

**DISMANTLING
DESTRUCTIVE
STRONGHOLDS**

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Fractured Resilience

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INTRODUCTION

God has called us to Himself. He has given us all a purpose and a voice. Sadly, most Christians have never found their God-given voice. The enemy has effectively used multiple strongholds to frustrate their growth, kill their purpose, and silence their voice.

A stronghold is a perceived offense that causes us to become self-focused. They are beliefs that weaken or destroy grit. I have divided the various strongholds into the categories of existential strongholds, environmental strongholds, and personal strongholds to aid in understanding. This list addresses most of the strongholds used by the enemy to steal, kill, and destroy. The enemy cannot physically put a brick on your path to stub your toe but can whisper a thought that can cause you to fall off a cliff.

Existential strongholds are the result of the fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3. When God breathed life into the first

man, God also gave man His image. This image of God was part of humanity's DNA. In the original design, humankind was to experience intimacy with God and other humans. We were to have purpose and power as co-creators with God. We were not designed to experience death but to live for eternity in a relationship with God. We were made with the capacity for intimacy, meaning, purpose, ability, immortality, and wholeness. Our God-given image was damaged with the fall of man. We are now offended by experiences we were never designed or equipped to handle. We now wrestle with the existential strongholds of isolation, meaninglessness, powerlessness, mortality, and spiritual emptiness. We feel disconnected because we are disconnected. The enemy uses these strongholds to drown you in the sea of "if only." If only I had more friends; if only I had more money; if only I was smarter; if only I had a new house; if only I had better opportunities; if only I had a better education; if only; if only; if only... Struggling with these issues is a constant drain on our resilience and grit. We are now more vulnerable to stress and environmental pressures. The good news is that Christ died for you to bring you back into a relationship with God. God, through Christ, has provided a way for restoration.

Environmental strongholds are the result of stress-producing events in our lives and the way we approach those events. We face daily events that are threatening, require change,

cause confusion, strain our sense of responsibility, or cause shame. The enemy uses the strongholds of fear with worry, confusion about self, uncertainty, misplaced responsibility, and angst about past transgressions to steal, kill, and destroy. These environmental stressors face us daily; we feel their pain and have to deal with them. They cause us to focus on the immediate and urgent and set aside the important and the eternal.

Personal strongholds are those that directly affect our world view. Some of these strongholds are how we choose to interact and interpret the world, and others are situations that leave us feeling hopelessly stuck. All these personal strongholds are a response to a real or perceived offense and encourage us to become powerless victims. If the offense is perceived injustice, the result is bitterness. If the offense is a perceived lack of something necessary, the product is greed. If the offense is a perceived unbearable loss, the result is grief. If the offense is a perceived loss of control, the result is legalism. If the offense is experienced as physical pain, the product is agony. If the offense is a perceived craving for a substance or activity, the result is an addiction. If the offense is perceived as deep insecurity, the result is self-love or narcissism.

This book does not contain an exhaustive list of possible strongholds, but it does include the ones I have observed

most frequently during my 40 years as a family physician. My prayer is that this book will help those pursuing God and struggling to find their place in His kingdom.

Chapter 1 – Tearing Down Strongholds

Life is like a long, long race. While living in northern California in the mid-90s, I determined to complete the “Death Ride.” The event’s name has recently been changed to the “Tour of the California Alps” to be politically correct. The Death Ride is a cycling event south of Lake Tahoe, where the goal is to cycle up and down five separate mountain passes in less than twelve hours. The course is 129 miles long, with a total climb of 15,000 feet. So, I bought a decent road bike on clearance and began to train. Cycling is a unique blend of fitness, skill, knowledge, and equipment. If you are cycling for fitness, the weight of your bike does not matter. If you are cycling for performance, every ounce counts, and you can spend a lot of money to make your bicycle weigh a few ounces less. What was surprising to me was what I witnessed during the Death Ride. The bikes were a collection of fantastic performance machines, but many of the riders were not.

Many of the riders who were unable to complete the arduous ride attempted to carry a weight that prevented their success. There is only minimal benefit for your bike to weigh a few ounces less when you, as the rider, need to shed twenty-five excess pounds. This experience reminded me of Hebrews 12:1 (AMPC), where it states, *“Therefore then, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [who have borne testimony to the Truth], let us strip off and throw aside every encumbrance (unnecessary weight) and that sin which so readily (deftly and cleverly) clings to and entangles us, and let us run with patient endurance and steady and active persistence the appointed course of the race that is set before us.”* If we expect to move ahead in our lives, we need to set aside the unnecessary weight. The weight that we think hinders us is often not the weight slowing us. Felt shortcomings are used as excuses for advancement when they matter little. We believe the weight holding us back is our lack of finances, physical abilities, environment, heredity, or present-life situation. These excuses are the equivalent of spending hundreds of dollars, so your bicycle pedal weighs a few ounces less while you still carry an excess of forty pounds. The weights we need to set aside that are holding us back are called strongholds, and God has provided the means to tear them down. 2 Corinthians 10:4 (NIV) *“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”*

What is a stronghold, and how do we tear them down? A stronghold is a barrier to experiencing God and His path and plan for your life. A stronghold is any and every system of belief, state of mind, or external circumstance that distracts from knowing God by turning your attention onto yourself. A stronghold is a distraction, a burden, or a stumbling block. If the enemy can cause you to focus on yourself, your situation, turmoil, or emotional pain, the stronghold will effectively block your progress. If you expect to move ahead successfully in your life, keep in mind the advice in Hebrews 12:1 (AMPC), and - *“let us strip off and throw aside every encumbrance (unnecessary weight) and that sin which so readily (deftly and cleverly) clings to and entangles us.”* The encumbrance is the stronghold, and the sin which so readily clings to and entangles us is the cry from the wounded, afflicted, offended heart proclaiming, “IT IS ALL ABOUT ME.” This “all about me” worldview may be appropriate if you are three, but it is not warranted or productive if you are an adult. No, you may not speak those words, but instead, you will disguise your victim role in language and beliefs that ultimately steal, kill, and destroy your voice, dreams, and life. Please do not fool yourself; it is not all about you. It is all about Him. This human tendency to take an insult and embrace it is why it is essential to be aware of strongholds and the areas in our life that are stopping our growth.

We experience a stronghold as an ongoing self-focusing rumination. About what do you ruminate? Are you aware you are ruminating? Chances are good; you are either ruminating on an offense or meditating on the goodness of God.

So, what are these strongholds? To aid in understanding, I have divided the various strongholds into categories. The categories are existential strongholds, environmental strongholds, and personal strongholds. We will be looking at twenty specific strongholds. This list addresses most of the strongholds used by the enemy to steal, kill, and destroy. The enemy cannot physically put a brick on your path to stub your toe, but he can whisper a thought that can cause you to fall off a cliff.

Existential strongholds result from the fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3. When God breathed life into the first man, God also gave him His image. The intact image of God was part of humanity's DNA. In the original design, humankind was to experience intimacy with God and other humans. We had purpose and power as co-creators with God. We were not designed to experience death but to live for eternity in a relationship with God. We were made with the capacity for intimacy, meaning, purpose, ability, immortality, and wholeness. With the fall of man, our God-given image was damaged. We now wrestle with the existential strongholds of isolation, meaninglessness, powerlessness, mortality, and

spiritual emptiness. We feel disconnected because we are disconnected. The enemy uses these strongholds to drown you in the sea of “if only.” “If only I had more friends; if only I had more money; if only I was smarter; if only I had a new house; if only I had better opportunities; if only I had a better education; if only; if only; if only... Struggling with these issues drains a little bit of our grit daily. We are now more vulnerable to stress and environmental pressures. Your bucket that contains the grit you need for your day has several holes in it because of these existential strongholds. The good news is that Christ died for you to bring you back into a relationship with God and provide a path where these grit-bucket holes can be patched. God, through Christ, has provided a way for restoration.

Environmental strongholds are the result of stress-producing events in our lives and the way we approach those events. We face daily events that are threatening, require change, cause confusion, strain our sense of responsibility, or cause shame. The enemy uses the strongholds of fear with worry, confusion about self, uncertainty, misplaced responsibility, and angst about past transgressions to steal, kill, and destroy. These environmental stressors face us daily; we experience them and deal with them. They cause us to focus on the immediate and urgent and set aside the important and the eternal.

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The enemy uses the strongholds to cause disease in your soul, to get you to take your eyes off God and focus on yourself. It may be my many years of work as a physician, but if you struggle with life-altering symptoms, the right place to start is to diagnose the disease. Do you feel stuck? Are you growing? Strongholds will show up disguised as fatigue, discouragement, loss of energy, loss of joy, and peace, with a lessening of the fruit of the Spirit.

The first place to start tearing down strongholds is to pause and pray Psalm 139:23 (TPT), *“God, I invite your searching gaze into my heart. Examine me through and through; find*

out everything that may be hidden within me. Put me to the test and sift through all my anxious cares.” He is the Great Physician; He will show you the areas of your heart that require healing.

Once you identify the stronghold, you need to see it for what it is; a lie of the enemy leading to your destruction. Now you need to apply your Spirit-infused Godly grit to tear down that stronghold. You do not need to go chasing after strongholds; tear them down as they show themselves.

Maintain your primary life focus. Seek to know God in all you do and all you experience. Keep exercising and utilizing your God-given voice.

Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30 (TPT), *“Are you weary, carrying a heavy burden? Then come to me. I will refresh your life, for I am your oasis. Simply join your life with mine. Learn my ways and you’ll discover that I’m gentle, humble, easy to please. You will find refreshment and rest in me. For all that I require of you will be pleasant and easy to bear.”* Tear down those strongholds, cast them aside; do not carry unnecessary weight.

Chapter 2 – Isolation

Isolation is a deep, painful craving for connection. God created us with a longing for belonging. A yearning that is never fully met. God made humanity for intimacy, to love, and to know we are loved. The enemy uses every experience of rejection or isolation to plant the thought that we are not worthy of being loved. We are not worthy of being loved by other humans, and we are not worthy of being loved by God. We feel we must somehow change ourselves to become more lovable. We live with a fear that others will reject us if identified for who we are. We are afraid of being authentic.

We live in an age of accessible communication but a growing sense of isolation and disconnectedness. We seem to crave and demand connection more than ever. We search for and, at times, require relationships that will lessen the pain of loneliness. We also demand that these relationships validate our need to feel complete, achieve some sense of immortality,

and confirm our life choices. We also request that these relationships confirm that our directions are worthwhile and that we are somehow spiritually intact and connected. Our current cultural connections have extraordinarily little to do with who we are and more to do with how we present ourselves. We superficially join based on shared beliefs, political affiliations, sports teams, gangs, and music genres. We take less time to pause as a community to consider life and how we should live our lives. We attend church less frequently. We have fewer funerals. We have fewer small group discussions about how to live and more superficial discussions around the latest computer games, cars, or sports teams. We have more superficial connections but less meaningful relationships, and we are more willing to compromise or abandon our beliefs to feel like we belong. My grandparents grew up in a community that needed each other; they would not have survived without their family and neighbors' support. They worshiped together, they prayed together, and they spent time together. They did not go to sporting events or political rallies. They cried together at funerals and rejoiced together with the birth of a new family member. They were able to identify with a community, a community they needed, and a community that needed them. Unfortunately, we no longer need each other the way they needed each other. Our desire for connection has not changed in the last one hundred years, but our need for each

other has vanished. Our affluence has brought us many advantages, but it has cost us the value of a connected community.

The erosion of connectedness has also significantly impacted our interpersonal relationships. We may have more interpersonal relationships, but they lack depth and meaning. We may have many people to talk to but no one in which to confide. Our interpersonal connections are less face-to-face and more digital. Our thumbs fly over the little screen to maintain superficial connections. We follow our kids through Facebook and not conversations over dinner. As we race through life, we no longer pause to prioritize meaningful relationships.

Our need for connection drives us to bury our authentic self and madly work on a more presentable self, a person who will be more connected. We push away any real connection chance - connection with the true authentic self in the process. We become nothing more than digital avatars. Our social media image becomes more important than our actual but terrified authentic self. If the isolation becomes too painful to consider, at least we live in a time of limitless distractions. If we want to avoid the pain of loneliness, we can always buy a new computer game, join a club, or drown our pain in drugs or alcohol. This life is a life of quiet desperation. If we want to have more meaningful connections and revive the authentic

self – how do we do that? We should not be afraid of isolation. Your relationship with God develops and grows in that quiet place of isolation. To awaken the authentic self, we need a time of silence and solitude. We mature in isolation; we uncover genius in solitude. If we are continually observed amid the noise and daily demands of life, there is no room to create brilliance. You need that place of isolation to figure out who you are and what kind of person you want to be. We have become so used to the sound of our busy world it causes anxiety to be without it – try turning off all electronic devices and sitting in a quiet room in complete silence for ten minutes. The silence is extremely uncomfortable because it is foreign. We have become comfortable with superficial, meaningless connections. For a moment, pause.

Pause and consider the following: Do you feel alone and isolated? Do you have others with whom you can confide? Are you working hard to create an image of yourself to be more acceptable to others? Are you authentic? What do you use as distractions from the pain of disconnection?

We live in an age of growing isolation amid limitless distractions and superficial connections. We waste a lot of our lives trying to fight or change what we cannot change. You feel isolated and alone because you are isolated and alone. In other words, nobody knows you well, and you do not know anyone else very well. We do have connections,

but the relationships are never good enough to eliminate the pain of isolation. You may be more distracted in a group, but you feel just as isolated in a group as you do on a desert island, at times even more isolated. You are not going to change this reality of life. Yes, you can do things to feel and be more connected, but you will still feel isolated in the end.

Accept this reality for what it is: you may be the star quarterback in a stadium of 80,000 cheering fans, but in whom can you confide - they care about how you perform or what you can do for them but do not care about you.

There will always be a distance in all relationships, emphasizing our awareness of felt isolation and aloneness. Isolation is a universal experience, so be aware; those closest to you also feel isolated. Take time to consider their pain.

When considering this stronghold of isolation, you have several choices. You can fight the sense of isolation and pour all your energies into seeking connection - chances are all this will do is push away those from whom you are demanding a relationship. This pursuit of a relationship will require that you compromise your authentic self to be more acceptable. The process of compromising your authentic self through pretense will only leave you more aware of your isolation and aloneness.

You could deny the reality and live with a sense something is incorrect. You can then feverishly seek out more ways to distract yourself - buy a new car, try a new sport, join a new club - the choices are endless and will allow you to remain busy, distracted, and empty for several lifetimes. This path of distraction is the path chosen by most people.

On the other hand, you could accept the reality of felt isolation as a lie of the devil. The enemy wants you to believe you are all alone and should ruminate on the pain of isolation. The enemy seeks to subtly convince you that you are not worthy of being loved by others or God. This belief is a lie! Meditate on Hebrews 13:5 (TPT), *“I will never leave you alone, never! And I will not loosen my grip on your life!”*

If we want to control the stronghold of isolation and the fear of being alone, we will have to learn to embrace it as a reality. By acknowledging it and seeing it as a lie, we allow ourselves to no longer be controlled by it; we can lessen its hold on us. We are beginning to tear down this stronghold. Denying this burden through distractions or drowning in drugs and alcohol will not help. Avoiding this reality or running from it in fear will not help. So, how do we do this?

First, we must pause to consider how isolation has been a burden in our lives and how that burden has impacted us and affected the crucial decisions in the past. What have you

done to lessen the pain of isolation? What were the consequences of those decisions and the path they led you to follow? I can recall several abysmal life decisions I have made in the past as I attempted to lessen the burden of felt isolation.

Felt isolation is painful. Solitary confinement is still a form of severe punishment. Prison is separation from those you care about - from those who care about you. Isolation can hurt deeply! Subjectively felt pain is selfish and demands comfort. The enemy wants you to be convinced that it is all about you. Drop a brick on your toe, and all you will be thinking about is your sore toe. Felt pain is a loud voice demanding all our focus and attention. The pain caused by felt isolation forces you to think about the isolation and the unfortunate state you are in - it makes you more self-centered and self-focused. The pain caused by perceived isolation increases the felt isolation by making you more self-centered. If, on the other hand, you see the lie, you embrace the truth that God loves you and recognize that all other humans share this burden, then it can be a point of connection and not a cause for separation. Shared pain is uniting; individual pain is isolating. The truth that God loves you, even when you experience rejection from others, will set you free.

The acceptance and appreciation of this isolation burden can free you to grow in two significant ways. It can improve

meaningful connections with others by recognizing we all share this burden, and it can strengthen authenticity by freeing you to embrace productive silence and solitude.

What you share with other humans can draw you together and not separate you. If you approach others looking for or demanding a connection from them, you will only increase your sense of isolation. On the other hand, if you approach others, realizing they feel the pain of loneliness as much as you, and you are present to offer connection, you are more likely to find a more meaningful relationship. Do not work to find others to connect to as a way of dismissing your felt isolation. God loves you so you can love others. You will experience more of God's love as you focus on loving others. Look at how you can offer a meaningful connection. Focus on being more trustworthy, hold confidences, be kind, honest, humble, and remain thankful. You are more likely to get what you offer than what you demand.

Put aside pretense. A manufactured, false image will only foster incorrect, meaningless, pressure-filled connections with others. If you want meaningful, genuine relationships, you need to be authentic. So, what does the path to authenticity look like in this crazy, fast-paced, noisy world? Only in silence and solitude will you find authenticity. In solitude is where isolation will make you stronger. Without silence and

solitude, you will be a faint reflection of those around you, not thinking or believing for yourself, a finger puppet of the masses. I mean an isolated, lonely finger puppet of the masses.

We are superficially connected in so many ways that it is hard to picture solitude with silence. Why do we never leave our houses without our cell phones, or when we do, we feel something vital is missing - our constant conduit to the world, a short leash tied tightly around our neck. We need silence and solitude more now than ever before.

Solitude requires time in a specific place with a deliberate purpose and plan. It is time to ponder and ask questions; it is a place we set aside, intending to find what we believe and stand for, and a life path that is not forced or pressured. God will meet you in that quiet place.

For solitude to be productive, you need time free from observation and distraction. You will need to unplug your electronic connection with the world.

Solitude is a necessary break from the world, it is a setting aside from daily pressures, but you need to choose the form of solitude carefully.

There is a mind-numbing solitude, which is often more destructive than beneficial. We can find mind-numbing

activities like drugs, alcohol, gambling, computer games, and excessive sporting events or television observation. Mind-numbing solitude is a break from the everyday world, but the result is less grit. Mind-numbing isolation is attractive because it provides a readily available separation from the world's pressures with little personal investment. Over time this type of solitude loses effectiveness and can cost you everything.

There is recreational solitude in going for a walk or run, playing a sport, hiking in the woods, or sitting in a tree stand. If approached with a positive attitude, routine apparent mundane tasks like lawn mowing, floor cleaning, washing dishes, or car washing could be considered this type of recreational solitude. This type of solitude can be a real break from daily stresses as you have an opportunity to think through life issues without distractions from others. Recreational isolation can help improve your physical fitness and restore or maintain your resilience to a certain degree.

Creative solitude is found in painting, photography, quilting, playing a musical instrument, or other creative activities. This type of solitude is another definite break from daily stressors and can also help restore your resilience.

The most valuable form of solitude is restorative solitude,

where you sit in silence with pen and paper with a purpose and focus. You will need a place to separate yourself from others and the world. This place needs to be easy to get to and free from interruption. If you find it exceedingly difficult to focus your thoughts because of distractions from your past, you may have to start with some therapeutic writing. Therapeutic writing is a way of setting aside past issues that weigh you down today. These could be past hurts, abuses, or injustices. To set aside these issues, take thirty minutes a day for four to five days, and write about the individual problem. This exercise will not eliminate the impact of past injustice, but hopefully, it will help you live more deliberately and not continue to live as a victim. If you live as a victim, you will live a powerless and ultimately meaningless, and very isolated life. You do not want to live as a victim.

The goal of this time of solitude is to become more authentic. God only made one you, and you are unique. No one else has your qualities, purpose, or voice. It would be a shame to neglect that uniqueness as you work to gather appreciation from others, others who do not care. It is during these times of refreshing solitude that your relationship with God will grow, and you will discover your voice. It is a time of separation from others' thoughts, actions, words, and opinions. It is time to honestly and humbly evaluate and reevaluate. What are your core beliefs? What do you stand

for? Who are you?

For restorative solitude to be productive, it needs to not turn into a time of fanciful daydreaming. It can be helpful to write your thoughts to keep your wandering mind in check. It is time to find your purpose and meaning. A time to evaluate your choices and the consequences of those choices. A time to reflect on your mortality and the mortality of others. A time to ponder spiritual matters. A time to ask God to search your heart. What do you believe, and how is that evident in how you live your life? It is a time to prayerfully consider passages in the Bible and how they apply to daily life.

Solitude time should be a time for reflection and contemplation and not a time for rumination over previous hurts and injustices. If you find these intrusive thoughts distracting you, it may be time for more therapeutic writing.

It is not a race; take your time, remain focused but unpressured, and you will find that slowly, your resilience, creativity, and authenticity will grow with God's guidance.

A part of God's image in man is the capacity for an intimate relationship with God and humanity. The image was fractured with man's rebellion, leaving an opening for the enemy's lies. If you continue to live with a fractured God-image, isolation and loneliness will remain a stronghold. There is a better way; tear down that stronghold.

Chapter 3 – Meaninglessness

In Ecclesiastes 6:7 (MSG), we read, “*We work to feed our appetites: meanwhile our souls go hungry.*” Hour after hour, day after day, we work our fingers to the bone to feed our hunger. A hunger that never seems to be satisfied. We end up exhausted and disappointed. We struggle to find meaning in who we are and what we do. We strive to find meaning and lose contact with our value in the process.

What is wrong? Why is there a disconnect between purposeful action and an expected result? The existential stronghold of meaninglessness often causes the disconnect. The enemy wants you to believe you have no value.

Searching for meaning is a reality of human life. It boils down to why we are here or why do we exist? What will make me worthwhile?

We look for meaning in labels, badges, legends, fantasies,

legacy, and heritage.

We strive for labels hoping they will give us increased meaning and value. Tags like; officer, president, doctor, teacher, pastor, or your highness bring with them an increased degree of worthwhileness. Unfortunately, a name does not give you more value; a name carries with it a specific responsibility and expectation. If you are on the path to getting a name to increase your sense of meaning, you will find that it will be a disappointment when you do get that label.

You will also find all tags have qualifiers along with the label, and the qualifiers are much more important than the name. So, you may have gained the label of “the president” and the associated responsibilities. Now you must focus on the qualifier because worse than not getting the name would be getting the name and the qualifier of being a “Bad” President. You will have to work harder to be a good president than you did to get the name of “the president.” Labels may define specific roles in society and assigned responsibilities, and those responsibilities have degrees of meaning, but they do not provide any increased worth or value.

Badges are those external announcements to society of what we have achieved. Badges are symbols not necessarily backed by any reality. If you drive a specific car, you are wealthy, even though it is an old car, costing you everything

you own. Badges are all around, from the clothes we wear to the car we drive to the way we comb our hair. Symbols make a statement of meaning but do not provide any meaningful increase in worth or value.

We look at legends to increase our worth. Legends are associations with others who we see as having more significant value. These associations may be with sports figures, celebrities, politicians, famous musicians, or people of power or wealth we see as increasing our sense of worth and value. Even just knowing a little secret about these individuals can increase my perceived sense of worth. Unfortunately, our legends have significant issues with their value and worth. They are not the people we thought they were - in the long run, association with an esteemed someone else will not bring you an increased sense of value.

A trendy place to turn for an increased sense of meaning and value is fantasies—media and the advertising industry master the world of imagination. If I can make you believe a fantasy, I can sell you anything. We cling to the “if only” statements as we struggle with a sense of meaninglessness. “If only” I had – well, you name it - a different house, another job, a more significant bank account, a vacation home on the beach, a new motor home – and because it is out of reach, you believe it would bring you the sense of value you desire. If you acquire the fantasy, you will end up disappointed - the new

car now has its first scratch, the new job has increased demands and expectations, the increased wealth does not bring the sense of security you had hoped. Fantasies are valuable for the economy and the sale of lottery tickets, they keep people buying, but they only disappoint.

Another area where we attempt to cling to meaning and value is legacy. We try to hang on to past images of glory and success, hoping the momentarily increased positive sensation will somehow last, but unfortunately, it does not last. Our trophies gather dust, and our medals and plaques get stored in a box we will never open. They are meaningless relics of a distant past.

Another area where we search for meaning is heritage. If I can find some ancestral hero, I will feel greater worth. We search our family tree; we test our DNA; we cling to old family trinkets with the hope they will bring a greater sense of value. We search and find in every family tree; there is good fruit and rotten fruit. Our precious trinkets become clutter no one else wants, but we continue to reach to the past for a greater sense of worth in the present. Whether you are a descendant of Joan of Arc or Attila the Hun - it does not matter - your past heritage does not bring you higher or lesser worth today.

