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FOCUSED ON JESUS

Early Winter 2003

When I was a child, I would visit my grandmother in both the winter and the summer. Now I have to tell you that my grandmother lived in the country without electricity, indoor plumbing or central heat. They had fireplaces with wood burning in them all the time in the winter, but that was insufficient heating for the room. The only warm places in the house were directly in front of the fireplaces and in the kitchen where the wood cooking range kept the entire room warm. There was no heat in the outdoor privy. There is nothing worse in my memory than going to the privy early in the morning, sitting down on the cold wooden seat and trying to do my business. Another terrible thing was going to bed at night in a cold room. We would always take some warm bricks wrapped in a cloth with us, and put them at the foot of the bed to keep our feet warm until the rest of the bed warmed up with our body heat. Fortunately, we had goose down mattresses on the bed that we could sink down in to stay warm during those cold winter nights. We covered up with heavy quilts that helped keep us warm, but going to bed and getting up was the hard part. In the mornings we would go down to wash our faces in the basin kept on the porch and the water would be frozen in the bucket, so we would have to go to the well and draw a fresh bucket of water to wash with. Then we would go to the kitchen and warm up before we ate breakfast and started our new day.

Then came the work. There was always something to be done on the farm. The cows, mules, hogs and chickens had to be fed. Wood had to be split and brought into the house, eggs had to be gathered and the cows milked every day. The milk had to be poured into the churn and it had to be allowed to curdle and then churned and the butter skimmed and pressed for use. Washing had to be done on Mondays in a big iron pot in the yard. Life was hard and was what we consider today primitive. Even in the face of all this work, my grandmother never complained, and she was always cheerful. She never complained about the primitive conditions she lived under for that was all she had ever known.

Grandma had it tough. Four of her five daughters died before they reached 30. My grandfather died before I was born and her children had to take over the farm. Her youngest son lost his wife in childbirth. Her oldest son, his wife and Grandma had to temporarily take the three children she left behind. Still, she kept on singing hymns.

As I look back on that situation now, I realize that Grandma was keeping her mind on Jesus. She was a Christian and, therefore, was heeding the Apostle's admonition to be filled with the Spirit, speaking to herself and others with

psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. She sang and made music in her heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:19, NIV).

Recently God has been revealing to me that keeping our mind focused on Jesus is an excellent way to deal with sinful thoughts that lead to temptation. In my practice I find that most of the people I work with have a thought life that is filled with thoughts they want to get rid of. Now most of these are lies they have learned in their childhood. Others have thoughts and impulses coming out of their human nature that lead them into sin. One of my patients who is addicted to pornography has a terrible time with TV. Almost all the advertisements on TV have some sexual content. Even though the advertisers do not admit it, the ad agencies know that sex sells. Therefore, the theme of ads for everything from food to cars has some sexual stimulus in it. Beer advertisements are particularly explicit in using sex. They always present the implied theme that candy is dandy but liquor is quicker. Even the History Channel is using sex to sell these days. They are presenting a series called "Boys' Toys." There is a young woman with large breasts and written on them is "Boys' Toys." When my patient sees this kind of soft porn, he is immediately stimulated to fantasize harder stuff and the next thing he is lost in a world of sexual fantasy. This draws him away to harder pornography and this gives birth to sin.

I asked God to show me how to fill my patient's mind with right thoughts when he realizes he is being tempted. He did, therefore, remind me of a prayer attributed to an itinerant Russian monk. This prayer was repeated by the monk over and over as he walked about the countryside. It goes like this: "Jesus, son of the Living God have mercy on me a sinner." I told my patient to try this and see if it would help. He was not very cooperative and told me on his next visit that he had not followed my suggestion. During that visit I remembered that the name of Jesus is powerful so I suggested to him that if he sang a song like "Jesus, name above all names, beautiful Savior wonderful Lord, Emanuel, God is with us, blessed redeemer living Word." Or a song such as, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, there is something about that name. Master, Savior, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, let all heaven and earth proclaim, kings and kingdoms will all pass away, but there's something about that name." I felt these would make a difference in resisting temptation. I do not know as yet that he has followed my suggestion.

