

# A Sound Mind

# A Sound Mind

*Christian principles for mental health  
through a God-governed thought life*

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To Rachel: sound in mind and sweet in nature

*Note:* While this book is written primarily for committed Christian readers, many of the principles it sets out are valid for everyone. An Appendix at the end of the book sets out what it means to be a Christian.

# Introduction

But for the grace of God I would long since have been in a mental institution.

From childhood, something inside me instinctively knew there must be some bedrock truths to support a steady existence, some solid convictions to live by. But humanistic school-teachers, poets, novelists and scientists combined to impress upon me, from the age of five onwards, that life was fundamentally meaningless.

As I grew older my mind became a battleground. How could the supposed virtue of an open mind be reconciled with the firm convictions of Christian faith?

As the two ideologies fought for control of my thinking, I would incline towards first one, then the other. To yield my mind to God would be to restrict its activity. Surely that couldn't be right? Yet to embrace the teaching of humanism would be to suffer like Phyllis McGinley, who wrote:

*Ah, snug lie those that slumber  
Beneath Conviction's roof.  
Their floors are sturdy lumber,  
Their windows weatherproof.  
But I sleep cold forever  
And cold sleep all my kind,  
For I was born to shiver  
In the draft from an open mind.*

That 'draft from an open mind' has smitten modern man

with a mental pneumonia from which he is slowly dying. Psychiatric wards and mental institutions are full of the terminally sick in mind.

For myself, I wanted to live—to the full. That very quality of life, I discovered, was what Jesus promised (John 10:10), but at a price: I would have to submit my whole being—*my mind included*—to his rule. The grace of God prevailed. The Lord God of Armies won the battle for my mind and I became a Christian.

Once committed to Jesus, I discovered that my thought processes needed re-educating, that a ‘renewing of the mind’ was required. Far from being a one-off crisis, this turned out to be a lifelong process, one I have been happily involved in now for over fifty years.

To my delight I have discovered that true mental freedom lies, not in keeping an open mind and doing one’s own thing, but in having the right master. Jesus has proved to be that right Master.

In this book I share some of the liberating insights that the Lord has given me as part of the mind-renewing process. May they prove equally liberating to you.

*David Matthew*

Castleford, England, 2006

## *Chapter 1*

# A sound mind

‘Suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed.’

You put down the newspaper with a sigh. Another tragic end to a human life, the file closed with the coroner’s blunt verdict.

A host of questions flood into your head as you sip your coffee with a faraway look in your eye and ponder that grim phrase: ‘While the balance of his mind was disturbed’. What fearful mental tortures racked the victim before the event? What dark forces dominated his thinking? How could anyone, you ask yourself, sink so low in depression and despair as to take his own life?

Then the most fearful question of all: could it ever happen to you?

With a shudder, you dismiss the haunting prospect from your mind and busy yourself with the day’s work. Some things are best not even contemplated!

Nevertheless, while most people manage to stay on the right side of insanity, and of suicide, we all have to admit that mental pressures can sometimes be intense. The human mind is such a delicate instrument; its fine balance is liable to be upset by a variety of factors.

Let’s consider some of them.

## Health and temperament

There's our *physical health* or lack of it. We are often negative here. A thumping headache is quick to convince us that we are suffering from a brain tumour. Or a twinge of pain in the chest triggers off a train of thought that within seconds has us visualising our own funeral, complete with hearse, graveside committal and weeping relatives.

Then there are *hereditary factors*. 'How I wish I hadn't been born so intelligent!' a student once complained to me. 'If only I could have been the average type who's content to amble through life, satisfied with a routine job, a bit of gardening at weekends and a few pints of beer with some friends down at the pub. But as it is, I've inherited a keen brain. I find myself asking deeper questions about life. The trouble is, the answers don't come easily, and when they do come they're nearly always depressing.'

While there is truth in the proverb, 'When ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise', the fact remains that, in practice, we often have little choice. We have to cope with what we are—a sharp mind included.

*Temperament* is another part of our hereditary makeup. We have all met the 'artistic' type who is highly sensitive to mood and atmosphere. His permanent state seems to be mildly manic-depressive—one minute he is on a guffawing, backslapping 'high', the next in the pit of despair. He is just made that way.

