

Christian Coping in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT: Coping is the use of conscious intellectual and behavioral strategies to deal with problematic life issues and associated stress. Psychologists use therapy to help people change self-defeating thought patterns and behaviors and overcome their problems long-term. Christian counsellors employ many of the same methods as do secular therapists, but they also approach life issues from a Christian, Bible-based perspective. Christian counselling often includes analyzing the stories of Bible characters for guidance in dealing with common psychological disorders. This essay addresses personal challenges faced by major characters from the Bible (Job, Noah, Jonah, Moses, and David) and by many people today: substance abuse, racial discrimination, social phobias, and chronic guilt. The essay takes a holistic approach and discusses therapeutic options available in both secular and Christian treatment.

KEYWORDS –Christian counseling, coping, discrimination, guilt, phobias, substance abuse

I. INTRODUCTION

Life comes with its “ups and downs.” Along with our happy moments, we experience disappointments, losses, and stress. When a person’s difficulties start to feel uncontrollable, they need to learn effective ways to adjust their outlook, improve their situation, and bounce back. They must learn to *cope*. Most people have a general idea of what it means to cope, such as “dealing with and overcoming problems and difficulties” [1]. Psychologists and therapists have a more technical definition. They define *coping* as “the use of cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage the demands of a situation [that exceed] one’s resources or to reduce the negative emotions and conflict caused by stress” [2]. Each of these definitions means the same thing: coping is the way people face challenges that appear overwhelming and make them worry.

In order to deal with difficulties in a positive way, therapists suggest learning appropriate *coping strategies*. These are productive ways of managing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Psychologists also have a technical definition for coping strategy: “an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one’s reaction to such a situation. Coping strategies typically involve a conscious and direct approach to problems” [3]. There are many positive coping strategies: exercising, getting more sleep, engaging in healthy diversions, improving interpersonal relationships (such as by confiding in others or helping someone in need), systematically “counting our blessings,” setting new goals, and improving our spiritual lives. These strategies are positive alternatives to *defense mechanisms*. Defense mechanisms are the ways a person’s mind reaches (usually subconscious) compromise solutions to conflicts that it cannot resolve consciously. The classic defense mechanism is *repression*, which is excluding painful experiences and feelings from conscious thoughts to lessen anxiety and avoid a lowering of self-esteem. Unfortunately, though, bad situations often worsen when a person resorts to *immature defense mechanisms*, such as prolonged repression, unrealistic denial, destructive acting out, or passive-aggressive behavior [see 4, 5].

Counsellors, or therapists, help people resolve emotional issues and eliminate problematic behaviors and habits. Therapists can assist in improving coping strategies and in enhancing a person’s well-being. Most counsellors employ a *secular* perspective, meaning they do not approach treatment from a religious or spiritual point of view. Christian counsellors, on the other hand, often use secular methods but also see situations from a

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Christian vantage point. Many Christian counsellors use Bible scriptures and lessons in therapy sessions. This essay is a fusion; it discusses secular methods, contemporary case studies, Christian perspectives, and the life stories of people from the Bible (Job, Noah, Jonah, Moses, and David). The goal is to use all of these resources holistically to help twenty-first century people develop effective, positive, Bible-based coping strategies.

II. FACING MISFORTUNE

Perhaps it is best to begin by considering a complicated, but often-asked question: Why does God allow suffering? Theologians and philosophers have pondered this question for millennia [6], because there is no simple or concise answer. The Bible suggests a few explanations, though, including 1) rebellion against God leads to suffering; 2) suffering provides opportunities for compassion and charity; 3) suffering demonstrates our physical and spiritual reliance on God; and 4) suffering suggests the qualitative difference between temporal material life and eternal spiritual life [6].

