siege of Leningrad

May 15, 2020 - Day 50 of Lockdown

Psalms 125: 2: *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.*

Although we are in isolation, there are also certain freedoms we can enjoy. A very acute form of isolation would be when a city is besieged, such as the Siege of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) that lasted from September 8, 1941 to January 27, 1944. Hitler besieged this Russian city for 872 days, though it is widely known as the 900-day siege.

Of the three million inhabitants, just over a million died. Although the Nazis killed about sixty thousand of them, most of them died of hunger and cold. During one winter, a hundred thousand people died in one month. The men who worked received 6 slices of bread a day and the rest of the population three slices. So bad were the circumstances that two thousand people were accused of cannibalism.

However, the spirit of the city's population was never broken. During August 1942, for example, they staged a major concert featuring Dimitri Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony. They turned the speakers in the direction of the German soldiers outside the city just to make the point that they were not going to give up.

The worst affected were the members of the church. They were doubly isolated. Of course, they were also under siege like the others, but since the Russian Revolution in 1917 it was also forbidden to be a Christian. The church buildings were converted into warehouses by the government. However, there were still 21 congregations in Leningrad during the siege that organised all the charity work. There were many orphans in particular who needed to be cared for. Many were taken into Christian homes. During the siege, Leonid Chupiatov painted a painting called Veil of the Mother of God over the dying city. It also showed that, despite decades of oppression, the church's testimony flourished in that extreme of extreme circumstances.

We are not experiencing a fraction of that isolation. However, our testimony at this time is still invaluable. It may be that when people look back on this pandemic in a few decades, it will be clear that the church has passed the test.

Prayer: *Lord, help me to care for others at this time. Help us as Your church to be the epitome of a spirit that is not broken. Amen*

✿ A new normal

May 16, 2020 - Day 51 of Lockdown

Proverbs 26: 4,5: *Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.*

Someone once said "Normal is just a setting on a washing machine". However, there is now also talk of a so-called new normal. The state president also said that we should get used to not shaking hands or to kiss hello. Shopping malls should in future, even after the lockdown, have hand sanitizer available at the doors. This is the new normal.

Our text today sounds very contradictory. What this means, however, is that one has to deal with and evaluate every person, every conversation, every situation within context and on merit. There are practices we are learning during this lockdown that can also become part of our lives there after. However, there are other things for which we will have to return to the "old normal".

A doctor also discussed the ways in which the new normal severely harmed people. Patients are afraid to go to doctors' surgeries for fear that they will catch Covid-19. There are now people who die because of their fear of getting to a doctor. One patient had severe headaches and died of a brain tumour, as she avoided the doctor's surgery. The same is true of a young man who had a heart attack, and a woman who had double pneumonia, but thought a telephone consultation was enough. The new normal should not be the sick diagnosing themselves, relying on Google and telephone consultations.

The same is true of the church. Congregations now serve members through the electronic media. This may well become part of the church's new normal. However, we should never end up in a situation where, for example, sermons on YouTube replace the place of worship with other believers on a Sunday morning. I realised that we need *more* opportunities for equipping our members, such as Bible school, rather than *less*. The new normal, like everything else, must in the first place be to the Lord's glory.

Prayer: *Lord, help me to replace what is bad from the past with a better new normal. Help me also cherish the good from the past. Amen*

The wrong checklist

May 17, 2020 - Day 52 of Lockdown

Matthew 7:22 - 23: *Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"*

I read in *accountingweekly.com* of May 11, 2020 that the President of Tanzania, John Magufuli suspended the head of Covid-19 testing in his country. This comes after Magufuli set a trap for this man by sending him specimens of a goat and a papaya. Both the goat and the papaya tested positive for Covid-19. Magufuli also argued against western medicine, the test devices used and the accompanying checklist. Rather, he relies on the herbal blend made in Madagascar.

In our text we find people who are shocked and disappointed at God's final judgment. They were truly under the impression that they were not only the Lord's children, but even very active in a particular ministry. I do not really want to use the word "checklist" in terms of a final judgment conversation, but against the background of the events in Tanzania, the persons in our text certainly had the wrong checklist on how to inherit salvation.

At the final judgment some will come to the shocking conclusion that the checklist does not involve a particular type of baptism, a great deal of service skill or good works. Nor certain gifts of the Holy Spirit, or the practice of fasting or cutting out certain foods. The checklist (for lack of a better word), is much simpler. It also separates faith and unbelief in a much simpler but drastic way. As simple as that.

"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12)

"Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 John 5:12)

This is the checklist and nothing else. Faith in Christ alone.

Prayer: *Lord, I again profess my faith in You alone today. Please take any other false certainties out of my life. Amen.*

Is it really about God?

May 18, 2020 - Day 53 of Lockdown

Romans 11: 33-36: *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his*

counsellor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.

A friend with whom we did missionary work many years ago, contacted me today. She mentions that at this time she has many opportunities to listen to sermons on various forms of social media. It is disturbing to her that so few of the sermons are about God. Most of the messages are about preachers who tell viewers what to do and how to do it. It may be good things, but not much is said about God Himself.

Her observation is in line with a study done a decade or so ago at the University of Stellenbosch and found in the book by Professor Johan Cilliers, *The Extermination of God on the Pulpit*.¹ The study analysed radio sermons. The conclusion was that only a small number of sermons succeeded in "preaching the gospel as a force for change ...". The pulpit, shockingly enough, became a "ghetto" where God is not welcome, nor given a chance to speak nor introduced.

In summary, Cilliers says of this type of preaching: "God and His great deeds disappear... erased on the pulpit... it draws a line through the glory of God. It denies the reality of God, replaces it with... the honour of men".²

Think about it and test it: the messages we read, the sermons we hear, the spiritual touches we receive, how many of them are about what you need to do, or about it going well with you. And that in itself is not wrong. But how much, on the other hand, is about God Himself? About His glory, about His Being, about His attributes? We easily say in church context that it is just about God for us. I'm afraid practice proves us wrong.

Prayer: *Lord, I confess that my relationship with You often revolves around myself. May I never accept You being extinguished on the pulpit or anywhere else. Amen*

The blessing of radio

May 19, 2020 - Day 54 of Lockdown

Luke 2:14: *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'*

Last week, I had the privilege of recording daily devotions to be broadcast on a regional radio station, Radio Rosestad. Religious broadcasts on radio, of course, are not something peculiar to lockdown. For years we have had the privilege of listening to religious programs on radio. What most people do not know, however, is that the very first broadcast on radio was a religious program and related to the Christmas song *O Holy Night*. Next to Silent Night, it is the most famous Christmas song.

¹ Cilliers, J. 1996. *Die Uitwissing van God iop die Kansel*. LUX VERBI: Kaapstad

² Cilliers, J. 1996. *Die Uitwissing van God op die Kansel*, p. 14

The song *O Holy Night* has a stirring history. In 1847, the priest of a small French village asked Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure, a wine merchant, to write a poem for that year's Christmas. The poem was experienced positively immediately, but Placide realized that the poem would be lost if there was no music to add to the poem and make a song of it. He had a Jewish friend in Paris, Adolphe Charles Adam, who was a good musician. Of course, he was not a believer, but Placide gave him the poem that he put to music.

The first radio broadcast ever was on Christmas Eve 1906 at Brant Rock, Massachusetts. Reginel Fessenden that evening read the Christmas story from Luke 2, took his violin and played *O Holy Night* over the radio. The first talk on the radio was the preaching of the Gospel. The first song played, *O Holy Night*, was written by a wine merchant, composed by an infidel. A song the Lord used to touch millions.

When you hear the song *O Holy Night*, think of its rich history. When you hear the Gospel on the radio at this time, think about the wonderful connection that exists between the origin of radio and the Gospel - specifically this song. Give thanks to the Lord for the privilege of hearing the Gospel on radio, and in particular pray for organizations such as FEBA radio (<https://feba-radio.co.za/>) that exists to broadcast the Gospel through radio in blocked countries where it is not possible to share the Gospel in another way.

Prayer: *Thank you Lord for having the privilege of hearing the Gospel on the radio. I pray for radio stations broadcasting the Gospel in countries where people are being persecuted for their faith. Please let their work bear much fruit. Amen.*

An unlikely peace

May 20, 2020 - Day 55 of Lockdown

John 20:19: *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"*

Christmas 1914 took place during the First World War. That Christmas there was a strange ceasefire. On Christmas Eve, many British and German soldiers started singing Christmas carols in the trenches. The Germans even with a brass band.

At dawn on Christmas Day, German soldiers emerged from the trenches, walked in the direction of the British soldiers and called in English "Merry Christmas". When the British saw that the Germans were not armed, they also came out of the trenches, shook hands and wished their enemies a merry Christmas. They even exchanged Christmas presents - mostly cigarettes and Christmas cakes. They sang Christmas songs together and even played a soccer match against each other. A German Lieutenant, Kurt Zehmisch summed up the experience

with the words: *"How marvellously wonderful, yet how strange it was. The English officers felt the same way about it. Thus Christmas, the celebration of Love, managed to bring mortal enemies together as friends for a time."*

I read in Maroela Media yesterday about another ceasefire amid the Covid-19 pandemic. It is a ceasefire between gangs on the Cape Flats. In an article "*Cease-fire while gangs are spreading food on the Flats*," JP Smith, Cape Town's mayoral committee member for safety and security, describes the gang's normal activities as murder, extortion and smuggling of weapons and drugs.

The article mentions how hardened members of the Americans and Hard Livings gangs work closely together to bring bread, flour and vegetables to the poor. Part of the report reads: *"Preston is standing in a courtyard with the other gang members during this unlikely ceasefire. He lowers his head while Dany, a senior member of Hard Livings, says a prayer. Hats are removed and tattooed arms are folded behind."*

This is how Covid-19 brings together enemies in a strange way. May God maintain peace. Not just a peace long ago, during the First World War, or far away on the Cape Flats. Also, peace between me and the one with whom I am dissatisfied. An unlikely, permanent peace!