This sense of having no value weighs us down. Who we are or what we do lacks the kind of meaning that makes us feel

worthwhile? Feeling meaningless is a heavy burden to bear. We either carry it or learn how to deal with it. Through disappointments and failures, the enemy tries to convince you that you have no value.

It is a part of our daily lives to ascribe meaning. Ascribing meaning is subjective; what I decide to have meaning may have no meaning to anyone else. Determination of meaning is also relative; what has meaning today may have no meaning tomorrow; it all depends on the circumstances. If I am dying of thirst, a cup of water has more value than a bar of gold. Value and meaning are determined by what something represents. If you have two copper coins that weigh the same, their value may differ because the image stamped on them is different. The value of each currency is the result of when and who minted the coins. We struggle to determine our meaning and how that meaning relates to our sense of value.

Our desires run deep and are a driving force in our lives. We desire what we sense is lacking, some affirmation that our lives are achieving something of lasting value. Yet, our honest evaluation tells us all we do is meaningless and has no eternal value. We keep chasing shadows. We reach for a future hope and, in the process, miss God's gifts that are available today. The enemy's lie is that your value comes from what you do and not based on who you are.

The struggle with meaning is ultimately a struggle for comfort and contentment with the belief that if I have a purpose, then I will feel less discomfort and more peace. We incorrectly assume that what we determine to be meaningful will increase our sense of value.

There are three general categories of meaning we can pursue. We can seek false meaning, transitory meaning, or ultimate meaning.

False meaning is the pursuit of immediate self-comfort and contentment. It is a type of endeavor that is often just a pleasant diversion and not helpful for long – often, it is the pursuit of activities for immediate pleasure that are harmful. In the long run, the objective of food, drink, drugs, money, power, or any other action considered immediately pleasurable is not connected to any form of lasting meaning. This purpose is very superficial; it is a distraction from life's turmoil and troubles. It is a desperate attempt to cover the sensation and discomfort of feeling meaninglessness and worthless.

Transitory meaning is the pursuit of long-term self-comfort and contentment. The quest is not destructive, but neither gives any lasting meaning or purpose. Developing skills, achieving success, receiving an education, and pursuing health interests, may not cause harm: they keep us busy and

distracted but do not provide any ultimate or lasting meaning. We falsely interpret the accolades received for accomplishment as attributing meaning and value. This positive sensation is fleeting. We devote all our time, energy, and emotion to achieving the most difficult of goals, with the belief the more out of reach an accomplishment is, the more it will give us a sense of value. Many people will spend their life trying to achieve the impossible, and if they realize their goal, they find they are disappointed because the achievement did not bring the desired result of a sense of lasting worth. In the end, this results in exhaustion and disappointment.

Ultimate meaning is where the pursuit of comfort and contentment is on behalf of others. You find ultimate purpose in a relationship with something or someone greater than us. This ultimate meaning transcends the other issues of relationship, mortality, and free choice and can put those other areas into a more realistic perspective. This ultimate type of meaning is rare because it requires faith.

We struggle with the stronghold of meaninglessness because the enemy has done an excellent job convincing us that we have no eternal value. We all want to know we have value and what we do is not meaningless. We constantly compare and attribute different values and meanings throughout the day. We use this ability to evaluate and contrast when it

comes to ourselves, what we possess, and the tasks we perform. It is excruciating when we realize our actions and accomplishments are meaningless, with no value or purpose, because that is most often the reality. This existential stronghold of meaninglessness drives us to deny the facts and distract us through meaningless, distracting activities. We are now back to that life of quiet desperation.

Our search for meaning and value is a search for some action, attribute, or quality within our control that could somehow lessen the pain and discomfort of isolation, minimize the terror of our mortality, alleviate the angst of free choice and spiritual emptiness.

We live with the belief that something we can do or say will give our felt meaningless lives some sense of value. So, we work hard to pursue positions, accomplishments, physical attributes, memberships in the best clubs, entertainment, or even personal sacrifice. All to no avail, we still end up feeling meaningless. Pursuing meaning and value seems to push it further and further away.

When we pour all our energies into achieving a self-defined meaningful result to feel worthwhile, we only make the problem of meaninglessness worse. Goals are essential in life, they give our lives direction and purpose, but we must be cautious when we overvalue results. Results are not always

within our control. To focus on results leads to a life of disappointment because it becomes a life of constant comparison - there will always be others with better results. Even if you only compare yourself with yourself, your ability to achieve a specified result will eventually become more complex, if not impossible, as you age. Focusing on results to give you a greater sense of worth is also discouraging because, even if you achieve the desired effect, you will find that it can never bring you the sensation of value you so wish. Another problem with pursuing results to give you a greater sense of importance is when you focus too intently on a result, you have sacrificed today's benefit for an anticipated future occurrence. You lose track of the joys and creativity present today in the process – you achieve satisfaction based only on the following result, and then the pleasure only lasts for a short period. In other words, to give meaning to an expected result, to attain a sense of value or worth will only steal your joy and contentment, kill your creativity, and destroy your awareness of your true worth. Your song remains unsung.

Do not forget that the people you see as having meaning and value look back at you with their feelings of meaninglessness, believing that you have achieved worth through your meaningless activities. We all want to feel significant, that who we are and what we do has some value. The harder we try to attain comfort, the more discomfort we experience.

Once we see this stronghold as a lie of the enemy, we can begin to tear down that stronghold. So, how do we do this?

Firstly, we must realize there is a difference between meaning and value. Meaning is subjective, while value is objective. Meaning is a focus on what you do, and value focuses on who you are. Meaning is direction-focused; it focuses on where you are going, where value is determined by where you are in the present. Meaning is what you know and believe; value is who you are. Meaning looks back to the past and forward to the future; value looks to the present. Meaning fosters pride, where value encourages humility. Meaning rests on what I create, but my value rests in the awareness that God created me. Meaning promotes status or social position where value fosters purpose. Meaning is data-based, whereas value is faith-based. Meaning focuses on the observable gain, where value focuses on enrichment and life direction more than specific achievements.

Once we realize we all carry this burden and no single individual act can bring us the meaning and value our soul longs for, we can be free from the pressure to find meaning where meaning does not exist. When we demand meaning from any specific action or quality, we only increase our discomfort. This knowledge can free us from diminishing the feeling of meaninglessness through accomplishments, status, physical attributes, acquaintances, memberships, knowledge,

wisdom, sacrifice, spiritual endeavors, or notoriety. The increased sense of value from all these endeavors is weak and fleeting. You are now free to approach your life and activities in a way that can bring real peace and contentment. Your value comes from your creator, God. When you struggle with your sense of meaning or value, meditate on Luke 12:6-7 (TPT), *“What is the value of your soul to God? Could your worth be defined by an amount of money? God doesn’t abandon or forget even the small sparrow he has made. How then could he forget or abandon you? What about the seemingly minor issues of your life? Do they matter to God? Of course they do! So you never need to worry, for you are more valuable to God than anything else in this world.”*

No matter how meaningful you determine it to be, no activity, accomplishment, or possession will give you the value or sense of worth you desperately desire. So, what are we to do?

Ecclesiastes 5: 19-20 (NLT) has some good advice regarding meaning and significance. It states: *“To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life – this is indeed a gift from God. God keeps such people so busy enjoying life that they take no time to brood over the past.”*

This verse says that there is joy in today's work if we are willing to accept our lot - or current results.

Think back to the example of the coins of various values because of the image on the coin. Like the coin, our worth is not our substance; it is not our flesh and blood or what we can do with our flesh and blood; it is what God has stamped on our soul; the image of the creator. Our value comes from His image. We have an inherent value not based on who we are or what we do but on whose image we bear. An essential element of the image of our creator is creativity. The stronghold of meaninglessness will steal, destroy, and kill our God-given creativity. Our creative God-image is the part of us that is valuable and meaningful and a gift of God to all humanity. You are worthwhile; you have a song to be sung. You and your song are a gift to all of humanity. Find and use your voice. Do not throw this gift away, trying to achieve some warped sense of meaning. Take time to evaluate where you determine your fundamental understanding of worth. Suppose we focus our creative energies on the task before us today and not the results of completing that task. In that case, we will free ourselves to experience joy and contentment without having to place a value judgment on an accomplished job. God's gift is the freedom and ability to enjoy your work and the fruits of your labor. The type of work you do is not as important as your freedom to apply your creative energies to enjoy that work.

My grandfather was a great example of living this kind of

blessed life. He was not a wealthy or highly educated man. He grew up in a Russian-speaking community in Canada that immigrated because of religious persecution. He only managed to get to third grade in school and had to teach himself to read English. I had the privilege of building two homes with him. I learned a lot from him by observing how he lived his life. He never saw a challenge as impossible, nor did he try to avoid a task. He did not rejoice over the finished product – he just applied his creative self to every daily problem. His joy-filled but straightforward life had a positive impact on many people. His legacy was how he lived his life.

We will experience value, meaning, and contentment if we remember our value comes from God. We are then free to focus on the process and not the product, our attitude, and not our achievement, our creativity, and not our creation, our opportunities, and not our trials.

Take some time, find that place of solitude and ask yourself the following questions - be sure to write your answers.

To what are you looking to feel worthwhile? Where do you find your value? What does it mean to be creative? Do you give too much meaning to results? Have you found joy in your work? How do you approach your day? Have you found your voice? Are you singing your song? What does it mean that God made you in His image?

Once we are free from the belief that an accomplishment will give us meaning, we can focus on what can provide us with joy – the creative process and living the image of God. If you are free to sing your song and exercise your voice, we will all be enriched as a community.

Our actual value is in the reality that we are valuable to God, so valuable that He gave His Son to die for us to restore our relationship with Him and heal our fractured image.

Chapter 4 - Free Choice and Responsibility

In Deuteronomy 30:19 (NLT), God instructed the people:
“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!”

Our life is filled with daily choices – too numerous to count. We choose a path that eventually leads to a result. The result is the consequence of the decisions we have made. It is our choice – select the road leading to life or the road leading to death. The decision is your responsibility.

In this chapter, I will be dealing with the stronghold of free choice and personal responsibility. We are in the privileged and yet, the terrifying position of creating who we are through the choices we make. The frightening part is that it is our personal and individual responsibility to make those choices.

If you abandon your responsibility by living as a victim, with bitterness, fear, or anger, you are giving up your power and the ability to create a new you. Ultimately, it is your choice that should be freedom and not a hindrance.

This chapter is not a philosophical debate on free will. Whether you are a determinist, a compatibilist, or a libertarian, you will still have to choose many times today. Your choices will make a difference in your life; they will affect your present and future life experience. You will make choices today, and you will have to be responsible for those choices' consequences and outcomes. The enemy wants to convince you that God is not good and is not in control. If God is not good or in control, I do not need to be responsible for my choices. After all, what will be will be; it is all about me.

Our life is the sum of the choices we make, and we make thousands of them every day. We face hundreds of immediate daily options, from what we will have for breakfast, what clothes we will wear, and what we will do with our day. We make choices about our future, like what we will do for our education or work, to where we will go for vacation this year, that is, if we have chosen to set aside enough money throughout the year to afford a vacation. We decide where we will live, what we will believe, who we will marry, and on and on. We even get to choose a lot of our emotional responses, whether we will be angry or bitter or decide just to

let things go and be happy. Our life is a massive flow chart of decisions leading to where we are today. It boils down to this burden of free choice, and personal responsibility is a matter of what we choose to do with what we have. To better handle this stronghold to make it work for us, we need to be aware of what we have and what options we have when choosing what to do with what we have.

So, what do we have? What we have can be broken down into the four categories of person, place, things, and time.

What do we have as a person? We have our personality, core beliefs, and physical body - this is our person. There is room for limitless choice within this category of "my person." What is your personality? How can you determine how your character will show itself? What components of your personality would you like to change? What are your core beliefs? You need to consider your core beliefs as they are the main factor determining your life's direction. You have many choices regarding your physical body. Unfortunately, we all have limitations to our fitness potential. We cannot all be Olympic athletes or world-class swimmers, but as you sit here today, you are as fit and fat as you have chosen to be. You are responsible for everything you put in your mouth and accountable for what you do for exercise. Sorry, but it is not your thyroid or your bones' size; if you are fat, you have overeaten many times, which was your choice. Another part

of our personality that often gets neglected is our dreams. Our imagination and dreams bring about new directions and inventions, often making the world a better place. We should choose to allow ourselves time to dream.

The next category is the category of place. What is our place? Our place is the space we occupy and our defining titles, which is the space we employ in others' lives. It is where we live, where we work, and how others define us. We live and work in an established community in a specific country in history. We define ourselves by titles like a friend, neighbor, husband, wife, teacher, banker, sister, brother, son, or daughter. If you take the time to consider this list of titles, it will be extensive. What place do you want to occupy? What choices will you have to make to occupy that chosen space? What tags are used by others to define you? Options in this area will end up consuming most of your time, so be careful how and what you choose.

The category of things is also pervasive. It is the category of what we feel we own. It is our resources, our talents, our job, our family, and our immediate responsibilities. We face multiple daily choices about what we are to do with what we own. This choice is where we are most aware of the importance and demand of everyday choices and decisions. What resources do you have? How do you plan to use those resources? What do you plan to do with your talents?

The next category is the category of time. We all have an allotment of time; how we choose to spend it will be the most significant factor in the outcome of our life. We measure the quantity of our life by years when it would serve us better to measure the amount by days. We should approach each day as if it is a new year. What and how you choose today will have a more significant impact on your life than what you plan to do in the distant next year. If you choose wisely the path for your day, the year will take care of itself. Yes, long-term plans are necessary, but what you decide to do with the day will determine if you achieve those plans. Today is my 24,265th day. We should live counting our days and not counting our years. This day is a gift – spend it wisely. We make a lot of wrong assumptions regarding time and how to spend it wisely. There needs to be a balance between work time, rest time, active time, and meditative time. We need time to push ahead and time to step back. We are wrong to assume it takes massive amounts of consecutive time to accomplish something of value. The reality is we can achieve a lot with the regular, daily utilization of small allotments of time.

It is best to view all these components of person, place, things, and time as potential bearing seeds. For example, we all have a handful of time, where we choose to plant those “time seeds” will determine what happens in our lives. It is a

worthwhile exercise to spend some quiet time in solitude to consider and evaluate what you have - what seeds are in your pocket - write them down and ponder the best way to plant and care for those precious seeds.

These free choices do not feel very free much of the time, and we end up wasting a lot of our life trying to fight or change what we cannot change. The following are some of the factors that make a free choice feel like a burden.

Firstly, it puts you in the driver's seat; your choices are your responsibility. We may not have an issue with free choice, but we have problems being personally responsible, especially when things do not go as planned. Yes, you get to choose what direction you go, but what you do not get to choose is that choice's consequences. You must own the outcomes as well as the opportunity. You do not get to blame anything or anyone else if you are not happy with the consequence. If you cast blame or live as a victim, you have just given away the power in your ability to choose - you have given it to someone or something else. You are now powerless.

Free choice is also an issue because there can be too many choices, making it impossible to choose the best path. We can become paralyzed by a diversity of possible right decisions and end up not choosing at all.

Another problem is that once we make some choices, they

are tough to undo, you are stuck with the selection, and it may not be possible without a lot of grief to undo that choice. Just try to undo a career choice, a marriage choice, having a child choice, selecting a housing choice, choosing to take an addictive substance, or getting into the driver's seat while intoxicated choice. You will quickly find out that undoing these choices will be very costly. Attempting to undo destructive decisions is an attorney's bread and butter. You will want to avoid as many of these choices as possible. Life is hard; do not make choices in the direction of making it even harder.

Another issue with all these free choices is we do not live on a deserted island, our choices affect others, and their decisions affect us. Somehow, we need agreeable common ground, or else our options will end up causing a war.

Another issue is that choices may also have significant limitations. We do not get to make some choices because of constraints in time, genetics, attributes, resources, legality, other obligations, and at times, just a limited number of options.

Considering these problems, suddenly, this free choice does not seem free, and at times it is a significant burden. You have the privilege of free choice and the burden of being responsible for your choice. You do not get limitless "do-overs." If, however, you are wise, you do get to look at and

evaluate others' decisions and their resultant consequences. We have a lot to learn from our parents; whether they were good or evil, they were examples of choices and outcomes we observed closely.

When we understand that we can choose our path but not our consequences, we are free to dream and imagine within realistic parameters. The desired outcome should guide today's choices. We are now living life in the zone of the "if-then." If I dream of becoming a concert pianist, I should get a piano, find a teacher, take lessons, and devote time to practice. If I desire to retire with an income for my retirement years, I better start saving as early as possible. These are choices based on the desired consequence. It takes courage, perseverance, and grit to live deliberately, not caving to the urgent demands of the moment.

You are free to dream and imagine. Take time to ponder. About what are you passionate? What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of spouse do you want to become? What kind of parent do you want to be? What kind of grandparent do you want to be? Who do you want to serve? What legacy do you want to leave at the end of your life? Do not throw away your freedom for productive pondering. After all, it is your life, the only one you get; live it deliberately.

To live with intent, to live more deliberately, is life-changing.

So, how can you do this?

First, it is essential to spend time in solitude for an honest appraisal. Take time daily to consider who you are and what you have. Embrace what you have as if what you have were seeds, seeds with incredible potential. Seeds you need to plant and maintain. In Psalm 5:3 (TPT), the psalmist states: *“At each and every sunrise you will hear my voice as I prepare my sacrifice of prayer to you. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on the altar and wait for your fire to fall upon my heart.”* Prayerful, meditative solitude will change your life. Take time to list your dreams, gifts, resources, and options. What will you do with those seeds? You can choose to do nothing, you can throw them away, you can treat them carelessly, you can manage them casually, you can just put them aside, you can give them away, or you can plant them where they will grow and flourish. If you do this in the quiet of the day when there are no pressures for an action, you will find that you will become aware of many more options.

Secondly, take time to quiet the loud noise of urgent demands. You will always have urgent matters demanding attention right now, but most of those urgent matters are not necessary. Learn to separate the urgent from the important and spend some time considering the important - then you can move on to the pressing issues that demand attention.

Thirdly, write out your options. Be creative and list as many options as you can think of, even options you know you would never follow. Writing will help bring to the surface options you may have never thought of before, providing a positive, creative solution to a stressful problem.

Fourthly, plan for essential choices and decisions. When you ponder crucial life decisions like a spouse, education, work, hobbies, or housing, write a list of what is important to you during your time of solitude. Feel free to dream; you have an imagination, use it. Try to make some of these decisions before they become a matter of urgency. The pressure of necessity will destroy your creativity and imagination.

Fifthly, take time daily for significant decisions. The decisions that determine what kind of person you will become are much more important than what you do. Be honest when you evaluate your status; are you angry, are you bitter, are you greedy, are you self-centered, are you a victim, are you discouraged - be honest with where you are if you expect to get somewhere else.

Lastly, do not blame anyone else for your immediate consequences. If you blame, you give away your power and the ability to make choices.

Being overburdened by free choice and personal responsibility will steal your ability to make decisions, kill your

dreams and imagination, and destroy your ability to live deliberately. You will witness your grit vanishing.

Take time to pause and consider - it is your life - live it deliberately - it is your choice. God loves you, and God is in control. God made you so you could be creative and productive as you walk with Him.

Chapter 5 – Mortality

Psalm 103:15-16 states (TPT), *“Our days are so few, and our momentary beauty so swiftly fades away! Then all of a sudden, we’re gone, like grass clippings blown away in a gust of wind, taken away to our appointment with death, leaving nothing to show that we were here.”* Life is short, and the longer you live, the more you realize how quickly time and life pass. And then it is over. One day it will be over for everyone; there is no escaping the reality of our mortality.

Our eventual death is an issue faced by all human beings. For many, the subconscious anxiety caused by a fear of death is behind a lot of their daily anguish. This burden affects us all; we are all going to die. The essence of this burden is not death itself because we cannot fear something we have not experienced. The nature of this burden is the fear of separation, separation from ourselves, others, dreams, goals, what we value, purpose, and sense of meaning. What we fear

is not death; we fear ultimate, permanent separation. We fear uncertainty and change, and death represents the most significant change we will ever experience, shifting from being to not being. Through this fear of separation, the enemy tries to convince you that God has permanently separated Himself from you, and there is nothing you can do about it.

To honestly wrestle with this stronghold means we must struggle with our sense of meaning and purpose. As you approach the end of your life, you will face how meaningless and self-centered most of your life has been, and this can be a lot to bear. Having to face meaninglessness and life's disappointments will often lead to a crisis. The Hebrew word for hell is sheowl, meaning a place of no return or exile; this is the stronghold of mortality. We live in the shadow of hell with the enemy whispering that God does not care; God does not love you; you are worthless. The fear of death is a reality we need to acknowledge and accept. It is not healthy to live oblivious to death or in constant fear of death. Seeing the burden of mortality as the lie of the enemy can substantially enhance your life. It will significantly aid our ability to value and use the short time we are alive.

So, in day-to-day living, how does this burden show itself? It may manifest itself as fear or anxiety. We will often disguise the fear of death with worry about our health or the health of those we love. This worry leads to a compulsive drive to get

and stay healthy. We refer to these individuals as the “worried well.” Billions of dollars a year are spent on supplements, health spas, and unproven innovative treatments to push aside the concept of one’s ultimate demise. Faced head-on, this burden of mortality is just too troubling, but the reality is we cannot deny our eventual death; it impacts our lives in many subtle ways. During separation or loss, the burden of mortality is more likely to show itself through activities, beliefs, or thoughts that are self-protective, self-absorbed, or self-nurturing. When we feel a threat, we do what we can to protect our fragile selves. These are times when one retreats from relationships or avoids intimacy. Intimacy in relationships requires us to be vulnerable, and when we feel threatened, we do not want to increase our supposed vulnerability. This fear causes us to avoid solitude; solitude represents isolation, intensifying our awareness of loss. We experience increased discomfort in intimacy and loneliness when we experience a significant loss, but there is some comfort in being part of an intimate group. Conformity brings a sense of safety. If the threat is long-lasting, this conformity can foster narrow-mindedness with adherence to a specific group with fear or avoidance of others who may think differently.

The experience of the burden of mortality varies from person to person. For the young to it is experienced as separation

anxiety where the elderly suffers the burden of mortality as angst about impending death. I have observed many very healthy individuals live in constant fear of death. I have also seen many people with a terminal diagnosis live in peace with renewed freedom and compassion. It is almost as if those with a terminal diagnosis have the freedom to be and are no longer living under pressure.

This stronghold of mortality is a reality that affects all areas of our life. It is a reality too painful to address directly, so being the self-protective creatures' we humans are, we have developed the fantastic skill of denying what we do not want to face. Studies have shown most people do not believe they will die. Denial can help find a safe harbor while figuring out the next path to take, but if denial becomes a way of life, it quickly becomes destructive. When faced with the apparent reality of our death, it takes an enormous amount of energy to maintain a life of denial. We end up spending considerable amounts of emotional energy in the act of self-protecting. This type of denial is not deliberate deception or lying; it is psychological hiding from the truth or reality; it is honest self-deception. And humans are masters of this type of self-deception. We are in danger of spending so much energy on self-protection and denial we have no grit remaining for other endeavors. Our grit-bucket begins to drain quickly. We spend our valuable time self-protecting, often unaware of what we

are working so hard to protect.

We are working hard to protect a deep fear of exposure to realities too painful to handle. We try to deny we feel isolated and alone and try to hide the anguish of no sense of purpose or meaning. We work to protect ourselves from the shame and guilt of choosing a life direction that did not go as planned and the fear of ultimate separation. We are working as hard as possible to avoid an existential crisis about our meaning and purpose.

To tear down the stronghold of mortality, we must address both the reality of our mortality and the denial that often accompanies that reality. The biggest problem with this burden is not accepting that we will die someday. The biggest problem is permitting denial to control our life as we hide from what we are unwilling to accept. The enemy is very skilled in convincing you that denial and distractions work to keep you feeling safe and secure. Accepting mortality is accepting reality – it happens to all of us – it is a reality we all must face. We all live with varying degrees of denial. We spend time and energy wrestling with mortality when we would be much better off spending our time dealing with the denial. Our mortality is a future reality; our denial is a present opposing force. You need to accept your death to deal effectively with the denial.

The burden of mortality causes universal anxiety, attempting

to control this anxiety with denial. A little denial for a brief period can be helpful; it can be a safe harbor during times of distress. However, the problem is what serves as a fleeting comfort soon becomes a pattern of living, and the practice soon becomes a lifestyle. We live in a dome of denial – not only regarding our mortality but also regarding any area of our life that may cause emotional pain. We have become compulsive comfort seekers. If anything dares puncture our denial dome, we are quick to patch the hole with another dose of denial in the form of some self-destructive behavior like drugs, alcohol, excessive exercise, working long hours, embracing bitterness, or anger and on-and-on. We end up being hurt by our self-protective beliefs and actions, but our dome of denial must remain intact. Life is hard; it is hard for everyone; be incredibly careful what you choose as your safe harbor.