Virtuous people often suffer, including Christians persecuted for their faith. A particularly shocking example occurred in early 2018 in a small town in Nigeria, called Dapchi. Fourteen-year-old Leah Sharibu was a student at the Government Girls' Science and Technical College in Dapchi. On February 19, 2018, Boko Haram militants stormed Leah's school and kidnapped more than a hundred girls; five died that day. Boko Haram is a wing of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and has been active in Nigeria for the past decade. *Boko Haram* translates roughly, from the Hausa language, as "Western education is a sin" [7]. In March 2018, after the Nigerian government paid a huge ransom, all the girls were released, all except Leah Sharibu. Leah remained in custody because she refused to renounce her Christian faith or swear allegiance to Islam. In the months that followed, there was very little news concerning her well-being. Then in January 2020, news outlets reported that Leah was forcibly converted to Islam, had married one of her captors, and had delivered a baby. Leah Sharibu has spent three years in captivity [8]. If she ever regains her freedom, she will undoubtedly need help dealing with her trauma. Experiencing or witnessing terrifying events can trigger *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, a condition that may cause flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety.

The Bible describes many, many people who overcame trauma. Very few, though, suffered as much as did the man called Job. The scriptures say that Job had a faith like that of Leah Sharibu, that he was "upright" and "feared God" (Job 1:1 NIV). Job was greatly blessed; he had seven sons, three daughters, and many servants, thousands of sheep and camels, hundreds of oxen, and lots of property in the "land of Uz" (likely, modern Saudi Arabia). His neighbors considered Job the "greatest man among all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). Job expressed his thankfulness by praying and continually offering burnt sacrifices. God had such confidence in his faith, he allowed Satan to tempt Job. First Satan took away the servants and animals; then he caused a violent storm that killed Job's children. Nevertheless, Job's faith persevered. Racked with grief, he tore his clothes, shaved his head, and fell to the ground. Then he continued to worship (fig. 1): "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21).



Figure 1.
Marc Chagall. *Job Praying*.
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Many difficult days followed. Satan compounded Job's affliction with a miserable disease. "Painful sores [spread] from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). Anguish gnawed at Job's spirit and he descended into a deep depression. He began questioning the point of his existence: "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil." (Job 3:11, 3:25-26). Job was unable to understand the reason for his torment and he could not envision his situation improving. At his greatest depth of despair, Job finally heard the voice of the Lord. He reminded Job of his limited understanding of the grand scheme of things. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me, if you understand." Where were you when I created the heavens, the earth, and all living things? "Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like this?" (Job 38:4, 40:9). Job responded, "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you" (Job 40:4). After the Lord put things in proper perspective, Job offered a prayer of forgiveness and the Lord restored his health and prosperity.

Christian and secular therapists can offer a person facing difficult situations a fresh, healthier perspective that can ease stress and reveal areas for improvement. Gaining a new outlook (along with amazing perseverance and faith) helped Job when he was at his lowest point. Modern psychologists use a technique called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to teach a person to "accept their issues and hardships and commit to making necessary changes in their behavior, regardless of ... how they feel about them" [9]. This process can also be effective within the context of Christian counselling, where it is called "ACT with Faith" [10]. ACT with Faith incorporates the contemplative traditions and practices of early Christians to produce an awareness of God's presence and guidance.

Some people can sympathize with the title character in William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) tragic play *Hamlet* (ca 1600). Hamlet's life was spiraling out of control and he could not see a way out. At one particularly low point, Hamlet laments the pain and unfairness of his existence and he considers putting an end to it all. He ponders whether he should take positive steps toward improving his situation or choose a darker alternative, suicide. In his famous soliloquy, Hamlet deliberates,

"To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them."

Coping can take positive or negative forms. Positive forms tend to lessen stress and enhance the sense of well-being. Adjusting our perspective and reimagining our difficulties as opportunities is positive coping. It requires some mature self-evaluation, though. Often people are at least partially responsible for creating their own problems. If so, it is essential they first recognize and accept their faults and their previous mistakes. Being honest with oneself better prepares a person to turn their negative thoughts into positive thoughts and take progressive steps toward improvement.

III. ESCAPING INTO SUBSTANCE ABUSE

All too often, people try to alleviate stress, or simply escape from the cares of the world, by consuming alcohol or other drugs. This type of escape, however, may only create more problems. That is what happened to Noah, the hero of the Biblical story of the flood (Genesis chapters 6-9).