Prayer: *Lord, let the unlikely make peace at this time. Me too. Amen*



Ascension – Day of Blessing

May 21, 2020 - Day 56 of Lockdown

Luke 24: 50, 51: *When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.*

Today is Ascension Day and our text describes the events surrounding the Lord Jesus' ascension on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem. The background of the blessing of which our text speaks is found in Numbers 6: 23-26 where the Lord commands the priests to bless the people with the words: *"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."*

It was not only during Jesus' ascension that He blessed people. With His hands He blessed the little children who were brought to Him and with those blessing hands touched the eyes of the blind so they could see. He touched the dead with His hands so that they would live, and with His blessing hands broke the bread at communion.

He also lifted up those blessing hands that day of ascension for our sake. Today, on this anniversary of His ascension, He also blesses you. He blesses you to be a

blessing to others. Throughout the ages, the church of the Lord has been a blessing to many. In his book, *"Affirming the Apostles' Creed,"* J.J. Packer³ writes about the fact that we believe Jesus ascended to heaven: *"In a weary world in which grave philosophers were counselling suicide as man's best option, the unshakable, rollicking optimism of the first Christians, who went on feeling on top of the world however much the world seemed to be on top of them, made a vast impression. (It still does when Christians are Christian enough to show it!)"*

Ascension is always a day that reminds us of the Lord's blessing. In a broken world, pervaded with Covid-19, this Ascension Day reminds us not only of the Lord's blessing on us, but also, like the early church, to bless the world. Like our father of faith, Abraham: Blessed to bless (Genesis 12: 3)

Prayer: *Thank you Lord that I can be your blessed one and for reminding me of this on Ascension Day. Make me a blessing to others. Amen*

A time like this

May 22, 2020 - Day 57 of Lockdown

Esther 4:14: *"And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"*

A few days ago, I heard a very creative story that a minister had spread, especially with a view to serving children. It is about an imaginary community of parrots, with even a minister named by Reverend Mordecai, following the story of Esther in our text. The essence of the message is that we should not complain about the time we are in. For years, we have been equipped to be God's church in every situation - even for a time like this.

Recently, a member told me a story that reminds me of Esther's story, but also our story during this time of Covid-19. It is the story of a woman and her daughter, Cindy (pseudonym), of Pietermaritzburg with whom they are somehow involved. Christian people. Very poor and sickly. The nearest school is a Muslim school and because of their financial situation, they had no choice as to which school Cindy would go to. She went there from grade 8. The only Christian among hundreds of Muslims. A few months ago, at the end of her Grade 11 year, Cindy was elected head girl of her school. The school was actually in a predicament, because they also had to have a head girl who could lead the Muslim prayers. Then they just chose an additional head girl to carry out those duties.

Here again we have an example of someone who is unimportant in herself but who is God's person in God's time in God's place. Just imagine what living testimony

this teenage girl, can we say, this modern little Esther had to live, that Muslims chose her as their leader.

The same goes for you and me. I don't have the exact same situation as Esther or Cindy to deal with, but we were called to be witnesses at this time. God is not surprised by this situation. He knew you and I would be the church representing Him in this time of isolation. He knew you and I were going to be here. He even prepared us for this moment. For a time like this, He has prepared us to be His Church.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for preparing me for years to be your witness during this time. Help me not to disappoint You and the environment that needs me. Amen.*

Stress

May 23, 2020 - Day 58 of Lockdown

Proverbs 4:23: *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*

Yesterday, there was a news report on the radio quoting a pharmacy group about the fact that people buy much more sleeping pills during this lockdown period. They are reportedly unable to sleep due to stress. It would be worthwhile to look at stress for a day or two; what causes it, and how we as believers should think about it.

In short, one would say that stress is among other things a medical matter and that those suffering from it should consult a doctor or a therapist. This includes the imbalance of transmitters in the brain. However, the Bible is also very clear that man's thinking ultimately determines his behaviour, as well as how he feels and also how he feels about himself.

Of course, our thinking also affects the degree of stress we have. In our text, Proverbs 4:23, we have already seen this truth (the influence of our thinking on our lives). Proverbs 27:19 also reads: *"As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart."*

What happens to me is not as defining for my stress levels as how I think about what is happening to me. Our thinking patterns are often linked to rules that we set ourselves to live by. These rules are not necessarily biblical commands. It is often nothing more than what we think others expect of us. Sometimes it is things that are optional in life that we have decided ourselves are compulsory. It is often those so-called rules that kill us. These so-called rules turn people into slaves and unnecessarily increase their stress levels.

Henry Ford said on occasion: *"If you think you can or if you think can't, either way you're right"*. He probably meant it about whether or not you would achieve success in life. However, the Bible is also clear about the influence our thinking has on us. It will benefit us to look

³ Packer, J.I. 2008. *Affirming the Apostles' Creed*. Crossway:

for the connection between our stress and irrational thinking. As the saying goes: "It's all in the mind".

Prayer: *Lord, I bring my thinking to You. Where it contributes to stress in my life, help me to correct it. Amen.*

Stress again

24 May 2020 - Day 59 of Lockdown

Ecclesiastes 7:21: *Do not pay attention to every word people say ...*

In conjunction with yesterday's daily devotion, we look at stress again today - something that many experiences in this lockdown because of many reasons.

One of the causes of stress in general is that we are too concerned about others' opinions. Of course, it would be stupid and arrogant to go through life and never listen to others' advice and learn from others' mistakes. The other side is also true. There are people who live their entire lives based on the opinions of others. What will people think of the dress I am wearing? What will the neighbours say about my child who failed the exams? What will the members think if my child goes to church without shoes? What will people say if you don't do what everyone else does? Proverbs 29:25 says according to the Good News Bible: *"It is dangerous to be concerned with what others think of you, ..."*. Ecclesiastes 7:21 also says, *"Do not pay attention to every word people say"*.

Proverbs 29:25 states that it is dangerous to be constantly bothered by what people think of you. Why? Because it boosts your stress levels. I started yesterday's piece by saying that there are people who get stress as an illness like any other illness. Something they don't choose, which they have no control over. However, stress also becomes an illness because of other things we looked at yesterday and today.

For example, I can stress because I think wrongly about life; or the rules I set are inappropriate. It makes me and every other person around me unhappy. My perfectionism, which is a sign of the fear of never being good enough, makes it unliveable for me and everyone in the house. The rushed life I live causes me to constantly release too much adrenaline and therefore I get sick of the stress afterwards. I am so disturbed by the opinions of others, or whatever I think they will be, that I am constantly walking around with a stomach ache.

Wouldn't we rather pay attention to what God thinks of us? Of course, God knows that we have come into this world as sinners, but He looks at us with loving eyes and does not want to overwhelm us with His judgment but with His love (John 3:17).

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for being a gracious God. Help me to rest in You. Amen*

To wind down

25 May 2020 - Day 60 of Lockdown

Proverbs 17:22: *A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*

The day before yesterday we started looking at the issue of stress. It was based on pharmacists' observations that people are more stressed than usual during this lockdown - a deduction they make from the fact that many more sleeping and sedative pills are now being sold. It is good to be aware of the problem, but more importantly to look at how to get rid of the stress.

Stress can be an illness like any other, which means you have to go to a doctor. Sometimes people think if you just pray more, it will go away. Without underestimating the tremendous value of prayer, prayer and faith can become a mechanism by which some want to turn God's arm. A doctor's work is also not opposed to the work of God. It is God who makes medical science progress.

Furthermore, it is important that you maintain a calmer lifestyle. Get to your family and get to God. Get out of the rat race where you worship the rat god. Furthermore, you will have to start thinking differently about life. In Romans 12: 2 we read, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will"*

Develop a sense of humour. I do not know if one can learn it and whether it is a family affliction, but at least become aware that everything in life is not so serious. At least try to see the humour in a situation. Comedian Groucho Marx said: *"If you find it hard to laugh at yourself, I would be happy to do it for you"*. In Proverbs 14:13 we read: *"Even in laughter the heart may ache ..."*. Another truth from Proverbs, in this regard, we find in Proverbs 15:15: *"All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast"*.

Furthermore, we must also have the ability to stand back and see what is happening to us against the background of God's total plan for our lives. In addition, it also requires us to believe that God's plan for our lives is the best plan.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for providing medical science for our benefit. Help me remember that You have a plan with my life and that You are in control of every event. Amen*

✿ Think for yourself

May 26, 2020 - Day 61 of Lockdown

Romans 12: 2: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

After the State President spoke to the country again the day before yesterday, the press was naturally full of comments about it. Although the responses ranged from "too much" to "too little", or from "too slow" to "too fast", there is something that many commentators agree on, and that is the danger that people no longer think for themselves. They delegated that extremely important matter to the government, the police and the scientists. However, it is also wrong for Christians in general that they leave their decision-making to others - to the world.

Another translation puts our text as: *"Don't let the world squeeze you into its mould"*. The world would like to leave its mark on us. It would like to mould us into a shape that will make us look like the world. Among other things, peer pressure is one of those ways in which the world wants to mould us into its shape, to make it into its image.

We must remember that this is about our thinking in the first place. Paul says we must allow God to change us by renewing our thinking. The fact of the matter is that the world will not allow us to think for ourselves. No, it would be eager to do our thinking on our behalf. Hal Urban⁴ emphasizes this point when he writes in his book *Life's Greatest Lessons*: *"Without any effort or even realizing that it's happening, we can turn our lives into exercises in mindless conformity: go with the flow, be in, be cool. In other words, let others do our thinking for us... like getting into a big circle and following the follower to nowhere"*.

If the ability to make choices is one of our greatest freedoms, we cannot afford to sacrifice our right to think for ourselves. Every day, the media, advertising and people in general try to think on our behalf. They will take over our thinking if we give them only half a chance. But we have a choice. Think for yourself and then let God change you by refreshing your thinking. Then you can grow spiritually and become the person God has in mind.