Tearing down this stronghold involves acknowledging how much of our lives are consumed and wasted by denial. If we accept our mortality, it will help lessen the power behind much of the denial in our lives. Less denial means a lot more energy and grit for living.

So, what is the power and impact of denial? Denial does have the ability to protect, but this only lasts briefly. Denial can be powerful enough to distort reality and erase memories. Denial prevents accurate evaluation and recollection. In this

state, living in the dome of denial, other areas of life get confusing. Anything causing discomfort or pain, like relationships and responsibilities, increases our denial. This denial is the power behind the irrational thinking that is part of any addiction. Statements like, I do not know why I am gaining weight; I don't eat anything; this drug will not harm me, I am only hurting myself; drinking and driving is not a problem; this cigarette will not hurt me are all statements from the mind of someone living in the dome of denial. We end up living in a self-destructive world of myopic self-evaluation.

Denial may initially start as a self-protective defense mechanism to shelter us from the thoughts of early parental separation. As we age, denial has many opportunities to grow as we mature. Any significantly painful childhood event can substantially increase the growth and development of denial. The experience of abuse at a young age, the experience of trauma, or the death of a loved one can make life without denial seem impossible to bear. The significant negative impact of adverse childhood experiences may be enhancing denial. These are not the only things fostering more considerable denial. Any event that alters your impression of reality can encourage the growth of denial. Growing up in affluence with the belief life should be smooth and pain-free will significantly impact your denial level. This view of life is not reality; life is hard; it is hard for everyone, and no amount

of money will change any of that. Life is not to be lived as a fantasy because the fantasy will only disappoint. Freedom in life comes with facing the painful and uncomfortable realities, recognizing all humans share these and that we can meet these realities with faith and perseverance. It takes a dose of Godly grit to tear down the stronghold of denial. Facing life's difficulties and realities are challenging and, at times, feels like it is too much to bear, but denying these realities will destroy you. Living in denial will produce momentary comfort but long-term frustration and exhaustion.

To effectively deal with the stronghold of mortality, you must accept the reality that you will die. Remember, our battle is not with our mortality but with our denial. Your death, just like your birth, is a part of life: do not be afraid of it, do not ignore it, do not tempt it, and do not deny it. Do not waste your limited time on this earth, supporting denial and fighting a fight you will only lose. If you accept you will die, you will place a higher value on the time you are alive.

Learn to embrace your fears and denial; by doing so, you will lessen their power.

Take active steps to limit your denial regarding your mortality. Calculate how many days you have lived and contrast this to how many days your parents and grandparents lived. It can be very sobering to realize you have an expiratory date: you

will not live forever, this side of heaven. Take time in solitude to ponder your life and not your problems. Your experience is unique; your issues are not. What kind of person are you, and what kind of person do you want to be? What do you want your legacy to be? Read obituaries and take some time to write your own. Do not shy away from the funerals of family or friends. Death is a reality.

Avoid denial by living authentically. Embrace times of solitude and be honest. You will hurt yourself and all those you contact if you live a lie.

Embrace a sense of wonder. A sense of wonder can help you get things into the proper perspective. A sense of wonder can lessen our continual focus on ourselves and our problems. You do not want to get consumed by your emotional pain or the injustices you face. In Psalm 8:3-4 (TPT), we read, *“Look at the splendor of your skies, your creative genius glowing in the heavens. When I gaze at your moon and your stars, mounted like jewels in their settings, I know you are the fascinating artist who fashioned it all! But when I look up and see such wonder and workmanship above, I have to ask you this question: Compared to all this cosmic glory, why would you bother with puny, mortal man or be infatuated with Adam’s sons?”* Wonder and awe put things into a proper perspective. The sense of wonder from gazing at the night sky, walking in the forest, or looking out over the ocean or the Grand Canyon

will change you. Learn to embrace your puniness. A sense of wonder can slowly erode the cover on your dome of denial. You can learn to appreciate a sense of wonder in nature, works of mastery, music, or learning to see things differently. If you are not using up all your grit trying to prop up your denial, you can slow down enough to live your life and embrace the wonder all around you.

Be aware of what is really at the core of your fears and denial. Do not be afraid of the vulnerable part of you that is afraid of separation and isolation. Do not be controlled by the reality of your ultimate non-existence – your mortality. Do not miss the big picture by remaining self-centered and spiritually empty.

Be alert and on guard concerning denial. These are some of the signs that denial is active in your life. If you answer yes to any of these questions, denial is present. Have you lost your sense of wonder? Are you less compassionate and intimate with those you love or those who love you? Do you blame others for your present life situation? Are you living as a victim? Are fear and anxiety controlling you? Do you have an increase in irrational thoughts and beliefs? Do you demand and seek comfort at any cost? Does bitterness control you?

If you do not address the burden of mortality, it will feed your denial, steal your peace and clarity, kill your joy and compassion, and destroy your perception of reality. Do not be controlled by denial and the burden of mortality. Mediate on John 5:24 (TPT), *“I speak to you an eternal truth: if you embrace my message and believe in the One who sent me, you will never face condemnation, for in me, you have already passed from the realm of death into the realm of eternal life!”* Your eventual death is not the end of your story.

Chapter 6 – Spiritual Emptiness

In the book of Psalms 6:6 (TPT), we read: *“I’m exhausted and worn out with my weeping. I endure weary, sleepless nights filled with moaning, soaking my pillow with my tears.”*

Are you exhausted and worn out? Has your life turned out differently than you expected? Have you run out of answers? Do you feel isolated? Has life lost its meaning? Are you confused? The chances are if you think this way, you are spiritually empty.

What is spirituality? What is spiritual emptiness? Why is spirituality important?

Spirituality is essentially restoration. It is the restoration of body, soul, and spirit. It is the path and process of reclaiming a relationship with God, learning to walk with Him, and not opposing Him. It is the recovery of the image of God in man. It is the rebirth of our spirit with subsequent transformation in

our soul and body.

Spiritual emptiness is the pursuit of comfort and a sense of completeness apart from a relationship with God. Man attempts to negotiate his life path without depending on God. It feels threatening to rely on something or someone you cannot control.

We live in an age with many potential solutions to our problems that do not require reliance on God, so why do the spiritual things matter? We know about proper diet and exercise. We have beneficial models of psychology and philosophy. We have affluence and distractions that can keep us busy. We have never known so much about diet and exercise, yet we are more obese than ever. We have never had so much information on our psychology and emotions, yet the suicide and addiction rates skyrocket. We are rich in resources yet poor in spirit. Something vital is still missing. We are all aware, deep inside us, there is someone, a master designer, who is much bigger than ourselves. We were created to serve that someone and not spend our lives in endless self-service.

We are rarely aware of our spiritual emptiness. It is apparent when we are up against something much bigger than ourselves, like the threat of a significant loss or the struggle with addiction. We are also aware of it during times of

prosperity when, even if we have acquired everything we could want, we are still aware something vital is missing. This awareness is often written off as a bout of fatigue or emotional exhaustion. We try to fill our spirit with a substance or activity that we could never satisfy.

How do you know you are spiritually empty? What are the signs and symptoms of spiritual emptiness? A spiritually empty life is a life of self-centeredness and self-promotion. All that matters are my experiences, life, comfort, and image. IT IS ALL ABOUT ME!! I may be aware of others but not aware of their pain or struggle. The spiritually empty life mission is to avoid discomfort and pursue comfort, no matter the cost.

If you are spiritually empty, you are proud; you think your way is the only way. You may be sweet and kind about it, but you are still arrogant.

If you are spiritually empty, you are also deceptive. You deceive others, and you deceive yourself. You work hard to hide your faults and point out the flaws in others - in an ever so lovely way.

If you are spiritually empty, you are not thankful. You live your life with constant discontent. You are never satisfied.

These are several shreds of evidence of living a spiritually empty life, but the most significant proof is that you live a life

of constant comparison. You will find hollow contentment or increased discontentment when you live comparing yourself with your peers, your expectations, or with your former youthful self. We continuously use comparison as a tool to determine our value. From the time we are first born, the comparisons begin. We are weighed and measured, and labeled based on our size. As life goes on, the comparisons continue. Being spiritually empty means you live believing the enemy's lie that you will never measure up or that others will never measure up to you.

Just pause for a moment to consider the many tools of comparison you experience on an average day. You have scales to weigh you, measuring tapes that size you, clothing sizes, IQ tests, school grades, credit scores, and of course, the big one, a mirror. We compare ourselves to others and our former selves, and we are not satisfied in the end. If you score high on the comparison scale today, the result is pressure to maintain your position or arrogance because of your success. If you rate low on the scale, the product is discontentment. As you age, the person you see in the mirror every day becomes a fading vision of your once fit and fashionable self. Spiritual emptiness, the life of constant comparison, results in the life experience of quiet desperation, full of disappointment and discouragement or out-of-touch arrogance.

It is time to accept that, as people, we are all very self-centered. We grumble and complain that no one understands us. We believe no one can experience our physical or emotional pain the way we can, so we end up on a life-long personal mission to achieve comfort. When we are successful in gaining some degree of comfort, we become proud; when we fail, we become depressed and even more self-centered. To get what we feel we need, we become deceptive and, in the process, lose our authenticity. We are no longer grateful; we live discontented and dissatisfied in a sea of constant comparison. This experience is the living hell of spiritual emptiness, a life of quiet desperation where at best, we experience momentary comfort amid meaningless, endless distractions. It is a life of continuous self-service and fading compassion. All we care about is our comfort. We are willing to bend the rules because we see our circumstances as unique, so society's laws do not need to apply. We live as bitter, lonely victims with no sense of meaning or purpose. Our thoughts and motives are awash with denial and irresponsibility. We are dependent on our environment to come through for us and lessen our discomfort. When our discomfort increases, we become more self-focused and aware of our pitiful human predicament. We spend our life wallowing in discontent. Living this way is the definition of the stronghold of spiritual emptiness. We are all born with our backs turned away from God, determined to go our way, and

in the process of seeking comfort, manage to create even more discomfort and pain.

How do we tear down this stronghold of spiritual emptiness? If we recognize the problem and that it is an issue for all humans, we can stop comparing ourselves to one another and address our spiritual emptiness's real problem. If we are aware that where we are turning to address and fill our void will not work, then maybe we will have a chance to turn in a direction that will be productive. We do not have to remain spiritually empty. However, it takes humility, honesty, courage, and gratitude to turn our lives around and seek God. It takes faith to believe there is a loving creator who has provided a way back to Him through the sacrifice of His Son. A sacrifice that meant He experienced all the physical pain, social isolation, and psychological anguish all humans have ever experienced. There is someone who knows what you are experiencing. He suffered it on the cross. He bore the weight of it for you. He has provided the path back to God. God has provided this gift, a gift we only need to accept.

The stronghold of spiritual emptiness does not have to tear you down; with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, you can learn how to tear it down. How can this be possible? How do you tear down this stronghold? So, what does spirituality mean? How do we become more spiritual? The answer is simple. In the book of Jeremiah 29:13-14 (MSG), we read,

“When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.” The path to spirituality is the humble, courageous path of seeking God with your whole heart. As we take these steps, it is essential not to be confused by what spirituality is not. People and society promote many practices and beliefs as being spiritual that are nothing more than counterfeit spirituality.

Spirituality does not involve comparing yourself to anyone else. Spirituality is comparing yourself to what God has in store for you and living by His Word. Much of what we have equated with spirituality is nothing more than a man’s program to feel good about himself. I have worked with many criminal patients over the years; most attend church regularly. They attend church, not for spiritual growth, but as a way of convincing themselves they are good people, and how they conduct their life is not so bad. If you pause and look, you will find self-deceivers in every church. Are you one of those self-deceivers?

Spirituality is not the maintaining of a list of laws and rules. Laws, regulations, and boundaries are helpful to avoid negative consequences, but the keeping of commandments does not get you closer to God. A life focused on law-keeping will result in a lack of compassion and joy. Rule-keeping and law-focus is another mode of comparison we use to determine

our value. If I keep more laws than you, then I am more spiritual than you – this is not spirituality; it is a force that drives people away from God and each other.

Spirituality is not a specific group of meditation, prayer, or worship practices. Prayer, meditation, and worship are valuable elements of a relationship with God but are only weak psychological boosters outside of a relationship with God. Do not use these practices as a measure of your spirituality. Just because you pray longer than your spouse does not necessarily make you a more spiritual person than your spouse. Are you praying, meditating, and worshipping because of your relationship with God, or are you praying, meditating, and worshipping to gain favor with God?

Spirituality is not “sacrifice.” A relationship with God should free us to be generous in our giving, but how much you give does not determine your degree of spirituality. You should be free to give because of what God has given to you, giving out of gratitude and thanksgiving and not as a means of buying special favors from God.

Spirituality is not a specific diet or dietary code. You are responsible for what you put into your body. A special diet will not get you closer to God. On the other hand, gluttony, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse are evidence you are spiritually empty. You are responsible for everything you eat,

drink, smoke, or inject. Choosing to put anything into your body to alter your mood is evidence of spiritual emptiness.

Spirituality is not a belief. As it states in the Bible – “even the devil believes.” It is more a matter of faith and seeking God than the knowledge of His existence. It is not just the belief; it is what you do with the belief. How have your beliefs changed your life?

Spirituality is not belonging to a specific group or club. Membership or attendance at a church or religious group does not make you spiritual. Encouraging one another of similar faith can be very uplifting and healing. It can promote a relationship with God, but it is not a relationship with God or a measure of your relationship with God.

Spirituality is not knowledge, wisdom, or reason. Spirituality is trusting God and not trusting your ability to reason. It is tempting to those seen to possess knowledge, understanding, or power to rely on their strengths and not trust God. Gaining knowledge and acquiring wisdom can help determine a path in life with more positive results than negative consequences, but exceptional mental skills do not equate with spirituality. Knowledge can help you see the wonder of God’s creation. Wisdom can help you find a path with fewer negative consequences. Reason can help you evaluate your life, and if mixed with honesty, it can help you realize your knowledge

and wisdom are not enough to build a relationship with God. A high intelligence quotient does not equal a high spiritual quotient. True spirituality is only a product of humble faith.

Spirituality is not doing something to gain God's approval; it is accepting what He has so graciously offered. Spirituality is not living with pressure to perform but living with thanksgiving for what He has provided. Many of the efforts and activities you use to gain spirituality may act as diversions or a means to avoid painful areas in your life, but it will not bring you closer to God.

Spirituality is not just crying out to God for deliverance or personal comfort. Most people live their lives with no desire to relate to God. They carry on from day to day until some big disaster; then, they cry out to God to come through for them. God is gracious and, at times, will come through. Still, it is much better to develop this relationship before the going gets tough, at a time when the relationship with God may be able to guide you in a direction that could avoid some of those big disasters.

Spirituality is not a partial surrender or calling out to God to be rescued in times of trouble. Spirituality is not surrendering in part of your life with the hope of seeing improvement; it is a surrender of all areas of your life. In my work in addiction medicine, I meet many people who use surrender to try to

build a stronger inner resolve to fight a craving. This type of surrender is a psychological trick to fight off an urge. Often the addiction wins this fight. Surrender and submission are all or none, and it is terrifying.

So, how would you rate your spirituality? Is spirituality important to you? Are you discontented? Are you spiritually empty? Are you working hard to achieve what God has given as a gift? Are you honest about your life? Are you humble? Are you grateful? Are you content? Where do you turn for answers to life's difficult questions? Do not forget the promise that if you seek Him, you will find Him - seek with your whole heart - God will not disappoint. The enemy is whispering to you that you will never measure up, so you might as well give up. This thought is a lie. Because of the cross of Christ, in God's eyes, you now measure up. God has provided for you a path to spiritual completeness.

Chapter 7 – Imminent Danger

It was a cold but bright Monday morning. It was April 15, 2013, and we had two family members running the Boston Marathon that morning. The morning was buzzing with excitement and anticipation. We rode bus #7 to Harvard Square and then took the subway to downtown Boston. The city was alive with the event of the day. It took over an hour to shuffle our way through the crowd to place ourselves next to the finish-line fence, where we told our children we would be cheering for them. I maintained our position next to the barricade, and my wife went to get us some hot chocolate. The warm cup of hot chocolate felt great. As I was taking the first sip, it happened. The first bomb exploded! The crowd was bewildered. What just happened? Did one of the buses at the finish line catch fire? What was going on? It seemed like minutes when it was only a few seconds when the second bomb exploded. Now there was no confusion. We saw what

happened across the street from us; we tasted the gunpowder. We were in imminent danger. It was like a curtain of haze descended on the event. We were confused, the crowd was confused, and the police officers in front of us looked confused. No one knew what to do!

Now, I have worked in an emergency department for twelve years, I have had to deal with many serious medical emergencies, but I was unprepared for this type of palpable threat. Do I jump the fence to give medical assistance? Do I stay with my wife and find a place of safety? Do I look in the crowd for our daughter-in-law and infant granddaughter that was on their way to meet us? Where was my son on the marathon course? It was clear that the same terrifying confusion paralyzed all those around us. The once lively, boisterous crowd was eerily silent.

To do well when danger is present, and our action is required, we do not want to be timid or controlled by fear. The stronghold of imminent danger is the stronghold of paralyzing fear.

Suppose you want to preserve and develop your resilience. In the case of the stronghold of imminent danger, you need to be able to evaluate a threat and approach it appropriately, with sound judgment and discipline. This task seems impossible when you are tasting the gunpowder.

This stress is faced daily by many professionals in our community who keep us safe. The police, paramedics, emergency room staff, and fire department staff work amid this type of stress all the time. It is also the stress military personnel face when under attack. Without these brave individuals in our community and fighting for our country, we would be facing a lot more stress of imminent danger, and we would be doing so without the necessary tools to do it well.

The antidote to this type of imminent danger stress is to evaluate the potential for real danger accurately, avoid it if possible, and, if unable to prevent it, develop a plan to be adequately trained to deal with the real threat.

If you want to be ready to handle the stress of imminent danger, you will rehearse your plan and put it into practice when the danger level is low. The antidote to imminent danger stress is to act on an already developed plan to deal with the event. In Boston, we had a great plan "A." We had a prearranged meeting place to get together after the race, and we even went to the finish line the day before to practice the plan. All seven family members knew where to meet and how to get there, but we had a faulty plan "B." Plan "B" depended on our cell phones. Within minutes of the bombing, the authorities turned off the cell towers. I stood there paralyzed by indecision, but my quick-thinking and quick-acting wife contacted the two family members who were

waiting at the predetermined spot and sent them away from the finish line. She then called our daughter-in-law and set up a secondary meeting place; we prayed.

The accurate evaluation of danger, practice, and plan will lessen stress and strengthen resilience when facing imminent danger.

However, the problem is that we tend to be more affected by presumed danger and motivated by fear as human beings.

Most of us face the imminent danger type of stress day-to-day in the category of the fearful “what ifs.” What if someone breaks into my house? What if the road is icy on the way to work? What if there is a flood? What if my house catches fire? What if the stock market crashes and I lose all my retirement?

We are human beings devoid of reason and directed by emotion. So now, when you take a concept of threat and danger and a mix of emotion and fear, you have the ingredients for a toxic soup. Our emotional memory is more robust than our rational memory, and we are governed by a deep-rooted fear much of the time. The enemy's goal with this stronghold is to hobble you with fear and dread. Meditate on Psalm 34:4-5 (TPT), *“Listen to my testimony: I cried to God in my distress and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears! Gaze upon him, join your life with his, and joy will come.*

Your faces will glisten with glory. You'll never wear that shame-face again." The Bible has hundreds of references to not being controlled by fear.

Fear is not rational; it is unreasonable and often more destructive than the object or event that evokes the fear. If you could somehow calculate all the human hours of productive life lost through the real imminently dangerous situations like natural disasters and war, it would pale compared to the hours of productive life lost because of fear. Fear is powerful. Fear is a limiting disability. It is a ruthless master; it will beat you down; it will make you feel useless and unworthy; it will sicken your soul and drain your grit. Fear is one of the most common tactics used by the enemy. Fear will stop you from finding and using your voice.

Fear is a powerful force and has the power to rob your joy and destroy your potential. Say goodbye to your grit. Fear of cancer has more life robbing power than cancer. Cancer may shorten your life, and it may steal your tomorrow, but fear takes your life today. Fear may protect you sometimes, but ongoing fear is never your friend.

Fear will leave you in a pile of anxiety and worry that will limit any productive action.

In the end, you will have lost your energy, joy, peace, and resilience.

Fear will convince you that if something is considered dangerous, it will have to be terrifying and that if it is not scary, it is not harmful. Fear is an emotional response and not a rational response. Fear will tell you that if you feel you are in control, you are safe, and if you are not in control, you are in danger. Fear will completely twist your ability to evaluate the potential for real trouble. If we hope to build any resilience, we need to figure out how to deal with fear.

Let us look at an example of how fear, real danger, and a sense of control can twist our ability to reason. Let us imagine you decide to ride your motorcycle fifty miles to do a tandem skydive. You are a skilled rider, the day is clear, and you will not have to ride at night. You are in control, and therefore you feel safe.

As far as skydiving goes, you get some preliminary training, get strapped in with a skilled skydiver, and off you go. When you leave the plane, you suddenly realize you are not in control; you are terrified and evaluate the experience as dangerous.

Now, if you were to look at these two events rationally, the motorcycle ride was much more dangerous than the skydive. However, the problem is that we do not evaluate rationally, evaluate emotionally, and end up being controlled by fear or become dangerously confident when we feel in

control.

Fear is powerful. An excellent ability to evaluate risk will serve you well, but fear will only bring you down. Like physical pain, fear is a loud voice that must be reckoned with, or else you will become a self-centered, self-focused pile of misery.

Fear is a liar; it suggests it is present to protect you when, in fact, it is present to destroy you. If we expect to reach our potential and become more resilient, we must learn to recognize fear, identify it as an enemy, and learn how to set it aside and move forward. It takes Godly grit to tear down the stronghold of fear.

Not only is fear deceptive, but it is also destructive. It will increase your stress, cause stress-related disease, rob your joy, destroy your plans, drain your motivation, and dissolve your grit.

So then, how should we deal with this mighty stronghold of fear?

To deal with fear, we first need to recognize it for what it is; it is not our friend; it is our enemy. Do not run from it; fear will hunt you down. You must face it and call it by name.

Once you recognize it for what it is, then do not feed it by always letting it rumble around your mind or be the focus of your speech; instead, learn to hate it. Do not let fear limit your

experience of life. Life is short enough.

Ask for help if needed. There are many times when fear is too overwhelming to overcome on your own. Do not internalize or personalize fear; after all, you are trying to get rid of it. Take some quiet time alone to define the fear, externalize, and depersonalize it by giving it a name. For example, if you are afraid of public speaking, then give it a name like, here comes “Anxious Pete” to prevent me from speaking to this group of strangers.

As a final death blow to fear, find someone else with similar fear and help them overcome that struggle. Follow the advice in the Bible in 1 John 4:18 (NKJV), where it tells us that *“Perfect love drives out fear.”* This statement does not mean that we should wait to experience someone loving us entirely; it means that in the presence of our fear if we focus on loving someone else thoroughly, our fear will soon disappear. Caring for and about others with a common struggle is the power of small groups, as seen in AA or successful drug recovery programs. The presence of a non-judgmental support group allows you the opportunity to help others who are struggling with similar pressures and fears. In turn, you are maintained and strengthened through the process of giving. You end up getting what you give, a reduction of your fear. In this context, make it a goal to give away your fear.

If you are plagued by the stronghold of fear and imminent danger, then assess, avoid, plan, prepare, and practice. Recognize fear, call it out, and then give it away. Do not let the enemy control you with fear-generating lies. Psalm 27:1 (TPT), *“The Lord is my revelation-light to guide me along the way; he’s the source of my salvation to defend me every day. I fear no one! I’ll never turn back and run from you, Lord; surround and protect me.”* Tear down the fear stronghold.

Chapter 8 – Strained Identity

In my early years as a family physician in Canada, I had the privilege of working with a young woman with a horrible seizure disorder. She averaged two hundred grand mal seizures per day from the time she was an infant. She had seen the best neurologists in several Canadian specialty centers but showed no improvement with any medication. When she was eighteen years old, there was only one other option. This option involved a major neurosurgical procedure that would separate her brain's two halves. She was very anxious about the surgery, but she had no other options. The operation was a success. She went from the two hundred daily seizures to none. Everyone was ecstatic. She had achieved what both she and her family had wished. She was seizure-free but not stress-free. Although she was now living the life she had longed for, she was unprepared for the change. It took a couple of years of regular counseling and

encouragement to learn to live her newfound life. Any life change is stressful. A significant life change is incredibly stressful. It involves a redefinition of self and relearning how this new self is to navigate in the world.

