

2 Spiritual and Mental Health in the Balance

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To prepare myself as a Christian psychiatrist, I undertook college studies, an M.S. degree in human physiology, an M.D. from medical school, psychiatric residency training in two different programs, and theological coursework from two evangelical seminaries. During those years of preparation, I was equipped with many techniques and shortcuts for bringing human beings relief from anxieties, depression, phobias, fears, insecurities, and other kinds of emotional and physical pain. Among the many tools I learned to use, by far the one that has been most valuable in helping people attain spiritual well-being is Scripture meditation.

Because man is a holistic being, his spiritual, psychological, and physical faculties are complexly intertwined. Every aspect of man's nature affects him as a whole being. Daily meditation on the principles of life passed on from man's loving Creator is more important for his health than food or sex or any other factor.

A primary reason Scripture meditation is vital for holistic health is that God's thought patterns and values are in sharp contrast to

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mankind's. Man is a totally depraved being, possessing selfish and ultimately self-destructive thought patterns and behavior. Show me a natural man, untaught in God's principles, and I'll show you a natural man who suffers from emotional pain. I'll show you a man who experiences the guilt and discomfort of a God-vacuum. I'll show you a man who is unconsciously fighting and struggling for a sense of significance, using worldly ways (e.g., sexual fantasy, materialism, power struggles, and prestige) in a vain attempt to attain significance, all of which will fail. The ways of the world bring temporary relief, like band-aids on open flesh wounds, but not ultimate relief from man's inner awareness of his insignificance apart from God. The billionaire John D. Rockefeller was once asked by a reporter how much money it would take to make him happy. Rockefeller scratched his chin and thought for a moment. Then he replied, "just a little bit more!" Such is the relief from insignificance man finds in sexual affairs, power, money, or prestige. It only lasts for a little while.

Ultimately, man's sense of holistic well-being can come only from a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. But man needs more than salvation for joy and peace in his daily existence. Many of my anxious, depressed, and even suicidal patients are born-again believers who have not yet been taught how to appropriate personally God's thought patterns and behavioral principles, as outlined in the Bible. Instead, they have been misinformed by their parents, their peers, and frequently even by their churches. They have learned to think negative, self-critical, other-critical, destructive thoughts. They have become accustomed to behavior patterns that result in increased guilt, insecurity, and feelings of insignificance.

SEMINARIANS AND RENEWING THE MIND

A few years ago I conducted an extensive research study on seminary students from an evangelical seminary. The research included giving psychological tests using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and asking participants to fill out an extensive spiritual life questionnaire. The completed psychological test results were divided into three groups:

- Group A: Those with exceptionally good mental health and a high level of maturity
- Group B: Those with apparently normal mental health and maturity

Group C: Those with statistically significant psychological conflict and emotional pain

Then I ran statistical analyses comparing the level of mental health and maturity of each participant with his response to each factor on the spiritual life questionnaire.

When the results came in, initially I was surprised and disappointed. Those seminary students who had been Christians for many years were only slightly healthier and happier than those who had accepted Christ in the past one or two years. The difference was not even statistically significant. However, my disappointment turned to joy. I learned one of the most valuable lessons of my life when I found the factor that made the difference. That factor was Scripture meditation. Students who practiced almost daily Scripture meditation for *three years* or longer were significantly healthier and happier than students who did not meditate on Scripture daily. Also, they were significantly healthier and happier than students who had meditated on Scripture daily for *less than three years*. The level of significance on the various psychological scales varied from the 0.05 level (meaning only one chance in twenty that the correlation was a coincidence) to the 0.001 level (meaning only one chance in a thousand that the correlation was a coincidence).

What I learned from this research can be summarized as follows:

1. Even though trusting Christ is all that is needed to obtain eternal life, experiencing the abundant life Christ promised (John 10:10) and experiencing the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace) rather than bitterness, depression, and anxiety are dependent upon a renewing of the mind.
2. Renewing of the mind can come from various sources, such as confrontation by loving friends about personal blind-spots, therapy with a Christian professional counselor, conviction from the Holy Spirit, confrontation with scriptural principles in sermons or seminars, and daily meditation on Scripture.
3. Renewing of the mind is a continual process, a progressive sanctification requiring continual, preferably daily, input from God's Word.
4. Daily meditation on Scripture, with personal application, is the most effective means of obtaining personal joy, peace, and emotional maturity.
5. On the average, it takes about three years of daily Scripture meditation to bring about enough change in a person's thought pat-

terms and behavior to produce statistically superior mental health and happiness.

6. None of the students in Group C (those with statistically significant psychological conflicts) were presently meditating on Scripture daily, although some were reading their Bibles regularly as a textbook for their classes.

7. All of the students who had meditated on Scripture daily, or almost daily, for three years or longer were in Group A or Group B, with most being in Group A (superior in mental health, happiness, and maturity).