Prayer: *Lord, help me not to delegate my decision making to others at this time. Let me grow spiritually by refreshing my thinking. Amen*

✿ A few generations later

May 27, 2020 - Day 62 of Lockdown

1 Peter 3: 15b: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

A great theologian, mentor and role model for me, Ravi Zacharias (26/03/1946 - 19/5/2020), died of cancer during this time of lockdown. A person with immense intellect, enthusiasm and oratorical ability to bring home the basic truths of the Christian faith to believers as well as unbelievers.

He was best known as an apologist who wrote more than thirty books. Apologetics, in short, can be seen as the part of Christian theology dedicated to the defence of the Christian faith towards a non-Christian audience. As our text says, it is the readiness to answer (debate) any question that any person asks about the Christian faith and the hope that lives in us.

If you haven't read anything written by Zacharias or seen a video of him, I urge you to go on Google or YouTube to see how the preaching of God's Word and genius meet in a broken earthenware jar (2 Corinthians 4: 1-7)

What is striking is how the Zacharias' family, originally from India, is inextricably linked to a lockdown state. One of his ancestors (I think it was his great grandmother) heard the gospel as a teenage girl and was very interested in it. She went to a mission to hear more about it. While she was there out of curiosity, a lockdown was announced in that part of India as a result of a pestilence. So she couldn't go home that night. She had to stay at the mission for a month until the lockdown was suspended. In that month she accepted the Lord Jesus as Saviour. Who would have thought that the fruit of that lockdown would produce a theologian of the format of Ravi Zacharias three or four generations later?

What will be the fruit of the lockdown in which we are now living? May it be that the Lord, as before, as the fruit of this lockdown, summons a lot of young people to rise up as apologists for the Gospel.

Prayer: *Thank You God for the life and work of someone like Ravi Zacharias. Help each of us stand up with conviction and expertise for the truth of Your Gospel. Please raise a new generation of apologists from our young people. Amen.*

⁴ Urban, H. 2003. *Life's Greatest Lessons*. FIRESIDE: New York

🌸 Country-wide day of prayer

May 28, 2020 - Day 63 of Lockdown

Acts 4:12: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*

The State President announced the day before yesterday that there will be a National Day of Prayer on Sunday, May 31, 2020. People of all religions are called to pray together for the healing of the country. This has again raised the question of whether all religions are equal and whether Christians should participate in it.

There is no room to discuss all the arguments here. In light of yesterday's contribution on Apologetics, I have to summarily say that we will fail a test if we (the Church of the Lord) do not take this opportunity to engage other religions through the joint prayer event.

Religion is an anthropological matter. It is therefore strange that Religious Studies or Religion are taught at Theological Faculties and not as part of Anthropology or Sociology. R.C Sproul⁵ spells out this anomaly in the following words: "... the study of religion is chiefly the study of a certain kind of human behaviour, be it under the rubric of anthropology, sociology, or psychology. The study of theology, on the other hand, is the study of God. Religion is anthropocentric, theology is theocentric. The difference between religion and theology is ultimately the difference between God and man - hardly a small difference".

The point is that in academic circles, all religions are considered equal. We could also have made peace with it if we simply saw it as an anthropological matter. However, what we cannot have peace with (and that is the point I would like to make) is that all gods are not equal. The Lord alone is God (1 Kings 18:39). Salvation is also only possible through Jesus Christ. Our text (Acts 4:12) is very clear about this, as is John 14: 6.

We could therefore boldly participate in such a day of prayer and respect the human dignity and religious customs of other religions. However, they should know that we are not standing back in terms of our confession: Jesus is the Lord! Salvation can be found in Him alone.

Prayer: *Lord, I confess today with gladness that salvation can only be found in You. Amen.*

🌸 Different faces of the church

May 29, 2020 - Day 64 of Lockdown

Revelation 19: 7: *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.*

I read in yesterday's paper how the church, various denominations and a variety of pastors served the South of the Free State during this time of Covid-19. It ranges from sermons on You Tube, daily devotions, voice messages, handing out food, and so on. A very long list that makes you grateful and proud to be part of the body of Christ.

You can probably imagine my indignation when people stated on radio during a dial-in program yesterday that the churches are only happy that people may attend church services again, because the churches are after their money.

Some time later, however, it dawned on me that the church has not always had a good record through the ages when it comes to matters such as money and power. The program also mentioned that some churches tell people that the coronavirus is a demon and that particular churches have a special oil that Covid-19 sufferers can get from them - at a high price. It will then expel the Covid-19 demon. Last year there was a big controversy when a matric student made images for his art project that are linked to the occult. His explanation was that it was merely a protest against the general impression that the church relentlessly pursues money and power.

The church has many faces. In our text it is called the bride of Christ. It is also called the people of God, the flock of the Good Shepherd, the shoots on the Vine and the people of God. There are also many other names, which tell something about the face that the church shows to the world.

In the context of this conversation, it is also important that people are not indiscriminately motivated to attend church services. Those who are ill should rather be encouraged to stay home during this time. This also applies to other people who are fragile - the older members and members with other underlying medical conditions. Our care for the flock of the Lord comes to the fore during this time by discouraging some to attend worship services.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you very much for the prospect of reuniting with fellow believers in a worship service. We also pray for the sense of responsibility to discourage the most fragile members from attending worship services. Amen.*

⁵ Sproul, R.C. 2016. What is Reformed Theology? Baker

What growth did your seclusion create?

May 30, 2020 - Day 65 of Lockdown

Galatians 1: 15-18: *But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem ...*

This text is very valuable to me personally. This was the text for my inaugural sermon on December 9, 1990 after I was first ordained as a minister. Today we look at it following the ministry of the apostle Paul.

Paul was one of the most influential people of all time. As he traversed the earth with the Gospel, he travelled approximately 20,000 kilometres across sea and land. He was often beaten and stoned. He was in prison and suffered shipwreck more than once. He was often hungry and thirsty. The suffering he suffered for the expansion of the Gospel is second to none. He also had to stand up against heresy that threatened the Church from Judaism, and he even at one occasion reprimanded the apostle Peter because he presented himself differently than he really was.

This toughness in his person is not something that came by itself, although there had to be a genetic component to it. However, what our text tells us is that after his conversion (Acts 9), Paul was in the wilderness for three years. We can imagine that the zealous Paul, after his conversion, could not wait to preach the Gospel. However, the Lord set him apart for three years in the wilderness to prepare him for his ministry.

As the levels of lockdown begin to relax, I must also ask myself what the seclusion changed in my relationship with the Lord? What difference did my "desert experience" bring to my ministry?

Prayer: *Lord, I pray that this period of isolation was not a waste of time in my relationship with You. Grant that I will serve You with much more zeal and in the future look back in gratitude on my "desert experience". Amen*

The impact of Pentecost

31 May 2020 - Day 66 of Lockdown

Acts 4:13: When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

It is Pentecost today! The day we celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Our text is part of the events shortly after Pentecost. In the life of the Apostles, we see what an incredible difference Pentecost, the presence of the Holy Spirit brings to your life. The same

Peter who profanely denied to a servant girl that he knew the Lord Jesus, proclaim here with conviction to the Jewish Council that salvation is not possible in any other way than through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Our text says that the scribes and Pharisees were astonished at the boldness of these two apostles. Our text also says that the scribes and Pharisees could see the secret behind the apostles' transformation, namely, that they were followers of the Lord Jesus.

The effect that Pentecost had on the followers of the Lord Jesus was enormous and it was clearly visible. It was actually disturbing to unbelievers. The same Holy Spirit also made us God's children and lives in us as well. However, it must also be clear in our lives.

Two chapters further, we read again of the astonishment of the Jewish Council when they look at another child of the Lord, Stephen. In Acts 6:15 we read: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." It is said that after the Communists took over China and banned the Christian faith, it was easy to identify the Christians. Their behaviour was different but also physically they looked different from the unbelievers.

It is always an important question, but now at Pentecost even more relevant: When the world looks at us, what do they see? Are they surprised that you call yourself a Christian, or do they marvel at the similarity between you and the Lord Jesus? Do they see that you are His image? Do they see the effect of Pentecost in your life? Is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit clear in your life?

Prayer: *Thank You Spirit of God that You dwell in me. I want to live in such a way that it is clear that You have changed my life and are changing it more and more every day. Amen.*

A praying church

June 1, 2020 - Day 67 of Lockdown

Acts 1:14: *They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

It is significant that the State President announced a National Day of Prayer for yesterday. The idea was to pray for the country in the situation where we are trapped in the Covid-19 pandemic. It was requested that the country intervene in prayer for protection against the virus, but also pray for those who form the first line of defence against the disease - doctors, nurses and the Police.

Yesterday was also Pentecost. Prayer and Pentecost have always gone hand in hand. In the Dutch Reformed Church there has been the use of Pentecostal prayer meetings for more than a century - a time traditionally extending for the ten days of Ascension up to

Pentecost. A few other denominations have also started to use this good practice of the Dutch Reformed Church. However, prayer and Pentecost go back much further than that. In our text we see how the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was preceded by persistent prayer.

Pentecost can rightly be seen as the birthday of the New Testament church. Right from the beginning of the church's history, prayer is a very strong part of it. The greatest tragedy is not that our prayers are not answered, but rather that we do not even direct our prayers to God - that we, as a church, but also as individuals have fallen into prayerlessness.

J.C. Ryle said more than a century ago: "Bibles read without prayer, sermons heard without prayer, engagements to marriage without prayer, travel undertaken without prayer, homes chosen without prayer, friendships formed without prayer, the daily act of private prayer itself hurried over or gone through without heart - these are the kind of downward steps by which many a Christian descends to a condition of spiritual paralysis..."

