**Journey Into Wholeness “*Seek peace and pursue it” Ps 34:14***

**Session 4: “STRESS AND GETTING FREE”**

***Overview: This session will identify the danger of our stressful and busy lifestyles and how we need to intentionally embrace the Lord’s call to be countercultural and live simply, purposefully and in accordance with Christ and the Spirit.***

1. **TOO MUCH STRESS, TOO MUCH STUFF, NOT ENOUGH TIME**

***“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away and its lusts; but the one who does the will of God continues to live forever.” 1 John 2:15-17***

***“As goods increase, so also those who consume them. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look at them?” Ecclesiastes 5:11***

**We live in a fallen world that has always promoted lust for status, possessions, materialism and worldly attainment.** The word **“lust”** essentially means to crave something intensely and is usually associated with worldly desires of sexual intent or material possessions. As we discussed our fallen nature in Session 2, lust has to do with our fallen desire to gratify ourselves – either our soulish or sensual needs (body).

**We have all been shaped by the pressure of the world and “the powers that be” to gratify ourselves, and to attain more and do more.** Especially in America this has led to epic levels of stress, discontentment, and subsequent problems in our mental and physical health.

***“According to The American Institute of Stress, more than 70 percent of people experience stress that contributes to poor physical and mental health, and 48 percent have trouble sleeping.” The Epoch Times, Aug. 31 – Sept. 6, 2022, C6***

One in five Americans suffers from extreme stress, resulting in panic attacks, anxiety, depression, gastrointestinal problems, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, stroke, heart attack, chronic fatigue, dementia, and a long list of addictive behaviors (***American Institute of Stress; Anxiety Disorders Association of America; National Institute of Mental Health***).

**Is this “the abundant life” God has intended?**

***“And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard (God’s Word), and as they go on their way they are choked by worries (stress), riches, and pleasures of this life, and they bring no fruit to maturity.” Luke 8:14***

Stress, busyness, and worldly lusts are choking us physically, mentally and spiritually. Time to make a change.

1. **BECOMING COUNTERCULTURAL**

***“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.” Henry David Thoreau***

**Recognize that God is playing a different tune than the world and He is calling us to live to a different drum.** The *Journey Into Wholeness* requires us to step back and evaluate our “way of life” and to get in tune with His Way. We must evaluate our lives based not on how they look from the outside (from the world’s perspective), but how we are living before God and in relation to what really matters and what is going to result in wholeness, life and fruitfulness.

***“I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd.” John 10:10-11***

1. **Our worldview and lifestyle must change.**

We cannot live according to the world and its “way”, which is causing us great harm, but in accordance with eternity (God’s ultimate reality), the Spirit of God, and “The Way” of Christ (***Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14***). Like the early Christian believers, God is calling us to be countercultural and to live a lifestyle that is informed by the Lord and not the world.

***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” John 14:6***

Early Christians were called followers of “The Way”, not simply because of the way they lived, but precisely because of whom they followed – Jesus!

**“The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; and all flesh will see the salvation of God.” Isaiah 40:3 quoted in Luke 3:3-6**

The Spirit of Christ will lead us and help us to fill every low place in our life (brokenness) and also to bring down every high place (idols). He will straighten us out and make the crooked way straight and the rough places in our life smooth. Have faith!

**Listen, we are only successful as followers of Christ and “The Way” when we choose to live intentionally and with godly purpose.** Each of us has a unique calling and purpose before God that we are responsible to get in tune with. We must give attention and effort to eradicate the thorns that are present in our lives to choke the good and healthy fruit the Lord wants us to manifest and produce.

**We must be entirely honest with ourselves and recognize that we often like and are attracted to the hurried, busy, and material life.** We are all “fallen humans”, and we like stuff, and we strive to be accepted by others, and we long for worldly status. Take inventory of yourself and ask:

**Why do I live the way I do? And for what reason? Honestly evaluate your values, your priorities, your lifestyle and how it is positively or negatively affecting you. Ask yourself: In light of eternity and God’s great promises – How should I therefore be living?**

1. **MAKE SPACE, GET PLANTED, AND FLOW LIKE A RIVER**

***“Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened (stressed), 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.” Matthew 11:28-30***

**You cannot get God nor wholeness on the run.** Busyness, stress, and clutter is the enemy of your journey into wholeness and Christlikeness. We each must determine to disengage from the pressures of this worldly system and to simplify our lives and our schedules, so we may enter into the rest and ease of God’s Spirit.

***“Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself but must remain in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; the one who remains in Me, and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” John 15:4-5***

**Slow down and simplify your schedule.** Carve out more alone time, and time with the Lord. Do you struggle with that? Are you more comfortable living life like a spinning top, rather than a planted tree in the flow of God’s Spirit? Step back and take account of the lifestyle you have become accustomed to and chosen.

**Our goal is to become more simple, connected, authentic and humble.** We want to separate ourselves from the fast-paced, results oriented, superficial conventions of modern life. God call us to turn inward and to find harmony and rest in Him - to be planted and fruitful.

***“He will be like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruits in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.” Psalm 1:3***

**Time is precious and sacred. Time cannot be bought, and when it is used it is gone.** It is one of the few things we can control and that we can give to God. Yet, we often spend our time so haphazardly on things that don’t matter in the light of eternity. We would never let people take our money, or our cabin, or our stuff, but we often freely and frivolously let people, and things and experiences take our time and energy.