To function in life as a human being, with some sense of meaning, purpose, and direction, we all operate from a platform of self-definition. This platform is a form of ego-intactness, how we see and define ourselves, and how we think others see us. If our self-definition becomes unfamiliar or not authentic, there will be stress. We need a grip on our identity.

In the Bible, we are encouraged in Romans 12:3 (TPT), *“I would ask each of you to be emptied of self-promotion and not create a false image of your importance.”* We need an accurate, familiar self-definition to function successfully.

It is essential to ask ourselves the following questions. How do you define yourself? Is that definition accurate? Has that definition changed recently? How would you like that definition to change in the future?

This “self-definition” develops and changes throughout our lives. It is the culmination of every element that makes up who we are; our upbringing, our family of origin, our birth order, the community where we grew up, and our expectations. This self combines our life experiences, gains, losses, rewards,

encouragements, and discouragements.

Our continually changing environment continually challenges this self-definition.

Our self-reflection, thoughts, self-evaluation, and contemplation also challenge our self-definition. It is also impacted by what we believe and our lives' directions. It gives our lives an emotional and spiritual path.

The opinions of others also challenge our identity. We are impacted by how family and acquaintances view us and their expectations of us.

Then, all the other stuff challenges or defines our self-concept: our gender, ethnic heritage, education, physical appearance, abilities, and economic status. In other words, our self-definition becomes the total of what uniquely makes us an individual.

You add up all these elements of who we are and what we are becoming, and you end up with a unique personality, a novel you, a psychological and spiritual fingerprint of yourself. You are an individual, and there is no other replica of you. You are utterly unique, the only you that you or your world will ever experience.

Yes, you are unique, but your uniqueness does not signify your identity. Your identity is from God and the fact that you

bear His image. The enemy wants you to believe your identity is in what you can do for yourself because, after all, you deserve more. We desire to be valued beyond our uniqueness, for more than what we do, but appreciated for who we are. The enemy whispers to you that your uniqueness makes you special. He wants you to focus on that uniqueness and strive as hard as possible to convince yourself and others that you are special because of what you can do. He wants to reinforce the belief that it is all about you and your uniqueness, not that you are special because God loves you. We run into problems when we start to define this uniqueness as something that makes us special, different, or better than the rest of humanity.

We are all unique, one-of-kind individuals. The more you hang on to your uniqueness as the foundation of your identity, the more you open yourself to stress, disappointment, conflict, and despair. If you were to take the time to sit down and write out your self-definition, it would most likely be a list of those things that make you unique. We have lost touch with our identity.

Humility with a sound understanding of your uniqueness is necessary to have a healthy self-definition. You are a unique one of many. It is essential to realize that 90% of human DNA is identical from human to human, and only a tiny percentage accounts for all the differences we observe. You might be one

of a kind, but so is your neighbor and the rest of the community.

If you appreciate your uniqueness for what it is and live with humility, it will foster growth and strengthen your resilience.

But on the other hand, if you see your unique qualities and attributes as making you special, you are moving in the direction of excessive amounts of stress. The enemy wants to convince you that your identity has nothing to do with God. We have traded our identity in God for a cheap sense of specialness. We deny that we bear His image and, in the process, devalue ourselves, destroy our grit, and live in misery. Our voice never gets spoken.

This “specialness” is a product of arrogance and an unrealistic worldview that requires massive amounts of energy to maintain. Now you are working overtime to prove how special you are; it may work for a while, but eventually, you will burn out. Why do you burn out? Because you are using your uniqueness to support a lie. The lie is that you are different or better than everyone else. Do not believe this lie of the enemy; it will become a stronghold in your life very quickly.

How do issues with our identity cause stress? What are the pressures that cause an alteration in our self-definition?

As we walk life’s path, this self-definition that we so dearly

cling to is challenged daily. It is challenged most directly by either an experience of loss or an experience of gain. We are most acutely aware of this pressure when we experience a significant loss. Loss of a spouse, marriage, child, job, or loss of health is incredibly stressful. In these situations, you are forced to see yourself as different, and it will take time to adjust to this status change. A significant change in any form is a threat to our self-definition and is, therefore, stressful. This ongoing form of stress will drain our resilience, but it can build grit if appropriately handled.

We often do not define the occurrence as stressful when we experience gains, such as a hard-fought-for goal achieved or a desire realized. We become so accustomed to operating in life with a fixed self-definition that we do not recognize that the definition will change when we reach our goals. A study has shown that 60% of those who complete the Boston marathon end up depressed within the next month. How could achieving this goal result in depression? It takes about two years to prepare and qualify to run the Boston marathon, and all the while, you are defining yourself as “training for the Boston marathon.” Your identity is in the achievement of a challenging goal. You work hard, get up early in the morning, change your diet, adjust your social calendar. You know how to live your life as someone training to run the Boston marathon, so when you reach your goal, you have to change

how you have previously defined yourself because you are no longer training to achieve that goal. This self-definition change can be incredibly stressful.

So how do we deal with this stress of altered self-definition? Is there a way to accommodate to change that does not take years?

Yes, there are several things you can do that may lessen the negative impact when your identity is challenged, attacked, or altered by gain or loss. These actions require honesty, humility, and time.

Firstly, you will need to separate yourself from all the motion and commotion of life. Turn off all your electronic devices that continuously invade your solitude and take some quiet time. Use this time of solitude as an opportunity to take inventory and set aside some of the twisted concepts of what you have come to believe gives you your identity. Your skin color, gender, ethnic group, physical features, age, physical abilities, group memberships, values, beliefs, accomplishments, education, failures, the experience of trauma or abuse, physical pain, illnesses, possessions, job, social status, and on and on and on make you unique but do not make you special. Your identity is much more than these things. Identify and address false beliefs as they present.

We are only here for a limited time; the lines on the fingerprint

of your soul are not as important as what you do with that fingerprint. Live your life deliberately. Live your life humbly.

Take an honest inventory of how you have defined yourself. During this time, journaling can be very productive. Who are you? What events have shaped your view of yourself? Who do you want to be? What would you like your children or grandchildren to say about you at your funeral?

If you strip away all the elements of uniqueness, you will be left with what it means to be a human being. At the core of who you are, you will find that you are very much alone, it is up to you to ask and answer these complex questions of who you are, and then you will need to take full responsibility for the consequences of those decisions and directions. If you conclude that human life is a random chance happening, you will have to wrestle with the consequences of ultimate meaninglessness with no basis for morality. If, on the other hand, you look at the incredible order, diversity, and beauty around and determine that this must be the work of a benevolent creator, then you will have to wrestle with what you should do about your relationship with that creator. Should you seek that creator or try to hide?

If you perform this inventory, you will find that a lot of the stress you carry will melt away.

Take time to consider what it means to bear the image of God. What does the Bible say about your identity? In striving to be considered special, we lose touch with our identity and our real specialness. 1 Peter 2:9 (TPT), *“But you are God’s chosen treasure - priests who are kings, a spiritual “nation” set apart as God’s devoted ones. He called you out of darkness to experience his marvelous light, and now he claims you as his very own. He did this so that you would broadcast his glorious wonders throughout the world.”*

After you have done the challenging and humbling self-evaluation work, there is an opportunity for reinvention. Not only do you get to redefine yourself, but you also get to redefine yourself with a lot less stress. You can now find your voice and use it for its intended purpose. Your grit will grow, and your life will have a purpose. How would you like to define yourself? Do not believe the enemy’s lies that your identity is your uniqueness or what you can do for yourself.

Chapter 9 – Uncertainty

My palms were sweaty, my heart raced, and the muscles above my left eye twitched like an epileptic hummingbird. It was early Spring 1975, and I was being interviewed by a committee that would determine my acceptance into medical school. The magnitude of stress was almost unbearable. My future was in the hands of that small group of interviewers. The pressure that day was the stress of perceived imminent danger. Although it was nerve-racking, I was prepared for that stress. The stress I was not prepared for was the stress that followed that interview. It took eight weeks for the result letters to go to the applicants. There were 650 applicants for only 50 positions. I was not confident that I would be accepted, and I anguished as I waited. What I was experiencing at this point was the stress of uncertainty. My mind raced with different options. What will I do if I am not accepted? What will I do if I am accepted? What else should

I do with my life? My brain felt like a little ping pong ball bouncing from side to side as the time dragged on.

We are encouraged by the following words in the book of Philippians 4:6 (TPT) in the New Testament. *“Don’t be pulled in different directions, or worried about a thing.”*

Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to live an utterly worry-free life with no uncertainty or confusion? Unfortunately, life is not that easy to navigate. Life is filled with times of confusion and uncertainty.

So, let us look at this stronghold of the stress of uncertainty.

I have been in the health care field as either a primary care physician or an addiction medicine specialist for over forty years. I can say with conviction that health concerns and uncertainty walk together. Even the terminology that medicine is called a “practice” means there is lots of room for uncertainty, such as an uncertain diagnosis, test result, and treatment.

As a patient, you experience real symptoms, but the cause is often uncertain. To go from the symptom to an accurate diagnosis is often a path that is both confusing and exhausting. You present to the doctor’s office with a nagging cough, and you are sent for a chest X-ray. The X-ray reports that a possible abnormality has been detected, and the

radiologist recommends that the X-ray be repeated in three months. You are now living with a form of uncertainty that produces terror.

Another area filled with uncertainty is the area of finances and financial security. As living gets more expensive every year, how can you ever determine what you may need to retire? As you look at your newborn son or daughter, you have no idea what you will need to send them to college in eighteen years, let alone know what their first car might cost and how they will ever afford to buy their first house.

No matter what you make as an income, it feels like it will never be enough.

Another area of uncertainty involves our sense of safety. There have always been areas of our communities where we did not feel safe. We felt safe by avoiding those areas while enjoying a sense of safety at school, church, or while attending community events. What has happened to our understanding of security and safety? Uncertainty about our community's safety and security has recently become universal. There seems to be no place that feels safe with reports of school shootings, violent protests, random acts of violence, home invasion robberies, rising distrust of authority figures, and new deadly infectious diseases.

Where can we go to find safety, security, and peace? Safe

places seem to be harder to find.

The most significant uncertainty is in relationships, and nothing is more troubling than for a relationship to sour. We define ourselves by our relationships, and it is incredibly alarming to find out that those relationships were not what we thought. A relationship depends on a lot more than just you, and you do not have control over the other person in the relationship. With 100% accuracy, you never really know precisely where they stand. That uncertainty can be incredibly stressful.

The stress of uncertainty is present to some degree all the time. This type of stress can negatively impact our lives in several significant ways.

Firstly, the stress of uncertainty causes a lot of confusion. This confusion can initially be very energetic. If you have a physical symptom, it can lead to hours of internet searching for answers, multiple medical consultations, and tests. If the confusion is in finances, it can result in a feverish review of investments or taking a second or third job. If the confusion is in relationships, it can result in sleepless nights and hours, days, weeks, months, and years of anxious thought.

The worry and fear generated by the stress of uncertainty will eventually burn you out. The uncertainty that plagued you, to

begin with, is still present, but now you have no energy to do anything about it. You burn out and give up.

So, if the original uncertainty was in the area of health, then you give up and reach for another donut or beer or beer and donut.

If the original uncertainty was in finance, you give up and spend all you have today. You think, why bother with a retirement plan that may not be sufficient anyway?

If the uncertainty was in relationships, you might as well give up and do what is best for you. At least if you abandon relationships to become self-centered, you know the thoughts of the one with whom you are relating.

So now I am left overweight, broke, insecure, and alone. My actions to deal with uncertainty have been not only ineffective but destructive.

At this point, our resilience weakens, and there are no tools to deal with the next area of uncertainty that you may have to face today. To avoid a life of despair and isolation, you will have to learn to live with uncertainty. The enemy's lie is that you can and should be confident and sure before moving ahead in your life. This lie results in you ending up paralyzed by uncertainty and confusion.

To deal with uncertainty, first, you must recognize it. At times,

just recognizing something is uncertain and likely to remain uncertain for a while will lessen the uncertainty's power.

If you are starting a new job, it is appropriate to feel uncertain and insecure for the first few weeks. Give yourself the freedom to feel unsure and insecure. These feelings will go away quickly if you do not waste your valuable emotional energy fighting what is appropriate and inevitable.

The same principle applies in finance, security, and relationships.

Take time to write out the areas of uncertainty in these areas. This exercise may not clear up the uncertainty, but it will go a long way to lessen its negative impact.

Now that you have listed the uncertainty areas do what you can to clear up the confusion. Ask questions, ask for help, and be patient.

In the medical setting, it can be helpful to ask for options. There are always multiple diagnostic and treatment paths in medicine, so ask if there are other ways to get a diagnosis or other treatment options.

Find a mentor, and when necessary, ask for help. Help could come from a medical professional if the uncertainty is your health, a financial planner if the uncertainty is in the area of finance, or a marriage counselor if the uncertainty is in the

area of essential relationships.

There will be times when the troubling uncertainty will just not let go. These are times when there seem to be no answers, and the help you get seems insufficient. During this time of overwhelming uncertainty, one may easily slip into a pit of despair or depression. If you are in one of these times, make a habit of being thankful. Get a gratitude journal and discipline yourself to write daily. Chances are you will not want to write anything, so force yourself and write a daily list of the things and people for which you are thankful.

If your stress is in uncertainty, question, clarify and remain thankful. These times of uncertainty can be times for your trust in God to grow. Follow the example of the psalmist in Psalm 143:8 (TPT), *“Let the dawning day bring me revelation of your tender, unfailing love. Give me light for my path and teach me, for I trust in you.”* You will have periods of uncertainty and confusion and do not believe the enemy's lie that you can always eliminate the uncertainty. Do not let uncertainty destroy your God-given peace. Do not allow uncertainty to paralyze you. Trust God, and keep moving. Find your voice and use it.

Chapter 10 – Covering Responsibility

Bob is a 52-year-old male whose life is a living hell. Addiction stole Bob's job, destroyed his marriage and health, and left him renting a small room from his eldest son. However, none of these losses were the central part of his living hell; his living hell was that his youngest son was addicted to heroin. Bob lived in constant fear and torment. He questioned his every action. Should money be given to his son? Should he help him find a place to live? Should he even talk to his son? Bob's living hell is the stronghold of covering responsibility. This stronghold is the enemy's lie that your thoughts, words, and actions determine the outcome of someone else's life. You believe you are responsible for the consequences of their actions.

As humans, we function best when personally responsible, care for ourselves, and function with a meaningful purpose. However, there are times when this is not possible,

and you are in the position where you must provide necessary care, boundaries, and security for someone you care about that is not willing or able to function independently. In Galatians 6:5 (MSG), we read, *“Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”*

It is hard enough to be responsible for yourself in this ever-changing, confusing world, let alone to have to be responsible for another who is unable or unwilling to be accountable for themselves. This type of stress is present in several different life situations. One of the most stressful life experiences is to be the spouse of someone with dementia. In this situation, day-to-day life feels like a prison with a life sentence. Both you and the person you are caring for are trapped. You never know what to expect, and you, as the responsible party, are often the target of accusation, disrespect, and abuse. As you walk through the day, you know you will step on an accusatory landmine, but you do not know when.

The enormous stress of parenting is another example of this type of stress. Parenting takes you from caring for an entirely dependent and vulnerable little creature, through times of adolescent rebellion and irresponsibility, to the struggles of early adulthood. There is no such thing as being adequately equipped to be a parent. It is one thing to be a parent with this stress of responsibility for another when you are young,

but it is another thing when you are older. I do not know how grandparents can raise their grandchildren, yet I live in a state where 60% of grandparents raise their grandchildren - being responsible for others as parents is incredibly stressful.

Caregiving is another area where the stress of being responsible for someone else is experienced. Caregiving could be caring for a spouse with dementia, caring for an aging parent, caring for a disabled child, or even keeping an eye on an aged neighbor. This stress is exhausting because it is almost impossible to get a break if you are a caregiver. There are many excellent books on the strains of ongoing caregiving, and if you are in this position, you may want to read them.

Lastly is the stress of social responsibility for individuals who are unable or unwilling to be responsible for themselves. For example, it is stressful for a medical provider to continue to provide ongoing, high-quality care to members of their community who take no responsibility for their health. How much caring energy should you devote to an obese diabetic who continues to eat fast food and consume large soda volumes? It is stressful for society to take responsibility for those who do not take responsibility for themselves, and in an age of entitlement, this stress is growing.

So, if you find yourself in one of these situations, what can you

do? How can you possibly survive? How do you tear down this stronghold of covering responsibility? The enemy uses this stronghold to silence your voice and rob your peace.

The pressure in this situation of being responsible for another comes from tension or imbalance between love and trust. There would be minimal stress if you did not love or care for the person for whom you are responsible. We struggle with the definition of love when caring for someone who cannot be trusted to care for themselves.

In a healthy, non-stressful relationship, there is a balance between love and trust. On the love side, there is compassion where you care deeply about the other, and over time, this caring becomes more profound and more meaningful.

With a healthy relationship, there is also patience. No one is perfect, and patience needs to be present as our compassion grows for another.

With a healthy relationship, we also have trust. Trust grows in an environment of authenticity and dependability. Yes, there will be times when trust weakens and falters, but conflicts can be resolved with compassion and patience, and the relationship can grow.

With a healthy relationship, there is also personal responsibility. With personal responsibility, you can trust the

other to share the load, allowing the trust to grow and strengthen the relationship.

On the other hand, when a growing distrust develops, an incredible strain is put on the relationship and produces a lot of stress. When suspicion grows, the person you once cared about is seen as being more unpredictable and undependable. With increasing irresponsibility, the balance between love and trust is strained as the relationship's responsible person becomes exhausted. With increasing exhaustion, trust erodes even more.

If a relationship were a brick wall, love and compassion would be the mortar, and trust would be the bricks. It takes both love and trust to build a healthy, productive relationship. So, now you are in a situation where you love someone, but it is not safe to trust them. This situation is the stress of covering responsibility. Now, what do you do?

Firstly, reaffirm that you do love them. It is a common and natural reaction to deny this love when the going gets tough, but remember that the tension between love and trust is the cause of this stress, not your lack of love. You do care, even if you do not feel like it at times.

Now, if you continue to care and want to avoid being crushed by stress, you will need to establish boundaries. A boundary setting will free you to act without making emotional decisions

in the heat of the battle. Choose your battles carefully and, if possible, do not set the boundaries in isolation. If you are dealing with an acting-out adolescent, you may need to establish a behavior boundary contract with clearly stated responsibilities and rewards. If you are dealing with a parent or spouse, developing these boundaries with all the other family decision-makers is necessary. It will not work out well if you take your spouse's keys away, only to have them given back by a naive son or daughter.

You may need boundary contracts in the following situations: a rebellious adolescent, a family member with addiction issues, an aging parent (when should driving be stopped, cooking, or using a ladder), or an adult child requesting a financial bailout. These boundaries can be challenging to set in the heat of the moment when things are not going well, so try to think ahead of the conflict and start the discussion early.

Often, the burden of this type of stress is just too much to carry alone. You need help. This help could come from other family members, neighbors, community or church programs, or other groups. Explore what is available early and develop a plan on how and when to request the needed help. Formulate your plan before you are too exhausted to call in any support.

As mentioned in some of the other sections dealing with different types of stress, remember to be and stay deliberately

thankful. When you are responsible for a loved one, this conflict between love and trust can easily drag you into a bottomless pit of despair. Take time daily to write out five things you are thankful for; it may save your sanity.

If you struggle with the stronghold of covering responsibility, breath, ask for help, do not personalize, set boundaries, and be thankful. Remember, the enemy wants to use this stronghold to rob your peace, steal your voice, and kill your relationships. Use your Godly grit to tear down this stronghold. Remember, live humbly and honestly with thanksgiving, and you will have a lot less destructive stress.

Chapter 11 – Transgressions

As people, we will do almost anything to hide our transgressions, yet their hiding makes them damaging. We have all done wrong. We have all deeply wounded the people who love us. We all carry the scars of hurting others. To live your life carrying these injuries is stressful. The enemy whispers that you can successfully cover your transgressions, and they will not produce negative consequences.

When I was fifteen years old, I wanted to spend a summer doing something meaningful. I contacted the regional director of the church I attended, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and asked if there was a volunteer project to use my help. The denomination was planning to build a new house and chapel for a missionary in the arctic that summer, and they needed four volunteers.

I volunteered, and so did my grandfather. My grandfather was

an amazing man. He was physically sturdy and emotionally stable. A day does not pass without recalling something that I learned from him. I had a perfect mentor; I was blessed. I loved my grandfather, and I knew he loved me. So, we boarded the train and headed for Churchill, Manitoba, and then onto a very loud pontoon plane to fly to Eskimo Point, Northwest Territories. We shared a fabulous adventure. When we returned in the fall, our local church pastor asked to report to the congregation. Now, my mentor had taught me a lot that summer; I learned the proper way to hold a hammer, the formula to ensure that a corner was square, and other skills that I would use for home repair projects to this very day. Unfortunately, there was one skill that was modeled by my grandfather daily that I did not learn, and that was humility.

When I spoke to the congregation that day, it was a display of arrogance. I wanted them to think I was great and strong, and independent. The pastor interviewed me in front of the congregation and asked about the other volunteers. I mentioned the other volunteers, but I did not acknowledge that my grandfather was my grandfather. Later that evening, I found out from my mother that my arrogance had hurt my grandfather. I am fortunate that my grandfather was the man he was because he did not let my arrogant display interfere with our relationship. He continued to be my mentor and even was by my side every day while I built my first house.

On the other hand, I carried the burden of that insult for thirty years. I am thankful that I had an opportunity to talk to him about that event before he passed away. Why did I wait so long? The enemy's lie is that transparency is dangerous and that you can successfully deceive.

In Ephesians 4:32 (AMP), we are encouraged to: *“Be kind and helpful to one another, tender-hearted, compassionate, understanding, forgiving one another readily and freely.”*

None of us like the process of looking at where we have hurt others. The stronghold of transgressions is the anguish of guilt, shame, and remorse. It will require humility, honesty, and Godly grit to overcome this stronghold. Our hearts are very deceptive, so you may be unaware of where you have hurt another.

There are also areas where the offense was not intentional. It is still an offense and harms the relationship.

The transgression could be some form of injustice or misinterpretation of an action. Be very slow to judge because a rapid judgment is usually inaccurate and can cause more offense.

Or maybe your action was deceptive, like a little or big lie, hiding the truth, or spinning a story to make you look better than you should. All of these can offend and result in

relational distrust. The Bible states that those we lie to, we hate.

So, what do you do with this stronghold now that you have discovered areas where you have offended?

Firstly, please stop it. Do not continue the offense. Do not keep telling lies to cover other lies. If you recognize where you are hurting others, admit it, and stop it.

Secondly, take time to become more aware of how you have hurt others. We are sensitive to how others have hurt us yet not very sensitive to where we have hurt them. Take time to consider and ponder where you have hurt others.

Before sending off a quick apology text or leaving a voice mail, take the time to write out the transgression you have committed. Be honest and open. If you run around making superficial apologies as a way of covering your tracks, you will only be increasing your stress, weakening your resilience, and worsening the offense.

Take time to write it out first. Pause to consider the apology. Some apologies are best delivered by letter, and some are best-delivered face-to-face. A sincere apology is asking for forgiveness and not anything else from the other individual. You should not expect them to think better of you because you apologize or immediately restore a damaged

relationship. A sincere, meaningful apology has absolutely no strings attached.

Once you have delivered the apology, you need to wait patiently. If the relationship is recoverable, it will take time. Be patient. Do not be demanding. Restoration may not be possible with some relationships because of an offense you are responsible for, and you will have to learn to live with that.

If you struggle with a stronghold around transgression, be humble, apologize, and wait. Follow the advice in Romans 14:19 (TPT), *“So then, make it your top priority to live a life of peace with harmony in your relationships, eagerly seeking to strengthen and encourage one another.”*

Chapter 12 – Bitterness

Bitterness is the internalization and personalization of a real or perceived injustice with a persistent and intense rumination about the offense or the injustice agent, resulting in more damage caused by the bitterness than could ever be caused by the injustice. There will be times in your life when rumination about a major injustice will be necessary. Use these times to gain clarity and develop a plan. Be on guard. If you remain thankful and do not grumble to God about your life situation, you should remain protected from the snare of bitterness.

You may have suffered some horrible abuse and feel your bitterness has merit. Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse is never justified. Civil society needs strong laws with harsh penalties for abusers. If you have suffered abuse, you do not have to live the rest of your life defined by the abuse's pain.