A prayerless Christian or a prayerless church is a term that contradicts itself. Let us cherish this matter (communal prayer) that preceded the birth of the church. We can appreciate the government calling the church to prayer. However, it would be even better if the church called on the government for prayer. Let us also encourage one another to pray.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for the wonderful privilege I have of speaking to You. Help me to wrestle with the prayers I do not pray, rather than wrestle with the prayers that I think You did not answer. Amen.*

Not everyone knows of freedom

June 2, 2020 - Day 68 of Lockdown

Galatians 5: 1: *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

One of the reports that have dominated news bulletins over the past few days is the events in America where a white policeman killed a black man by pressing his knee into his neck. Someone recorded it on his phone and it was shown all over the world. Heavy riots followed and many voices against it claimed that the quality of life of many Black Americans has not improved since the emancipation of slaves.

One day, while walking in a town centre, I heard a terrible noise. Cars' brakes and horns filled the air. People screaming. Sirens wailing! People rushed out of stores to see what's happening. It was two Nigerians fighting over a girl trapped in prostitution. They were fighting over whose property she is. For me, that was a terrible thought. That one person could be someone else's possession. Suddenly, that girl became a symbol to me of

what someone looks like that have become a slave to Satan and sin. A slave of drugs. A slave to prostitution. The slave of a Nigerian who is getting rich from her pain and misery.

The American Civil War took place over a hundred and fifty years ago. The war took place because of the emancipation of slaves. After the war on September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln enacted a law that would come into force on January 1, 1863. It provided that all slaves in America would be free. The problem is that communication was lacking at that time. The result was that in certain places in America, years and years after the release of the slaves, there were still people in slavery simply because the message of their emancipation never reached them.

Today, millions of people around the world are still trapped in the slavery of sin. The reason is, among other things, because the message of the freedom from sin has never come to them. We must take that message to them. The Lord relies on us to take the message of salvation, the message that we can only be free in Christ.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that in the Lord Jesus we can be free from the bondage and slavery of sin. Help us to convey the message of freedom purposefully. Amen.*

Everything is right, even when everything is wrong

3 June 2020 - Day 69 of Lockdown

Galatians 4:13: *As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you*

A minister tells of his best friend who had cancer. He went to visit him in the hospital when things went very badly with his friend. When he left after visiting time, his sick friend greeted him with the words "Everything is right". Those were his last words, too, because soon after he died.

The father of a friend of mine passed away a while ago. My friend sat and talked to him minutes before, and asked him, "How are you?" He held his thumb in the air and said, "Everything is right!". So here are two cases where people said, "Everything is right", while things were obviously wrong. Or, is it possible that everything can be right, even if everything is wrong?

There are many guesses as to what the illness was that Paul was referring to in our text. However, this is speculation and that is not the point Paul wants to make. The point is that it was this illness that gave him the opportunity to bring the gospel to the Galatians.

Generally, people will say that being ill is a big disadvantage. Illness disqualifies you. If you are ill, everything is wrong. But Paul is saying "No! Everything is right, even if everything is wrong. It was precisely because of my illness that I was able to preach the Gospel".

When we look at the Covid-19 drenched world and our own lives, there are probably many things that make life bitter for us. Maybe an illness, as was the case with Paul. Joni Erickson Tada was an Olympic diving champion. In an accident, however, she broke her neck. Then she met the Lord Jesus and today she has an extremely blessed ministry, despite being a paraplegic. She will also be able to say with conviction: "Everything is right even if everything is wrong".

It is because of the Covid-19 pandemic that this daily devotion (and the series) has been written and that you

can read it. Do you not want to leave your shortcomings, your suffering and your trials today in the Lord's hand and confess: "Lord, everything is right, even if everything is wrong"?

Prayer: *Lord, I bring all my shortcomings and trials to You. Use it in Your kingdom so that I can also sincerely confess: "Everything is right, even if everything is wrong." Amen*

Common ways we look for affirmation, other than from God

By Rev Diane Pickford

CPSC Formal Book Review

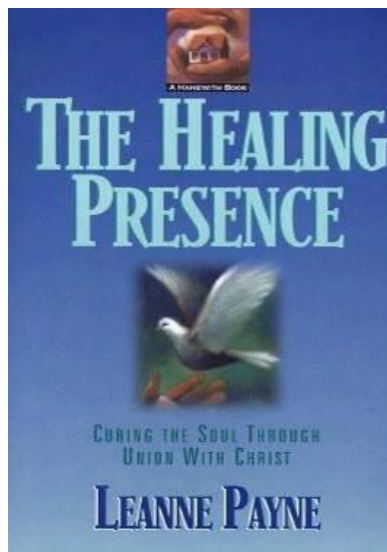
This is the third of a four-part series on Leanne Payne's book *The Healing Presence*.

In part one and two of this book review, I looked at Leanne Payne's chapters on our tendency, even as Christians, to live out of the old self. This is a choice to live in a cluster of diseased attitudes and feelings about ourselves, resulting from three scenarios.

- A person's grave reactions to childhood trauma.
- An inability to relate meaningfully to a parent through lack of bonding.
- A parent's sinful behavior towards the child, which leaves the child damaged and immature.

This old self is no longer a reality for the Christian. It is not how Christ sees us, but it is illusionary and insubstantial. It spins whole paranoid and delusional worlds out of its diseased feelings and imaginings, arising out of the sins of self-pity, envy, fear and hate. It may weave itself around another personality completely; e.g. when a man, feeling sexually inferior and rejected, can become in his mind an illusionary woman, a female impersonation. Sin has to do with people rebelliously demanding to experience 'what is not' - what God did not create and cannot bless. Satan has aims to use our woundedness to twist, defile and destroy us-spirit, soul and body.

Healing comes from praying with Christ's presence, thereby recognizing the illusion and choosing to die to it. We then choose to live out of our new center where, Christ indwells us and wholesome images replace the diseased ones. Each person that requires healing must not be passive in choosing to die to habitual sin, and then repeatedly cast sin off like a filthy rag. Many people misunderstand what dying to self really means. We



are to die to the old sinful self and thought patterns, but accept and grow the new creative self, where Christ indwells us.

The new self needs to have an imaginative grasp of Christianity as well as an intellectual one. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures hold and guard the Christian symbolic system. Through reading the Scriptures, and receiving the Living word, we are enabled to understand Ultimate reality, we also receive language and imagery to express this truth. In this way we are 'remythologized'. God's words and pictures replace diseased, inner images and nega-

tive, lying words. We receive God's Spirit and the gifts he gives us so we may be partners with Him in building up the body of Christ.

When we cast our eyes upon God as Father, as risen Saviour, as Shepard and as coming King, these symbolic pictures fuse our thoughts and feelings and help us have an intuition of the reality of God. Oswald Chambers wrote about the heart's need to focus on God and the strengthening of spirit that happens when we do this. Commenting on Isaiah 26:3, "Thou will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee" Chambers writes,

"The test of spiritual concentration is bringing the imagination into captivity. Is your imagination looking on the face of an idol? Is the idol yourself? Your work?...If your imagination is starved, do not look back into your own experience; it is God whom you need...One of the reasons of stultification in prayer is that there is no imagination, no power of putting ourselves deliberately before God."

As Christians we need to regain our souls and the knowledge of the truly imaginative. Then we must teach others. ■

Meditations

It won't wear out

Submitted by Rina Wucherpennig

Source: Paul David Tripp - Paul Trip Ministries (2012)

Have you noticed that everything in your life wears out? The sweater that you loved so much and wore winter after winter, is now stuffed in the bottom drawer of your dresser, threadbare, unused, and unwanted. The car that excited you so and that even smelled new, is now just a car, with scratches and squeaks to prove it. The stain-resistant carpet ended up not being so stain-resistant after all. The list could go on and on, but the point is, that this side of heaven, everything in your life wears out somehow, someday. In fact, even you wear out. Your body grows old, weak, and tired. Your joints hurt because they are wearing out from all the stress of exercise over the many years of your life.

It's something you and I are used to. So; we are happy when a car or an appliance lasts for ten years before it wears out. We are all quite accustomed to living in a world where things simply do not last.

But, if you are one of God's children, there is something in your life that will not wear out. In fact, it has the amazing capacity to be new day after day after day. Scripture says that God's mercies are "New every morning." Now, you know you need mercy, because you know you need forgiveness and help. Almost every day, you mess up in some way. Almost every day you face things that are bigger than the size of your personal wisdom and strength. You and I constantly need the mercy of forgiveness and the mercy of enablement. And so, it is very encouraging to know that God's mercy is new every day! God's mercy never grows stale and it never loses its transforming power. God's mercy is brand new morning after morning after morning.

This also means that God's mercy is form-fit for the problems that you are facing right here, right now. Each morning you are given new mercies for the particular things that you will face that day.

So, you can wake up tomorrow with courage and hope. And you can do this, not because of your strength and wisdom, but because you know that the most important thing you have ever been given will never wear out. You can also have hope because you know that the God who has given that new mercy, knows exactly what you are about to face.

God bless.

The Wild Card: Your Choices

Submitted by Rina Wucherpennig

Source: Rick Warren (Daily Hope Devotions) – 2012

"God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those

who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him." (Romans 8:29 MSG)

You are wonderfully complex (Psalm 139:14). To fulfill God's purpose for you, you have to look at every dimension of your life and understand five factors that influence your identity. We've talked this week about the ways that our chemistry, our connections, our circumstances, and our consciousness affect the way we are shaped.

If these factors were like the five cards you're dealt in a game of poker, then the fifth factor would be your wild card. Why? Because it's your choices, and it affects all your other cards. You may not be able to control the hand you were dealt, but you can use your wild card to change the way you live your life by the choices you make.

The Bible says we are created in the image of God. No other animal was created in the image of God! Dogs have instinct but don't know the difference between right and wrong. Elephants have no moral compass. But you get to choose to do right or wrong. The freedom to choose is man's greatest blessing and also his greatest curse, because we make stupid choices all the time that harm us, and everyone around us.

The wild card can change the suit and number of the other cards you are dealt. You didn't choose your chemistry, but you can choose what you do with your body. You didn't choose your connections, but you can make new relationships and mend or nurture the ones you already have. You can choose how you respond to your circumstances, and you can choose to stop believing the harmful things people say to you. Your identity is shaped by your choices. What choices will you make today that will positively affect the rest of your life? Talk About It

What do you need from God today to help you overcome the difficult circumstances in your life that keep you from making good choices? Pray, and ask God for the help you need.