**A successful life is a life lived before God consciously, intentionally, and purposefully.** The path to freedom and wholeness begins by giving God and your personal development the attention and time it deserves. **When we are planted and abiding, then we can be fruitful! We cannot be a fruitful tree if we are stressed, overburdened and too busy.** We are going to have to learn to say “no” to lesser things that compete with God’s best. There is nothing impressive about living a life that has little eternal value and that is unfulfilling. **Evaluate your schedule: What are the absolute essential things you need to be doing? Where can you cut things out of your schedule and spend more time focusing on God and your personal development?**

1. **Get into the flow**

***“Be still (stop striving) and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10***

**Instead of striving, working harder and forcing matters, we want to learn to live in a harmonious and restful flow from our spirit and the Spirit of God.** The Spirit’s movement in our life is to be like the flowing of the river through our spirit and on out through our soul and body (***John 7:38***). We want to remove all resistance from our fleshly/soulish efforts and find ourselves being moved along in God’s river of life (***Ezekiel 47:1-12***).

As we learn to let go of our human efforts and ambition, worldly pressure/stress, anxieties about the past and future, then we can simply enjoy “being in God” and being content in the present moment, immersed in God’s Spirit, love and grace. **As we give ourselves and get more and more “in tune” with the Spirit of God, we will begin to flow more naturally, harmoniously, and with ease.**

Stress is an emotion that causes us to feel anxiety, pressure, and to strive. We want to let go of the feelings of pressure and stress and bring our focus on the Lord and the provision in Him that is available for every circumstance – stilling our mind and rooting our heart in the peace that only He can provide through the Spirit.

***“Do not be worried (stressed) about your life…Seek first His Kingdom.” Matthew 6:25; 33***

1. **Enjoy the beauty of nature**

**The Lord has made nature to be a stress reliever and an incredible source of healthy connection.** Stress researcher Hans Selye found that responding to beauty in nature helps us overcome chronic stress, returning our bodies to a healthy balance. Encountering a “sense of awe” in nature soothes the nervous system and reduces elevated levels of inflammation and proinflammatory cytokins which are linked to many health and mental issues, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and depression (***Diane Dreher, “A Surprising Way to Deal with Stress: New Insights from Recent Research”, Psychology Today, 10/11/2017***).

***“There is a lot of research around awe, and we can experience its blissful sense of transcendent connection in as little as 15 seconds. That’s an incredible mood booster. You don’t have to be in a national park to experience that – just look up at the trees and sky, watch the sunrise.” Psychologist Suzy Reading***

**God has created natural beauty to be medicine for our mental, physical and spiritual health.** Research shows that focusing on beauty produces positive emotions that help to restore our peace of mind, increase our hope, and build our capacity to deal with life’s challenges. Train yourself to daily experience the massive benefits of beholding the beauty of God’s creation.

1. **Breathing: God’s natural tranquilizer**

**Our breathe is energy and life.** You can go weeks without food, days without water, but only a few minutes without breathing. Breathing is a critical God-given tool to deal with stress and to achieve a relaxed and clear state of mind.

**“Practicing a regular, mindful breathing exercise can be calming and energizing and can even help with stress-related health problems ranging from panic attacks to digestive disorders.”Andrew Weil, M.D.**

Breathing practice is an art lost mostly to the Western world, but has been a known practice for centuries and among most cultures. **The breath is the link between the sympathetic nervous system, which helps us to respond in a “fight of flight” mode, and the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to calm us, bring us into relaxation, and even help us sleep.**

**Box Breathing Technique (4x4x4)** – (**Mark Divine, “The Way of the Seal”, page 108**)

Get into a comfortable sitting position with your back straight, your chin slightly tucked, and your eyes closed or in a soft gaze. Place your hands lightly on your knees and bring attention to your breath.

1. **Take a few deep diaphragm breaths slowly, with a four-count inhale followed immediately by a four-count exhalation. Repeat this for four rounds as a warm-up.**
2. **Now, begin your Box Breathing practice by taking a four-count breath slowly through your nose.**
3. **Hold your breath for a count of four. Concentrate on the quality of the breath and noticing what enters your mind. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the breath.**
4. **Exhale slowly through the nose to a count of four.**
5. **Hold your breath again for a count of four. Pay attention to the quality of the hold and watch your mind.**

Repeat this process for a minimum of five minutes. Over time you can increase the duration of the inhale, exhale, and hold period. Use Box Breathing as part of your morning routine and whenever the opportunity arises throughout the day, or when you are feeling stress building up.

**Relaxing Breath Method (4x7x8)** – (**Andrew Weil, https://www.drweil.com/health-wellness/body-mind-spirit/stress-anxiety/breathing-three-exercises/**)

Get into a comfortable sitting position with your back straight, your chin slightly tucked, and your eyes closed or in a soft gaze. Place your hands lightly on your knees and bring attention to your breath.

1. **Breathe in through your nose while for a count of four.**
2. **Hold your breath for count of 7.**
3. **Exhale for a count of 8.**

Repeat this process for a minimum of five minutes. A 2022 study published in Physiological Reports reported that the 4x7x8 Relaxing Breath Method reduced a person’s heart rate and blood pressure for several minutes.

**Try both of these methods and use both or whatever one you like.** Using these breathing methods will help you to reduce stress, feel calmer, more grounded, and better able to relax, let go, and receive from the Spirit.