Noah was born into an extremely sinful generation. The people were so wicked, the scriptures say, "The Lord regretted that he had made human beings ... and his heart was deeply troubled." The Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created" with destructive floodwaters. He decided to spare Noah and his family, because they were obedient and had "found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:6-8). Noah's family included his wife, his sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth), and his daughters-in-law. The Lord

also decided to spare a single pair of each type of animal, a male and a female, to reestablish the animal kingdom on the earth. Noah built an *ark*, an enormous wooden ship, to protect his family and the animals during the months and months of the deadly deluge. After the floodwaters eventually receded, Noah's family and the animals emerged from the ark and Noah immediately began to worship. The Lord then promised, "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Genesis 8: 21). The Lord then blessed Noah.

Perhaps Noah was in a celebratory mood. After the flood, Noah planted a vineyard and grew grapes. When the fruit had ripened and had been harvested, Noah "drank some of its wine[and] he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent" (Genesis 9:21). The Hebrew term translated as "uncovered" means to undress oneself in a disgraceful sense. One commentator has noted that when this happened Noah was quite elderly and in all likelihood, "he drank too liberally, more than his head at this age would bear, for he was drunk. ... [and] the consequence of Noah's [drunkenness] was shame" [11]. An anonymous Japanese proverb seems to apply to Noah's situation:

"First, the man takes a drink,
Then the drink takes a drink,
Then the drink takes the man."

Alcohol has a depressant effect; it reduces the ability to think rationally, lessens inhibitions, and distorts judgment. Over time, it can actually induce anxiety and increase stress [12]. Alcohol certainly caused Noah to lose his judgment and lessened his inhibitions. Ham came into his father's tent and saw him drunk and naked. Rather than keeping silent, Ham told his brothers about their father's disgraceful condition. Shem and Japheth employed more tact. They took a garment, walked backward into the tent (so they would not see their father's nakedness) and discreetly covered him (fig. 2). After he awoke from his drunken slumber and realized what Ham had done, Noah flew into a rage and cursed Ham and his descendants. Noah apparently did not recognize he had brought his humiliation upon himself. He took a drink, and then the drink took him.

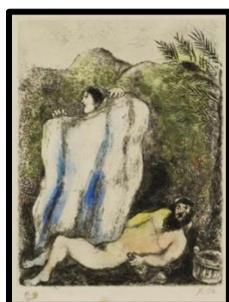


Figure 2.
Marc Chagall. *The Mantle of Noah*.
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Noah is a towering figure in the Bible, yet he fell prey to problem drinking. When problem drinking reaches the point that a person is unable to control their consumption despite adverse social, occupational, or health consequences, it is called *Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)*. An estimated fifteen million people in the United States have AUD [13]. Many powerful people who have attained professional success suffer a downfall due their inability to cope with substance abuse. Personal pride may be involved. The scriptures say, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). Humility, a humble or modest view of one's importance, helps a person avoid self-defeating behavior. Admitting one's weaknesses is an aid in overcoming them. Living with the disease of alcoholism or overcoming drug abuse, though, usually requires more than a

humble attitude. Consider, for example, the experience of Heather Kopp, a successful author and editor of Christian literature [14].

Heather Kopp had been a Christian for decades when she began drinking more frequently. At first, having a couple of glasses of wine with her husband each evening seemed “romantic,” but it was not so romantic when Heather had a few extra glasses before her husband got home, or when she drank secretly in the bathroom. She began having violent outbursts that she could not remember even though her husband had the scratches and bruises to prove they had occurred. Heather found ways to get her work done (she was a “high-functioning alcoholic”), so her colleagues in the Christian publishing world suspected nothing. She says that her greatest fear was they would learn her secret and her hypocrisy. She says, “The hiding and the guilt were tremendous.”

Heather Kopp never lost her faith in God even though some of the attitudes of people attending her church were frustrating. Heather felt that among church members “there was such a fundamental misunderstanding of addiction ... that it’s purely a sin issue ... that we should be able pray it away, repent harder, or get more convicted.” After reflecting on her own experiences, however, Heather concluded “addictions are more complex,” and, at least for Christians, addiction is a combination of sickness and sin. Heather felt completely powerless over AUD and “powerlessness over her sin,” so she sought help in a *twelve-step program*. The American Psychological Association defines a twelve-step program as, “A distinctive approach to overcoming addictive, compulsive, or behavioral problems that was developed initially in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to guide recovery from alcoholism and is now used, often in an adapted form, by a number of other self-help groups. [AA] asks each member to 1) admit that he or she cannot control his or her drinking; 2) recognize a supreme spiritual power, which can give the member strength; 3) examine past errors, a process that is carried out with another member who serves as sponsor; 4) make amends for these errors; 5) develop a new code and style of life; and 6) help other alcoholics who are in need of support. Variations of this model also exist for drug abuse and addiction, gambling addiction, and other problems.”