Similar to him is the introverted thinker, categorised by the ancients as 'melancholic'. He is the 'dark horse', the 'strong, silent type' who thinks a great deal but says little. He ponders deep issues till his mind comes near to bursting point,

because the longer he ponders, the more convinced he becomes that there are no satisfying answers. When the melancholic sees a poster bearing the legend: ‘Sometimes I sit and think, and sometimes I just sit’, he lets out a sigh and wishes with all his heart that he could escape out of the first situation into the second. But he knows he can’t.

Closely allied to heredity are *emotional factors*. Generally speaking, a woman’s mind is more prone to be influenced by these than a man’s. Often there is a glandular or hormonal aspect, as is commonly the case with pre-menstrual tension, post-natal depression and the menopause.

*Age*, too, has a bearing on our state of mind. Mental sharpness tends to be dulled with the advancing years. Memory begins to fail. We become less able to cope with a variety of demands at the same time. Sometimes confusion sets in and, especially for those unable to get out and about, the ability to distinguish past and present events slips away as time seems to stand still.

Yet another element is *use*. Just as an arm or leg muscle will atrophy from lack of use, so will the ‘muscles’ of the mind. Conversely, a mind kept active by new challenges and a variety of stimuli tends to remain fitter for longer. Apparently older folk who do crosswords or sudoku, or even play bingo, are more liable to enjoy robust mental health.

Over and above these factors governing our mental condition, however, there are others peculiar to the times in which we live.

### Pressures of today’s world

We are all *world-conscious* in a way unknown to any previous generation. Living, as we do, in the era of computers,

television and long-haul air travel, we are robbed of the parochial view of life common to our ancestors.

TV is here to stay, whether we like it or not. Thanks to satellite communications and videophones, reports of earthquakes, wars, famines, revolutions and disasters are pumped into our sitting-rooms from 'embedded reporters' right as they happen, complete with moving, talking pictures in full colour. One viewer was heard to comment, 'I don't know which is the worse: watching the early evening news and being too frightened to eat my meal, or watching the late night news and being unable to sleep.'

Yes, world-consciousness can be a mental burden. The often-heard remark, 'What on earth is the world coming to?', is a comment peculiarly appropriate to our times.

Even more difficult to cope with is the *accelerating rate of change*. Time was when life was ninety per cent predictable. The routines of youth, marriage, family life, employment, retirement and death varied little from one generation to the next. Like a marathon runner who has reconnoitred the course, people used to be able to pace themselves through life with a fair degree of certainty. For our generation such a luxury has gone for ever. Life is so unpredictable, so full of change and uncertainty that it could better be likened to a commando being parachuted into enemy territory. Anything can happen!

My grandmother remembered the motor-car being invented. Now we can fly in cushioned comfort at 500 miles per hour, seven miles up, relishing a gourmet meal to the sound of stereo music before watching the in-flight movie. More than that, we have men on the moon and space probes taking close-up photos of distant planets.

Previous generations wrote books long-hand or, more recently, with a typewriter. I'm writing this, of course, on a computer screen using a word-processor, juggling words and sentences around at the touch of a button. At the touch of another button the whole book is captured in seconds onto the disk and a backup copy saved at a safe location elsewhere. Yet another touch will set the printer purring away to produce an effortless printout. All very normal, yet I have seen older writers peer at my computer with a wary expression. To them it represents the unknown, and the unknown is frightening. Technology, though potentially so helpful, can also be scary—a pressure on the mind because it represents change and the end of the already short-lived status quo.

Added to this uncertainty is a related and equally heavy, pressure: *the frantic pace of modern life*.

While the 'hurry factor' varies, we're all caught up in it to some extent. Being in a frantic hurry is seen at its worst in the big-city commuter waiting on the station platform for the early train into town. He glances nervously at his watch. The train is thirty seconds overdue! His body stiffens with impatience; his heart rate increases; with knuckles white from tension he taps his foot on the ground, as if to send a morse message to urge the train on. He breaks into a cold sweat as his mind races ahead to possible missed connections in town, work-time lost and a host of other upsets to his over-busy, over-scheduled life.

For many in the western world, *economic uncertainty* adds to the mental burden. While the pressure to possess material things increases, the means to buy them become, for many, less readily available. They find themselves gripped in the tight coils of the credit system or stabbed in the back by their 'flexible friend', the credit card. Adjustable interest rates, short

job-contracts, pension problems, rocketing fuel prices or the threat of unemployment combine to make financial planning ever more difficult.

And in some of the nations with a now-forsaken Christian heritage, *increasing lawlessness*, either real or perceived, constitutes a growing pressure on the mind of ‘the man in the street’. More and more he is becoming ‘the man indoors’, for the street is a dangerous place to be, especially after dark, in spite of anti-social behaviour orders on local jobs.