Who am I?

Submitted by Rina Wucherpennig (April 2020)

Poem by Russell Kelfer

Source: 'The Purpose- Driven Life (Rick Warren)

We all come to a point in our lives when we wonder, 'Who am I?'

We read in Romans 12:3 the following: "The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us."

This poem by Russell Kelfer sums it up: (No more low self-esteem and no more uncertainty)

You are who you are for a reason.
 You're part of an intricate plan.
 You're precious and perfect unique design, Called God's
 special woman or man.

You look like you look for a reason.
 Our God made no mistake.
 He knit you together in the womb; You're *just* what he
 wanted to make.

The parents you had were the ones he chose,
 And no matter how you may feel,
 They were custom-designed with God's plan in mind,
 And they bear the Master's seal.

No, that trauma you faced was not easy.
 And God wept that it hurt you so;
 But it was allowed to shape your heart, so that into his
 likeness you'd grow.

You are who you are for a reason,
 You've been formed by the Master's rod.
 You are who you are, beloved, because there is a God.

Uncertain of the next step, but certain of God

Source: Posted by Jon Walker from Purpose Driven Connection (2011)

Submitted by R Wucherpfennig

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3 (NIV)

When my oldest son first started playing baseball, he was still relatively young and not used to a life lived around clocks and calendars. So it wasn't uncommon for him to ask, "Is my game today?" "How many days until Saturday?"

Jesus says this childlike nature is necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven. My son wasn't questioning if something would happen; in fact, he was confident that it would. But he was dependent upon my wife or me to tell him when it would happen. ?

Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest*, says, "The nature of the spiritual life is that we are certain in our uncertainty." He says we can be certain of God, even if we are uncertain of the next step he wants us to take. We can be certain of God's plan for us, even if we are uncertain of the specific details. Even though we're uncertain, we can be confident God will not disappoint us (Romans 5:5).

This also means we can release the things we have no responsibility for and stop worrying about them. For instance, my son could be certain I would get him to the ball game, but he didn't have to be concerned with how much gas it would require or how to get to the baseball

field. He could just enjoy being a child and live in each moment, trusting that I was handling the details and that I would let him know when was time to go.

This is the childlike faith Jesus wants us to develop, where we grow confident each day that he will come through at just the right time and in just the right way.

Get a better night of sleep

Source: Paul Tripp Ministries (2012)

Submitted by Rina Wucherpfennig

Have you had any sleepless nights lately? Do you struggle to lay peacefully in bed because something, or someone, is consuming your thoughts?

Maybe it's a looming deadline and you're putting all the pressure on yourself to make that big project a success. Maybe it's a life-altering decision you need to make on behalf of your family and you just don't know what option is best.

Maybe it's an act of betrayal and deceit and the good thing you had been working towards is now destroyed by the corruption of another. Maybe it's news from your doctor about a new physical affliction that's going to drastically impact your life.

We all struggle to sleep at night, and to be fair, life in a fallen world is harsh and unpredictable. There are many outside factors that make life difficult and provide reason for restless nights.

But I'm deeply persuaded that in the midst of trial, we often abandon our theology. We quit believing that the Bible has the answers for life and we try to take the reins. With the weight of the world now on our self-appointed shoulders, we struggle to get a good night of sleep.

When you're facing the harsh and unpredictable realities of life in fallen world, what should you do? Here are four actions that find their roots in the Word of God, but it's important to recognize that these actions are not one-time quick fixes. As long as you're facing difficulty, you'll need to continually preach the gospel to yourself as you fall asleep.

1. Accept the Confusion

If you haven't recognized it already, you have very little control over your life. You didn't choose where you would be born or how your parents would raise you. You didn't choose the color of your skin, the language you spoke, or how wealthy your family was.

The reality is that you have a miniscule amount of control in gargantuan universe. Add to that the sin and brokenness you face at every turn, and life gets overwhelming.

If you believe a false gospel of self-sovereignty and personal control, you'll be kept awake when life doesn't go according to plan. The first step in falling asleep is to

accept that you don't have much reason to sleep peacefully!

2. Evict the Imposters

When the waves of pain and difficulty come crashing down, you need to seek shelter. Sadly, so many of us seek shelter in all the wrong places.

Some pick up a bottle of alcohol or painkillers to physically numb their bodies; others drown out the pain with television and food. Others yet take a credit card to purchase items they don't need, in the hope that material things will provide comfort for their soul.

If you buy into the false gospel of earth-bound treasures, you won't have many restful nights of sleep. Evict the imposters and invite the Messiah to commune with your soul once again.

3. Pursue the Disciplines

In the midst of trial, it'll be very tempting to abandon the spiritual disciplines of your faith: prayer, fasting, meditation/memorization of Scripture, and attendance at worship services/small groups.

When you abandon these disciplines, whether you intentionally mean to or not, you're saying, "I don't need God or His church - I can make it on my own!" That's never a good idea; your heart is corrupt, and you need help to see yourself and your situation with accuracy.

If you believe a false gospel of self-sustainment, you'll struggle to wake up each morning with energy. You weren't created to live independently, even in a sinless world. Live with God - His Spirit, His Word, and His body of believers.

4. Trust the Author

All these other actions – Accept, Evict, and Pursue – make no sense unless one thing is true: God is the good and wise author of your story:

* Because God is the author of your story, you can accept the confusion and find rest, knowing that everything in the universe is managed with complete and specific authority.

* Because God is the author of all that is good, you can evict the imposters and find comfort in communion with Him, even in the midst of physical trial.

* Because God is the author of life, you can pursue the spiritual disciplines and find peace, knowing that God's wisdom for your life is far better than pursuing it on your own.

You and I don't have to crumble when we don't understand; we don't have to be paralyzed with fear because our plans have blown up in our face. We don't have to dread what the next day will bring.

You and I can sleep because God is wise, loving, and powerful. He is in moment-by-moment control of every detail of our lives.

Isaiah 65:24 – God answers prayers

Source: Email Received from Marilie Lessing (June 2012)

Submitted by Rina Wucherpennig

This is a story written by a doctor who worked in Africa. One night I had worked hard to help a mother in the labor ward; but in spite of all we could do, she died, leaving us with a tiny, premature baby and a crying two-year-old daughter. We would have difficulty keeping the baby alive; as we had no incubator (we had no electricity to run an incubator). We also had no special feeding facilities.

Although we lived on the equator, nights were often chilly with treacherous drafts. One student midwife went for the box we had for such babies and the cotton wool that the baby would be wrapped in.

Another went to stoke up the fire and fill a hot water bottle. She came back shortly in distress to tell me that in filling the bottle, it had burst (rubber perishes easily in tropical climates). 'And it is our last hot water bottle!' she exclaimed. As in the West, it is no good crying over spilled milk, so in Central Africa it might be considered no good crying over burst water bottles. They do not grow on trees, and there are no drugstores down forest pathways.

'All right,' I said, 'put the baby as near the fire as you safely can, and sleep between the baby and the door to keep it free from drafts. Your job is to keep the baby warm.'

The following noon, as I did most days, I went to have prayers with any of the orphanage children who chose to gather with me. I gave the youngsters various suggestions of things to pray about and told them about the tiny baby. I explained our problem about keeping the baby warm enough, mentioning the hot water bottle, and that the baby could so easily die if it got chills. I also told them of the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died.

During prayer time one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed with the usual blunt conciseness of our African children. 'Please, God' she prayed, 'Send us a hot water bottle today! It'll be no good tomorrow, God, as the baby will be dead, so please send it this afternoon.' While I gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, she added, 'And while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl so she'll know You really love her?'

As often with children's prayers, I was put on the spot. Could I honestly say 'Amen?' I just did not believe that God could do this.

Oh, yes, I know that He can do everything; the Bible says so. But there are limits, aren't there? The only way God could answer this particular prayer would be by sending me a parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, ever, received a parcel from home. Anyway, if anyone did send me a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!

Halfway through the afternoon, while I was teaching in the nurses' training school, a message was sent that there was a car at my front door. By the time I reached home, the car had gone, but there on the verandah was a large 22-pound parcel. I felt tears pricking my eyes. I could not open the parcel alone, so I sent for the orphanage children. Together we pulled off the string, carefully undoing each knot. We folded the paper, taking care not to tear it unduly. Excitement was mounting. Some thirty or forty pairs of eyes were focused on the large cardboard box. From the top, I lifted out brightly colored, knitted jerseys. Eyes sparkled as I gave them out. Then there were the knitted bandages for the leprous patients, and the children looked a little bored. Then came a box of mixed raisins and sultanas - that would make a batch of buns for the weekend.

Then, as I put my hand in again, I felt the.... could it really be? I grasped it and pulled it out. Yes, a brand new, rubber hot water bottle. I cried. I had not asked God to send it; I had not truly believed that He could.

Ruth was in the front row of the children. She rushed forward, crying out, 'If God has sent the bottle, He must have sent the dolly, too!' Rummaging down to the bottom of the box, she pulled out the small, beautifully dressed dolly. Her eyes shone! She had never doubted! Looking up at me, she asked, 'Can I go over with you and give this dolly to that little girl, so she'll know that Jesus really loves her?' 'Of course,' I replied!

That parcel had been on the way for five whole months, packed up by my former Sunday school class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God's prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. And one of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child - five months before, in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year-old to bring it 'that afternoon.'

'Before they call, I will answer.' (Isaiah 65:24)

When you receive this, say the prayer. That's all I ask. No strings attached. Just send it on to whomever you want - but do send it on.

Prayer is one of the best free gifts we receive. There is no cost, but a lot of rewards. Let's continue praying for one another.