A TROUBLED CHRISTIAN FINDS HELP

Mary D. was thirty years old. She was married to a loving Christian husband; had two children, both in good health; and was financially secure but not wealthy. She attended a good local church, where her husband was a church officer. There were no external circumstances in her life at the time that would have been likely to make Mary suicidally depressed. Her conflicts, like those of most humans, were within herself and stemmed from early childhood thought and behavior patterns.

Mary had been depressed off and on most of her life, but for several months Mary experienced increasing anxiety, depression, insomnia, loss of appetite, loss of sexual drive, loss of energy, early morning headaches, crying spells, feelings of hopelessness, infections, and a fear of losing her mind. She had absolutely no insight into what might be causing her psychological and physical symptoms. She hoped that her symptoms were caused by hypoglycemia or some hormonal deficiency because that would be less embarrassing than to admit to her friends that she had psychological conflicts. However, a thorough medical evaluation by her family physician turned up nothing. The physician recommended psychiatric consultation, which Mary took as an insult. Unwilling to search within herself, Mary grew progressively worse. One evening she suddenly lost touch with reality, thought her husband was plotting to kill her, and left her bed to get a knife to kill her husband in self-defense. Fortunately, he woke up and prevented her from killing him. He was shocked to find out that she now believed she was God and that he was the devil. She thought she heard both God and demons speaking to her in audible voices (auditory hallucinations). Her husband called their pastor, an experienced counselor, who with his wife came immediately to Mary's house. Together, the three of them, husband, pastor, and pastor's wife, persuaded Mary to meet me at the hospital. After committing herself to the hospital, Mary again

became violent, condemned the nursing staff to hell, and had to be physically restrained by six nurses and aides.

I gave Mary moderate doses of a major antipsychotic medication. Within thirty-six hours Mary was over her psychosis, and the delusions or hallucinations (voices) had ceased, although she was depressed and frightened by the fact that she had almost killed her husband when she was in a psychotic state.

After regaining her sanity through the help of medication, Mary willingly began daily counseling. It soon became obvious that her problems stemmed from early childhood. She was the only daughter of a controlling, critical, insecure mother and a passive father. She had two younger brothers who seemed to have adjusted reasonably well. Because of a mechanism known as projection, described in Matt. 7:1-5, insecure mothers nearly always are most critical of the oldest daughter, and insecure fathers are frequently critical of the oldest son. When Mary was growing up, her mother was overly-critical of her, with the result that as an adult the daughter was filled constantly with self-critical messages. Mary's mother was legalistic and rigid; consequently, as an adult, Mary was filled continually with false guilt over minor things most people would ignore. Mary's mother did not tolerate Mary's expressing her anger or other feelings; as an adult, Mary continually repressed her emotions, denied her anger, and even felt guilty for having normal emotions. Mary's mother was overly restrictive of young Mary; as an adult, Mary was afraid to make independent decisions or to be assertive. At the same time, however, Mary was in many ways a wonderful person. She was kind and was thoughtful to her husband, children, and friends. Yet she had significant emotional pain and strong feelings of insignificance because of her negative thought patterns, legalistic false-guilt, overdependence on others to make her decisions, and fear of becoming aware of her repressed hostility toward her mother, whom on a conscious level she loved dearly. In the hospital the truth was revealed to Mary carefully, step-by-step. Showing her too much truth too quickly would have tipped her back into hearing "demon" voices and having paranoid delusions. Antipsychotic medications were continued to keep her brain's dopamine levels balanced to help prevent another psychosis. Mary's internal conflicts (spiritual and psychological) had also resulted in all of the physiological symptoms of depression (fatigue, insomnia, loss of appetite, loss of sex drive, and so on). Those symptoms only come when emotional conflicts are severe enough to cause depletion of serotonin and norepinephrine, two essential brain amines. Therefore, Mary was given anti-depressant medications as well to speed up her physiological recovery.

As daily homework, Mary was asked to meditate on Scriptures related to her problems, such as passages dealing with self-worth (Ps. 139), legalism (Eph. 4:26), and unconscious vengeful attitudes (Rom. 12). Through meditation on Scripture and daily therapeutic confrontation with the truth about her resentment toward her mother, Mary was able to become aware of her intense but hidden bitterness toward her mother. She was then able for the first time in her life to forgive her mother. She was taught how her buried emotions and conflicts had resulted in biochemical changes in her brain, which in turn resulted in the depression and psychosis she had experienced. She was taught that though modern medicines could restore brain amines to normal quite rapidly, it would take right thinking, right attitudes, and right behavior to keep those brain amines normal in the future and to insure that she would not need medicine six months down the road. She was encouraged to meditate on Scripture daily to facilitate the renewing process. Also, she was encouraged to continue outpatient therapy for over a year to make sure she was not misinterpreting Scripture negatively and to give her continuing encouragement and support in her new ways of thinking. Within three weeks of hospitalization, Mary was over her psychosis and her depression. She continued to progress in outpatient therapy. Today she is living a happy, abundant Christian life and enjoying the fruit of the Spirit.