For a few, these pressures are compounded by *physiological factors*. A chemical imbalance or glandular malfunction can affect the mind in a big way, turning a person with a well-integrated personality into someone who crouches weeping in a corner, unable to grasp what is happening.

Little wonder, then, that under such a barrage of pressure the mind of modern man is prone to disintegrate. ‘I’m nearly out of my mind with worry’ is all too commonplace a remark. And, for some, the mental burden becomes too much. No longer able to maintain the equilibrium of their mind, they end up the subject of yet another coroner’s report.

### The believer’s birthright

What about you? Can you reasonably expect to stay sane under present conditions?

If you are not a Christian in the Bible sense of the word—see the Appendix to this book if you are unclear what that means—there can be no guarantees. But for the believer in Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, the prospects are altogether brighter. Mental stability, however, does not come from dodging the pressures. Becoming a hermit isn’t the answer. Nowhere in Scripture does God promise his followers a

smooth ride. As long as you live in the same world as everyone else you will have to face the same pressures. But your happy privilege as a Christian is to experience power sufficient to keep you sane and mentally healthy in the very midst of the pressures. Your birthright in Christ includes *a sound mind!*

You may need to adjust your thinking a little if you were raised on the notion that Christ ‘saves souls’. He doesn’t just save souls in the sense of the intangible, immaterial part of us, scorning interest in our bodies or our brains. No, he saves the whole person, body and mind included. And while it is true that we shall have to wait until the age to come to enjoy the fulness of our redemption, we can still enjoy a substantial taste of that age’s powers right here and now.

‘God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of *a sound mind*’.<sup>1</sup> The apostle Paul’s statement is true for *you* and for *now!*

Don’t worry if your version of the Bible translates ‘a sound mind’ as ‘discipline’ or ‘self-discipline’. That’s because the original Greek has no exact English equivalent and several different ideas comprise its overall meaning. The *Amplified Bible* wraps it all up in a tidy package as follows: ‘He has given us a spirit of power and of love and of calm and well-balanced mind and discipline and self-control.’

Here, in fact, we have the same Greek word used to describe the once-suicidal maniac named Legion. After Jesus had dealt with the demonic powers that governed his life, the man was found by the astonished locals ‘sitting there, dressed and *in his right mind*’.<sup>2</sup> Jesus simply restored him to normality. The touch of Jesus upon a human life always has that effect. He brings order out of chaos. He stills the mental storm to produce in the human mind ‘a great calm’.

Has he touched you with his salvation? If so, then a sound mind is your privilege. If not, now is the time to step out of the driving seat of your life and hand over the controls to him.

### A mind 'held together'

It is one thing to receive a sound mind at the touch of the Lord. It is another thing to hold on to it. Many a tormented mind, initially stilled at the divine command, has in time become turbulent again.

In no way can we lay the blame on the Lord; he always does a reliable job. The problem lies in our failure to live in the good of what he has done. And why does that happen? Chiefly because we don't understand what the Scripture teaches about the mind. If we ignore the Maker's guidelines for the *maintenance* of mental health it should come as no surprise to find the machinery running into difficulties. Together, therefore, we're going to explore some of the Bible's principles for mental health and stability.

Do you find yourself right now in a state of mental turmoil? Does your mind feel as if it must break apart any moment? I understand; I've been there. I pray that the Lord himself will give you sufficient calm and concentration to stay alert as we look into his Word together.

Paul said about Christ: 'In him all things hold together'.<sup>3</sup> 'All things' includes *your mind*. Jesus can hold your mind together. Trust him to do it while you read through these pages. By the time you have finished you will be in a position to co-operate with him to make it a permanent arrangement.

*Chapter 1 NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7 NKJV

<sup>2</sup> Mark 5:15

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 1:17

## Chapter 2

# Mind dethroned

It begins in the primary school classroom—a brain-washing process that teaches us to accept without question that Mind is king.

Our thoughts, we are told, can wander unchallenged, like sacred cows in India, wherever they will; nothing and no-one has the right to forbid them passage. There is no higher authority.

By the time we reach our teenage years, the indoctrination has bitten deep, to the point where most of us don't even realise that there could be an alternative to Mind as king. Were someone to voice the possibility our likely response would be: 'What do you mean? How can my mind *not* be its own boss? Surely no-one else can legislate for what goes on inside my head!'