Abuse is a real but legless, hungry tiger growling on the other side of the room. Bitterness gives the tiger legs and claws, so now it can tear you to shreds. Do not allow bitterness to provide the destructive power to abuse.

When I first began this journey to write about bitterness, I naively thought it would be a simple task. Bitter people are victims of their own making, imprisoned by their own hands. For four decades, working as a family physician, I have seen lives destroyed by many agents. I have witnessed cancer taking the lives of the young, heart disease kill people in their prime, and addiction rob many. None compare to the devastating impact of bitterness of all these agents of destruction. Bitterness will turn the wise into fools, the wealthy into beggars, and the delightful into the disgusting. Bitterness will steal your wealth, your health, and at times, your life.

I thought it would be a simple matter of just stating the evils of bitterness, saying a loud warning, and then moving on to another topic. My simplistic view may help someone who is not bitter, but it has no value to those who are already bitter. Bitterness tosses away reason and makes the bitter person both blind and deaf. If it is possible to help someone caught in offense, we must look behind the scenes and address the cause. This journey led me to explore the roots of bitterness, the actions, directions, thoughts, and beliefs of someone bitter. The bitter feel they need more to feel

complete, which leads to an exploration of greed and self-centeredness. If greed and self-centeredness are behind bitterness, then what is the cause of greed and self-centeredness? This awareness led to a path where only the brave dare venture, exploring spiritual emptiness. There is no adequate medical or psychological treatment for the misery produced by greed-fueled bitterness. Some therapies will lessen the pain of the suffering, but they are not a cure. The only effective remedy is spiritual. If you live in a pond of misery, you are also bitter. No life circumstance can cause you this degree of distress without being bitter. You will need to address the bitterness if you hope to escape the misery. So, if you are not bitter, I hope the strong warning to avoid bitterness, like a poison, will be sufficient to keep you on the right path. If, on the other hand, you are bitter, and living in misery, then I pray you will have the courage to read on and allow God to guide you out of the hell of bitterness.

Tannerite combines two safe and stable compounds, an oxidizer consisting of ammonium nitrate and ammonium perchlorate and a catalyst comprised of aluminum powder. The oxidizer and the catalyst are very safe if kept separate, but they explode when combined and subjected to a high-velocity impact. You get the same result if you mix an offense with bitterness. The offense is the oxidizer, and bitterness is the catalyst; the result is psychological Tannerite. Combine

these two and subject the combination to the high-velocity impact of stressful living and kaboom; you have an explosion of misery.

Bitterness will steal your health, energy, and emotional stability. It will destroy your relationships and rob your joy, peace, and contentment. It will kill your potential, purpose, plans, relationships, aspirations, and dreams. If this interaction between bitterness and injustice were a loaded gun, the injustice would be the gunpowder, and the bitterness would be the armor-piercing bullet. The gunpowder makes all the noise, demands attention, fills the room with confusion and smoke. The projectile silently sells through the air and into your heart amid the noise, smoke, and fire. Bitterness can and will kill you!

You have heard that bitterness is drinking poison, waiting for someone else to die. This statement is false. Bitterness is drinking poison and then giving a little to everyone you care about while waiting for someone to die.

If bitterness were an autoimmune disease, it would be the most lethal. It slowly chews away at your soul and leads you down a path of destruction. Not only is bitterness deadly, but it is also contagious as it generates bitterness in others as the toxic poison is shared. Bitterness leaves a wide wake of destruction. You must recognize bitterness early. You must

take personal responsibility for it, and you must run from it as fast as you can. Treat it as a toxic poison, or it is likely to kill you.

Bitterness, to the degree just described, is easy to identify. You know you are bitter, you are aware of the injustice, you focus on it, and it occupies every thought and conversation. To recognize this form of bitterness, just stand in front of a mirror and ask yourself, “Am I bitter?” Your answer will most likely be, “yes, and because of what that so-and-so did, I deserve the right to be bitter.” Remember, it does not matter how justified you feel about your bitterness; it will still kill you and most likely have minimal impact on the object of your irritation. You are not harming them; you are just hurting yourself! If questions remain after you look in the mirror, then just set the timer on your smartphone to ninety minutes; each time the alarm goes off, write down what you are thinking about at that time. It may take a few days, but you will quickly find out if you are meditating about an injustice. What thoughts awaken you in the middle of the night?

In Ephesians 4:31-32 (AMPC), the Bible gives clear instructions regarding bitterness where it states, “*Let all bitterness and indignation and wrath (passion, rage, bad temper) and resentment (anger, animosity) and quarreling (brawling, clamor, contention) and slander (evil-speaking,*

abusive or blasphemous language) be banished from you, with all malice (spite, ill will, or baseness of any kind). And become useful and helpful and kind to one another, tenderhearted (compassionate, understanding, loving-hearted), forgiving one another [readily and freely], as God in Christ forgave you.” If you desire to be free from the impact of injustice and offense, you need to avoid bitterness.

The enemy's lie is that you can correct injustice through bitterness. He wants you to believe that you will win the injustice battle if you ruminate and churn enough. Please do not believe this lie; it will kill you. Do everything you can to recognize and avoid the stronghold of bitterness!

Chapter 13 – Greed

The power behind bitterness is greed and emptiness. Greed is the passionate pursuit of more, just for the sake of having more. It is an insatiable longing that cannot be satisfied. It is a loud, demanding hunger. A hunger that does not go away. It desires more food, money, affirmation, affection, power, knowledge, status, or comfort. It is an inability to experience contentment with what you currently have. Greed is an intense pang of hunger with unattainable peace. The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of greed is “a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (such as money) than is needed, motivated by naked ambition.”

A form of greed is avarice, an excessive desire to gain and possess wealth. The root word for greed or avarice is also the ancient root word for grasping, craving, long for, gluttony, voracious, hungry, covetous, or eager to obtain, with an

emphasis on hunger.

The most destructive component in greed is not the hunger or the object of the craving. The dangerous element is the lack of contentment in the passionate pursuit of attaining more when you already have enough. The enemy's lie is that if you have enough, you will be content.

How does greed lead to bitterness? The intense desire and pursuit of more and the inability to experience contentment cause the greedy individual to view others as obstacles to attaining their desires. We perceive barriers as unjust and offensive; therefore, we can justify being bitter. In my work in addiction medicine, if you get between an addict and their drug of choice, you will be seen as offensive and a target of bitterness. Greed is the energy behind all the roots of bitterness.

The greedy individual focuses on their needs, and they soon become unaware of the needs of those around them. The greedy become blind and deaf to their world. This worldview can be a disaster for relationships and guarantee the failure of a business. A business owner who loses sight of their customers' needs will not be in business very long.

Jesus warned the people of His day to avoid greed as recorded in Luke 12:15 (TPT), "*Speaking to the people, Jesus continued, "Be alert and guard your heart from greed and*

always wishing for what you don't have. For your life can never be measured by the amount of things you possess." Be on guard; greed is subtle but deadly, and if we are honest, we are all greedy.

Greed will twist your thinking and fill your mind with all sorts of irrational thoughts and beliefs. Greed will convince you an emotional need can be satisfied with a possession. The greedy believe you can eliminate misery with ownership. If I just possess more, life's anguish will vanish. The enemy wants you to think that you can purchase peace and contentment. Greed is self-centeredness on steroids.

Greed causes a restless intensity that will never be satisfied. With each unsuccessful attempt to attain more and an ongoing lack of contentment, the result is a growing dissatisfaction and despair. The greedy view other people as obstacles to more, so the greedy end up more isolated.

Proverbs 15:27 (MSG) describes the impact of greed on relationships. *"A greedy and grasping person destroys community; those who refuse to exploit live and let live."*

The greedy live in constant conflict with others. Their needs are the only essential needs, and they will do what they can to take from others. Proverbs 28:25 (NIV), *"The greedy stir up conflict, but those who trust in the LORD will prosper."*

In the end, the greedy live out their lives in isolation and full of misery with no hope of a cure. If you are bitter, you are also greedy. You do not want this to be a description of your life.

If you desire to be at peace and avoid greed, your goal should not be more; it should be contentment and gratitude for what you do have. 1 Timothy 6:6-10 (TPT) speaks to this issue. *“We have a “profit” that is greater than theirs—our holy awe of God! To have merely our necessities is to have enough. Isn’t it true that our hands were empty when we came into the world, and when we leave this world our hands will be empty again? Because of this, food and clothing is enough to make us content. But those who crave the wealth of this world slip into spiritual snares. They become trapped by the troubles that come through their foolish and harmful desires, driven by greed and drowning in their own sinful pleasures. And they take others down with them into their corruption and eventual destruction. Loving money is the first step toward all kinds of trouble. Some people run after it so much that they have given up their faith. Craving more money pushes them away from the faith into error, compounding misery in their lives!”*

Do not forget that greed is a part of every one of the roots of bitterness. Greed is ugly! If you are anxious, impatient, a gossip, a mocker, or any one of the roots of bitterness, then you are also greedy. We all need to admit and address the greed in our lives if we want to be free from destructive

bitterness.

How do we get a handle on the evil of greed? Understanding where greed originates will help get it under control. Greed is a desperate attempt to fill a profound spiritual emptiness, a bottomless pit of human angst. Empty people are greedy; greedy people are bitter, and bitter people live in misery. Tear down the stronghold of greed.

Chapter 14 – Shame

Shame is the internalization, personalization, and rumination about our inadequacy and depravity. Shame causes emotionally painful self-condemnation. Shame is a state of bitter, paralyzing remorse when you get a glimpse of who you are. Shame is a powerful force. We do all we can to look good and intact from the outside, knowing something is rotten on the inside because of shame. We all hide and avoid exposure.

Abusers use shame to control the behavior of a child, a community, or a nation. Politicians weaponize shame during political campaigns. It is often the candidate with the best use of shame who will win an election. The enemy uses shame to condemn you and leave you feeling hopeless. The enemy wants you to believe you are the most depraved person on the planet, and therefore you are worthy of rejection.

What is shame? What is the power of shame? How does the enemy use shame to increase your self-focus? You cannot talk about your shame without acknowledging your depravity because shame occurs when you get a glimpse of your depravity. Remember Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV), *“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”* Deceitful and wicked, wow, what a combination and potential for self-destructive deception. In other words, we are all polluted beyond repair.

My parents grew up on a farm in the Canadian prairies before indoor plumbing. They thought it would be necessary for my growth and development to experience some of what they experienced while still a young adolescent. I would spend a couple of weeks each summer at the farm owned by my mother’s cousin. It was a time full of experiences that were utterly foreign to me, the city boy. My mother’s cousin had a son that was a few years older than me, and he was my on-the-farm mentor. He remains a valued friend to this day. One of the first lessons I learned on the plumbing-deficient farm was that you had two options if you required the facilities in the middle of the night. Option A was to take a very poor-quality flashlight and wander across the yard to the outhouse, where it was cold and dark. Option B was to use the five-gallon pail that sat in each bedroom. Wealthy farmers had exquisitely crafted chamber pots, and regular farmers had

metal five-gallon pales. You know, if you get up quickly in the middle of the night and accidentally kick into that pale or chamber pot, it does not matter much about its style or form. What matters is what is in the pot. I think we live much of our lives in this way. We focus intently on the container and are not concerned with the contents.

The dictionary definition of shame is: “*Shame is an unpleasant self-conscious emotion typically associated with a negative evaluation of the self; and feelings of distress, exposure, mistrust, powerlessness, and worthlessness.*”

We live in fear that if anyone knew what was really inside us, we would not be loved or accepted. We spend our time, energy, and resources attempting to avoid exposure and failure. We hide and deny our wrongdoings and thoughts. We deceive ourselves as we try to deceive others. Shame makes us direct our focus inward and view ourselves negatively. The enemy will do whatever he can to cause you to focus on yourself. This intense inward focus blinds us to what is going on around us. Shame caused Adam and Eve to hide from God because of their sin and rebellion - Genesis 3:8 (NKJV), “*And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*” They knew what they did was wrong, and therefore they hid. Since then, we have become skilled

at hiding. We hide in our work, hobbies, addictions, passions, preaching, good deeds, caring, sacrifice, and on and on and on. We hide in our gangs and churches where a shared norm helps us feel a little better and more sheltered from exposure. We will do anything to avoid feeling humiliated, exposed, or small.

We are afraid of what will spill out of our pot if it is accidentally kicked. What is the cause of our internal conflict? What is the real reason for our shame? For this conflict to exist, we must be aware of two things. We must be aware, to a degree, of what is inside us; who we are. We must also have some awareness of who we were intended to be. If we were not aware of both, there would be no conflict and no shame. We would live like animals under the control of the strongest and fittest. There would be no right and wrong awareness and no basis for a moral code of conduct. If you have ever experienced shame, you cannot deny that this conflict exists.

If we were able to pry off the lid of our pretentious denial, what would we find inside? What we would see would be our true nature. What is our true nature? How depraved are we? Theologian R.C. Sproul defines our sin-nature or fallen state as one of “radical corruption.” In a 2005 article, he explained radical corruption as; “Radical corruption means that the fall from our original state has affected us not simply at the periphery of our existence. It is not something that merely

taints an otherwise good personality; rather, it is that the corruption goes to the radix, to the root or core of our humanity, and it affects every part of our character and being. The effect of this corruption reaches our minds, our hearts, our souls, our bodies — indeed, the whole person.” This radical corruption is something we have had since our very beginning, as recorded by David in Psalm 51:5 (TPT), “*Lord, I have been a sinner from birth, from the moment my mother conceived me.*” If we were to pry that lid a little more, we would find the expression of our radical corruption is the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23, we read about the fruit of the Spirit. The Greek word used for fruit is singular, meaning one fruit has many expressions. The fruit of God’s Holy Spirit is agape love. The enemy’s fruit is the opposite of agape love. The opposite of love is not hate; it is self-centered indifference. Like the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of humanity’s unregenerate heart expresses itself in many ways. Instead of joy, there is only a positive emotional experience dependent on external circumstances. Instead of peace, there is fear, worry, anxiety, and exhaustion. Instead of kindness, there are acts of deception and manipulation. Instead of virtue, there is vengeance and a fight for justice. Instead of faith, there is unreliability and self-preservation at any cost. Instead of the gentleness of heart, there is arrogance, harshness, or pretentious sweetness. Instead of self-control and strength of spirit, there is a loss of focus and

control. Apart from God, we are a mess. We all know we are a mess. The enemy convinces us that our lot is worse than others; therefore, we work hard to hide that mess and the experience of shame.

Considering human reality, how can anything good come from anyone living apart from God? There is still good in the world because humanity still possesses the image of God. Yes, that image was severely distorted when man chose to rebel against God, but we still maintain that image's components. This tension between good and evil is the conflict that results in shame. We know what is right and what is wrong. We know how we should be living, yet we are not living that way. We know we are corrupted and worthy of rejection by both man and God. Created in God's image, we were made to experience the giving and receiving of unconditional love; our very existence depends on it. Yet, when we look inside, we see we are neither capable of loving nor worthy of being loved.

As humanity walks this tight-rope between their corrupt nature and their God-image, shame will surface when that awkward balance gets upset. That balance is upset by several different situations. The bubble of pretentious denial weakens, exposing shame, at times of unwanted exposure, failure, unrealized expectations, being left out, loss of love, or times of grief. These are times of increased vulnerability when we either give up or work that much harder to reinforce the denial.

These are times when we may respond with anger or hostility as our corrupt self gets exposed. It is also a time of increased risk for self-harm or suicide.

What is the answer to this universal human dilemma? Where can we turn for comfort or guidance? God's word deals with this as we see in Romans 7:24-25 (TPT), *"What an agonizing situation I am in! So who has the power to rescue this miserable man from the unwelcome intruder of sin and death? I give all my thanks to God, for his mighty power has finally provided a way out through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One! So if left to myself, the flesh is aligned with the law of sin, but now my renewed mind is fixed on and submitted to God's righteous principles."*

Apart from the Holy Spirit's regenerating work, no person in his own power can choose godliness, choose Christ, choose the things of God, refrain from evil, accept the gift of salvation, or choose to follow God. The Bible tells us that this "sin condition" or "radical corruption" affects all of us. Romans 3:23-26 (TPT), *"for we all have sinned and are in need of the glory of God. Yet through his powerful declaration of acquittal, God freely gives away his righteousness. His gift of love and favor now cascades over us, all because Jesus, the Anointed One, has liberated us from the guilt, punishment, and power of sin! Jesus' God-given destiny was to be the sacrifice to take away sins, and now he is our mercy seat because of his*

death on the cross. We come to him for mercy, for God has made a provision for us to be forgiven by faith in the sacred blood of Jesus. This is the perfect demonstration of God's justice, because until now, he had been so patient—holding back his justice out of his tolerance for us. So he covered over the sins of those who lived prior to Jesus' sacrifice. And when the season of tolerance came to an end, there was only one possible way for God to give away his righteousness and still be true to both his justice and his mercy—to offer up his own Son. So now, because we stand on the faithfulness of Jesus, God declares us righteous in his eyes!" We are all dependent on God's grace. As you teeter between good and evil, let shame be a reminder that God has a way that can lead you back to Him and a full, meaningful, and abundant life. He has made a way. Joshua 24:15 (NKJV), *"And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*

How is the experience of shame, or avoidance of shame controlling your life? The intense pain of shame will cause you to focus on yourself and exclude others. You will not see others as people; you will see them as objects. Shame will affect your relationships, causing you to feel alone and

isolated. Shame will also cause a loss of authenticity as you hide through pretense and deceptions. In the end, you are not deceiving others; you are only fooling yourself. It may take time, but others will become aware of your deception and manipulation. You know the right and acceptable way to act; otherwise, you would not be hiding.

How do you know if you may be struggling with shame? Are you depressed or anxious? Are you afraid of being exposed? Are you hiding from those close to you? Does anger overcome you? Are you struggling with an addiction? Are you hiding from yourself through an overinflated view of yourself; are you narcissistic? Do you have low self-esteem, a loss of hope, feel powerless or worthless? Do you feel small and inadequate? Do you ruminate or have difficulty letting go of anger? Do you feel defensive towards others or even hostile? If you answered yes to these questions, you are most likely struggling with the impact of shame. Shame can lead to all sorts of self-focused activities, criminal thinking, and addictions. Shame is a mighty stronghold that needs to be torn down.

How is this stronghold of shame torn down? Like any of these strongholds, the first place to address them is to humble yourself and pray. Admit to yourself and God that shame impacts your life and spiritual growth. Admit that you are afraid of the exposure of your radical corruption. Humbly

admit that you cannot rescue yourself. Ask God for help. Pray scripture that deals with deliverance over shame. Psalm 31:17 (TPT), *“As I call upon you, let my shame and disgrace be replaced by your favor once again.”* Psalm 119:116 (TPT), *“Lord, strengthen my inner being by the promises of your word so that I may live faithful and unashamed for you.”* Philippians 3:13 (TPT), *“I don’t depend on my own strength to accomplish this; however I do have one compelling focus: I forget all of the past as I fasten my heart to the future instead.”* Psalm 139:5-6 (TPT), *“You’ve gone into my future to prepare the way, and in kindness you follow behind me to spare me from the harm of my past. With your hand of love upon my life, you impart a blessing to me. This is just too wonderful, deep, and incomprehensible! Your understanding of me brings me wonder and strength.”* Shake off the shackles of shame. Do not believe the enemy's lie. Be grateful for God’s grace and the work of Christ. Live the fruit of the Holy Spirit through love. Shame and fear of accusation do not have to weigh you down. Romans 8:1 (TPT), *“So now the case is closed. There remains no accusing voice of condemnation against those who are joined in life-union with Jesus, the Anointed One.”*

We are all depraved, so depraved that Jesus had to die for us – you no longer have to listen to the enemy’s voice of condemnation.

Chapter 15 – Grief

Grief is the internalization and rumination about a significant unbearable loss. The magnitude of the loss determines the degree of suffering. What losses would result in the experience of grief? This last fall, the area of Oregon where we call home experienced several massive wildfires. The air became thick with smoke as family and friends around us evacuated. My wife is one of the most organized people on the planet, so we did not have any difficulty finding what we considered essential. I hooked up our small utility trailer behind the car, and we loaded up our treasures. We had a few boxes of family photos, some important papers, a few valuables, irreplaceable possessions, and a few days' worth of food and water. The little trailer was only a quarter full at the end of our packing. We were fortunate in that we did not have to evacuate, but the exercise of evaluating what we possessed and what was important was very cleansing. The

loss of our material possessions would have been inconvenient, but it would not have resulted in much grief. Losses that cause grief are the ones that are so great we question our ability to continue to function. The losses that are this egregious are the losses humanity was never created to experience. The enemy uses these losses to cause us to question God's love. Humankind was not created to experience death, the loss of a significant relationship, the loss of purpose, or the loss of a relationship with God. We do not have the necessary tools to deal with these types of losses in our toolbox. These are the losses we can never be prepared to handle.

The dictionary definition of grief is: *“Grief is the response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual and philosophical dimensions. While the terms are often used interchangeably, bereavement refers to the state of loss, and grief is the reaction to that loss.”*

There are three categories of losses that can produce grief. There are personal losses, relational losses, and significant losses. Personal losses are the ones that involve the loss of identity, status, position, or ability. This type of loss is experienced many times throughout our lives. It is

experienced with retirement, a job change, a loss of an expected promotion, moving to a new community, or changing churches. It is also experienced as a slow act of bereavement where physical and mental skills are slowly lost because of aging. This type of personal loss can occur with any significant status change.

The most significant grief-producing loss is a relational loss. God created us as social beings. He placed us in families. It is in this environment that we experience being loved and loving others. The most significant loss we experience as humans are losing a meaningful intimate relationship. This loss can occur through death, divorce, separation, or the slow, gradual loss of a loved one through Alzheimer's or other chronic diseases. These losses are magnified if there is a high degree of dependency in the relationship, such as losing a child, a family member with a disability, a miscarriage, or an abortion. There is not only grief in these dependency-type losses, but there is also guilt. The guilt can prevent movement through grief, resulting in a lifetime of unresolved grief.

Grief can also occur with the loss of any element of one's life that has a high value or meaning. Grief can be experienced with the loss of a pet, a home, a place, or even a time. As people age, they often grieve the loss of their youth and vitality.

The experience of grief, as previously mentioned, was not God's plan for humanity. We were created to be immortal and to have harmonious relationships. Therefore, the experience of significant loss feels impossible to manage. We are left in a state of disbelief, confusion, and turmoil as we try to regroup and move on with life. The danger during this time is that we can quickly become stuck and self-focused on our pain. This path can lead to an increased sense of isolation and chronic loneliness. If you work to suppress the feelings, recovery only gets prolonged. It is common for people stuck in grief to lose the capacity for pleasure, lose interest in eating, neglect self-care, become depressed, or develop insomnia. Grief is highly individual and unpredictable; you do not know how you will respond until you experience loss. During the first twelve years of medical practice, I spent most of my time working in an emergency department. I have had to tell many people that they had just lost a loved one. I have witnessed people cry, laugh, faint, become enraged, and one person even punched me. There is no set or expected formula for how a significant loss will be experienced.

The experience of grief can end in one of four possible ways. Most people with resilience and grit will be able to maintain stable levels of functioning and move on with their lives. Others may eventually recover after several months. Some people get stuck in grief and have a prolonged period of

dysfunction. Others may appear to regain function quickly, but after some time or the experience of another loss, they may develop a delayed grief response and lose their ability to function normally. There is a condition called prolonged grief disorder. This condition is defined as an "extreme focus on the loss and reminders of the loved one, intense longing or pining for the deceased, problems accepting the death, numbness or detachment. The prolonged grief disorder can also result in bitterness about your loss, inability to enjoy life, depression or deep sadness, trouble carrying out normal routines, withdrawing from social activities, feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose, irritability or agitation, and a lack of trust in others."

During grief, a damning tactic used by the enemy is the tempting belief that more understanding will bring more peace. So, we enter hell through the gate called WHY, never to return. We dig and claw for answers, only to find more troubling questions. WHY quickly becomes WHY ME as our increased self-focus turns to bitterness.

Not only will grief cause increased self-focus, but it can also cause significant relationship issues, addiction, depression, and suicide.

So, what are we to do when we experience a significant loss? Firstly, do not push the grief aside; it will only cause more

problems if suppressed. Recognize the depth and significance of the loss. Acknowledge your feelings, as ugly as they may be. Writing out the importance of the loss and how you feel is valuable, then taking that journal and praying. Do not avoid funerals or memorial services. Our society needs times of corporate pausing and evaluating. A time of grief is a valuable time of evaluation and reflection on life priorities. Death is real; it is harsh; it is hard to handle. Take time to consider your mortality. Pause to evaluate; pause to appreciate; pause to reflect and ponder.

In your pausing, take your pain and circumstance to God in prayer. Consider what the Bible says about loss and grief.