Heavenly Father, I ask you to bless my friends reading this. I ask You to minister to their spirit. Where there is pain, give them Your peace and mercy. Where there is self doubting, release a renewed confidence to work through them where there is tiredness or exhaustion, I

ask You to give them understanding, guidance, and strength. Where there is fear, reveal our love and release to them Your courage. Bless their finances, give them greater vision, and rise up leaders and friends to support and encourage them. I ask You to do these things in Jesus' name. Amen

Abandonment and Confidence

Source: Shattered Dreams written by Larry Crabb, Chapter 11

Notes compiled by Rina Wucherpennig

Sometimes we get the feeling that God abandons us, especially when we experience trials and tribulations. But, like St John of the Cross; it is in these dark nights and occasions that God visits us.

It is possible to meet God, and what do we, as Christians, want more? Some people go on silent retreats, fast, even live in solitude to get to 'meet' God. They need to 'feel' the special touch of God; His presence in a way indescribable. More people are self-consciously hungry for God. They want spiritual renewal and a deep satisfaction of the soul.

To achieve a deep spiritual renewal, we need to abandon ourselves and say goodbye to our self-control and not try to control God and His blessings for us. We need to place our confidence in God, the One who cannot be managed. It is extremely difficult to 'let go, and let God', but it is vital to give over to Him in order to let Him enter your space.

We sometimes think that our 'good' work for God will give us the open door for Him to enter our lives. We try to make it happen. You do not have to try and make this happen: - Where God finds space, He does enter, with no help from your side whatsoever. We read in Jeremiah 29:12-14 that, God told Israel that if they sought Him with all their heart, He would let them find Him. We do not realize it when God enters our lives, as we always want the 'special' occasion to be spectacular. But, it does not have to be spectacular. We tend to measure His presence by the kind of emotion we experience. The Spirit's invitation to experience God appeals to something much deeper than easily produced emotions.

Sometimes we need our technique of abandonment to make space for God to enter our lives. But; we do not need to do this. God's mercy is all that is needed for Him to enter our lives. Nothing that we do can speed up the process or course. Only our sufferings bring us to the point of entrance by God. We, as his followers live under God's mercy, and we serve at His pleasure, not ours.

Confidence in God is not described as a pleasant emotional experience. It is much deeper than just the experience that we have with our five (5) senses. As our pain grows deeper, we experience a warm Truth that becomes more real. We do not experience the presence of God on a natural way, but as we abandon ourselves

more and more, a confidence emerges; a sense of His presence, that can be identified by the awakened spiritual capacities of the soul.

When this happens, there might still be pain, but you will experience an awareness that only God can fill in our souls. We will then find the confidence that He is there. Only by His mercy will this take place. We will believe and will rest, and eventually, will sing about this wonderful presence of God in our lives.

Our shattered dreams give us a chance to discover our desire for God and then to create space for Him (abandonment) and to watch Him enter (confidence). As this process unfolds we slowly become aware of God's desire for us.

The illustration of abandonment is powerfully expressed through the story of Naomi. No one can make the event of God's presence happen, only God can, and we can ask God for it.

Cross 1 – NEW Identity and NEW potential

How People Change, written by Timothy S. Lane and Paul D. Tripp.

Source: How people change written by Timothy S. Lane and Paul D. Tripp, Chapter 11

Notes compiled by Rina Wucherpfennig (February 2012)

The first three sentences described me to a T – I hate problems, reading manuals, and I'm a "Quick Fix –person"

BUT, I've come to know by reading this chapter (11), and various other books on the topic, that only with God there can be a solution and that there is no quick fix in life for life's issues. We need to work through our issues in order to grow as a person. Whatever is left untouched, will stay a problem forever and a day more, unless addressed. We need to step back and assess our thoughts, and reactions upon trouble coming our way (pg. 147) We need to take an honest look at the *real* problem. This is when the penny drops, as with God's grace we are shown the way to healing. As we read in Heb. 4:12 that, our responses are shaped by the thoughts and motives of our hearts, we need to examine the *real* heart in us. What drives you?

The words describing a baby learning to walk, was to me a good metaphor of our Spiritual growth. We sometimes fall by doing the wrong thing, but should not stay down. Like a baby falling down and just try again and again, we need to get up and try again and again! Life is about trial and error. Our confidence will also start overriding our fears and the challenges we face to become the person God has in mind for each one of us. With each difficulty and blessing that crosses our path, we self-evaluate ourselves in a standard way.

Yet, with this self-evaluation, we miss the core of our potential as a Christian [experience how we could feel unprepared and ready at the same time.] THIS can all change when we consider who we are in Christ: The indwelling Christ – Gal. 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, *"But Christ lives in me..."* We have a new life in Christ through the gift of the Spirit who now lives within us. Paul defines our *Identity* and *Potential* right here and now because we are *Alive in Christ* (Rom. 8:9-10).

Through the Holy Spirit that lives within us, we receive a new heart, and new power to live out of an entirely new potential. **Three redemptive truths** come from the statement that Paul makes:

1.The redemptive fact: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live". When Jesus physically died, we died along with Him. His death was a triumph! In His death, the spiritual power and authority that sin had over us, was broken. You are *not* the same as you once were!

2.The Present Reality: "Bur Christ lives in me." Paul says that we will not be renewed or replaced by a new self, *But with Christ Himself!* And where sin once ruled and controlled us, *Christ* now rules! Your heart is new, because Christ lives there.

3.The result for daily living: "The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me". We live by a new principal – the power and grace of Christ who now resides in us. Because of this fact we can do what is right in desire, thought, word and action, no matter what blessing or suffering we face. [That is when a mom can speak to her child in love and not treat him in her anger with hurt when he does wrong].

What will it look like to face life really believing that Christ lives within you?

- You will live with personal integrity – You will be honest in your struggles
- You will create a climate of grace in your relationships – Forgive as you have been forgiven – Be merciful about the sin of others, based on the mercy you have received from Christ (Mark 11:25; Matt. 6:1-15). You will seek to serve and give in tangible ways (Rom. 12:14-21). You will persevere even if you are tempted to quit.
- You will act with courageous grace and constructive truth – Speak in honesty and truth (do not cover up any longer Lev. 19:17; Eph. 4:29). You will not be motivated by your own agenda, but by God's grace you will want to live your life to reflect what God is doing in you. This is a Cross-centred living! You will start using your God-given gifts for God's glory and to the benefit of others, and not be self-centred but Cross-centred. You will learn to humbly affirm

the New Fruit in your life, through Christ living in you.

What if you fail? – Sin still lives in us. BUT, you need to know that Christ has broken the power of sin. We have been empowered but not yet perfected. When you sin, you have the freedom, through the Cross, to admit your sin and repent. You are also given the freedom to seek forgiveness every time that you fall.

When you fail – *Keep your eyes on the Lord, run to Him!* Ask for His forgiveness, receive His forgiveness and *try* again! Not only do we have a new heart through the Holy Spirit, but we also have a new foundation that gives us confidence and hope as we live the Christian life on a daily basis. Galatians 2:20 – Christ in me - He died for me. Therefore, our potential is much greater!

Changes that Heal

Notes compiled by Rina Wucherpennig (June 2012)

Source: Changes that Heal, by Larry Crabb

This book grabbed me from beginning to end – not an easy one to read though.

Good and Bad - I certainly didn't want to know that I might see only the 'bad' or just 'good' in others and live in denial for the 'bad' in me, and that I only experience the 'good' stuff and ignore the 'bad' stuff! I needed to make the change to accept that I, as well as others have 'good' and 'bad' in us and I needed to learn to accept that.

Bonding to Others; a factor that we experience during childhood already, and from which we form our own ideas of how relationships and bonding should be. Our attachments to other people sometimes get hurt or are being distorted during the growing process, and we just build further on this 'model' when we reach adulthood and start to form our own relationships with our partners and friends in the same destructive ways that we grew up with.

What really grasped me was the fact that I have to *bond* with others to form healthy and truly enjoyable, intimate relationships. BUT, be aware of co-dependency or to the other extreme, isolation. Learn to be in bonding with others, but also be separate from others. We need to set boundaries in our relationships, but be aware of not overextending, or 'trespassing' of boundaries; your own as well as those of others. We are too scared that others will not 'like' us when we set boundaries, yet this part of being in relationships are extremely important to us.

The last part of the book was about becoming an adult and how we sometimes steer away from our responsibilities of becoming and being adults. We need to grow in stature and wisdom (Luke 2:52), meaning, being an adult in an adult world. Christ is our Leader, not other people, whom we sometimes see as our leaders. We have to submit to God, not people. When we fail to grow up we struggle with feelings of inferiority, guilt, fear of disapproval, being judgmental, suffering from depression, and many more. We need to please God and not people, living to the approval of God, not of man (John 12:42-43).

Skills for becoming an adult include the following:

We need to re-evaluate our beliefs. Make our own decisions. See your parents and other authority figures realistically. We don't have to agree with everything others share with us, but form our own opinion about things. Recognize and pursue your God-given talents. We have to discipline ourselves. We need to do good works as God commanded us to do. We can also appreciate mystery and the unknown. Love and appreciate those who are different from you.

We all from time to time struggle with these issues. Our struggles are not emotional or spiritual; they are entwined. Relationship reconciliation is at the base of all healing. Get your relationship with God in order. We also focus on the symptoms, instead of the issues that bring the symptoms to the forefront. Issues can be resolved, symptoms cannot.

I need to work on my abilities to attach to others, so I can have my empty heart filled. I need to set boundaries so that I can own my life. Confessing and receiving forgiveness can help me to develop real adulthood. Working on assuming adulthood will help me to be an authority.

Only once I have achieved all of these goals, can I go out there and give it to others. The greatest love I know is the Love of Jesus Christ, who laid down His own life so that I can have life and have it in abundance (John 15:13).