But we would be wrong. *God* claims ultimate rule. His is the authority over all things, and 'all things' includes our thinking.

## A bit of history

Down the centuries God's claim has been disputed. Not only have individuals asserted the independence of their own minds, but some have also attempted to dictate the thinking of others. The ancient pagan priests attempted this, and largely succeeded. They asserted their rule over the minds and

consciences of those they purported to serve, uttering dire threats over any person daring to think independently. Today this usurping of God's authority still goes on. Witch-doctors, dictators and cult leaders the world over keep a tight grip on the reins of people's thinking.

Historically, it was probably the Greeks who first broke free, declaring, 'No-one must be allowed to tell us what to think or believe. No limits must be set on human thought. Everything must be open to examination, everything called into question.' In general, however, thinking in Europe continued to develop through the Middle Ages along Christian lines (using 'Christian' in its broadest sense), with God acknowledged by all and his right to make demands on their minds implicitly accepted. Not until the eighteenth century was that situation overturned.

### Rationalism: the rule of mind

In that century, in the trend known as *rationalism*, human reason finally exalted itself above God. 'Start by doubting everything—even God's existence' became the watchword. Philosophers and thinkers began to kick against the rule of God and Christ, shouting, 'Let us break their chains...and throw off their fetters'.<sup>1</sup>

In France at this time—the period of the French Revolution—the liberation of the mind from the supposed shackles of God found expression in the setting up of the Goddess of Reason in the heart of the nation's institutional church, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

As the ideas of the philosophers spread through European society more widely, Reason tightened its hold on the throne. It became ever more bold in its claim to absolute rule, and few

dared challenge that claim. The belief soon prevailed, as it still does, that the human mind could even analyse God. How foolish! Man can no more fathom the mysteries of God with his little brain than he can suck the ocean dry with a drinking-straw. Pascal was right in observing that ‘the last function of reason is to recognise that there are an infinity of things which surpass it’.

Today we live as the heirs of western rationalism. But there is one difference. Whereas in the eighteenth century the supremacy of the mind was the philosophy of a few professional thinkers (like Berkeley, Hume, Voltaire and Rousseau) and of their educated disciples, now it has filtered down to the grassroots of society. Today we all regard it as self-evident that we can think what we want to think. Mind is worshipped universally—even in the primary school classroom.

## The Christian difference

But we who are Christians cannot fall into line. We break out of our generation’s cultural straitjacket by declaring that God alone rules all things, even our minds. Convinced that if he isn’t Lord of all, he isn’t Lord at all, we tell him, ‘*Lord, we concede your right to govern our thought-life.*’

This must be our starting point in considering the whole question of the human mind. The Bible underlines it as the number one priority by declaring, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’.<sup>2</sup> We could add that the fear of the Lord—that is, the according to him of his rightful place as ruler—is also the first step to mental stability.

To exalt your own mind to kingship is to load it with a weight of responsibility that it is ill-equipped to carry. As major questions about life, death, purpose and direction arrive

in a steady stream on its desk, requiring decisions, it begins to panic. It lacks the capacity for making such taxing decisions. Soon, it begins to crack under the strain.

But God can never be overloaded. It is no burden at all to him that the buck stops at his desk. You can therefore submit to God with confidence and, in so doing, release your mind from unbearable pressure.

## Your mind under the Word

So far so good. But what does it mean, in practice, to bow to God? First of all it means *submitting your mind to God's Word—the Bible*.

Take, for example, the question of where the universe came from. Astronomers and scholars have put forward a variety of suggestions: the Continuous Expansion theory, the Steady State theory, the Big Bang theory. What do we believe? Genesis presents us with an account of the direct creation of the universe by God, an account summarised by Hebrews 11:3 in the neat statement: 'By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.'

There you have it: *'By faith we understand'*.

Faith is simply taking God at his word. When he declares, 'I personally spoke the universe into being', you submit your mind to his word and so find true understanding. You are not free to consider alternatives. At last you know the answer to a question that has baffled the minds of eggheads for as long as humanity has existed.

Bigger questions than this also have their answer in God's Word:

- Why are you here? Because God willed it.
- What is the purpose of your life? To know God and to co-operate with him in his eternal plan.
- What does death hold for you, as a Christian? Being with Christ, which is far better than anything experienced this side of the grave or the crematorium furnace.
- Do you have any real significance? Yes, you are a unique expression of God, chosen by him, supported by him, loved by him.

Smile, God loves you!