John 16:22 (NIV), *“So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”*

Philippians 4:13 (NIV), *“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”*

Revelation 21:4 (NIV), *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

Romans 8:18 (NIV), *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

Romans 12:2 (NIV), *“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.”

Psalm 34:18 (NIV), *“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV), *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

Psalm 147:3 (NIV), *“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”*

Psalm 73:26 (NIV), *“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”*

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NIV), *“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven,*

with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

John 14:1 (NIV), *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.”*

Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV), *“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

Joshua 1:9 (NIV), *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

Romans 8:28 (NIV), *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

Matthew 5:4 (NIV), *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they*

will be comforted.”

Take time to meditate on these verses and write down your thoughts and prayers. Read the Psalms. Help others who are grieving. God will show Himself strong and faithful. The Holy Spirit will strengthen you. Do not believe the enemy's lie that God is not trustworthy and has abandoned you or does not love you.

Chapter 16 – Legalism

Legalism is the internalization and personalization of a set of rules or a code of conduct strictly adhered to and promoted as the way to achieve righteousness. Legalism emphasizes what you do and neglects who you are. Legalism attempts to secure rightness in God's sight by good works. Those who live legalistically add human rules to God's laws and treat them as divine.

What is the appeal of legalism? What is the power of legalism? Legalism is attractive because the focus of living is on what you do and not who you are. If you are legalistic, you can push aside your depravity and focus on gaining favor with God through outward actions. If you mess up, you deal with the guilt by asking for forgiveness and then move on. Living this way is more controllable than being open with who you are and being dependent on God's grace and mercy to set

you free. There is no need for dependence on grace and mercy; it will all be okay with legalism if you work harder. You may experience some guilt with legalism, but it is less devastating than being exposed to the shame for who you are. With legalism, the focus is on the external and not the messy, confusing internal. Legalism puts me in control. I get to be the code's creator, interpreter, and deliverer. I make myself god. Legalism negates the necessity for the atoning work of Christ on the cross. We are not at His mercy; we are at the mercy of a self-crafted set of righteousness-defining rules.

Legalism promotes arrogance, insecurity, desire for power, and greed. There is no room to experience the joy of the Lord or the move of the Spirit under legalism. With legalism, the burden is performance. Legalism will drain your resilience and grit and eventually burn you out.

Legalism is a mighty stronghold as it encourages you to focus on your performance. It would be best if you tore down the stronghold of legalism. To tear it down does not mean you throw out all the components of a code of conduct. No, there is a way we should be living, a practice that glorifies God, but we should not be living that way attempting to gain favor with God. We should be living rightly out of gratitude and love for God. Our love for God should motivate our living and not the other way around, where we expect our way of living to give us a special status with God.

The essence of legalism is an attempt to build a manmade structure on a God-given foundation. We need to tear down the structure but not destroy the foundation. There are critical foundational beliefs. Your key-belief system is intact if you answer yes to the following questions. Do you believe the Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God? Do you believe that God sent His Son to be born to a virgin and to die as an atonement for your sin? Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? These core beliefs are called the fundamentals of Christianity. Be careful; do not convert your code of faith into a legalistic code of conduct.

What does the Bible teach us about legalism? Jesus addresses legalism in Luke 18:9-14 (TPT), *“Jesus taught this parable to those who were convinced they were morally upright and those who trusted in their own virtue yet looked down on others with disgust: “Once there were two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a proud religious leader, the other a despised tax collector. The religious leader stood apart from the others and prayed, ‘How I thank you, O God, that I’m not wicked like everyone else. They’re cheaters, swindlers, and crooks—like that tax collector over there. God, you know that I never cheat or commit adultery; I fast from food twice a week and I give you a tenth of all I make.’ “The tax collector stood off alone in the corner, away from the Holy Place, and covered his face in his hands, feeling that he was*

unworthy to even look up to God. Beating his breast, he sobbed with brokenness and tears saying, 'God, please, in your mercy and because of the blood sacrifice, forgive me, for I am nothing but the most miserable of all sinners!' "Which one of them left for home that day made right with God? It was the humble tax collector and not the religious leader! For everyone who praises himself will one day be humiliated before all, and everyone who humbles himself will one day be lifted up and honored before all."

Take time to meditate on this parable. Are you legalistic? Is your Christian life a performance? Are you working to gain God's favor? How do you know if you are legalistic? Are you suffering under the stronghold of legalism?

Living a legalistic life affects how you view yourself, others, and God. Are you spending time and energy looking for a formula for righteousness? If you feel a constant pressure to do and your life could be defined by a list of what you feel compelled to do, you are most likely legalistic. There is no joy in legalism. Actions that express your knowledge of God's love bring joy. Actions performed to gain God's favor bring defeat. A necessary part of spiritual growth is Bible study, meditation, prayer, fasting, fellowship with godly people, and the performance of good deeds for the glory of God. If these practices are a pressure you feel needs to be checked off your daily to-do list, you are most likely legalistic. These spiritual

practices are essential to knowing God and should not be a performance. Do you live constantly comparing yourself with others? If you live in this storm of constant comparison, you look to others to set the standard for righteousness; you are legalistic. If you believe blessings are a reward for good performance and forgiveness needs to be earned, you are legalistic. If you are on a too-tight schedule and focused on continually doing, you are legalistic. If you do not experience joy, just because your sins are forgiven, you are legalistic. We should be living the words of the psalmist in Psalm 32:1 (TPT), *“How happy and fulfilled are those whose rebellion has been forgiven, those whose sins are covered by blood.”* We have a reason for joy that is not dependent on our circumstances, performance, achievements, or status. If you perform your good deeds to get God to love you or feel like God is never happy with you, you are legalistic.

If you are legalistic, it will affect how you view others. If you are an impatient judge of others, quick to be critical, you are legalistic. If you see others as being more blessed or favored by God, you are legalistic. If you are angry when others receive grace and feel everything in God’s kingdom needs to be equal, you are legalistic. If you look down on others and see yourself as superior, you are legalistic. If you focus on praising outward actions and miss the motives, you are legalistic.

The most damaging part of being legalistic is that it affects how you view God. If you are legalistic, you view God as a dispenser of blessing based on merit. Legalism is a sin because it devalues the work of Christ that is necessary for our salvation. If you are legalistic, you are saying that Jesus' sacrifice was not enough. It is not humanly possible to save ourselves. The enemy's lie is that you can save yourself through your righteous performance.

Legalism is much like narcissism in that the focus is self-focus. Keep in mind the words of Jesus from Luke 11:14 (TPT), "*For everyone who praises himself will one day be humiliated before all, and everyone who humbles himself will one day be lifted up and honored before all.*" God did not place us on this planet to build ourselves up; He set us here to know Him and build His kingdom.

Another downside to legalism is that it fosters rebellion. In a legalistic community, you have two options. You can follow the code, or you can rebel against the code. When legalism prefers compliance over a relationship, it encourages outright rejection and rebellion.

Legalism is a destructive stronghold used by the enemy to cause you to focus on your performance and compliance and miss what God has available for you. So, what is the cure for legalism? The only treatment for legalism is to be

continuously reminded of what Christ accomplished, for you, on the cross. You do not have spiritual bootstraps to grab and pull yourself into God's favor as hard as you try. You are already in God's favor. He provided a way for you, a path that cost the suffering and life of His son before you even acknowledged Him. You cannot buy your salvation or sanctification by trying to do better as hard as you might. This reality should be the source of abundant joy.

What does the Bible say about legalism? God's word talks a lot about the errors of trying to live by the law. God desires that His people are free to experience His love and to know that it is by His generous grace that we can live without the burden of the law today. Obedience to God is the obedience of love, not an adherence to a set of rules. Yes, how you live your life is important, and living in God's grace is not a license to behave foolishly or irresponsibly. Our actions still have consequences, so it is essential to live wisely. God's word is full of advice on how to live wisely, but it is still only by His grace and mercy that we can walk in His favor. Here are a few passages worth considering regarding living by the law versus living by grace.

Galatians 3:10-13 (TPT), *"But if you choose to live in bondage under the legalistic rule of religion, you live under the law's curse. For it is clearly written: "Utterly cursed is everyone who fails to practice every detail and requirement that is written in*

this law!" For the Scriptures reveal, and it is obvious, that no one achieves the righteousness of God by attempting to keep the law, for it is written: "Those who have been made holy will live by faith!" But keeping the law does not require faith, but self-effort. For the law teaches, "If you practice the principles of law, you must follow all of them." Yet, Christ paid the full price to set us free from the curse of the law. He absorbed it completely as he became a curse in our place. For it is written: "Everyone who is hung upon a tree is doubly cursed."

Ephesians 2:8-9 (TPT), "For it was only through this wonderful grace that we believed in him. Nothing we did could ever earn this salvation, for it was the gracious gift from God that brought us to Christ! So no one will ever be able to boast, for salvation is never a reward for good works or human striving."

Romans 3:28 (TPT), "So our conclusion is this: God's wonderful declaration that we are righteous in his eyes can only come when we put our faith in Christ, and not in keeping the law."

Legalism is a stronghold that will cause you to focus on your performance and rob you of the joy of your salvation. You must tear down the fortress of legalism.

Chapter 17 – Agony

The stronghold of agony is the experience of physical pain. The offense in agony is betrayal. This type of betrayal is not one you can easily ignore because, with agony, your own body betrays you. If you are suffering under the stronghold of agony, your world gets exceedingly tiny very quickly. Pain is tangible; you feel it, yet the pain's source is often unknown. Pain's origin can be physical, emotional, existential, or spiritual. This chapter is not a thesis on pain's pathophysiology but will show how physical pain's subjective experience can be a stronghold. Physical pain is a loud voice that demands attention. This loud voice is a powerful distraction, yet you are the only one that hears its screams. Pain is a stronghold in that it causes you to focus on yourself. You feel compelled to focus on the area of pain to find a solution. The solution becomes a stronghold at times, as we will see in the next chapter on addiction. When it comes to

the human experience with pain, physical pain is the one that is the most easily recognized and identified. Suffering from a biological source can be named, like headaches, backache, tooth pain, etc. This physical pain has a specific location and quality, and most often, a pathology causing the pain experience.

On the other hand, non-physical causes of discomfort or anguish, which feel the same as physical pain, are often tough to identify. Yet, this is the type of pain the enemy often uses as a stronghold.

The field of pain management is controversial and filled with difficulty. Pain is subjective; there is no blood test to evaluate someone's pain score. In the end, we are left with a complaint of anguish and limited treatment options.

Regardless of the cause, the experience of pain is real and can come from four different sources. The first we are all too familiar with, you stub your toe, which screams out in pain. This type of pain is called nociceptive pain. Nociceptive is the medical term for the kind of pain that comes from physical damage. This pain occurs in the nociceptive nerve fibers activated by inflammation, chemicals, or an injury. This type of pain has an identifiable cause and usually lasts a short period.

The next kind of pain is called neuropathic. This pain results

from damage or disease affecting the somatosensory nervous system. The cause of this type of pain is often more challenging to determine because it is usually not connected to a specific injury or event. This type of pain can be continuous or episodic and usually lasts for a prolonged period.

Another cause of physically experienced pain is an enhanced pain response. In this situation, the pain-sensing nerves are overactive and send out pain messages even when there is no nerve damage. This type of pain is called hyperalgesia. Individuals taking or who have been on opioid pain medication can develop hyperalgesia due to the pain medication. In this situation, their pain may worsen because of the drug prescribed to control the pain.

In the presence of opioid or alcohol withdrawal, an individual will experience physical pain. This type of pain is often severe and constant. This type of withdrawal pain may first show itself when a person reduces their daily dose of prescription opioids or when the amount they take is no longer adequate. Do you see the diagnostic dilemma in treating physically experienced pain?

Bob is a 55-year-old mechanic who has had two previous surgeries for lumbar disc disease. The operations failed to control his pain, so he has been on a moderate dose of

prescription opioids that have allowed him to continue working for the last five years. Bob has heard about the opioid crisis and would like to get off the medication. He sees his primary care doctor, and they decide to wean him off the opioids. This weaning task is difficult and often takes many months. Two months into the process, Bob presents back to his physician, complaining that his pain has gotten so much worse he has had to miss days at work and is afraid he may lose his business. The question is, what is the cause of Bob's increased pain experience? Is his pain coming from increased damage in his lower back? Is his pain more pronounced because he has developed hyperalgesia from the long history of taking opioid pain meds? Is his pain intensified because of withdrawal now that he is on a lower dose of medication? At the end of the evaluation, it is impossible to explain which scenario best identifies Bob's pain. Bob will need a very understanding, patient, and compassionate physician to explore his care and future options. Hopefully, Bob will find a satisfying solution and not be discharged from his doctor's practice because he complains of increased pain. And Bob, do not run to drugs or alcohol; it will only worsen your problem.

Are you struggling with the stronghold of agony? Is your situation like Job's when he cried out to God? Job 30:17 (NKJV), *"My bones are pierced in me at night, And my*

gnawing pains take no rest.” Pain wants to be your master. The enemy encourages a belief about your pain that will steal your peace, kill your voice, and destroy your legacy. Ongoing discomfort is a power that can limit your activities and silence your voice. The powerful distraction of chronic pain makes it challenging to focus past the pain. The experience of physical pain will increase the impact of all the other strongholds. You will feel more isolated, meaningless, powerless, empty, fearful, bitter, and self-centered when in pain.

The experience of pain is a potent offense that the enemy can use. What is the enemy’s lie regarding agony? The enemy can use pain to whisper to you that God does not care. The enemy wants you to believe that you must limit or extinguish your voice until you get your pain under control. The enemy also wants you to think you need to focus on your pain to get it under control.

So, how should we deal with the stronghold of agony? The first step in coping with agony is to humble yourself and pray. Part of humbling yourself is asking for help in dealing with pain. You do not want to ignore an episode of chest pain with shortness of breath and left arm and jaw pain as just a spell of indigestion. If you are experiencing a new onset of pain, you should get it evaluated and, if possible, diagnosed. Do not be foolish or arrogant. Do not be like the fool I heard about from a colleague working in the medical tent at the Boston

Marathon's finish line. After completing the marathon, a runner limped into the medical tent, crying that his ankle was fractured. When asked how he knew it was fractured, he reported, "that is what the X-ray showed yesterday." Be wise if you experience a new pain, check it out, ask about treatment options, and then pray about what options you should follow. Uncertainty about a new pain will give that pain more power than it deserves. If you live with physical pain, you need to live as being vulnerable to developing a possible addiction. Do all you can to find and use other methods for pain control. If you need to be on prescription opioids, do all you can to limit the treatment dose and duration.

Secondly, do not believe the enemy's lies. Even when you do not have all the answers or solutions, God still loves you. God has not abandoned you; you still have worth in His kingdom, and your voice is still necessary.

Thirdly, do not focus on the pain. Pain that you focus on quickly turns agony into uncontrollable misery. Several years ago, when pharmaceutical companies evaluated the benefits of their new pain-controlling treatments, they would have the study subjects record a daily pain journal. They quickly learned that if you keep a pain journal, your pain will increase, if you are on medication or not. Current studies now focus on improved function and not the level of pain.

Fourthly, do what you can do with caution. Once you have ruled out severe, treatable conditions, do not submit to the pain. Stay active and do not isolate yourself.

Fifthly, do not let the pain distract you from your role in God's kingdom. Seek God with your whole being. Love and serve God and others. Use your voice. Write down what you are thankful for daily. Follow the encouragement in Philippians 4:8 (TPT), "*So keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy, merciful and kind. And fasten your thoughts on every glorious work of God, praising him always.*"

Consider Jeremiah's cry to God in Jeremiah 15:18 (NKJV), "*Why is my pain perpetual And my wound incurable, Which refuses to be healed? Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream, As waters that fail?*" And then consider God's response in Jeremiah 15: 20-21 (NKJV), "*For I am with you to save you And deliver you,*" says the LORD. "*I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked, And I will redeem you from the grip of the terrible.*"

Lastly, as you humbly seek God and pray, always remain thankful. Ask others to pray for you and instructed in James 5:14-16 (TPT), "*Are there any sick among you? Then ask the elders of the church to come and pray over the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of our Lord. And the prayer of faith*

will heal the sick and the Lord will raise them up, and if they have committed sins they will be forgiven. Confess and acknowledge how you have offended one another and then pray for one another to be instantly healed, for tremendous power is released through the passionate, heartfelt prayer of a godly believer!”

If you live with agony, humbly seek God, pray, remain thankful, and exercise and use your God-given voice. Do not believe the lie of the enemy. Meditate on Isaiah 41:10 (NKJV), *“Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”*

Chapter 18 – Addiction

Let me apologize at the onset of this chapter on addiction. I am a board-certified addiction medicine specialist who has had the privilege of working with patients struggling with addiction for the last several years. This chapter is overly scientific to show the degree of brain change that occurs because of addictive substances. There is hope for the addict, but it will take more than increased willpower. If you are interested in more information on this subject, then check out my short book on addiction titled, “Now I’ve Gotcha!”

An addictive substance is a non-essential element, meaning it is not necessary to maintain or sustain life. These chemicals can impact the nervous system by producing a sensation of satisfaction. It creates the desire, which is craving, and the need, which is a physiological dependency for more of the element. Using the element repeatedly will result in a

changed nervous system that now defines the element as necessary for life, as essential as oxygen, food, water, shelter, and relationships. Eventually, this element's value surpasses all the other ingredients, and the addicted individual will be willing to sacrifice any of the other elements to get more of the addictive substance.

The stronghold of addiction is the belief that a chemical is a solution to life's trouble and pain. It is the conviction that I can put something into my body to alter how I feel. The trap of addiction is that once the chemical has been taken repeatedly for some time, the pain in stopping the compound becomes unbearable.

The Merriam-Webster definition of addiction is "the compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal: broadly: persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be harmful."

Addiction is a strong memory in the reward pathway of the brain. To understand this memory, we need to understand epigenetics. Genetics is the DNA we inherit, accounting for our hair color, eye color, etc. Epigenetics is how individual segments of DNA get expressed in a cell. Every cell has the same DNA, but cells perform different functions through epigenetics. Because of epigenetics, a muscle cell is different

from a kidney cell. Epigenetics allows our nervous system to remain adaptable and learn new things. Memory is an epigenetic structural change in the DNA in the neurons in your brain.

Let us look at how epigenetics works in memory formation and how it works with addiction development. A stimulus causes a release of powerful neurotransmitters that directly impact the neurons' DNA in various ways that eventually result in memory formation.

Triggered neuroplasticity is the process of stimulus-induced change. Triggered neuroplasticity is the ability of the neurons to change or adjust because of stimuli. Without neuroplasticity, we would not be able to learn or develop new memories or, as we shall see, develop an addiction.

The most common process in triggered neuroplasticity is DNA methylation. DNA methylation leads to DNA exposure. This change in the DNA is like a cancer-causing chemical's impact on a cell, resulting in cancer. DNA methylation prepares the cell to change its structure and function.

Also occurring is a process called posttranslational modifications of histones that allows the tightly coiled DNA to uncoil and expose DNA areas that can then be modified. The DNA is now no longer a tightly coiled bundle of DNA. The cell structure and function continue to change through

modifications of noncoding RNAs that remodel chromatin and facilitate or suppress gene expression. The cell changes and protein manufacture can be turned on or turned off. The neuron has now changed both its structure and its function. Now you have a newly formed memory.

Let's take a closer look at this process in the context of something we can all relate to, the development of different levels or types of memory.

Short-term memory formation is the result of a minimal stimulus. This kind of memory extinguishes quickly. For example, what do you remember about last Wednesday? It was not long ago. The chances are that you do not remember much unless it was a special day. You might remember if it was your birthday or anniversary, but if it was not, then the details are long gone.

If you increase the stimulus, the memory will last longer. This is the type of memory formation you experience when cramming for exams or remembering significant historical events, such as President Kennedy's assassination or the first moon landing. What do you remember about September 11, 2001? Do you remember that it occurred on a Tuesday? Do you remember where you were? Do you remember what you did that morning or what you had for breakfast?

If you increase the stimulus, even more, the memory will last

even longer, to the degree it may have a lasting, lifelong impression. The event changes you. You may also act differently or interpret the world differently because of this overwhelming stimulus caused memory. What do you remember about what happened in Boston on April 15, 2013? As I reported earlier in this book, this was the day of the bombing at the Boston Marathon. I can easily relive that moment, from what I had for breakfast to the sensation of the cup of hot chocolate in my left hand as we experienced the explosion across the street. The overwhelming stimulus changed me. This stimulation level causes a profound type of memory that may result in post-traumatic stress disorder.

This process of DNA unfolding and changing both its structure and function is how different degrees of memories are formed and stored.

Addiction develops similarly, except the brain's affected area is the limbic system's reward pathway. The magnitude of the stimulus caused by drugs of addiction is more overwhelming than the stimuli that result in a profound memory formation. Several medical studies have confirmed the brain's structural and functional changes in the brain's reward pathway. A study on the effects of cocaine on rats' brains showed 17 DNA changes in six brain areas. A study on heroin addicts that had been in confirmed recovery for over nine years showed ongoing significant functional MRI changes when exposed to

auditory or visual drug-using stimuli. A study where subjects were given Morphine 50 mg daily for 30 days and then followed with monthly functional MRIs showed that the brain function changes that occurred because of the morphine exposure did not improve six months after completing the study. Changes in these areas of the brain have a prolonged and dramatic effect. Some of these changes may be permanent.

Chemicals that can cause addiction produce an overwhelming stimulus to the neuron. This stimulus changes the DNA in the neuron. The stimuli cause a flood of dopamine from the nucleus accumbens that sends messages to parts of the brain, saying, "this is good and necessary." The experience or feeling is something to be desired. You now have a powerful memory of desire and craving.

The impact of the stimulus in the hippocampus enhances the memory of the reward experience. It reinforces the memory that: "This is something I do not want to forget – I should remember as much about this reward as possible – where I got it, who I got it from, the people I used it with, the room I used it in – and on and on."

The impact on the amygdala is an emotional one. It produces a feeling of security, confidence, and peace – a level of completeness never experienced before the drug exposure.

The impact on the prefrontal cortex is to assign a high level of value to this experience. Nothing else compares to this experience, and the now addicted individual is willing to pay whatever it may cost to maintain this feeling.

As previously described, different levels of stimulus cause different permanence of memory. Varying degrees of activation of the reward system result in different formed desire levels. For example, a low-level reward stimulus results in a preference. I like puppies better than kittens is an example of a preference, but I do not want to pay for that puppy or take care of it for the next seventeen years. With a preference, I am still free to make rational choices. Preferences can easily be changed, especially if you have an issue with your preference or a better preference presents itself. Wait till that puppy chews your favorite shoes.

Increase the stimulus in the reward pathway, and you get what we call a desire. A desire comes from a felt need for a sense of completeness. This desire area is the realm of the advertising industry. If I can link your desire with a product that I sell, the sale is easy. If I can sell you the fantasy that a new Lamborghini can give you a sense of contentment or acceptance, then you just bought a new Lamborghini. Unfortunately, the romance quickly fades with the first scratch, the \$1,000 oil change, the eventual awakening to the reality that the illusion did not bring the contentment or sense of

wellbeing it promised. But we keep searching and buying.

If you increase the stimulus even more, you have an overwhelming impulse. This overwhelming stimulus requires significant brain changes to accommodate, and you end up with an addiction. You are now past minor preference and desire into the world of an intense craving. The chemical has effectively hijacked your neurons.

Your brain tells you that you may die if you do not get the substance that produced the stimulus. Stimulus caused alteration in the function and structure of brain DNA is the disease of addiction.

These addictive elements work in several different ways. They can mimic a natural neurotransmitter and activate a nerve cell directly. They can cause an increased release of a natural neurotransmitter. They can cause a delay in removing a natural neurotransmitter, or they can attach to a receptor and block the action of a neurotransmitter. They all share that, to varying degrees, they all cause an increase in dopamine activity in the nucleus accumbens part of the brain. This dopamine release labels the element as a reward and facilitates memory of the environment associated with that reward. These characteristics are all shared by the following addictive items: sugar, caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, opioids, cocaine, Ecstasy, Kratom, and

methamphetamine.

Why is it so hard to quit? The brain is a delicate organ designed to function speedily while maintaining a precise balance. If just a little too much glutamate is released, the cell dies; if too little is released, normal mental function is impossible.

Each addiction has its specific neurological and physiological effects, both during the use of the substance and during abstinence. The alcoholic gets anxious; the narcotic user experiences pain; the tobacco user cannot concentrate. These highly unpleasant symptoms can be enough to encourage continued use, yet all addictions share another layer of anguish.