I have a long and difficult road ahead of me when it comes to Changes that Heal, but I am prepared to walk it and overcome all the obstacles with Jesus besides me, knowing when the road becomes too difficult to travel on, He will carry me in His loving arms of Grace and Truth. And that the changes will come in His time, not mine. **Patience is the virtue of changes that last!**

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Caring – a turnover strategy

By Dr. Kobus Erasmus

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

- Proverbs 4:23

Caring- turnaround strategy

A believer must have a caring heart in order to make turn his life around. Your heart determines your life. The faithful's heart is filled with Christ (Gal. 2:20, Phil. 1:21). The content of your heart becomes love, faith and hope (De Macedo). This becomes especially evident when you study 1 Cor. 13.

A believer's consolation is in the fact that he belongs to Christ and the Holy Trinity in body and soul, in life and death, in time and eternity (Heidelberg Catechism (HC), Sunday 1, Q&A 1). Every believer belongs to God's church and forms part of a congregation. (HQ Su. 21 Q&A 54 & 55).

Caring strategy

God shows that He cares for the believer. In times of need He visits Adam (Gen. 3:8), and Noah (Gen.6-8).

He takes pity on his people in Egypt (Ex. 3:24), and at Sinai (Ex. 19&20). He consoles David (2 Sam.12, Ps. 32).

He communicates with his people through the prophets.

But then comes along his biggest act of caring/love, when he sends his son, Jesus Christ. Christ has all the power over heaven and earth (Matt. 28:20). He goes even further and gives us his Word and the Holy Spirit.

Because God cares so much for us, we should also care about others. There are two concepts in the Bible that deal with caring visits by God. The first one is a reprimanding or encouraging visit (Acts 20:2). During these visits, believers are encouraged to persevere in faith and good deeds (1 Joh. 2:14-24). God reprimands and comforts us so that we can comfort and encourage others (2 Cor. 1:4). The other concept focusses on strengthening faith (Rom. 1:11) so that a believer can remain steadfast and can confidently build upon the future.

From the heart (filled with love, faith and hope) of a believer comes reprimanding, consolation and strengthening. The caring strategy therefor comprises of reprimanding in love, consoling in faith and strengthening in hope. There must be balance in the heart of a caring believer. A believer must have passion (love), a mission (faith) and a vision (hope). Only when the heart of a believer is true, will it set the right course for the road ahead. True caring leads to action with a turn-around or reversal strategy.

Turn around-strategy

To change around a situation like yourself, your marriage, your family or church is an ethical matter. Nowadays people no longer want to consider the right principles, but they are rather guided by emotions or by what the world perceives as acceptable. For the faithful this is unacceptable. Paul warns that the truth must be practised in love (Eph. 4:15). The believer must be able to derive the truth of the matter and decide what is the best (Phil. 1:10).

A believer who seeks the truth in love, should always ask the following questions:

1. What is the motive?

A believer with a caring heart should always start with God as his motive if he wants to turn a matter around from wrong to right. A believer turns things around because of his love for God and his fellow man (Matt. 22). This should be done according to the truth and with love (Eph. 4:15, 1 Cor. 13). The motive must be pure.

2. What are the means?

The means a believer must apply to rectify something are the Word and the commandments. These are the principles to be followed by a thankful believer. Never will the purpose justify the means. The means are the guidelines whereby the reversal or turnover must take place.

3. What is the aim?

A believer's aim must be pure, namely to glorify God (Rom. 11:33-36). It must not be about personal honour, but about the honour and glory of God. You must therefore in all humbleness seek to honour God in all you endeavour. A person should not embark on an ego trip, as the aim does not justify the means.

4. What are the results?

With a turn-around strategy, the results must always be considered. If you deviate from the Word, it can lead to stumbling (Luke 17:2). If this happens, the action must be stopped. A believer must always set a good example and should never lead another into sin.

To summarise: A caring strategy is a matter that should come from the heart (love, faith and hope) by reprimanding in love, consoling in faith and strengthening in hope. This activates a turn-around strategy that always considers the motive, means, aim and results of the strategy. ■

Kneeling: The key

By Mrs Roxanne Bailey, Career Guidance Counsellor, Independent Psychometrist and Pastoral Counsellor

"Unto thee, O LORD, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me. Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed: let them be ashamed which transgress without cause. Show me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day. Remember, O LORD, thy tender mercies and thy loving kindnesses; for they have been ever of old." - Psalm 25:1-6 King James Version (KJV)

By Mrs R.A. D'Angelo (Bailey)

Keywords: key, kneeling, at risk, resilience, infinitude, prayer

Introduction

Classical American Poet born in December, 1830, saw the 'child spirit' regarding her idea of God as imminent ... '... for it shows her as a possessor of that quality which Jesus suggested was normative for true spiritual life when he said, "Except ye "become as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven."

My period had come for prayer

By Emily Dickinson

My period had come for Prayer —
No other Art — would do —
My Tactics missed a rudiment —
Creator — Was it you?

God grows above — so those who pray
Horizons — must ascend —
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend —

His House was not — no sign had He —
By Chimney — nor by Door
Could I infer his Residence —
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler —
Were all that I could see —
Infinitude — Had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended —
Creation stopped — for Me —
But awed beyond my errand —
I worshipped — did not "pray" —



So many of God's creation is 'at risk', whether it is the facing of global warming: rise in temperatures, rise of water levels, volcanic eruptions, droughts, coral reef bleaching, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, etcetera. So we search for meaning within ourselves and around us. Almost a spiritual battlefield is starting to arise. Yet, the constancy in all of this on- going circle of 'at risk', is to do the following that is highlighted within Emily Dickinson's poem...; that God comes upon

the North thus in all His golden splendor:

"He comes from the north as golden splendour; With God is awesome majesty." - Job 37:22 (NKJV) We should kneel and become a spirit child, as the key to enter Heaven.

CONTENT

J J Mc Whirter, B T Mc Whirter, E H Mc Whirter and R J Mc Whirter (2004) defines the term 'at risk' as describing many young people who goes through many challenges (problems at home, schools, communities, cultural norms, social / media messages, poverty, violence, terrorism, changes in technology, health, substance abuse etcetera) within the ecology of their lives, leading to many limited possibilities in becoming responsible and productive adults. Furthermore, J J Mc Whirter, B T Mc Whirter, E H Mc Whirter and R J Mc Whirter (2004) also refer to cultural anthropologist, Becker (1981), view of 'at risk' – "Strewn all over the place". It is meant by Becker (1981), that through-out live across the board there are unique challenges dispersed here on earth that everyone faces, whether young or old, with so many causes and effects.

Society may try to prepare the young people to become well-adjusted, responsible and well-educated, as well as aim to become the functional older generation to pass stability, values and strength to the future generation. Yet the tree of life gets damaged and the equilibrium disturbed. J J Mc Whirter, B T Mc Whirter, E H Mc Whirter and R J Mc Whirter (2004), refers to the metaphor of the at risk tree. An individual is born on an earthly realm within a complex and already broken environment, thus society (cultural differences, values, religion, and economic, as well as financial difficulties etcetera) - the soil, the infant is embedded into. Thereafter the roots- family structure (health of the family), parental style, school, church and peer group. A taproot system within biology is supposed to anchor a plant and provide sturdiness with the root hairs for protection as a shield against any unforeseen influences. However, many things can impact it negatively such as drought (temperature), not planted in the correct place,

watering too much or too little, as well as the type of plant it is. Most individuals today feel so hopeless and helpless by all things happening in life that they grow more fibrous roots, thus embedded close to the surface, as well as not anchored enough- lack the sturdiness and can easily get damaged by the elements.

This indicates already no or even weaker trunk to form or to develop healthy individual strengths, attitudes, skills, behaviours and well-adjusted sense of self-esteem, as well as motivation and responsibility. The branches – cultural heritage and values get lost, as well as no fruits of flowers to bloom – giving rise to an at risk (maladaptive, bruised young individual).

J Mc Dowell and B Hostetler (1996) highlight the causes of not discerning God's will, thus referring to Adrian Rogers words: "The starting place for teenagers, who want to find God's will, is the parents, not the teenagers themselves... It's highly important for parents to teach their children that God does indeed have a will for everyone's life. Many young people go through life without this awareness." The bible says to all of us, in Psalm 32:8- "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you." On earth we need guidance and counselling, however God says that if we only would really listen to Him, in Infinitude, and come to Him for Counsel through 'kneeling in prayer', we will become a child spirit and receive the key to life – thus enter His Kingdom in Heaven.

What then is prayer? An Unknown Christian provides the following answer: "The word "prayer" really means "a wish directed towards," that is, towards God. All that true prayer seeks is God Himself, for with Him we get all we need. Prayer is simply "the turning of the soul to God." David describes it as the lifting up of the living soul to the living God. "Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul" (Psa. xxv. 1)." How perfect an explanation to 'what is prayer?' we can come before Him through bringing our entire self, thus 'soul' to Him – how battered or brushed an individual might be; He will be there to provide us with His Grace and infinite unselfish Love.

The process to get to praying, is by firstly kneeling and then start with the following, as stated in John 16:24: "Hitherto ye have asked nothing in my name," but now, "ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full". Our Lord repeats this a few times; asks in 'My name'. If this is His condition to us, then we need to go over in action and kneel; just as Moses did: "And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the

earth, and worshipped."-Exodus 34:8, "And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them," -Numbers 20:6. We honour the Lord by kneeling and bowing our hands in praise, as well as respect for Him, just as many did before us; such as Moses. Kneeling is a symbol of acknowledging His remarkable Light of Eminence with great admiration towards our astounding God.

The Unknown Christian uses the following poem, to highlight that we as earthly beings will always face hindrances and He might not always answer our prayers the way we want it according to our own will; however if we can fully come to Him in prayer by kneeling, with an honest and true child-like self without masks, He will answer us in **His time**.

"THE poet said, and we often sing—

What various hindrances we meet

In coming to the mercy-seat.

Yes, indeed, they are various. But here again, most of those hindrances are our own making.

God wants me to pray. The devil does not want me to pray, and does all he can to hinder me. He knows that we can accomplish more through our prayers than through our work.

He would rather have us do anything else than pray.