Notice AA asks members to recognize and gain strength from a “supreme spiritual power,” but AA does not specify that power come from the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit of the Bible. Bill Wilson (1895-1971), the founder of the AA movement, was a Christian and a member of the Christian self-help organization known as The Oxford Group. Wilson had faith in the Christian deity’s power to change lives and help people overcome personal obstacles, including alcoholism [see 15]. This faith formed the basis of AA’s original twelve-step program. Over time, though, as the AA movement grew and more non-Christians joined, the specific Christian emphasis was adjusted. In modern AA programs, relying on the God of the Bible is neither mandatory, nor discouraged. In 1946, Bill Wilson wrote, “So long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most antisocial, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous group has been formed. [T]hese individuals are still an AA group if *they think so!*” [Emphasis in original] [16]. This attitude has led some Christian leaders to discourage others from participating in AA [17], even though AA has proven effective and AA meetings provide Christians with opportunities to “witness” and let their “light shine before others” (Matthew 5:16). Indeed, there are many stories of “non-religious” alcoholics giving their lives to Christ while participating in twelve-step programs [18], and of Christians reinvigorating their faith. That is what happened to Heather Kopp.

When she began her twelve-step program Heather still had faith, but she quickly learned “recovery was like starting over with God.” For the first time in her life, she fully understood that she could not save herself: “I had never experienced complete powerlessness.” At first, Heather was overconfident, thinking because she was a Christian she was ideally suited to enlighten recovering non-Christians. She soon realized she had much to learn. Recovering non-Christians, she says, “came to faith the opposite of me, by their experience. I came with all the beliefs, and hoped for the experience [of spiritual recovery]. I needed a lot of healing in my relationship with God and a new way of approaching Him. On the one hand, I knew I was a phony, a hypocrite, and a liar; but on the other hand, [m]y spiritual arrogance was very intense - There needed to be for me, a second breaking. Part of my spiritual practice now is the emptying of my ego. The idea of daily relying on His power was new to me, even though I had been a Christian for many years. The church can facilitate an atmosphere of vulnerability.

Maybe the depth of community I experienced in recovery, but rarely in church, had something to do with the inclusive nature of those twelve-step meetings. It was safe to be honest about your journey with God, because it was impossible to be ‘wrong.’ The basis for acceptance began and ended with a mutual need for healing, which led to honesty and connection. It’s definitely something Jesus understood: people bond more deeply over shared brokenness than they do over shared beliefs” [14].

Noah did not have access to a twelve-step program when he struggled with problem drinking. Hedrifted from God’s guidance, and he succumbed to sickness and sin, which brought trouble upon himself and his family. Today, Christians have many options when they face similar temptations or must cope with their addiction to alcohol, drugs, or other substances. A Christian’s first step is usually seeking spiritual guidance from the Bible, through prayer, or from the advice of others who have been through similar difficulties. These forms of guidance may very well lead to conventional therapeutic options, such as detox, intensive inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation, sober living homes, or faith-based treatments including Christ-centered twelve-step programs. For those battling addictions, helpful information is available on the websites of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute on Drug Abuse [19, 20].

IV. OVERCOMING PREJUDICE

The personal and social costs of substance abuse are staggering. According to the U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health, twenty million American adults battle substance use disorders and one of every eight adults struggle with both alcohol and illicit drug use disorders simultaneously [21]. Other issues, though, also bedevil people and societies and deserve equal attention. In recent years, racial prejudice has been front and center in the American consciousness. The term *prejudice* refers to generalized beliefs that an individual applies to certain racial or ethnic groups. Several disturbing cases of police brutality against members of minority communities have dominated the headlines. This has caused a collective re-evaluation of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Such self-reflection often uncovers uncomfortable truths. In the book of Jonah, the Bible provides a memorable example of how prejudice can be a major obstacle to fulfilling one’s spiritual mission.