To varying degrees, all addictions cause issues with the regulation of glutamate in the nucleus accumbens. The normal function of glutamate in the nucleus accumbens involves the release of glutamate with rapid activation of the next cell and then prompt removal of the glutamate by excitatory amino acid transporter 2 (EAAT2). If the glutamate is not rapidly cleared, it can overexcite the cell causing its death. All addictive compounds decrease the effectiveness of glutamate on the cell membrane and reduce the activity of the excitatory amino acid transporter 2. During times of abstinence, this regulation becomes very unstable, causing a

sense of severe anxiety, stress, sleep disturbance, profound fatigue, poor memory function, and even cell death. Abstinence feels like impending death, and the loss of control over mental processes feels like insanity.

The brain, its delicate balance, and proper function are now the compound's prisoner. Choosing to consume a known toxic chemical feels like life when it is a movement towards premature death.

The battle with the stronghold of addiction is a war. 1 Peter 2:11 (TPT), *“My divinely loved friends, since you are resident aliens and foreigners in this world, I appeal to you to divorce yourselves from the evil desires that wage war within you.”* If you are struggling with addiction, it is possible to divorce yourself from the raging war. It is possible to remain sober with grit and resolve, but willpower alone will not free you from addiction. It will take humility, honesty, an attitude of gratitude, and the power of the Holy Spirit to be free. God loves you and has provided a way to be free from the power of addiction.

If you do not struggle with addiction, then keep in mind 1 Peter 5:8 (AMP), *“Be sober [well balanced and self-disciplined], be alert and cautious at all times. That enemy of yours, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion [fiercely hungry], seeking someone to devour.”* The snare of the stronghold of addiction

will rob you of everything you value.

Chapter 19 – Entitlement

The next three strongholds share a common theme. The strongholds of entitlement, narcissism, and adoration are present because of a naïve, immature worldview carried into adulthood. What is appropriate and necessary for a three-year-old is not suitable for a thirty-year-old. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 (AMP), it is written: “*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.*” Living entitled, self-focused, and seeking to be worshipped as an adult will end in disaster. Remember, the enemy’s goal is to keep you in that self-absorbed mindset of the three-year-old.

The stronghold of entitlement is the naive belief that I deserve to be served by others. Entitlement is upside-down slavery, where those who see themselves as impoverished and disadvantaged demand service from those viewed as

advantaged. All slavery is evil.

From the moment we take our first breath, we begin to learn a powerful lesson. We realize that we have the power to impact and control our world. This lesson is reinforced dozens of times daily, hundreds of times weekly, and thousands of times monthly. The lesson learned is this; crying brings a comforting action. If something is not quite right, a felt pang of hunger, a slight abdominal cramp, a strange damp and smelly sensation in one's pants, then cry, and the world responds, and I am comforted. You may be small and inconsequential, but a cry or scream can change your environment, and others will respond to you; very quickly. We learn and expect that a cry or scream will produce an immediate response, and someone will resolve our discomfort. The infant and child's mindset is felt discomfort followed by a cry with an expected direct comfort provision. It is more reflexive than reasoned and gets reinforced frequently. This infantile worldview may be appropriate for an infant; after all, an infant needs some way to communicate with its world because an infant is utterly dependent on having its needs met by someone else. The infant is confined to an incubator of dependency, which is very appropriate for the infant.

From within this incubator, the infant cries out with expectation – someone feeds me, changes me, holds me, notices me, and

takes care of me. This dependence on its external environment is necessary for the infant to survive. There are no issues with the infant thinking this way; its survival depends on this external support incubator. A problem arises when this worldview persists into adulthood.

In infancy, the support incubator is necessary for survival; in adulthood, continually crying out for external help becomes a dependency prison. With maturation should come increased resiliency, and with increased resiliency should come greater independence and less demand for external support.

You cannot avoid turmoil, trouble, injustice, or anguish; it is a genuine daily life component. Life is complicated and, at times, harrowing. If you live with the infant's mindset, you will be severely disappointed. To demand immediate comfort as an adult can be dangerous. What gives you comfort you become dependent on, so be incredibly careful about where you place your dependency.

The enemy's lie in the stronghold of entitlement is that there is a readily available external solution to your anguish. We have a lot of readily available quick fixes in our modern world. We can choose medication, alcohol, drugs, intense activities, relationships, distractions, gambling, and shopping. You can choose what you depend on, but you do not get to choose the consequences of that choice. Be

incredibly careful and make choices as a responsible adult and not a demanding three-year-old.

It may be true that just one piece of cake, one sip of alcohol, one cigarette, one dose of a drug, etc., will not cause a lifetime of consequences, but the belief that it will not is likely to kill you or leave you paying an exceedingly high price.

This demand for immediate comfort is behind many of the problems we see in our current society, such as failed rebound relationships, morbid obesity, escalating issues with alcohol, and drug addiction. A demand for immediate comfort often leads to a life of chronic discomfort, anger, and despair.

Is there something you can do when every cell in your being is crying out for immediate comfort, crying out for peace, crying out for less pain? First, do everything possible to not react out of discomfort, find the pause button, and push it. Take time to reflect and write down a description of the trouble. Just pausing will help to rebuild some resilience. Step back and look at the issue from a distance by asking yourself: will this issue matter in six months or a year, or will it even matter a month from now. Do not panic about issues that will not matter in the long run. Consider the options you have, be creative, write the possibilities down, and do not forget to write out those options' consequences. Be honest about the results. Ask for help. Getting someone else's

perspective can help lessen the discomfort and uncover more effective alternatives. Relying on one another for increased perspective is essential and helpful. It is not the same as depending on someone else to solve your problems. Learn to function, with contentment, amid discomfort. You will never get all your troubles sorted out. Increased resiliency comes by being strong and content amid turmoil, not by sitting on a beach having all your needs met by someone else. Grow up; after all, it is your life. Live life deliberately and not reflexively. Be patient amid trouble. There are situations in life when dependence on others is needed. If you have a significant physical disability or age-related functional issues, you may need to be dependent, but you do not have to be demanding.

In God's kingdom, contentment and peace come through serving and not seeking to be served. Take charge of your life and do not live like the demanding three-year-old. Proverbs 29:11 (TPT), *"You can recognize fools by the way they give full vent to their rage and let their words fly! But the wise bite their tongue and hold back all they could say."* 1 Corinthians 14:20 (TPT), *"Beloved ones, don't remain as immature children in your reasoning. As it relates to evil, be like newborns, but in your thinking be mature adults."*

Tear down the stronghold of entitlement and leave it in the crib where it belongs.

Chapter 20 – Narcissism

The stronghold of narcissism is the belief and demand that I deserve to be loved. Narcissism is the internalization and personalization of perceived inadequacy causing ongoing, intense self-centeredness and self-adoration. Self-love is the “sin that so easily entangles” recorded in Hebrews 12:1. All the strongholds are types of insults and offenses used by the enemy to get you to focus on yourself. Once we start focusing on ourselves, we lose our God-given peace, purpose, and potential. The enemy is the victor.

Narcissism is mostly used to define a type of personality disorder in psychology. The degree of pathology in Narcissism is determined by how it affects others and the individual. If you work in the mental health field, you know by experience that this is the area where angels fear to tread. There is no reported successful treatment for the highly

Narcissistic, borderline personality disorder, the sociopath, or the highly criminal. The best you can do is to establish boundaries. There is another category of self-love that is more subtle but just as dangerous. We were born self-centered. We cry to get our needs met and cry when we want attention. This type of survival narcissism may be appropriate for an infant, but it is inappropriate and destructive as you mature. This type of selfishness does not seem to hurt others or even appear to hurt you. It does not have a mental health diagnostic name or medical billing code. This subtle self-focus is present in all of us and has the power to steal from you the blessings of God.

The Bible warns us in Proverbs 3:7 (NIV), “*Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.*” We all struggle to vary degrees with self-centeredness. Honestly, we all have a core of narcissism that negatively impacts our life and growth. If you do not recognize yourself in the description of narcissism, you are deceiving yourself.

What is narcissism? Narcissism is an inflated sense of self-importance with a lack of empathy for others. If we compare ourselves to each other, we can feel comfortable not being too self-centered. On the other hand, if we compare ourselves to God’s standard, we are all very selfish. Carnality is selfish, and we are all carnal to a degree. Narcissists require excessive admiration, believing that they are unique and

deserve special treatment. The narcissist's feelings of inadequacy result in the pursuit of peace through self-adoration. The narcissist appears charming, confident, and in control to the world around him. Internally the narcissist experiences fear of abandonment, emotional instability, and deep feelings of emptiness. Narcissists perceive themselves as unique and notable people, but internally, they are driven by guilt and shame. The narcissist is oriented towards success to make oneself look positive, impressive, successful, and essential. They have a hunger for appreciation and a desire to be the center of attention, therefore deserving special treatment.

How does narcissism show itself in your life? Here are a few questions to ask yourself to help evaluate your level of self-centeredness.

Do you relate to other people as equals or as objects?

Do you feel empty much of the time?

How many selfies do you post in a week?

Do you feel entitled and the world owes you because you are special?

Do you have any empathy for the young mother holding her crying baby in the grocery store?

Are you angry or aggressive?

Do you feel you have low self-esteem?

Are you living with much shame or regret?

How well do you relate to others? Are those relationships full of distress?

Are you able to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who weep?

Are you bored much of the time?

How do you respond to a failure? Do you blame the situation or someone else, or do you evaluate your role in the failure?

Would you be defined by others as charming and charismatic but feel empty?

Do you work hard to seek the approval of others?

Do you feel angry or enraged when your self-worth is threatened?

You will require Godly grit to root out self-centeredness. If you do not fight this battle, the enemy will have you right where he wants you. You will live a lonely, empty life. You will have significant problems with your relationships. You will have an increased risk of depression and suicide. You will lose your grit and become a tired, burned-out shell of what you could

have been. You will lose your voice. You will live with confusion and a lack of purpose.

There is no known successful treatment in medicine or psychiatry for this degree of self-centeredness. If you seek a mental health worker's help, the best they can offer is boundaries to prevent you from hurting others. As Christians, we do have a greater hope. There is a solution to our self-destructive self-centeredness.

As Christians, how should we view ourselves? What is Godly self-esteem? Just asking the question should cause some concern. We should not be asking, "who am I?" We should be asking who God is and who are others. As much as my sinful, self-centered self would like to make this all about me, it is not all about me.

On the one hand, we are miserable, rebellious sinners, and on the other hand, we are creatures for whom Christ has died. We were made in His image. By focusing on self-discovery, am I not partaking in a narcissistic activity? Good self-esteem is not a question of how I view myself; it is an issue with how I view others. The fruit of the Spirit is a list of qualities present in how I relate to others, not how I expect or demand others to conform to me.

Romans 12:3 (NIV), *"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you*

ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”

So, what does it mean to have healthy, appropriate, and suitable self-esteem? Like many other valuable Christian characteristics, self-esteem is not something you achieve through striving. In God’s kingdom, self-esteem is freely living the authentic you He created. Our self-esteem comes directly from God. It is not an emotional sensation or a quality based on achievement. Like forgiveness and the fruit of the Spirit, we experience self-esteem when we give it to others. You receive from God what you give to others. Matthew 6:14 (TPT), *“And when you pray, make sure you forgive the faults of others so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you.”* So, if you want healthy, robust, vigorous self-esteem, then look at the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life. Galatians 5:22-23 (TPT), *“But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.”* When you walk into a room, do you make the conversation and activities all about you? If you make your contacts with others all about you, you will have significant issues with your self-esteem. When you walk into a room, do

you bring with you the fruit of the Spirit? Do others see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, virtue, faith, gentleness, and strength of spirit. To be a follower of Jesus, you must set aside what you desperately desire and give it to others. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 16:24 (TPT), *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If you truly want to follow me, you should at once completely reject and disown your own life. And you must be willing to share my cross and experience it as your own, as you continually surrender to my ways.”*”

Matthew 10:39 (TPT), *“All who seek to live apart from me will lose it all. But those who let go of their lives for my sake and surrender it all to me will discover true life!”*

You will not get improved self-esteem by memorizing and reciting positive affirmations. Self-esteem is gained by being the authentic person God made and through whom His Spirit gives to the world around you. Yet, the enemy will still whisper that it is all about you. Do not believe the lie.

Chapter 21 – Adoration

The stronghold of adoration is the belief and demand that you deserve to be worshiped. The enemy whispers, and knows when we are vulnerable and where we are weak. The enemy knows what to whisper, and when we are in pain, we listen. The enemy's whispers are lies that encourage us to focus on ourselves during times of anguish. With the stronghold of adoration, the enemy exploits another one of our weaknesses, the desire to be worshiped. When it comes to adoration, the enemy has many helpers because not only do we desire to be worshiped, but we were created to worship. If we do not worship the one true God, we will find a surrogate god in royalty or celebrity. This worship of false gods is not the stronghold of adoration; it is idolatry. The stronghold of adoration occurs if you are the focus of the adoration. This stronghold is one of the enemy's favorites. Lucifer himself was banished from heaven because of the stronghold of

adoration. God created and gifted him to be a magnificent being, made in beautiful perfection by God's hand. In Isaiah 14:12-14 (NKJV), we learn what happened to Lucifer when he pursued adoration. *"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'"* Humanity, like Lucifer, desires to be above God. We seek our glory and not the glory of God. John 12:43 (TPT), *"For they loved the glory that men could give them rather than the glory that came from God!"*

The stronghold of adoration is different than the stronghold of narcissism. You can be bound by the stronghold of narcissism and never leave your room. The stronghold of adoration is narcissism that craves validation from others. Humans are worshippers. God made us be complete when we worship Him. If we do not worship God, we will find something or someone else to worship. We adore our gods, our heroes, and our idols. Adoration is the demonstration of respect, showing reverence or strong admiration. Adoration means giving worth to something, worshiping it, or bowing down. Adoration is due to God alone. It is a manifestation of

submission and acknowledgment of dependency. We are dependent on what we worship. What we worship defines who we are and where we can go in times of trouble. Hebrews 12:28 (TPT), *“Since we are receiving our rights to an unshakeable kingdom we should be extremely thankful and offer God the purest worship that delights his heart as we lay down our lives in absolute surrender, filled with awe.”*

When it comes to the stronghold of adoration, we need to be aware of several things. We need to be mindful of what it means to worship, what we worship, the value of worship, and the dangers of seeking to be worshipped. With this foundation, we can then look at the disastrous impact of adoration and what to do if we are in its claws.

What does it mean to worship? The essence of worship is found in Proverbs 3:6 (TPT), *“Become intimate with him in whatever you do, and he will lead you wherever you go.”* Worship is not found in a building, a liturgy, a body position, a meditation, or an act of sacrifice. Worship is the acknowledgment of God in all your life. This intimate relationship with God will transform you. Do you want Godly grit to sustain you during times of turmoil? Do you want to be able to stand in trials? You will get the strength you need from what you worship. An idol of gold or celebrity will leave you weakened and discouraged.

What is the value and purpose of worship? Worship focuses our attention away from ourselves and, in so doing, expands our awareness of possibility. In other words, you become more like what you worship. If you worship a celebrity, you will attempt to look like them, wear their clothing, or buy the products they promote. If you worship the one true God, you will find the Godly grit to defeat the enemy, find and use your voice, and be part of building His kingdom. What you worship affects the capacity of your grit and resilience.

Worship impacts your morals and values. Worship encourages personal transformation. We look to what we worship to get insight into how we should be living. If you worship God, you will move toward developing godly morals. You will have a foundation for your morality. If you worship a manufactured idol, you have no basis for morality. If you worship a celebrity, well, you will probably end up confused and disappointed. The celebrity you worship is often two different people. The star has a stage persona, and then there is the real person, the one the public rarely sees.

While in medical practice in northern California, I was a volunteer physician with Haight-Ashbury Free Clinics providing medical care at rock concerts. My time spent backstage gave me a glimpse of the two lives of celebrities. One of the all-day shows I worked on was an angry, rebellious event at a ski resort. The music was in-your-face rebellious,

the crowd was intoxicated, and our medical team ended up busy all day. The medical area was backstage, where the musicians were gathered and preparing. The performers had access to all the alcohol they wanted, yet I did not see one musician at the beer tent all day. What they promoted was one thing but what they were was another. They knew if they lived the lifestyle that their music encouraged, they would not survive. I spent considerable time talking to several of the musicians about healthy diet and exercise programs.

Worship builds community and social identity. We view ourselves as being inferior to what we worship. This humility in the presence of what we worship is a social glue that knits us together.

Worship will change your perspective and how you can impact the world. Worship will adjust your priorities and values in a way that has a meaningful impact on the world around you.

Worship will allow you to rest in God as you acknowledge that He is in control. Worship prepares you for prayer and gaining a meaningful relationship with God. Worship will open the doors for God's blessings. I have witnessed multiple times in my work with addiction patients that the blessings start to flow when they take a step towards humility. God is eager to bless those who are willing to be humble.

Considering all these benefits of worship, you should want to

be worshiping all the time as reported by David in Psalm 92:2 (TPT), *“At each and every sunrise we will be thanking you for your kindness and your love. As the sun sets and all through the night, we will keep proclaiming, “You are so faithful!”*”

Victory is a product of worship and praise. So, whatever your battle, approach with a mindset of praise. Psalm 18:3 (NKJV), *“I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies.”*

Worship is soul-satisfying. Meditate on Psalm 63:1-5 (NKJV), *“O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You, In a dry and thirsty land, Where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.”*

Worship brings joy. Psalm 100:4 (NKJV), *“Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.”*

Worship will strengthen your faith. Romans 4:20 (NKJV), *“He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,”*

Worship opens us up to our God-given potential to a God-inspired renewal. Romans 12:2 (NKJV), *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

All of these incredible benefits of worship are lost if you are the one seeking the adoration. You may have accomplished some feat of excellence for which you receive public recognition and admiration. There is no harm in this, we should use our Godly grit to achieve greatness, but we should not use that platform to gain self-indulgent worship. A dose of public adoration can go to your head as quickly as an injection of heroin. Be incredibly careful and remain humble. Strive for excellence but leave the devotion to the only one deserving, God. After all, He is the one who gave you all your talents and abilities.

Three groups in our society are the most vulnerable to the stronghold of adoration. We have our cultural gods, heroes, and idols. Our cultural gods are those who have reached the status of celebrity. Among this group are actors, athletes, royalty, and some super-wealthy. Those in this group who use their position to gain public recognition get trapped by the adoration stronghold. As their adoring public, we see their fame, wealth, class, and glory as something to be desired. We do not see the consequences of living in this social

fishbowl.

A cultural hero expands the sense of what is possible for a human being. We look up to these people because of their accomplishments. They help to define the limits of our aspirations. They are those who have worked for what they have and become influencers because of their sacrifice, education, training, devotion, and availability. They do not seek public recognition but could use their position to gain adoration if they choose. Many narcissistic individuals within this group use their position to seek adoration. These people love to either be loved or feared. The problem with this source of worship is that the bar defining “hero” keeps moving. In my grandfather’s day, a hero was someone who graduated from college. In my father’s day, a hero was someone who graduated from medical school. In my day, a medical hero graduated from medical school and worked in a problematic remote part of the world. Today, there is little room for heroes in the field of medicine.

Cultural idols are people with natural gifts of talent, beauty, and charisma envied by others. We may not have many cultural gods or heroes, but we have many cultural idols. There are a few in every family and every classroom. These are the people who seem to have an extra dose of favor. They are more beautiful, humorous, intelligent, talented, charismatic, or athletic. They do not struggle to gain

acceptance. They are tempted by adoration even if they do not knowingly use their abilities to seek adoration.

If you are a cultural god, hero, idol, or seek to be, you need to be aware of the pitfalls of the stronghold of adoration. Adoration makes the impact of all the other strongholds more significant. Just look at the tabloid covers the next time you check out at the grocery store. Fame is an accurate predictor of misery. Adoration appears to be a positive platform when it is a snare. You no longer have issues you can keep private. Look at the list of strongholds. Every stronghold will be worse if you are a person who is adored. You will feel more isolated, struggle more with meaning, feel emptier, tend to be more bitter, struggle more with greed, have more incredible difficulty with shame, and on and on. The enemy loves it when you are adored and especially if you feel you deserve to be adored.

Striving for adoration can foster greed for glory. This greed quickly becomes consuming because adoration is very addictive and is only gratifying briefly. You live frantically chasing a fantasy you can never catch and hold. Fortune and fame will never satisfy for long. Ecclesiastes 5:10 (NKJV), *“He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.”*

Seeking adoration multiplies and reinforces the destructive impact of narcissism. After all, if everyone says it is all about

me, maybe it is all about me. Perhaps I am bigger and better than others. Remember, this world we create that is all about us is tiny, and lonely. We need to be part of something bigger than ourselves if we hope to survive and thrive.

Another result of living as the adored is that you quickly lose your sense of authentic self. Adoration and the subsequent loss of privacy can result in a loss of authenticity as there is a need to give your adoring public what they want and not your authentic self. This loss brings with it increased isolation, mistrust, dysfunctional adaptation to fame, drug addiction, and often untimely death. Fame and celebrity can change a person forever. It alters your reality and worldview in a way that crowds out love as one loses the sources of lasting joy and peace.

Once this form of adoration is experienced, there is tremendous pressure to maintain the adoration flow. This pressure to hang on to the adoration and maintain a degree of perfectionism is beyond exhausting. A celebrity living with excessive performance stress will often turn to drugs and alcohol for both the euphoria and the necessary productive energy. The addictive power of the combination of adoration and narcissism is often fatal. Yet, we are still attracted by the lure of wealth, access, preferential treatment, public adoration, and the desire to be part of an exclusive club. Remember what Jesus said about seeking glory in Luke 9:24

(TPT), *“For if you choose self-sacrifice, giving up your lives for my glory, you will embark on a discovery of more and more of true life. But if you choose to keep your lives for yourselves, you will lose what you try to keep.”* If you live your life to seek glory, you will lose your life.

The enemy's lie is that if you seek your glory, you will find it, and your life will be better. He wants you to believe that more money, power, prestige, celebrity, influence will solve your most profound problems. Yet, we all have an insatiable thirst within us that will not be satisfied with fame, money, power, drugs, or alcohol.

What does the Bible say about seeking adoration? In Proverbs 29:25 (AMPC), we read, *“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever leans on, trusts in, and puts his confidence in the Lord is safe and set on high.”* Those addicted to adoration become afraid of losing the attention of their fickle fans. They become fearful of the people they do not know. They are caught in a snare.

What must be done to tear down this deadly stronghold? The first step in approaching this stronghold is to admit that it is a problem that is much bigger than you. Cravings for adoration are more significant and potent than cravings for alcohol or any drug. If you do not humble yourself and seek God's help, you will never have a chance to overcome the stronghold of

adoration. This stronghold is a trap that very few escape. Pray that God will show you your heart and the path back to seeking and serving Him. Wash your mind and soul in His word regularly. God created us to seek Him, love Him, and love others, not be consumed with loving ourselves.

Continue to pursue excellence, aware that God alone is worthy of worship and adoration. Colossians 3:23 (TPT), *“Put your heart and soul into every activity you do, as though you are doing it for the Lord himself and not merely for others.”* Seek His glory, not your glory. Be conscious of the enemy’s lie who wants you to believe it is all about you. Seek the glory that comes from God. If you look with humble eyes, you will see the glory of God everywhere. The heavens tell us of the glory of God – Psalm 19:1 (TPT), *“God’s splendor is a tale that is told; his testament is written in the stars. Space itself speaks his story every day through the marvels of the heavens. His truth is on tour in the starry vault of the sky, showing his skill in creation’s craftsmanship.”*

If we seek personal adoration, we will be blind to the glory of God. 2 Corinthians 4:4 (TPT), *“for their minds have been blinded by the god of this age, leaving them in unbelief. Their blindness keeps them from seeing the dayspring light of the wonderful news of the glory of Jesus Christ, who is the divine image of God.”*

We were not made to be adored; we were made to experience the wonder of worship of the one true God. Therefore, we exist.

We live in a time of increased cynicism, distrust, confusion, and skepticism. We have lost trustworthy role models, the role models that point to the glory of God and not the recognition of man or human achievement. Use the talents and abilities that God has given you to be that positive role model. Do not use what God has given you to promote yourself. Psalm 37:34 (TPT), *“So don’t be impatient for the Lord to act; keep moving forward steadily in his ways, and he will exalt you at the right time.”*

This chapter concludes the section on strongholds. I am sure there are many more strongholds than I have listed. These are the twenty most common ones I have observed in the thousands of patients I have seen in over forty years of medical practice. Take some time to consider what strongholds are currently holding you back and use your Godly grit to set aside those weights that so easily rob you of your peace, kill your voice, destroy your legacy, and strive for all that God has for you.

Chapter 22 – The Enemy’s Playbook

If you are the coach of a team headed to the Super Bowl, you would have a considerable advantage if you had the other team’s playbook. A playbook details the game plan, listing what options you have and how you will respond based on the game’s unfolding. The Bible is not only a guidebook on how to live, but it is also a revelation of the enemy’s playbook. You will be at a considerable advantage if you know how the enemy plans to stop you from fulfilling God’s plan for your life.