What joy and comfort we find in submitting our minds to such glorious truths! What cause for godly hilarity! And what a far cry from the plight of the Earl of Chesterfield, an eighteenth-century thinker, who glumly remarked, ‘Since attaining the full use of my reason no-one has ever heard me laugh.’

Indeed, there is little cause for joy or laughter in what King Reason offers his subjects. The universe, he says, is a chance collocation of atoms, a happening without purpose. You, too, are without purpose—you have no significance, no hope and no meaningful expectations either this side of death or beyond. According to King Reason, you are a feeble swimmer in a vast, endless sea, with no rescue vessel in sight. You are destined to struggle to keep your head above water until your puny strength runs out and you sink to a frightening, meaningless end.

Give me God’s way any time!

Have *you* broken free from the tyranny of the mind? Five centuries ago, a German monk named Martin Luther broke

free from another tyranny: the mental and spiritual bondage imposed by a corrupt Church. Today's religion is a different one: humanism, with its idolising of the mind. It's our privilege, as it was Luther's, to break free and gladly embrace a new captivity, declaring as he did, 'My conscience is taken captive by God's Word. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.'

## Your mind under the Spirit

Second, to bow to God means *submitting your mind to the Holy Spirit within you*.

The Holy Spirit *is* God. He will show you things that the unaided human mind can never grasp, things that God alone can make known.<sup>3</sup> To begin with, he will bring assurance of salvation, convincing you beyond doubt that you are indeed God's beloved child.

I knew a young woman who was born again, baptised as a believer and filled with the Holy Spirit. As a result, her life was transformed. Her rationalistic husband, however, had no time for such 'religious nonsense'. Determined to rid his wife of her Christian fantasies, he patiently explained to her how God couldn't possibly exist and how her so-called new birth was no more than an emotional 'high'.

She listened dutifully to all his persuasive arguments. When he had finished, she flashed him a winning smile and said, 'Well, thank you for all your reasoning, dear. I certainly can't answer your arguments, but I just *know* I'm a child of God, and my sins are forgiven and...oh, it's so wonderful!'

The poor man nearly tore his hair out! His mental gymnastics were no match for the conviction of a mind persuaded by God's Holy Spirit.

## Anointed to know

‘You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth,’ explains John.<sup>4</sup> He makes a connection between being anointed with the Holy Spirit and knowing the truth.

The ‘truth’ he refers to here is more than doctrinal orthodoxy. It is the kind of everyday truth that we require in the most ordinary of circumstances. John is saying that the presence of the Holy Spirit will, among other things, guide you when your natural mind is in a dilemma, enabling you to reach a sound decision.

Among a class of seventeen-year-old girls the major topic of conversation one day was a popular novel that had won notoriety for its strong element of perverted sex. Jenny, a Christian, didn’t read it; she knew that such a book would do her thought-life no good.

‘Hey, Jenny, what do *you* think of this book?’ queried one of her friends.

‘Oh, I’ve no time for it.’

‘So you’ve read it, then?’

‘No.’

‘What! Well how on earth can you pronounce judgment on something you haven’t even read?’

‘Well, for a start, its reputation’s bad enough. But, apart from that, I just know inside myself that it would foul up my mind. So I’ve chosen to give it a miss.’

‘That’s stupid!’

‘Maybe it is to you, but to me it makes good sense.’

A Christian like Jenny—or you—doesn’t need to test

everything with the mind. That's the world's way: 'Mind is boss, so let it make all the decisions.' The Holy Spirit will sometimes lead you to wise decisions directly, when to involve your powers of mental analysis would stain your mind with moral dirt. It's not just books. Some newspapers, movies, magazines and websites can be equally harmful.

'I want you to be wise about what is good,' urged Paul, '*and innocent about what is evil*'.<sup>5</sup> Let your mind range freely around matters that are wholesome and good. That's wisdom. But when you hear alarm bells ringing at a deeper level than the mind—in the depths of your spirit—choose to turn your mind away. Don't watch that film or leaf through that magazine. To adapt the motto of a popular brand: 'Just don't do it!'

## Bankrupt logic

Moral questions apart, man's powers of logic are simply inadequate to handle *any* spiritual truth. Paul once came across a classic example in some people in Rome who argued like this:

'Sin is a sad fact of life. But, happily, God's grace reaches out to deal with it. The more sin there is, the more of God's grace flows out. The grace of God is a wonderful thing; we can never get too much of it. Why, then, don't we sin as much as we can, so that more and more of God's wonderful grace will be drawn out in response?'