We have already referred to Satan's opposition to prayer:

Angels our march oppose

Who still in strength excel

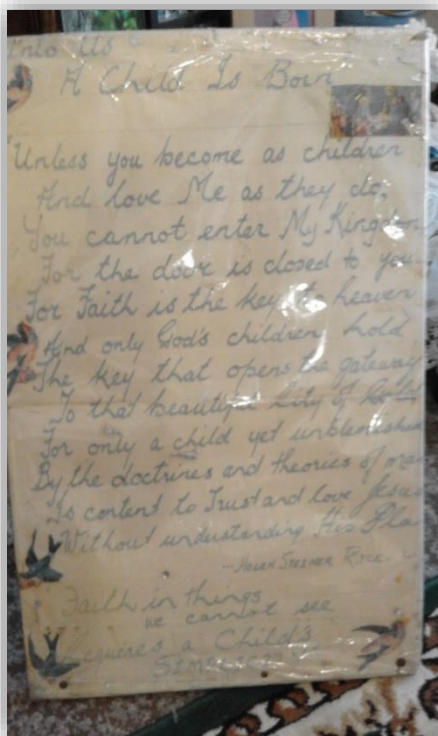
Our secret, sworn, relentless foes,
Countless, invisible."

Conclusion

My grandmother kept this poem by Helen Steiner Rice hung up onto our wall (RIGHT see the image of the original board- it is approximately sixty years old) at Christmas time; since this represented what Christmas was actually about: Giving thanks to God for all His wonders and being with family here on earth, yet knowing that He is the Key to Heaven- His Greatness as the Infinitude. God provides the resilience. How at risk His earthly child may be, He is the Key to all life and will lesson our burdens we might feel.

The following words stands out:

"For Faith is the Key to Heaven and



only God's children hold the Key that opens the gateway... For only a child yet unblemished..." It means that when we truly come to God in our honesty of sharing our WHOLE 'at risk' self, this makes us unblemished to Him and He will open the gate of gold, to enter His Kingdom.

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G-om project flourishes

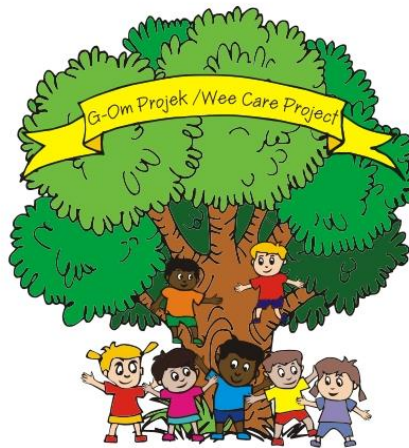
By Dr Linda Grobler, CPSC affiliate

The G-om or Wee (Scottish for small) Care Project functions as a free nursery school or crèche for 50 under-privileged children between the ages of 3-6 in Rustenburg. This project started in 2001 under a tree as an act of obedience to God. Throughout the years, God has shown His great power on many occasions!

What makes the project unique, is that it is staffed by volunteers. The children receive a healthy meal every day, which is prepared by volunteers on a roster basis out of their own pocket. During the lockdown there was no school and no food for the children. When the lockdown was extended, we realised that the parents and children would not be able to cope with another two weeks without help. So on Monday, 13th of April I asked our committee for ideas on how to supply food parcels to our children. We decided to ask the volunteers who prepare food, to donate R500 in order to hand out small food parcels and so we asked

By Monday afternoon we had R9 500. Tuesday-morning we had R16 500. When I had a look at the bank statement Tuesday afternoon, I discovered that someone had deposited R20 000. I was overjoyed!! Now we could give bigger food parcels. But God was out to show us how small our faith was in a God who owned all the resources in the world!!

We asked for R25 000, in the end God gave us double the amount!!



Enough to also pay our regular bus driver (our parents don't own cars so the children are picked up at certain points in town and transported to our project and back) who was not earning an income during lockdown.

On Thursday afternoon I received a WhatsApp from someone who wanted to sponsor the whole R25 000! We decided that it would be best that he donate the money to his

church so that they could help more people. We asked for R25 000 – God was planning on giving us R75 000.

So after Covid-19 I am looking forward to what God will do: "But as for me, I will look expectantly for the Lord and with confidence in Him I will keep watch; I will wait (with confident expectation) for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me" Micah 7:7 (Amp)

Wee care regards,

See the Facebook page for the G-om project in Rustenburg for photographs and make sure to read Hennie Grobler's letter!

Contact Linda at 083 292 5654



The Coronavirus and the stages of trauma

By Dr. Francois Hanekom

*"I am angry because I am not allowed to buy alcohol!
I am angry at this damn virus!
I am angry at the government!
I am angry at my partner!
My family members are frustrating me!
I am angry at God!"*

Have you heard people blurting out their anger like this? Maybe you have even said it yourself?

People expressing these emotions are not bad, mean or evil. They are just human!

The threat of COVID-19 and the lockdown are traumatising all of us and we are experiencing the different stages of trauma.

Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross did research with terminally ill patients and identified five stages of grieving. Her colleague and co-author David Kessler added a sixth stage he identified as "finding meaning".

I acknowledge and honour Kubler-Ross and Kessler for their great research and for identifying this model that serves as a valuable therapeutic GPS guiding our clients during their experience of trauma in this lockdown crisis.

In my 42 years of experience as pastoral counsellor and clinical therapist, I have noticed a further stage in my clients that I labelled "confusion".

The seven stages of trauma and grieving are the following:

1. DENIAL

Experiencing our trauma or grieve, we are in a state of shock and disbelief. The crisis of the virus and lockdown just cannot be true! We go in a state of numbness, our psyche's defence mechanism against the full impact of the traumatic event.

2. CONFUSION

Our reaction to the traumatic reality is similar to concussion. We feel confused and diffused. We experience memory lapses. We cannot remember dates, numbers and names. We struggle to make decisions. It feels as if we have lost our sense of direction in a dense fog.

3. AGGRESSION

Being traumatized and then experiencing anger is normal. Because of the shock and impact of trauma, we react with anger. Anger is a secondary and reactive emotion. It is like the tip of the iceberg. Underneath the anger there is the primary emotion of intense grieve and sorrow. During lockdown anger may be projected on the government. Confined to a limited space,

traumatized family members may project their frustrations on family members, as borne out by news reports on the increase in incidents of domestic violence.

We may also direct our anger towards God.

4. BARGAINING

During our trauma experience we feel helpless, powerless, scared and anxious. Now we focus on a Higher Power to help us. We focus on God to protect us. He is our only hope against the coronavirus pandemic. Now we start bargaining with God, promising to read the Bible every day and pray regularly. The underlying motivation for this behaviour is to get God's protection for our loved ones and ourselves against this virus.

5. DEPRESSION

We just feel completely empty, with deep feelings of sadness and sorrow. Poor sleep means that we have no energy to get up in the morning, feeling completely depleted. We are struggling with suicidal thoughts. Life is not worth living anymore and we feel like giving up.

6. ACCEPTANCE

We start realising the reality that the world will never be the same again after COVID-19. We stop fighting to try to control the crisis with the virus. We accept the reality of living in a world of post COVID-19. We accept this new reality and then we adapt.

7. MEANING

While reading the Bible a specific text touches me deeply. I experience the voice of God and I accept my traumatic reality or loss. I find meaning amidst my sorrow: ⁴ (God) who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:4, NIV)

In the midst of my traumatic circumstances I surrender myself to God my Father. This helps me to accept and also to find meaning.

Website: www.coupletherapy.co.za

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Notes from the CPSC office

Dear CPSC affiliate

We knew right from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that this was not going to be an easy ride. At the moment we are experiencing the unfolding reality of the full impact on all the different aspects of our lives.

I want to assure you that from CPSC side, we have empathy with every hardship you might encounter and we fully understand if you should at times feel engulfed by fear of what is yet to come.

We share the feelings of uncertainty of the road ahead, worry about loved ones (young and old), the fear, at times bordering on desperation, as well as increasing lockdown fatigue coupled with frustration if the set rules aren't followed diligently by everyone and the number of infections continue to soar.

Thankfully we can hold onto the words of Psalm 23 – still are as true and relevant as the day they were written by David, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want".

I was reminded on Sunday that these words were not spoken by someone in perfect conditions. These words were not spoken "because of", but "in spite of". The full Psalm 23 could have been written today and applies to all the emotions which we are all battling with now.

Issuing of certificates

Admin wise I was also facing a daunting year, mainly because of the problems of the automated central system managed from Bloemfontein. The system should automatically issue a 2020 CPSC certificate within 10 minutes after I have allocated a payment. After numerous e-mails of complaint, they have finally added an additional tab to the database page enabling me to activate the certificate after payment. I am truly happy for this bit of positive news that I can convey to you!



For all payments received on/after 20 April 2020 I could already activate the issuing of the certificate. If you have paid your 2020 CPSC subscription before 20 April 2020 and have not yet received your 2020 certificate, please let me know and I will gladly use my new tab and forward it to you.

NB. Please note that the e-mail with the certificate won't come from one of my usual e-mail addresses, so watch your inbox for a Pastors4Africa email with the 2020 CPSC certificate attached.

CPSC CPD workshops

Please visit the CPSC website for full information and links to the advertisements of all the available CPSC CPD points work-

shops and courses. Our webmaster has compiled a table of events with all the relevant information at <https://www.cpsc.org.za/news-and-events/cpd-events>.

CPSC Notes

This edition of the CPSC Notes is distributed a bit later than the usual end of May issue, as we had an additional COVID-19 special bumper edition by end April 2020. Find it at <https://www.cpsc.org.za/cpsc-notes>.

We are planning two further editions in 2020 – at the end of September and early in December.

New CEO

Join me in congratulating our Chairperson, Dr Tertius Erasmus, with being appointed the CEO of the Association of Christian Religious Practitioners (ACRP), the professional body of CPSC. We will pray for and support him with the additional work load and responsibility.

Please keep warm, keep safe and keep healthy!

Warm regards and kind wishes

Anita ■

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