This true example—only the name and a few personal details were changed to protect confidentiality—illustrates the complex interweaving of the spiritual, emotional, and physiological aspects of man. Even Mary's infections were the result of emotional tension. Stress hormones in her body suppressed the white blood cells, which in turn resulted in fewer antibodies being produced, leaving her susceptible to physical illness.

Some well-intentioned but uninformed pastors might have tried to exorcise what seemed to be demons and blame her insanity (which would have been life-long if she had not got prompt treatment) on her lack of faith. Some para-medical quacks might have told her she had hypoglycemia or a nutritional disorder and then persuaded her to waste hundreds of dollars on megavitamins. Other well-intentioned but naive friends might have convinced her she had cancer and sent her to Mexico for laetrile treatment. Others might have blamed her problems on astrology. We live in a hysterical society today, one as riddled with native myths as were the Dark Ages. Only Mary's growing insight concerning her repressed feelings, coupled with meditation on God's inerrant Word, could have produced life-long joy, peace, and a sense of significance for this troubled Christian.

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE ON GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

When I was ten years old, my mother helped me to memorize Psalm 1. Psalm 1 teaches much about renewing our minds. Every Christian who is interested in good mental health as God perceives it should carefully reflect upon what each line of this psalm means for him or her in daily living:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel
of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season,
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

The Psalm clearly teaches that there is a direct relationship between Scripture meditation and God-given happiness.

SOME RECENT RESEARCH ON MEDITATION

Especially in the past twenty years, literally hundreds of research articles have demonstrated the close correlation between psychological stress and physical illnesses of nearly every kind. It is not the purpose of this chapter to give a lengthy summary of those problems. Rather it is to encourage the reader to improve his or her own existence and growth toward Christ-like maturity by learning more about meditation.

One of the most interesting secular studies on the value of meditation per se was conducted in 1974 by Herbert Benson, M.D., a professor at Harvard Medical School and a cardiologist. Dr. Benson published his findings in an article in the *Harvard Business Review* July-August 1974, pp. 49-60, entitled "Your Innate Asset for Combating Stress." He chose the *Harvard Business Review* rather than a

medical journal because he wanted to help overworked men and women reduce their stress levels and thereby prolong their lives and increase their enjoyment of life.

Dr. Benson described some of the physiologic changes that take place during stress, including elevated blood pressure. In our everyday lives, whenever we experience a stress that requires behavioral adjustment, our bodies respond with what Dr. Walter B. Cannon has labeled the fight-or-flight response. That response, Dr. Benson observed, "is characterized by coordinated increases in metabolism, oxygen consumption, blood pressure, heart rate, rate of breathing, amount of blood pumped by the heart, and amount of blood pumped to the skeletal muscles" (Benson, p. 50). It is mediated by epinephrine and norepinephrine (also called adrenalin and noradrenalin) and leads to coordinated activity by the sympathetic nervous system. The response helps us either to fight or to flee in situations we perceive as being potentially dangerous emotionally or physically.

Yet "although the fight-or-flight response is still a necessary and useful physiologic feature for survival, the stresses of today's society have led to its excessive elicitation" (Benson, p. 50). When the response is called upon so frequently, chronic high blood pressure occurs, which predisposes a person to heart attacks or to strokes, the cause of over 50 percent of all deaths each year in the United States. Dr. Benson estimates that from 15-33 percent of Americans, many of them business executives, suffer from varying degrees of high blood pressure.

Dr. Benson compared the physiological benefits of various types of meditation, including progressive relaxation, autogenic training, Zen, yoga, and transcendental meditation. He found that most of the meditation techniques were physiologically beneficial and counteracted the effect of the fight-or-flight response on such variables as oxygen consumption, respiratory rate, heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. They also tended to increase brain alpha waves on the EEG. Dr. Benson proposed his own method of meditation, relaxation response, and observed that for any meditation technique to elicit beneficial physiological responses, it must have four basic elements:

1. A quiet environment (no noise or music)
2. A mental device (repeated thought on a single topic or word to free oneself from externally-oriented thoughts or worries)
3. A passive attitude (passively disregarding the distracting thoughts that tend to intrude on the mind, but not actively fighting them, because that often makes them worse)
4. A comfortable position (to reduce muscular effort to a minimum)

In October 1977, Dr. Benson was one of the guest lecturers at The Midwest Symposium on Meditation-Related Therapies held in St. Louis, Missouri. There he reported that after the publication of his article on meditating through relaxation response, Harvard psychiatrists as well had found the physiologically beneficial responses in Christians who prayed meditatively or who meditated on single principles or phrases from the Bible. Medical patients who had various degrees of high blood pressure were taught to meditate twice a day for twenty-five weeks. They experienced an average decrease of blood pressure of 8 mmHg systolic pressure and 5 mmHg diastolic pressure. The higher the patient's initial blood pressure, the greater the potential drop in blood pressure. The patients were using Benson's method of Christian meditation; in fact, Benson found that his religious patients followed most closely the relaxation techniques he advocated for lowering blood pressure.

