

Week 5 - Downtown Agency

As you know, we are using this series to talk about our overall well-being. And the backdrop has been that generally speaking, as a country, we aren't doing so great. For example, how, at the end of 2021, the US Surgeon General declared a "devastating" national mental health crisis.

As our members are well aware, mental health, in particular, is and has been a concern for us as a community. Every year for our members, we do something we refer to as member checkups. It's the process by which our members remain members and functions more or less for our pastors to ask every single member "how are you?" And the pattern is very clear. One of our church family's greatest struggles is with our mental health and all that goes along with it. From anxiety and depression to a steady state of feeling overwhelmed and all sorts of other issues. Of varying levels and extremes.

Some examples from member checkups:

- Pray for my mental health. Anxiety and some depressive symptoms tend to creep in when overwhelmed.
- Would love some prayer for anxiety and working through hard things.
- I have stress and depression.
- My job has been very stressful this year and really throwing me for a loop in my daily routine and my anxiety levels throughout the day.
- Depression has continued to be a thorn in my side and I've recently had anxiety attacks
- I am honestly battling a lot of lies right now. I feel that my mental health is all over the place.

So we've been using Peter's instructions in 1 Peter chapter 5 to serve as a guide for what it looks like, practically speaking, to build our lives on Jesus as our rock. To have the stability and overall sense of wholeness and well-being that comes from building our lives on him.

All of which brings us to 1 Peter 5. Last week we looked at vs. 8. Today, I'd like to look at vs. 8 and 9 together.

1 Peter 5:8-9 [8] Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. [9] Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

So, we'll hit the last part of verse 9 next week. Today, it's that first part that I want to catch our attention and be our jumping-off point today... "Resist him, firm in your faith."

I want you to notice a potentially small, but absolutely critical implication Peter's words are communicating.

Notice, he does not say, "your adversary prowls around seeking someone to devour... so good luck with that! No, instead, he says, "resist"... as in... you *can* resist. He says, "be sober-minded." As in, you *can be* sober minded so you should do that. He says "be watchful. As in, you *can be* watchful, so you should be watchful. You can stand firm in your faith, so you should do that, too.

That might seem like an inconsequential detail, but the point is, when it comes to our overall health and wellness, our spiritual health our emotional health our mental health, our overall wellbeing. Peter seems to believe that we have a meaningful amount of agency. As Christians, empowered by the Spirit of God, we have a meaningful role to play in our overall well-being.

Now, I want to take a minute here and talk because from my seat on the bus, there seems to be some confusion or even misinformation out there when it comes to the role we have to play in this, especially when it comes to our mental well-being.

I'm gonna share with you some of the things that I shared with our members in August at our Kickoff Weekend. Members if you are anything like me, hearing something 6 months ago means you have forgotten 90% of it. So depending on your level of forgetfulness this content will come to you as reminder or entirely new information. Either way this is not a subject where I am afraid to repeat myself and if anything, I think it's subject matter we all need to have repeated to us.

Continuum. Well and unwell. Contributing factors...

-personality, DNA, Trauma, circumstances, spiritual health, social life (loneliness), diet, exercise, spiritual practices, sleep, processing negative emotions, social media habits, thought life. Time and place.

Different societies at different times can shift the entire grouping. When and where you live won't necessarily tell you where you plot but it will tell you where the whole group plots.

For example, in a time of war, where you aren't sure if your people will make it through the day, that's gonna move the entire group.

As far as how these different data points combine to create your mental health...it's complicated. Some people do exactly what they should be doing in the areas they can control and they still struggle mightily. Others do just about everything wrong yet somehow have no mental health issues. And we're all very jealous of them.

We aren't always totally clear on what the deciding factors are. I've had people ask me, 'ok are you saying if I eat healthy and exercise and confess sins and sleep enough and spend more time with friends that I won't be depressed anymore?'

No I'm not saying that. And I don't think that's the best way to think about it either. I'd suggest flipping it around. If I came to you and for example, told you to try to do everything you could possibly do to make yourself depressed, are you already doing most of those things? If so, I can be certain that you aren't helping anything.

We can't control what we can't control, so we'd better take advantage of the things that we can control. We don't want to remove our agency because scripture doesn't. And that is actually pretty good news. You can fight back. You can resist. The Enemy doesn't have to win.

We want to steward our bodies and our time and our habits and practices as best we can because those are things that we can control. With so much that we cannot control, we cannot afford to give away agency over the things that we can control. The only point I'm trying to make is to help you to see you live in a place where I don't think it'd be hard to argue that the lion is devouring, so whatever God tells us that we *can* do... would be incredibly *wise* for us to do.

In particular for today, I'd like to zoom in on one of the contributing factors towards our overall wellness that Scripture clearly states our agency over that I do not think most of us take near seriously enough. Our thought lives. The things we allow into our minds, the things we allow to stay there, and the places we intentionally go in our minds.