During the next week I listened again to a record by Randy Travis called "Rise and Shine." This CD has on it some of the best country gospel songs I have heard in a long time. I have listened frequently enough to his songs as to be able to remember most of the words to them. One day I found myself singing his songs in my heart along with others that I had learned in the past. I did not intend to do this, it just happened. I then realized that the Holy Spirit was showing me that the scriptural injunction to sing spiritual songs in my life had been heeded and would crowd out thought garbage that constantly clutters up my mind.

I have to confess that in my past life I had accumulated a lot of that garbage and I had never completely dealt with it. So in these experiences I realized that although I cannot get rid of the memories, I could get rid of the emotions associated with them, and, therefore, I was better able to keep them from being a potential source of temptation to me. But even then I was troubled by them from time to time. Now as I was making music in my heart I suddenly realized that they no longer intruded into my conscious thought life. God had corroborated for me the insight that there is a way to deal with ungodly thoughts. It was then that I thought about Grandma. In my old age I finally understood why she sang hymns and made music in her heart. Fortunately, that was about all the music she knew, but it was a comfort to her and helped her live the godly life she lived under what we would consider today primitive conditions.

Now why does this work the way it does? The answer lies in what we have learned about memory formation in the last decade. It is now known that when we establish a memory, we build pathways in our brain that will persist for long periods, especially if the memory is reinforced. Let's take an example that I commonly encounter in the lives of my patients. Suppose a boy's mother told him that she wished he had never been born. She also told him innumerable times that he was dumb, or stupid or ugly. It is unlikely that she would say these things only once, if she said them at all. So we know he was told this over and over and over again. Now they have been permanently engraved in his mind and when he grows up and goes out into the world he subconsciously believes all his mother told him. After all, she was his mother. Away from her he may fail at some task. This corroborates his mother's accusations. He says to himself, "I am dumb and stupid." Or when girls are not immediately attracted to him, he thinks the reason for his lack of attractiveness is that he is ugly. Because he believes these things he will not associate with people who are bright and do well in school. Even if he makes good grades himself, he still thinks he is dumb and stupid. When he matures, he goes to college because he has learned that he has a thirst for knowledge. Again he does well, but he still cannot understand how he did it because he still believes he is dumb and stupid. In college he meets and falls in love with a wonderful Christian girl who he cannot believe could like him because he is so ugly. Even so, he courts and in time marries her, but he has trouble believing that she really does love him, so he lives in terror thinking that she might leave him because he is so unworthy. Finally he becomes a Christian. Again he has problems believing that God loves him. He also has a distorted view of God whom he conceives of as a critical, condemning God. His parents claimed to be Christian so God must be like them. Finally, when he has children he finds out how his childhood has influenced him so much, and he does not want to have his children scarred like he is. He now seeks Christian counsel, and discovers that all these misbeliefs (or lies if you want to call them that) have caused him to have low self esteem, and a distorted image of God. His counselor persuades him to recognize them for what they are and presents the truth to him from the Word of God. He learns who he is in Christ, the security that he has and

how significant he is in God's and his family's eyes. This changes his whole understanding and he is a changed man.

Are the thoughts still there? Yes they are, but now he does not believe them. Nevertheless, they occasionally intrude themselves into his mind. What will he do? He will now turn to the scriptures he has learned that are truth. He can repudiate the lies he learned as a child and not respond to them or let them influence his life. He can also sing songs in his heart. He can call on the name of Jesus to help with the thoughts that bother him. Neil Anderson has culled the scriptures that relate to who a person is in Christ, the security he has, and how significant he is; and placed them on a little card that the patient can use to pray a few of these scriptures each day until the truth is as fixed in his mind as the lies that he learned earlier. Now he can think those thoughts and sing songs about Jesus and the lies can no longer torture him. Having firmly inscribed the truth in his mind he will be a different person and relate to God in a different and right way.

