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Rein in Toxic Thoughts and Emotions

Written by Bill Perkins

I was eight years old and riding a quarter horse across some land my family owned outside of Roswell, New Mexico. As I headed the horse away from the stables he repeatedly resisted my lead and tried to reverse direction. After we had gone a couple hundred yards he suddenly turned toward the stables and darted away at full speed.

I tugged the reins to the right, trying to control him. I tugged the reins to the left, trying to slow him down. Nothing worked. I felt as helpless as a fly on his tail trying to control him with its antennas. Finally, I gave up and held on for my life as we raced toward the one thing he wanted ... food.

The Chariot of My Life

Of course, a skilled rider never would have lost control of the horse. As I think about that experience it reminds me of the many times the horses that pull the chariot of my life have run away, out of control, pulling me with them. Last week I shared with you a way to rein in run-away emotions and thoughts by imagining yourself driving a chariot with Jesus at your side. As a negative emotion darts off, bringing you with it, rein it in by allowing the hands of Jesus, who stands at your side, to wrap his hands around yours, giving you his strength.

If you've tried this exercise, you may have found it doesn't always work. That's because the emotion's power needs to be stripped by exposing the thoughts that feed it. You can do this the moment you feel fear by immediately following Jesus into a situation where he felt the same emotion--like Gethsemane.

What Thought Triggered This?

Once you've identified your negative emotion and connected with Jesus, ask yourself, *what thought triggered this emotion?* I've found that with fear, the triggering thought is often a lie. Such lies are toxic and cause the brain to signal the release of chemicals that produce negative and destructive emotions. By destructive, I mean when they are excessive and out of control they are poisoning you and can produce depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, loss of sleep, impotency, lack of motivation and suicidal thoughts.

Every emotion you experience is based on a thought. That thought is either true or false. When fear ran off with me late last year I identified the thought that triggered it as a lie about my future based on a seemingly insurmountable problem. Once I identified the lie I decided to reject it and not allow myself to think about it again.

I recently read that after we have a thought we've got three seconds to dispel it. If we do, then it will vanish. So will the accompanying toxic emotions it's feeding (Who Switched Off My Brain, Dr. Caroline Leaf). Did you catch that last sentence? When we stop the toxic thinking by exposing the lies they tell, the toxic emotions will also disappear.

A Second Question

You then need to ask a second question: *What purpose is this thought serving?* I concluded that I was imagining the worst possible outcome of my situation in order to prepare myself for the inevitable. Of course, such a prediction was based on a lie. Furthermore, all I was doing was suffering in the present the pain of a future event that might not occur. Indeed, it will not occur. I was obsessively dragging tomorrow's clouds into the present so I could sit under them today to prepare myself for a storm that might not happen.

After I identified the purpose those thoughts served, I decided such thinking didn't prepare me for tomorrow's disaster. Indeed, it depressed me, fogged my thinking, and robbed me, and those around me, of the Lord's joy and confidence. Once I realized the thoughts that fed my fear were lies and the purpose they served was bogus, I determined in the Lord, not to think about them. The relief I felt from fear was almost immediate. Once I sopped the toxic thinking, the toxic emotions subsided.

Three Steps

I want you to know that this way of thinking, that has flowed from the Jesus Experiment has changed my life. Here's a review of the three steps.

First, when you feel a negative emotion running away with you, view yourself in a chariot holding the reins of the horses with Jesus at your side, his hands wrapped around yours. In his power, rein in your fear, or other negative emotion.

Second, ask yourself what thought triggered the emotion and determine if the thought is a lie or the truth. If it's a lie reject it immediately and don't let it settle in your mind again.

Third, ask what purpose the thought serves. If its purpose is based on a lie, reject it too.

What If It Does Work?

About now you may be thinking, *what if this doesn't work?* I think a more important question would be, what if it does work? What if Christ can deliver you from toxic emotions and thoughts so you'll experience his abundant life?

I realize this will take effort on your part, but it will be worth it. Jesus promised, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." This life is there for those who will take it.