

PAUL ON STRESS

by Kenneth Williams, Ph. D.

The apostle Paul was an incredible person, but not without his problems. Amazingly, he endured many difficulties and hardships, even though he struggled with many weaknesses. To discover his secret of emotional health under stress, Ken Williams traveled back in time and was able to meet with him in Rome, where he was under guard. Paul happily consented to the interview.

K: Paul, I've studied your letters and Luke's vivid description of your long and fruitful life of service. You are truly amazing!

P: Why would you say that? I really haven't done anything out of the ordinary.

K: Well, you talked a lot about your weaknesses and struggles. Yet you traveled all over the world as you know it and shared the gospel everywhere. You endured really hard stuff that would have blown me away. But you made it, and you seem to be really healthy emotionally.

P: If you read my letters, then you know that I did it in Christ's strength, not my own. That's the key. Remember? His power is made perfect in my weakness. Living in His strength rather than my own made the difference for me.

K: Yeah, but there's got to be more to it than that. In your second letter to the Corinthian Christians, you talked about forty-five different kinds of terrible hardships you had experienced; but you came through all of them well! Come on, tell me how you did it.

P: You counted all those struggles? I didn't realize I had gone on about them so much. Okay, I'll let you in on a few of my strategies, but you'll have to dig the rest of them out of the Word. The first thing that comes to mind is that I'm very free to feel and express my emotions. I like to call it being "HOT"—honest, open and transparent. I don't apologize or feel guilty about my feelings, and I freely share them with my friends. Being honest with myself, God and others about my feelings is one of my secrets to emotional health.

K: Wow! That's awesome. Most of us modern people are slow to talk about our feelings, especially our painful ones. We're so reluctant that sometimes we even try to tell ourselves we don't feel them. We're afraid we won't be seen as spiritual, I guess.

As you can tell, I like to count things. I counted no less than thirty-three different feelings you mentioned in your letters, and twenty of those were what we call negative feelings like fear, anxiety, shame, regret, anguish, humiliation, and a lot more. Is it really okay to have feelings like these, and talk about them?

P: Of course it is. You 21st century people must really be messed up! Don't you see how we Bible characters are so HOT about our feelings? This is being just like God. Doesn't He feel all

kinds of feelings and talk about them? Why can't we? In fact, when we do, we take the first step to emotional health.

You can't lie about how you feel and be healthy, whether you're talking about physical or emotional health. So tell your friends to be honest and not be ashamed of their feelings. Tell them to encourage each other to be honest, and don't condemn each other for what they feel.

By the way, they need to know that emotional health does not mean never feeling bad, or never being hurt emotionally. Remember, physical health doesn't mean we're never sick or wounded, but that we bounce back to health again. In the same way, emotionally healthy people can be wounded, but they bounce back.

K: That's really helpful, Paul. What else has helped you keep healthy emotionally all these years?

P: Well, I've had a lot of help from others. In fact, I couldn't survive without them. I went out of my way to build strong relationships with friends and coworkers. They have ministered to me, not only in practical ways but to my emotional needs too. And I've also ministered to them.

God never intended for us to serve Him alone. I'll never forget how often Onesiphorus refreshed me when I was in prison in Ephesus. And how God comforted and strengthened me through friends like Timothy, Titus, Phoebe, Silas and even Mark. I wonder how many people God used to help me through hard times?

K: I counted seventy-seven people that you mentioned in your letters as being significant to you in some way.

P: You really do like to count things, don't you. I've heard that some of you modern people try to get along without much help from others.

K: When I became a cross-cultural worker, most organizations seemed to want independent people who could make it on their own. We all thought that needing others was weakness. That didn't work very well, as you can imagine. I've really been challenged to build strong friendships as I've read how God used friends in your life, Paul.

P: Thanks. I hope you'll tell others to put high priority on building strong friendships, in which they can minister to others and let themselves be ministered to. That makes for strong emotional stability, especially in hard times. I know what I'm talking about.

K: What have you done to keep yourself whole when the stress has been overwhelming, Paul?

P: One strategy I've used is to do something about the situation if I can't handle it. When I was in Athens one time, I couldn't stand the stress of not knowing what had happened to the Thessalonian believers. So Silas and I sent Timothy to check on them.

Another time in Troas, the Lord opened a door for the gospel, but I didn't find Titus there. I had no peace of mind, so I left there and went to Macedonia. The point is, it's better to change the situation, or even leave, than to damage yourself emotionally.

K: That's very encouraging to hear. As a counselor, I've had to help those who stayed in situations longer than they should have, and suffered severe mental problems. A lot of them aren't even serving God today as a result. We sometimes call it "burnout." We seem to see it as a major failure if we can't handle every situation, but you're giving us permission to get out if we need to. I'll pass that on. Can you share anything else that helps you?

P: I've built a couple of habits over the years that no Christian should be without. First, I've learned to choose an attitude of gratitude, no matter how difficult things are. Long ago I learned that even when I feel terrible emotionally, I can choose to be grateful to God. It's still hard to do at times, but God always brings emotional stability when I choose to thank Him and praise Him.

As you know, I told the Corinthians about the time I had no peace of mind in Troas and left. Remember what I said next? "But thanks be to God..." Even when I felt I had to miss a great opportunity for the gospel, I still chose an attitude of gratitude.

A second habit I keep working on is to choose joy, especially in hard times. Did you know we have a choice to rejoice, no matter what the circumstances? If only Christians in your time could build this habit, I'm sure they would have a lot less emotional upheaval. What do you think?

K: I agree. In fact, I try to follow your example of choosing joy, and the Lord really does give joy, even in very difficult times. Did you know that you mentioned joy 14 times in your letter to the Philippians? And you were in prison at the time! Paul, I want you to know that the Lord has never failed to give me joy when I've chosen gratitude and joy. I'm very grateful to you for showing me the way.

P: It's really the Lord who shows us the way. Remember, Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. Hey, they're going to be changing guards soon. Any other questions?

K: This has been a great help, and I can't wait to share it with other Christians. Before I go, can you just briefly mention a few other strategies you've used to handle all that stress over the years? Hopefully my friends can study them in more detail and learn how to apply them.

P: Sure. I'll just run through several, but I won't tell you where they are in the Bible. Your friends should be mature enough to find them without help.

I keep working at relying on the Lord, not on myself. Of course I don't have all the modern equipment you people have, so it's easier for me to rely on the Lord than for you.

I refuse to compare myself with others. I wish every Christian would learn to do that. Comparing ourselves causes such emotional uproar.

I freely admit my weaknesses and have learned to accept them, yes even delight in them. That brings great peace of mind and joy in the Lord.

I've had my share of conflicts with others, including Barnabas and Peter, but I didn't run away. Dealing openly with conflicts was painful for me, but it sure helps me to stay emotionally healthy.

When things look impossible, I choose to believe in God. As you must know, Ken, emotional health for us depends on choosing to trust in Him, especially when doubts try to take over our minds and hearts.

Finally, I work hard at focusing on eternal realities rather than just looking at present circumstances. This helps me not to lose heart when times are tough.

K: Paul, I'll pass these insights on, and hope that many Christians will work on following your example, as you have followed Christ's example. As they do, I'm sure they will experience the same joy and emotional health you have, even in tough times. Thanks so much.