Now that is perfectly logical by the standards of human reason, but by God's reckoning it is perfectly wrong. Paul didn't even consider it worth arguing over; he just dismissed it out of hand.<sup>6</sup> In the end, true understanding in such cases comes, not by logic, which may be spiritually questionable,

but by revelation from the Holy Spirit of God, who takes one look at the world's wisdom and sticks a warning label on it: 'Foolishness'.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of all this, then, *your first step to mental stability is to dethrone your mind and acknowledge the rule of God.* Your mind makes a good servant but a bad master. Let your thinking, therefore, renounce its claim to independence and agree to be restricted by God's Word and God's Spirit.

## Happy restriction

'Restricted?' you reply. 'That sounds like intellectual suicide. Surely restriction is a bad thing, isn't it?'

Not necessarily. In fact, some restrictions are altogether good. A train, for instance, runs far better when it is restricted to the rails. A football match makes sense only if the players restrict themselves to the rules. Traffic flows smoothly only when it is restricted to the correct side of the road. And your mind will operate successfully only when it is restricted to the guidelines of God.

Are you willing to submit your mind to his rule? The rest of this book assumes that you are.

If you have already done so, the basic issue is settled. You may, however, be struggling with making this mental submission a moment-by-moment reality. In spite of your best efforts, stray thoughts keep breaking away from the herd and heading off on their own. So what do you do?

We shall look at this in detail later on, but for the time being let the apostle Paul provide the answer. 'We take captive every thought,' he says, 'to make it obedient to Christ'.<sup>8</sup> So ride out after those stray thoughts. Rope them in and haul

them back to Christ's corral.

Let this become a way of life. Insist that *every* thought submit to the Lord, to his Word and to his Spirit. That is true freedom.

*Chapter 2 NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 2:2-3

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 1:7

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Corinthians 2:9-12

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:20

<sup>5</sup> Romans 16:19

<sup>6</sup> See Romans 6:1-2

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:19

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:5

## Food for thought

Nature, we are told, abhors a vacuum. No sooner does a vacuum appear (as when lightning flashes) than something rushes in to fill it (a violent in-surge of air, producing a clap of thunder). The same principle operates in the realm of the mind. A mind emptied of thoughts becomes a mental vacuum; thoughts will come rushing in to fill it.

But what kind of thoughts? The devil, of course, will always be quick to send in some of his own variety. You must be alert to his constant attempts, given half a chance, to push into your mind all sorts of mental garbage. For this very reason, avoid at all costs any kind of mental or spiritual ‘therapy’—such as yoga, transcendental meditation or hypnosis—that counsels you to ‘let your mind go blank’. To let it go blank is to invite the enemy to use it as a litter bin.

So far, in our search for a sound mind, we have concentrated on how to deal with unbidden thoughts: throw the bad ones out, entertain the good ones and then set up border checks at the gateways to the mind—Eye Gate, Ear Gate, Memory Gate and Habit Gate. In other words, we have focused on keeping out the rubbish.

But you must not stop there. As we have just seen, to empty the mind of rubbish, and then do no more, is to run the risk of creating a dangerous vacuum. Hand in hand with the

emptying activity, therefore, goes the need to *fill your mind with positive and wholesome thoughts.*

## Crowded out

I once read about a terrorist who planned to blow up a shopping complex. Having loaded a massive bomb into a stolen car, he drove to the complex on a busy Saturday afternoon, when the maximum number of people would be hurt in the explosion. The plan was to park the car, complete with time-bomb, in the roof-top car park of the shopping complex.

Unfortunately (or fortunately!), when he arrived, the ‘Car Park Full’ sign was displayed at the foot of the ramp and a policeman waved him on in the direction of the city outskirts. He couldn’t get in to do his dirty work because the place was already full.

That is exactly what the mental time-bombers sent by Satan should find when they approach your mental territory: not a wide-open space with a sign saying ‘Come right in and park where you like’, but a mind so jam-packed with good, wholesome thoughts that they can’t even get their noses inside.

## The staple diet

So what kind of good material are we talking about? Well, what could be better and more wholesome than the Word of God? The Scriptures will always be the staple diet of a healthy mind.

‘Oh dear, that rules me out, I’m afraid,’ you may be saying. ‘Bible study is OK for the brainy types, but I’ve never been a great reader and, if I’m honest, I find the Bible a very

difficult book to understand.’