What I have described to you in the above is one of the ways a person's mind can be transformed. I am sure you remember Romans 12:1,2 (NIV) that says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." This transformation comes about because the content of most Christian songs are prayers. Many of them are scripture verses. Most of these will renew our minds and thus change the way we think. Most of the worldly "garbage" thoughts that we have are now replaced. The porno addict who is thinking about ways he can stimulate himself sexually will be diverted. The greedy man who thinks all the time about how to make more money finds that the songs he sings will get his mind on God and off money. If a person is preoccupied with their bodily aches and pains, and speak to themselves with hymns and songs and scriptures they will not be bothered by the aches and pains. If their life is tough like Grandma's was then they will not whine and complain about their hard life. They will, instead, praise God for his beneficence and thank him for giving them the means to deal with their hardship. Giving thanks in our hearts is a great resource to change the way we think.

To illustrate the power of thanksgiving, I relate an event that occurred in my life. Many years ago I was overwhelmed with work. I had too many patients, too many responsibilities in the church and a lot going on at home. I began to think that in spite of all my efforts that it was to no avail. It did not bring me satisfaction or joy. I came home one beautiful warm fall evening and ate dinner and afterwards I went out to our front porch and sat down on the swing we had there. I felt miserable. But with the setting sun there was a golden glow from the sun shining on the trees where the leaves were in full fall color. As I sat there I found myself praying. I was praying guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. What I was praying was a prayer of thanksgiving. I was giving thanks for my wife who loved

me, for my five children who loved me and whom I loved. I thanked God for all my material blessings one by one. This was followed by thanks for my students, and the thanks poured forth for at least 20 minutes. Finally I finished, and I realized that the misery had gone away. The joy of the Lord filled my heart and my mind was transformed.

Later I realized, too, that others had come to the same realization. Terry Law wrote a book called *The Power of Praise and Worship* in which he describes the power of thanksgiving in his life. Terry was a musician and was on a tour with his group overseas when he got the news his wife had been killed in an auto accident. He immediately came back to the US and buried her. He was devastated by this happening and was in the pits of despair for several months. Finally he went to his friend, Oral Roberts, who had lost a son in a plane crash about the same time and asked him what he should do. Oral told him to thank God. Terry thought Oral was out of his mind. He could not believe that one should give thanks for such a terrible thing. He at first refused to do it but finally decided to give Oral's recommendation a try. Reluctantly, he began to give thanks and continued to do so. After a few days of this he suddenly experienced a lifting of his depression and he was healed. Oral had done the same thing and it had healed his grief.

Some time later I had an opportunity to use prayers of thanksgiving to obtain some healing in my life. I had developed a myositis in my left shoulder. I had a hot searing pain and nothing gave me relief. Ordinary pain medications, narcotics, injections of steroids and anesthetic agents did nothing. I could not sleep and eat, and I was losing weight rapidly. One morning about 2 A.M. I was walking the floor in agony, and I decided to try giving thanks for the pain. Timidly I began to praise and thank God for the pain. I told him that I did not know what he wanted me to learn, but I knew there was some good that could come out of the experience. After a short period of prayer I went back to bed and to sleep. Nothing happened for several days, but then I noticed that the pain was not as severe. It rapidly cleared in two weeks. Awhile later I was working in the pain clinic when a lady with low back pain said to me, "You don't know what it is like to be in pain and not get relief." My response was, "Oh yes I do!" I then explained to her what had happened to me and how I had suffered. She was comforted by knowing someone else had suffered as she did. I do not remember whether I told her about my prayers of thanksgiving, but if I didn't I should have.

All of us need some transformation of our minds and the Bible tells us how to do it. There is no reason why we should not follow the biblical instructions. But to close I would add that it is best accomplished if we absolutely surrender all aspects of our lives to the Lord. Only when we have done this will we become holy as God wants us to be.