Dr. Benson warned that meditating while lying prone does not work well. Too many people fall asleep. He recommended that a person sit in a comfortable chair. Also, he observed that the kneeling position works equally well if not better than other meditative positions. Patients who kneel find it easier to stay awake. He pointed out that it is no longer popular in our society to pray and meditate once or twice a day, as it was in past decades, and he suggested that that may be one reason hardening of the arteries is becoming an increasing problem for Americans at younger and younger ages.

A SUGGESTED METHOD FOR SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

The following is a method of Scripture meditation I recommend for my psychiatric patients and use myself.

1. Go to a quiet place. Occasionally vary the place by going out to a lake or stream in private.
2. Get in a comfortable position, but preferably do not lie down.
3. Relax your whole mind and body, including the various muscle groups.
4. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you into applicable truths as you read God's Word.
5. Read consecutively through the Bible, but do not place any legalistic guidelines on yourself (such as "four chapters a day").
6. When you come to a verse that stands out and offers you real comfort or confronts you with a needed change in behavior, stop

and meditate several minutes on that verse or even on a phrase within the verse.

7. As you meditate on that single principle from Scripture, think of ways you can appropriate the principle to your everyday behavior. Passively resist other unrelated thoughts and worries that intrude upon your mind.

If Christians meditated in such a manner for ten to thirty minutes morning and evening, they would probably experience

1. greater knowledge of Scripture
2. greater personal application of scriptural principles
3. greater understanding of who God is
4. lower blood pressure and other beneficial physiologic responses
5. longer life of usefulness for the Lord here on earth
6. greater ability to passively resist anxieties of the day even during nonmeditative time
7. greater awareness of unconscious truths about their blindspots as they become less afraid of the truth and their minds put up less resistance to the truth

Those are no small gains. With the power of the Holy Spirit prompting us, we can experience the renewing of our minds on a daily basis. Meditating upon God's Word in order to think God's thoughts after Him is the key.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think [meditate] on these things.

Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do; and the God of peace shall be with you.

The apostle Paul, A.D. 64
(Philippians 4:8-9, KJV)

A PERSONAL CONFESSION

At the time I was carrying out my research on meditation, I came across Matthew 11:30. The verse profoundly affected me. Christ is calling men to be His disciples, and He concludes His call by saying (KJV),

For my yoke is easy,
and my burden is light.

For the next several days, I spent my meditation times reflecting on the implications of that verse in my own life and expressing my feelings about it to God. My first reaction to the passage was sarcastic laughter:

Who are you trying to fool, God!
I'm your disciple, and I am swamped night and day.
I'm teaching, writing, witnessing, counseling, speaking in public
and carrying on a psychiatric practice! I'm worn out!
I don't even have time to relax or enjoy my family. Being your
disciple is a heavy yoke and a heavy burden. Serving
you has cost me a great deal personally!

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became at God for placing such great responsibilities on me and then having the nerve to write in His Word, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

My initial sarcasm was followed by anger toward God. But when I continued to think about the passage, I realized that God cannot lie. If God says discipleship is a light, easy burden, then a workaholic discipleship experience must be out of God's will. The more I thought about it, the more God's Holy Spirit convinced me that I was operating partly out of love for God and partly out of a sense of legalism. Gradually I changed my whole life-style. I gave up many of my Christian activities and focused on the few that I was convinced were God's easy yoke. Also, I started spending more time with my wife, children, and friends. Since that time I have written over a dozen books and helped build the largest Christian psychiatric clinic in the world—all while working at a relaxed pace and enjoying the abundant life in Christ. Slowing down helped me to accomplish more of what God wanted me to do. I could recount hundreds of other experiences I have had through Scripture meditation that have changed my life, step, by step, by step. But I don't have time, praise the Lord! I'm too busy enjoying my family!

I urge those who read this book to think God's thoughts and do God's work, at a reasonable pace, by meditating daily on God's precious thoughts. Read consecutively through the entire Bible, pausing to mull over passages that startle or particularly inspire you. Every time you read through the Bible, different passages will stand out, because God's Holy Spirit will already have accomplished His will in you from the passages that you meditated on and applied the first time through. May the principles of Scripture meditation revolutionize your life and enable you better to further the cause of Christ on earth until He returns.