But I didn’t suggest Bible *study*. Some people just don’t have the kind of mind that slips easily into concentrated study. I once saw a book entitled *Everyone a Bible Student*. ‘No chance,’ I muttered to myself as I turned away.

What I *am* suggesting is that you *read* the Bible—a different thing altogether. Every literate Christian can do that. What is more, any book is more interesting when you know the author, and, assuming that you are a born-again believer, you are intimately acquainted with the Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Look upon the Scriptures as letters sent by the Lord specifically to you to express his love and his will to you. Could you ever yawn over love letters? Make sure you have a good, flowing translation such as the New International Version or the New Living Translation, and choose an edition with good-sized print so that you are able to read without straining your eyes. Or, if you have Bible software, you can read it on your computer screen. Then get into the habit of reading as often as you can.

## Washing the wool

One way is to read big chunks at a time. Never mind if you come across bits you don’t understand; just pass over and keep on reading. So, at one sitting, you might read right through one of the New Testament letters, or half of Mark’s Gospel, or a dozen chapters of Isaiah, or a handful of Psalms.

‘But the trouble is, I just don’t seem to take much in. At the end I sometimes ask myself what I’ve just read, and as often as not I’ve little or no idea.’

Here we have a common complaint, to which I would reply, 'Never mind; just keep at it.'

'But what's the point of that?' you ask.

A Scottish lassie was once standing outside her Highland croft holding a round, tray-like object under a running tap. A passing tourist stopped to ask the way and, in so doing, saw that the object was a sieve containing wool.

'Poor girl,' he thought. 'She's obviously very simple-minded. Fancy trying to fill a sieve with water!'

When he pointed out to her that the water was going straight through the sieve, the girl gave him a withering look and retorted, 'Och aye, but it's washing the wool!'

You may feel that a sieve (not to mention the wool) is a perfect description of your mind as you read the Bible: nothing seems to stick in it. But be assured that the mere passage of the Word of God through your mind has a *cleansing* effect. In Africa I've seen something similar: freshly picked leafy vegetables being washed in a wicker basket wedged between rocks in the middle of a stream. The water doesn't stay in the basket; it flows straight through, washing the leaves in the process.

So keep at your Bible reading. Let it flow through you; more is being accomplished than you realise.

## Browsing in the library

Don't feel that you must start at Genesis and press right through to Revelation. Jump around a bit. Some Christians feel dreadful twinges of conscience about this, remembering the frown and the wagging finger of their primary school teacher who pronounced, 'Not until you have read Book

Three of the reading scheme *right through* will I allow you to go on to Book Four.’

It may help you to remember that the Bible, while it is in one sense a single book, is also a library of sixty-six smaller books. Feel free to browse along the shelves, so to speak, and read the books in any order. God won’t wag his finger at you!

As you read the Bible, ask yourself questions: What does this mean? How can I put that into practice? Why did the writer say that? Sometimes you may want to jot comments in the margin or in a notebook, or underline verses that particularly impress you. Get into the habit, too, of sharing with friends the insights you receive; it will both bless them and reinforce your own understanding.

## The Bible—Mm!

Large volumes have been written on Bible reading, and I don’t intend to write another. My particular concern is for your thought life, so I am going to highlight just two aspects of Bible reading that will be of help. They both begin with ‘m’.

Often, when people are deep in thought, the only sound to escape their lips is ‘Mm’. There you have it—double ‘m’ to link your thought life with the Word of God.

The first ‘m’ is *meditation*. ‘I meditate on your precepts’ said the Psalmist,<sup>2</sup> who points the way for you and me. Take one of those verses that has specially impressed you during your broad reading and let your mind dwell on it—that’s what meditation means—a sentence at a time, a phrase at a time, or even a word at a time.

## How to meditate

Take, for example, the first sentence of Psalm 23: ‘The LORD is my shepherd.’ You might begin by focusing on the last word: ‘The LORD is my *shepherd*.’ The eastern shepherd, upon whom this word-picture is based, really looks after his sheep, protecting them from predators, guiding them into good pastures, rescuing them when they fall down holes, calling them by name. Think how the Lord cares for you in similar ways.

Then let your attention settle on the first two words: ‘*The LORD is my shepherd*.’ Wonderful! None other than the Lord of creation, the crucified, risen and glorified Christ Jesus, is directing your steps!