If you seek God and have found your voice, you will also discover that the enemy has a plan. The enemy’s objective is to prevent you from using your voice. The enemy has a book of tactics to knock you off course and cause you to quit. Often, the enemy is victorious. In this next chapter, I would like to uncover the enemy’s schemes to prepare you for what you

will face.

This book is a project that started about fifty years ago. The contents developed slowly into a form that was ready to be shared with others in the fall of 2020. With ninety-five percent of the book written, I released the first podcast on November 18, 2020. The enemy was not happy. I believe I had found my voice and was now taking direct action to share it. On that day, the enemy released an unexpected attack to discourage me and prevent me from moving in the direction God was leading. That day's events included false accusations, mocking, deception, and shaming, with a significant threat to my finances. I was preparing to write this chapter, not realizing I was about to live it. Now, I have never given much stock to my dreams, usually explaining them on my dietary indiscretions or level of fatigue, but the night before these events was different. That night I dreamt that God presented my wife and me with an extraordinary gift – a gift that we at first would not understand to be a gift. I awoke that morning full of peace as I walked out to my shop to record and release the first podcast. God is so good in giving you what you need when you need it. I now have an experiential understanding of 1 Peter 4:16 (TPT), *“If you suffer for being a Christian, don’t consider it a disgrace but a privilege. Glorify God because you carry the Anointed One’s name.”* When you begin to live God’s plan for your life, you will find the enemy whispers, and

he has many willing listeners, ready to cooperate in his plan to get you to become discouraged and quit.

Amid the turmoil, keep seeking God and do not quit. He is your fortress and source of peace. James 1:12 (TPT), *“If your faith remains strong, even while surrounded by life’s difficulties, you will continue to experience the untold blessings of God! True happiness comes as you pass the test with faith, and receive the victorious crown of life promised to every lover of God!”*

This victorious crown of life promised in James 1 is not waiting for you in heaven; it is available today as you find your voice and begin to use it. You will find your life has purpose and meaning; you will experience contentment and peace that can only come from God. You will experience fulfillment as you establish a legacy of God’s love. The enemy will push back with intensity but keep standing.

You are a threat to the enemy's plans, and he will fight back. He wants to steal your peace, kill your voice, and destroy your legacy. He wants to keep you from being who God wants you to be. How does the enemy attack, who does he use? The Bible contains many examples of the enemy’s tactics against people of faith.

The enemy will attack you through condemnation. In 2 Samuel 6 about David and Michal after David experienced

a significant victory. When David danced in the streets celebrating the victory that God ordained, his wife mocked and ridiculed him. Do not be surprised if you experience condemnation from those close to you. Condemnation from strangers is powerless, but condemnation from those you love can be devastating. Do not let condemnation destroy you.

Another scheme of the enemy is a false accusation. In Genesis 39, we read the account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Joseph was where God wanted him. He was in a place of leadership that would ensure the survival of the children of Israel. The false accusation from Potiphar's wife was the enemy's scheme to remove Joseph. A false allegation is an injustice that can destroy you in two ways. If believed by others, the accusation can hurt you. It can also destroy you if you become consumed fighting the false charge. In Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV), we read, "*No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn.*" When falsely accused, condemn the words as untrue and move ahead with your God-given purpose. God does not require you to be the enemy's doormat. Strive to love the people, condemn the words, and not be consumed by the fight. God will defend you. We read the story of Samson and Delilah in Judges 16. In this account, we see that the enemy used seduction and

flattery to prevent Samson from fulfilling his God-given plan. Delilah mocked Samson and then accused him of mocking her. Be careful; the weapons used against you are often how the accuser hides those same actions and intentions. If you are mocked, flattered, or unduly promoted, it is most likely to take something from you and not give you something genuine. God has more for you than the accolades of others.

The events I mentioned occurring on November 18, 2020, happened during a time of personal physical and mental exhaustion. I had been on-call for an inpatient facility 24/7 for 15 weeks. The enemy knows when we are most vulnerable, and one of those times is when we are exhausted. In 1 Kings 19, we read about Elijah running from Jezebel, fearful and intimidated. He was exhausted and wanted to die. 1 Kings 19:4 (NKJV), *“But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!”* Take care of yourself – do not burn yourself out. Do not forget that the battle is the Lord’s. Do not become weary in doing good. Galatians 6:9 (TPT), *“And don’t allow yourselves to be weary or disheartened in planting good seeds, for the season of reaping the wonderful harvest you’ve planted is coming!”*

The enemy is aware of your vulnerable areas and will use

those areas to steal, kill, and destroy. The enemy will use any of the stronghold areas that have been areas of vulnerability in your life to isolate you and cause you to retreat. As you move ahead in becoming the person God would have you to be, you can expect to wrestle with your past strongholds. Be aware and on guard – seek the Lord and keep moving forward.

In 1 Samuel 30:18 (NKJV), we read of another scheme of the enemy. The enemy will attack by stealing the fruit of your toil and labor. *“Now it happened, when David and his men came to Ziklag, on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the South and Ziklag, attacked Ziklag and burned it with fire, and had taken captive the women and those who were there, from small to great; they did not kill anyone, but carried them away and went their way. So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. And David’s two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.”* Moving

forward with God may bring with it an attack on your finances, family, and reputation. The enemy will do all he can to rob your joy and peace to discourage you and get you to quit. Do what you can to value and protect your marriage and your family. Pray for them and be available.

We see another example of the enemy's schemes in the account of Moses. Moses was God's man to lead the children of Israel to their promised land. Almost every time Moses moved forward with God's plans, the people turned against him. Exodus 14:11-12 (NKJV), *"Then they said to Moses, 'Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness.'*" Do not be surprised if the enemy uses this scheme against you when it is least expected. A victory won is often attacked by the enemy through others' envy and jealousy.

Another effective scheme of the enemy is to get you to become offended and bitter. Bitterness will quickly steal your peace and kill your voice. Others will pick up on your offense and become bitter themselves. As you move forward with God's plan for you, you will see injustices more clearly for what they are. Do not pick up these injustices and transform

them into a bitter-producing offense. Look to Jesus, who faced the ultimate injustice as He hung on the cross yet did not become bitter.

If all else fails, the enemy will use fear and intimidation to cause you to quit and submit. We look at the Bible's heroes as people of exceptional courage and fortitude when they are no different from the rest of us. What is outstanding about them is that they continued to move ahead with God's plan amid fear and intimidation. Esther 4:15-16 (NKJV), *"Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"* Do not expect to fulfill God's plans for you with feelings of confidence and strength. God's plans for you are much bigger than you could ever accomplish with your power, and because of this, you will experience fear and intimidation. God's plans for you will take you miles beyond your zone of comfort and confidence.

We will need God's help to survive and move ahead with His plans for us. We need to develop a Biblical approach to spiritual growth and understand our role in God's kingdom. We need to build and supply a storehouse of spiritual weapons so that we will not be consumed by distraction, complacency, fear, and the enemy's other schemes.

Remember the words of Jesus in John 16:33 (TPT), *“And everything I’ve taught you is so that the peace which is in me will be in you and will give you great confidence as you rest in me. For in this unbelieving world you will experience trouble and sorrows, but you must be courageous, for I have conquered the world!”*

Chapter 23 – Stand!

The first man was created complete and placed in God's perfectly designed world. God created man to experience fulfillment in a quality relationship with Him, aware of his value and purpose, active and creative, with power, and an eternal spirit. We were made to be both physically alive and spiritually alive. God created humanity with everything we needed to be completely content. With disobedience came a fracture in our God-image. Now there was a problem. We still have God's image, but its expression and experience are severely distorted.

God is patient, God is kind, and God has provided, through His Son, a path of restoration. God loves you and wants to relate to a humble, honest, and thankful humanity. Psalm 139:5-6 (TPT) is an expression of His love. *"You've gone into my future to prepare the way, and in kindness, you follow*

behind me to spare me from the harm of my past. With your hand of love upon my life, you impart a blessing to me. This is just too wonderful, deep, and incomprehensible! Your understanding of me brings me wonder and strength.”

We do not need to fear the future; God has gone into our future to prepare our way. Even when things seem dark and uncertain, God has prepared your future. You do not have to be paralyzed by your past, controlled by guilt, shame, offenses, past abuse, or injustices. You do not have to live a life of misery and bitterness. There is hope. You can be free from anxiety about the future and harm from the past and live with thanksgiving today because of a loving God. A relationship with God is the only effective treatment for life's misery. You can now be free to pursue and fulfill your God-given voice to glorify Him as you work to build His kingdom. It is time to stand!

Ephesians 6:13 (NKJV), *“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”* Are you standing, or have you decided to remain seated? Do you have the strength and stamina to stand? Have you done all? To do all means, you have done all you can to set aside those weights that so easily trip you up. You have acknowledged and torn down strongholds and are not living a self-centered life. You can now stand, meaning you are established in your faith, using

your voice and not wavering. Are you strong enough to stand, or will you fall over with the faintest breeze of adversity?

If you follow Jesus and begin to use your voice, you will face much adversity. John 16:33 (NKJV), *“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* How you react to these tribulations will determine how close you can get to fulfilling God’s plan for your life. You will need the mindset of a warrior. 1 Timothy 1:18-19 (NKJV), *“This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck,”* 2 Timothy 2:3-4 (NKJV), *“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”* Warriors act righteously. They know what is right and what is wrong and act accordingly. A warrior is courageous in defending righteousness. A warrior is benevolent, respects others, and treats others with honor. A warrior is honest and sincere. A warrior is self-controlled, disciplined, and able to follow orders. Do you have what it takes to be a warrior? I am not talking about a physical combat warrior but a spiritual warrior who has the strength and

stamina to seek God, tear down strongholds and use their voice. God is looking for men and women willing to be His warriors. Most Christians are content just wearing their team colors and cheering from the sidelines. God did not call and equip you to be a casual fan; He called you to be part of the game.

Warriors must be humble, and confident, but not arrogant. They must acknowledge where they are weak and vulnerable. Philippians 2:5-9 (AMP). *“Have this same attitude in yourselves which was in Christ Jesus [look to Him as your example in selfless humility], who, although He existed in the form and unchanging essence of God [as One with Him, possessing the fullness of all the divine attributes—the entire nature of deity], did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped or asserted [as if He did not already possess it, or was afraid of losing it]; but emptied Himself [without renouncing or diminishing His deity, but only temporarily giving up the outward expression of divine equality and His rightful dignity] by assuming the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men [He became completely human but was without sin, being fully God and fully man]. After He was found in [terms of His] outward appearance as a man [for a divinely-appointed time], He humbled Himself [still further] by becoming obedient [to the Father] to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* If we expect to thrive and

grow, we must humble ourselves as Christ humbled Himself. We must lay aside our self-centeredness and pride and seek Him. 2 Chronicles 7:14 (ASV), *“if my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”* Humble yourself and pray, God will sustain you, and He will restore your strength and resolve as you find your value in Him.

Warriors prepare through training and discipline. 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 (NKJV), *“Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus, I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”* Start training and disciplining yourself by learning to trust God for the little things in life. If your reflex is to turn to Him and His Word when you do not feel threatened, you are more likely to turn to Him when adversity increases. Do you reflexively turn to Him, or do you turn to Google? What you train yourself to do when the pressure is low is what you will do when the pressure is extensive.

Warriors are reliable, trustworthy, and not self-centered. Strive to be authentic. Be honest and humble. Cherish your solitude time with God, ask Him daily to search your heart, then be willing to change what needs to be changed.

Warriors are honorable; they live by an ethical code and are respectful. A warrior has learned to live life considerate of others. Psalm 15:1-5 (NKJV), *“LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart; He who does not backbite with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honors those who fear the LORD; He who swears to his own hurt and does not change; He who does not put out his money at usury, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.”* A warrior will perish on the battlefield if consumed by self-centered thoughts.

Warriors recognize they are part of something much bigger than themselves. They know they have a specific task, at a particular time, for the benefit of all. 1 Peter 2:9 (NKJV), *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;”* Do not complain about the evils of this age and remain seated. God has placed you on earth for this time to stand; this is your time, and He has equipped you and trusts you to do your part.

Warriors have a keen sense of justice. The warrior is ready

and willing to stand up for the weak and vulnerable. A warrior knows the necessary boundaries. Titus 2:11-14 (NKJV), *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”* James 1:27 (TPT), *“True spirituality that is pure in the eyes of our Father God is to make a difference in the lives of the orphans, and widows in their troubles, and to refuse to be corrupted by the world’s values.”* Do you stand up against injustice? Do you see the struggles of the vulnerable? Do you know the boundaries?

Warriors live a sacrificial life of service. The warrior does not seek death but is willing to fight to the end if needed. 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NKJV), *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”* How much are you willing to sacrifice? Are you living for anything for which you are ready to die?

Luke 9:23 (NKJV), *“Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”* Your value does not come from your gifts or talents; they were given to you by God; you do not own them; you are a steward. Use what He has given you, whether that is much or little to serve others. 1 Peter 4:10 (AMP), *“Just as each one of you has received a special gift [a spiritual talent, an ability graciously given by God], employ it in serving one another as [is appropriate for] good stewards of God’s multi-faceted grace [faithfully using the diverse, varied gifts and abilities granted to Christians by God’s unmerited favor].”* We are to be co-creators with God and other believers. We can rely on our God-given creativity and curiosity to pursue our dreams with passion and commitment.

We are free to use our God-given talents and abilities to dream and imagine solutions, businesses, inventions, and so on to serve God and others. Acts 2:17 (AMP), *“And it shall be in the last days,’ says God, ‘That I will pour out My Spirit upon all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see [divinely prompted] visions, And your old men shall dream [divinely prompted] dreams;”* It is time for God’s people to wake up and dream! Find your voice and use it!

Warriors strive for excellence in all they do because their life

and the life of others depends on it. Push ahead with diligence. Colossians 3:23-24 (AMP), *“Whatever you do [whatever your task may be], work from the soul [that is, put in your very best effort], as [something done] for the Lord and not for men, knowing [with all certainty] that it is from the Lord [not from men] that you will receive the inheritance which is your [greatest] reward. It is the Lord Christ whom you [actually] serve.”* If you live to serve yourself, your diligence will dissolve, and you will become discouraged. Do all you do as if you are serving the Lord. You can now live your birthed dream with passion and commitment with the energy to see that vision come to reality. 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 (NKJV), *“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.”*

Warriors know their place and position in a chain of command. 2 Timothy 2:3 (NKJV), *“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”* We are followers of Jesus, He is our captain, and we are His soldiers.

Warriors live in constant preparation. After a period of intense training and physical preparation, a warrior must live in a state of continuous preparation, always on the ready. As a soldier of Jesus, we must be continuously prepared by renewing our minds and presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice. Romans 8:6 (AMP), *“Now the mind of the flesh is death [both now and forever—because it pursues sin]; but the mind of the Spirit is*

life and peace [the spiritual well-being that comes from walking with God—both now and forever];”

Warriors adhere to ideals that govern their actions and priorities. As God’s warriors, we can now live with the right priorities with a restored spirit. We no longer need to live in denial because of fear produced by our sense of inferiority or mortality. We can begin to see and prioritize as God sees and prioritizes. We can understand what will last and what will burn.

Warriors do not prepare and go to battle for themselves; they go to war on others' behalf. If we lived in a perfect world, relationships would be straightforward; people would love one another and be trustworthy and authentic. We will have to wait for that world. We should be living with a Philippians 2:5 (AMP) attitude as a guide to relationships on this side of heaven. *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit [through factional motives, or strife], but with [an attitude of] humility [being neither arrogant nor self-righteous], regard others as more important than yourselves.”* This attitude will impact our relationships' quality, give love a definition, help with proper placement of trust, and encourage authenticity. The Bible tells us that they will know we are Christians by our love and that we are to love others as we would love ourselves.

Warriors must be trustworthy and must trust their fellow warriors. Trust needs to be based on someone's actions and not just their words. Some of the most brutal criminals will speak some of the sweetest, kindest words. Trust is essential, but it must be with caution. Be patient in your judgment. The Bible tells us it is by their fruit we will know someone. Develop your skills as a fruit inspector. You need to maintain clear boundaries while you wait to see the fruit of their life. Be honest and trustworthy but be wise when it comes to trusting others.

In an ideal world, we would all work together, and our meaning and value would be secure in who we are in a relationship with God. We would all cooperate and work to elevate one another. There would be no competition or striving for meaning, value, or purpose; we would have a clear understanding of our God-provided value. We would have no problem going to battle together.

Warriors are goal-oriented. Warriors know what they are fighting and why they are fighting. Our battle as God's warriors is to tear down strongholds, stand against the attacks of the enemy, glorify Him, and make Him known. 2 Timothy 4:2-5 (NKJV), "*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires,*

because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” Are you living with a clear purpose? Do you know your mission?

Warriors know how to stand steadfast and unwavering. A warrior does not allow room in his life for excuses to knock him off track. You will never use your voice if you wait until you are better prepared or for the perfect opportunity. When warriors are called to battle, they do not delay or wait until their shoes are shined and their garage is clean. We should be living with an eternal purpose and not just living for what we can get for the moment. We should be living with eternity in mind and living to build and support God’s kingdom, not striving to create our own little empire. Is eternity in your mind?

We should value what has eternal value. Pause to consider what will last and what will not last. Where is your focus? What do you value? What do you treasure? Luke 12:34 (AMP), *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* If your heart is troubled, it is because you have rotting treasure. Live today with eternal priorities and values. Proverbs 4:23 (NKJV), *“Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.”*

Stand for your voice. You are God's warrior. You are unique. God loves you. You can have a meaningful relationship with God. As His child, you have substantial value. You have God-given creative power. God gave you an eternal spirit. So, go out and live the image as God intended, free from loneliness, meaninglessness, the pressure to perform, and anxiety about your mortality. Exercise and use your voice with commitment and passion.

Stand for righteousness. Do what is right. Protect and serve the vulnerable. Be honest and authentic even when the world around you may hate you for your honesty.

Stand against self-centeredness, strongholds, the attacks of the enemy, and the spirit of antichrist.

Our flesh is greedy and self-serving. We need the Holy Spirit to rescue us from ourselves. Our only experience of this world is through our own eyes, and we become blind to others' life and struggles. Apart from a relationship with God, we all follow a self-serving life path, whether sweet or nasty. If we are not God-serving, we are self-serving. What has been self-serving soon becomes self-consuming. All the self-serving acts we have performed, and the self-serving stuff we have gathered will eventually lead to our destruction.

Seek the Lord and ask Him to reveal the strongholds in your life. Tear down those strongholds so you can freely become

the person you were designed to be. Do not allow the strongholds to create a self-focused offense. Our spirit has been renewed, and we can live as God intended, but we still have an unrestored mind, habits, emotions, and desires. We need to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, and our minds need ongoing renewal. Romans 12:1-2 (AMP), *“Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [dedicating all of yourselves, set apart] as a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God, which is your rational (logical, intelligent) act of worship. And do not be conformed to this world [any longer with its superficial values and customs], but be transformed and progressively changed [as you mature spiritually] by the renewing of your mind [focusing on godly values and ethical attitudes], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His plan and purpose for you].”* Our minds are renewed or washed by God’s word. Ephesians 5:26 (TPT), *“to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God.”* We are now on the path from misery to peace. The process is one of humbly coming before the Lord, asking Him to search our hearts to identify and root out the irrational thoughts, the untamed emotions, the damaging habits, and the ungodly desires. We can rest confident in Philipians 1:6 (AMP), *“I am convinced and confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will [continue to]*

perfect and complete it until the day of Christ Jesus [the time of His return].” If you are drowning in misery, take time daily to ask God to search your heart and then have the courage and faith to change what He reveals to you. At the end of your day, as you prepare for bed, pray Psalm 139:23-24 (TPT), *“God, I invite your searching gaze into my heart. Examine me through and through; find out everything that may be hidden within me. Put me to the test and sift through all my anxious cares. See if there is any path of pain I’m walking on, and lead me back to your glorious, everlasting ways - the path that brings me back to you.”* If you abandon this growth process, it will not take long, and you will find you will again be struggling with the same strongholds that once held you back.

If you follow this path, do not expect appreciation from your previous group of family and friends. You will need to stand amid rejection from others, often others you have been close to in the past. If you have been part of a group that shares their bitterness and you move on to a godly path, you will face rejection from your former bitter friends. Your contentment is a threat to their beliefs, irrational thinking, and way of life. You bring with you God’s light, and this is a threat to those hiding in the darkness. They hide, knowing they are not living as they should; they know their deeds are self-centered and evil. They do not want your light around. If you become offended because your previous social group rejects you, you may

resort to your previously destructive irrational thoughts as a way of escape. These attacks can leave you feeling more isolated, causing you to question your purpose and meaning. They will challenge your dreams and abilities. The turmoil caused by these attacks can be noisy enough to impact your ability to hear God's still small voice. Stand firm; God is faithful, even when your family and friends are not.

As God's warrior, you live to bring glory to God, and therefore, you will be an insult to Satan and come under attack. The enemy will do all he can to steal your peace, kill your voice and destroy your legacy. Put on the whole armor of God and stand!

As God's warrior, you should also expect to be attacked by the culture of antichrist. So, what is the culture or spirit of the antichrist? How do we identify it? God, the Father, through Jesus Christ, has promised to meet your deepest needs. He has provided a way for the restoration of your God-image. He has promised you peace and security in Him. Any culture or system that offers these promises in the absence of Christ is the culture of antichrist. 1 John 4:2-3 (TPT) informs us of the test we can use to identify the antichrist spirit. *"Here's the test for those with the genuine Spirit of God: they will confess Jesus as the Christ who has come in the flesh. Everyone who does not acknowledge that Jesus is from God has the spirit of antichrist, which you heard was coming and is already active*

in the world.” The spirit of antichrist is the proclamation of God’s promises without Christ. The spirit of antichrist masquerades as “the truth” when it is a lie. The spirit and culture of antichrist promise compassion but then cause division by elevating one group over another. Groups based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or financial status have special treatment. It appears to be loving on the surface, but it is only causing more profound division. The antichrist culture promotes the belief that what I can make of myself is more important than how God made me. It supports the wrong notion that I can find peace by changing who I was made to be. The culture of antichrist glories in deception – lies for the sake of lying. It promotes a life of hiding and a life of secrets. Bonds develop with those you share secrets, not relationships based on God’s truth. With the antichrist culture, there is a loss of the sacredness of life. The economy and convenience are more important than human life, especially the most vulnerable lives – the unborn and the elderly. Antichrist's culture is a twisted road; it looks like it is going one way when it is going another. The antichrist culture may also overtly show itself as being perverse through open rebellion and open denial of God’s existence. The antichrist culture promises protection as it promotes fear; the greater the fear, the greater the need for the protection promised. The culture of antichrist fosters dependency. You are now dependent on me if I can simultaneously increase your fear of heart disease

and then guarantee solutions to that medical problem. I have become your savior. We live in an age where the culture of antichrist is flourishing. Be wise; do not get swayed by the subtle culture of antichrist.

As God's warriors, we should not be living controlled by fear. We can live with the promise in Romans 8:31(AMP) *"What then shall we say to all these things? If God is for us, who can be [successful] against us?"* We no longer feel the need to waste our life by hiding or guarding secrets with denial. God is big enough to handle any reality. We are free to be humble and honest. You no longer must live being controlled by fear. You are secure in your relationship with God and no longer need to be controlled by fear of failure or reliance on an excellent result to be confident in yourself. Isaiah 41:10 (AMP), *"Do not fear [anything], for I am with you; Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, be assured I will help you; I will certainly take hold of you with My righteous right hand [a hand of justice, of power, of victory, of salvation]."*

As God's warriors, we are more spiritually intact and aware. We know where the battle is and where the struggle is not. We understand the meaning of Ephesians 6:12 (AMP), *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [contending only with physical opponents], but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this [present] darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly*

(supernatural) places.” We are aware that there is a lot more going on than we see on the surface. 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 (NKJV), “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.”

You are God’s warrior. Seek Him with all your being. Find your voice, begin to exercise it, and use it for His glory. Put on all the armor He has provided and stand. God created you for this time, as difficult as it may seem. Stand!

Psalm 1:1-3 (TPT)

What delight comes to the one who follows God's ways!

He won't walk in step with the wicked,

nor share the sinner's way,

nor be found sitting in the scorner's seat.

His passion is to remain true to the Word of "I AM,"

meditating day and night on the true revelation of light.

He will be standing firm like a flourishing tree

planted by God's design,

deeply rooted by the brooks of bliss,

bearing fruit in every season of life.

He is never dry, never fainting,

ever blessed, ever prosperous.

The End

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A look at the image of God given to man.

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A look at the destructive impact of bitterness.

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