All of which we have power to control and all of which produce fruit in our lives, either good or bad. So those will be our 3 categories as it pertains to our thought lives.

What you allow in.

What you allow to remain.

What you bring in.

1) What you allow in

So in Teaching team this week, Michael Bailey, one of our Lexington Church pastors said that this past summer they were going to have to find new childcare for their kids. He and his wife Lauren both work but the daycares and other people that they trusted all weren't available for one reason or another. So they were going to have to hire a stranger. Which, he wasn't great with. And he said looking back on it he feels so bad for these perfectly nice young women that they interviewed because he just grilled them. You ever been arrested?! Tell me about your family growing up, how did your dad treat you? What would you do if one of my kids asks you where babies come from? One of my kids hits you, you gonna kit them back? I'm gonna install cameras in every room in this house, you ok with that?

All of us do whatever we can to protect what is valuable to us. Yet many of us don't take the same level of precaution for what God values... which is, among other things, you!

In 1 Peter 5, Peter calls us to be **sober-minded**.

Obviously comes from the idea of sobriety. Being free from intoxicating influences.

A person who drinks too much or consumes certain types of drugs, literally comes under the power of an outside force. They surrender some control of themselves to something else. Peter uses that idea except for the things we allow into our minds.

Writer Winifred Gallagher uses the phrase "the skillful management of attention," which I think is really helpful.

The problem, I would argue, is that for many of us our inner attention is not managed very skillfully.

For example, if I were to ask you this question, what would you say? What percentage of your thought life is purposefully directed by you, and what percentage just happens to you? What percentage are healthy, controlled, productive thoughts, and what percentage are just whatever showed up in your head in that moment?

We've talked about this a good bit so I won't belabor it, but this comes into play in a historically unprecedented way for us with social media and technology. Every time you open your phone, what is actually happening is you are saying, *"Okay invisible profit-motivated actors that make money off of my attention, rage, and fear--what do you think I should think about?"*

"What about you, Tik Tok? Instagram? Have anything that will get me mentally drunk on anger today? What about worry or insecurity? What do you know will get my attention? Alright algorithms...hit me!"

And we become these defenseless creatures. We invite all of this into our brainspace to plant whatever they want... whatever worry, whatever anger, whatever stupid new dance craze... And at a certain point of mindless zombie scrolling, having an intentional guard up is just really difficult. At a certain point, all the stimulation just erodes your ability to focus in general, leaving you scattered, distracted, agitated, and anxious. Your brain is not meant to take that many hits of dopamine at a time.

I just heard there is a term for this. Called attention residue. A professor named Sophie Leroy coined the phrase. Attention residue refers to thoughts about a Task A that persist even though one has stopped working on Task A, transitioned to Task B, and is now working on Task B. The argument is that because of the way that we bounce our attention back and forth between texts and feeds and

emails and news and in particular the way we scroll and see update after update on topic after topic, we have basically put ourselves into a permanent state of cognitive handicap.

So when you finally do sit down to read Scripture or pray, sometimes you find yourself unable to focus at all. Your body is pining for another hit of dopamine. Spending time with Jesus becomes near impossible because you've altered your mind in such a way that you can't simply be still and be with Jesus.

All because of the thoughts we've allowed into our minds. So we have to start with what we allow in. But next,

2) What you allow to remain

Imagine going home to your house or apartment today. And when you open the door, you see a young man sitting at your desk, working on his laptop. And you think, "*Huh...I don't know this gentleman. I wonder how he got in here.*" Then you walk into the kitchen, and you see a woman rummaging through the cabinet to get a bowl for cereal--she already has the milk out. And then, you see yet another man leaving the bathroom, and he announces to all in the house that you may not want to go in there anytime soon.

I won't ask you how you would feel, because that's obvious. But what I will say is that in the equivalent of this scenario that happens in your thought life, a lot of times what we do is we say "Huh," and you go on about whatever you were going to do with these strangers just making themselves at home.

When, what you of course should instead do is look at these thoughts and say "*What are you doing here? Who let you in? You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here?*" So maybe we need to start thinking about our thought lives way more like we think about our homes.

Anger is my usually my initial reaction to anything negative. I move on to other emotions later, but anger and frustration are my default. I'm an enneagram 8.

In other words, I don't need anyone from outside of me to fill my mind with something in order for me to be angry. I do just fine at that all by myself.

I have the best anger fantasies. I mean, they are super good. You would not believe how clever I am in my anger fantasies. I get back at people in the most amazing ways.

But here's the thing... Scripture tells me there is something dangerous about that... **Ephesians 4:26** Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil.