‘The LORD *is my shepherd*.’ Yes, there is no doubt about it. It is not just wishful thinking or a figment of the imagination. He really *is* your shepherd. You might not fully understand all the wonders of salvation (who does?), or be able to give logical answers to the agnostics, but by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit you just know, deep down inside, that the Lord *is* your shepherd.

‘The Lord *is my shepherd*.’ True, he looks after many other sheep as well, but, praise him, he cares personally for you!

Get the idea? To make Bible meditation of this kind a regular practice is to ensure a mind filled with wholesome thoughts. An alien thought trying to sneak in among such blessed company will be as obvious as a hippopotamus trying to sneak unnoticed into your bath.

## Memorisation

The second ‘m’ is *memorisation*. ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,’ urges Paul.<sup>3</sup> Memorisation is an excellent way to do it. Yes, I know, you have the most appalling memory and sometimes can’t even remember what day it is, so how can you be expected to commit Bible verses to memory?

By *disciplining* yourself to do it. ‘Train yourself to be godly’, wrote Paul to Timothy, using an athletic term.<sup>4</sup> Any training involves time, effort and determination—and mental training is no exception. But the fruit it bears in terms of godliness and soundness of mind is well worth the effort. If you can remember the birthdays of your nephews and nieces or the order of the first six football clubs in the Second Division, you can memorise Scripture.

Don’t set yourself an unrealistic target. If you have never done this kind of thing before, settle for memorising one Bible verse every two months—that is six per year. Should you find it easier than expected, you can always step up the pace later.

## In time of need

One advantage in committing Scripture to memory is that it gives the Holy Spirit some material to work with when you find yourself in a difficult situation. To his disciples Jesus said, ‘The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will...remind you of everything I have said to you’.<sup>5</sup>

Before the Holy Spirit could remind them, they had to hear Jesus speak. In the same way, you cannot expect the Holy Spirit to remind you of an appropriate Scripture truth in a time of need if that Scripture truth hasn’t first been filed away in your memory. So take memorisation seriously.

Begin now. Soak your mind in the Scriptures until, like cloth soaked in dye, the two become inseparable and your thinking is permanently coloured by God's Word.

### A 'thought-account'

Not that the only thoughts worth entertaining are Bible verses. Far from it. Recall Paul's advice that we referred to in an earlier chapter: 'Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—*think about such things*'.<sup>6</sup>

Lots of things in life fit into those thought-worthy categories: people you love, beautiful places, heart-warming events, good jokes, acts of kindness and generosity, lovely music, swimming, hiking, standing on top of a mountain—the list is endless, and very personal. I keep a 'bank account' of precious thoughts. From time to time I will draw one out and let it fill my mind—especially when I can't sleep and my mind is full of restless thoughts. I calm the unsettled thoughts by gathering them all round one precious thought.

Sometimes it is a Bible verse, and, like the Psalmist, I meditate on the law of the Lord 'day *and night*'.<sup>7</sup> Or it may be a non-biblical thought. There's a beautiful spot in the Yorkshire Dales, for example, where my family and I have spent some memorable holidays. I can picture it now: the river burbling along over the rounded stones, with a little green footbridge leading to the far bank, which is lined with feathery larches. Two grey stone cottages huddle together nearby. On either side of the valley the great green hills rise up, criss-crossed with dry-stone walls and dotted with sheep, all under the blue canopy of a summer sky.

To take a mental stroll in that lovely landscape is to fill my mind with good and wholesome thinking, rejoicing in the goodness of God. I encourage you to build up your own 'bank account' of beautiful thoughts, your savings for a mental 'rainy day' of depression or siege.

### Something beginning with 'G'

I couldn't close this chapter without relating an incident concerning a Christian friend of mine. One day he was relaxing in the office cafeteria during his lunch break, doing a crossword puzzle. He came to number 12 across: three letters, beginning with 'G'. The clue: 'Spirit'. Without hesitation he wrote 'GOD'.

Soon he realised that some vertical words didn't seem to fit. After tussling for a while he gave up and passed over the newspaper to a workmate who liked a crossword challenge.

'What on earth made you put "GOD" for 12 across?' asked the man. 'It's "GIN!"'

Now some would say my friend was a bit naïve. For myself, I prefer to see him as a man whose mind was filled with thoughts of God and wholesomeness. If someone could come along with a ladle and dip it into your mind, what sort of thoughts would they pull out?

The choice is entirely yours.

*Chapter 8 NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> See 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 119:15

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:16

<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 4:7

<sup>5</sup> John 14:26

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 4:8

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 1:2