That my anger, if I let it stay, can lead to all kinds of trouble... it can produce a suspicion and lack of trust or compassion in my relationships... it can lead me to be continuously quarrelsome - treating most interactions as fights to be won instead of conversations to have... and most certainly if I hold onto it, it turns me into a cold and bitter human - the exact opposite of what God intends for me.

if I don't take my thoughts captive then they will take me captive... and choke out the things that need to be growing in my mind... things like patience, kindness, and love...

And every time that happens, I have a choice to make. I can let it stay... and float over my entire existence like a Chinese spy balloon... or I can shoot it down.

I can remind myself in the words of Scripture that “vengeance is the Lord’s” - there is not one shred of injustice or sin in this world that God won’t rightfully execute his justice over - either through Jesus on the cross, or on the day when we all have to stand before him and give an account.

I can know, He’ll bring His justice so I don’t have to fill my mind with how I need to...

Now, for you it may not be anger... but we all have things like this...

- **Some of you are experts in anxious thinking.** You anticipate doomsday scenarios with the best of them. A “what if” thought intrudes into your mind, and you’ve spent the next 3 hours contemplating every possible scenario and outcome and what you would need to do in each. Ready to sit your kids down and tell them your 10-step plan for if the Last of Us ever became a true story.
- **For others of us it’s our appearance and** how we look. So you’re never not thinking about how you look or what other people may be thinking about how you look.

Point is, we all have different things. Things that if we let remain, will choke out the work of God in us. Will choke out our growth to be a people like Jesus - full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control...

But, what we can do is, like Peter says again in verse 8 is “be watchful”... notice those thoughts and say, “hey... you don’t belong here. You don’t line up with what God has said to be true. Get out.”

Think about the messages or sermons you’ve preached to yourself? For decades? *You’ll never fit in. You’ll never be happy. You are a screw up. Everyone thinks you are a loser. Things are never going to get better. You’ll never be enough. You’ll never be forgiven for what you did. God will never love you the way He loves that person.*

Have you ever stopped to realize that you may be actually speaking Satan’s words to yourself? Maybe he doesn’t even have to be here because you’re doing his job for him?

What if you were to stop, grab that ever-present thought out of the air, and say “*What are you doing here? How did you get here? And why have I let you stay so long?*”

And then, clean transition to point number 3, what you intentionally bring into your mind.

3) What you bring in.

Can you imagine the impact it would have on your joy, your peace, your quality of life, if When the thought pops into your mind that “You’re good enough. Not worthy of love...” to not just kick that thought out but replace it with “Romans 8:38–39 [38] For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Or, When you look at yourself in the mirror and all you think you can see is “ugly... failure... mistake...” You can replace it with what God says: Psalm 139:13–14 [13] For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. [14] I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

In this passage, Peter says, “Resist him, firm in your faith...”

That word firm means to harden. Think about the process of butter, sugar and flour becoming dough or a person lifting weights and becoming strong and in shape.

For Peter, a key to resistance is being strong in the right places. And with dough, or strength training that firmness happens through a consistent process of repetition. Mixing and folding over and over again until it's what it needs to be. Lifting and pulling over and over again over a period of time until... what do you know, you do have a tricep!

Our faith is not that much different.

There's been some incredible research in the field of neurology over the last 10-15 years. I believe I've shared some of it with you before, but specifically around the ideas of how our minds change - something called neural plasticity.

For the longest time scientists thought the brain was locked in once you hit your 20s. So how you think and act, by the time you're 25 or so is how you're basically going to be for the rest of your life. Which I don't know about you but me at 25 wasn't my ideal state.

Neural plasticity says that's actually not true, rather, your brain is like a muscle and just like any other muscle of the body we can do things to it to make it stronger or weaker. For instance, if you cultivate certain habits (for as short as 21 days or so), you can actually begin the process of slowly rewiring your brain chemistry to be more focused, less distracted, and more at peace.

And here's the real kicker, in a lot of the research, they say there are five practices you can put into place to rewire your brain: meditation, gratitude, serving, being in community, and journaling. Don't you love those moments where science catches up to the bible? All God's people are like "c'mon man. We've been listening to that music way before that band was cool." We're like 6,000 years ahead on this one.

But the point is, basically, by God's grace, we have the ability to change the type of people we are... The Bible calls this repentance--a changing of your mind and actions to focus on and follow Jesus instead of whatever you were focused on. If you are a Christian then the same Spirit who raised Christ Jesus from the dead lives in you, and if He can raise the dead He can certainly bring peace and order to a thought life.

And our continued pressing into what He says - our continued rehearsal of His Truth, our continued repentance from sin, our continued replacement of the enemy's thoughts with God's... actually has profound impact on who we become

All that to say, no matter how much of a mess your thought life might be, no matter how overrun and out of order--it can be brought into submission with the help of Jesus. This is part of how we are to be sober minded, watchful, standing firm in our faith. And while we don't always know the exact way that everything will combine in our lives to form our mental wellness, we can know that we are controlling the things we are capable of controlling.