The scriptures say the “word of the Lord” came to Jonah in the ancient Kingdom of Israel. Jonah was told to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh and “preach against it, because [of] its wickedness,” and to demand the Ninevites repent. Jonah rejected this mission. Instead, he went to a port and boarded a ship bound for a faraway land (Tarshish), attempting “to flee from the Lord” (Jonah 1:1-3). Soon thereafter, Jonah paid for his disobedience. A violent storm threatened to break up Jonah’s ship. He fell into the sea and he was swallowed by a great fish (fig. 3). From inside the fish, Jonah repented. He thanked the Lord for saving him from drowning and vowed to complete his task. The fish vomited Jonah onto dry land and he journeyed to Nineveh. He told the Ninevites that if they did not repent of their wickedness their city would be destroyed. The king of Nineveh and his subjects believed this prophesy. They put on sackcloth, sat in the dust, and fasted (these were customary signs of humility and repentance). “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10).

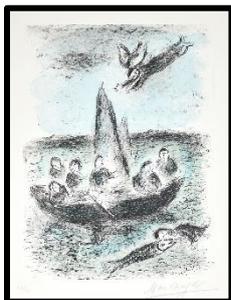


Figure 3.
Marc Chagall. Philips Galle. *Jonah’s Boat*.
Public Domain.

Jonah had finally accomplished his mission, but he had a strange reaction after God spared the Ninevites. “[T]o Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord ... ‘That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live’” (Jonah 4:1-3). Jonah responded this way because he was motivated by prejudice. He “hated [that the] Ninevites were repenting and the Lord was forgiving them” [22]. Perhaps Jonah had wanted only to deliver God’s message of wrath and did not appreciate or truly encourage his offer of mercy if they atoned. Jonah was an Israelite and Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, Israel’s greatest external threat. God had established a special relationship (or *covenant*) with the Israelites. He gave them a sacred law and a “promised land” in which to live (Exodus 19–24; Deuteronomy). Jonah treasured his nation’s favored status and he was hesitant to share the Lord’s mercy with the people of other nations, including the Assyrians. Despite God’s promise that the Israelites would bring blessings to “all peoples on earth” (Genesis 12:1–3), “the old covenant community, as a whole, tried to keep the Lord’s blessings for themselves and did not reach out to the nations” [23]. Modern Christians are also called upon to illuminate and shine God’s light on others (Matthew 5:15).

Jonah would have been familiar with scriptures that teach that it is unrighteous to mistreat “foreigners” or to show partiality (Exodus 22:21; Proverbs 24:23). Jesus also preached against harboring prejudices. He said the second greatest commandment was “love your neighbor as yourself” and he directed religious leaders to “stop judging by mere appearances” (Mark 12:31; John 7:24). Jesus’ disciples broke down ethnic barriers. The apostle Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The apostle Peter taught, “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10: 34-35). The ancient Greek term translated in Acts 10 as “show favoritism,” means discriminating against others based upon their outward appearances.

Willie Hubbard, Jr., is an African-American evangelist in District Heights, Maryland, USA. He has witnessed first-hand how racial prejudice hurts the church’s mission [24]. Hubbard says that he is “able to understand both sides of the matter,” because he has “been blessed to worship with — and serve — all races in the Lord’s church.” He says, “[I]t is true that different races and cultures often view things differently and through various cultural experiences, [but] as children of God, we should aim to become colorblind and learn from each other’s cultures. [T]he most segregated hour of the week is Sunday morning. Often, this is due to location. But for most, it is by choice. In the Lord’s church, culturally speaking, we must understand and accept the fact that there are two churches. Both practice the same doctrine, but with different cultural influences. ... I recently had the opportunity to visit with a brother in Christ with whom my family and I worshiped thirty years ago. He confessed that when we worshiped together he had a racial problem. By the grace of God, he fought against his upbringing, refusing to allow it to get in the way of experiencing what God had mandated: to love and consider as brothers those of a different color” [24].

Health care professionals suggest specific coping strategies to deal with the ill effects of discriminatory mindsets. The stress caused by discrimination can be reduced by physical exertion, breathing exercises, meditation, and *mindfulness*. Mindfulness simply means recognizing what we are sensing and feeling in the present moment, without passing judgment [25]. When a person becomes consciously aware of their prejudicial thoughts, they can make necessary adjustments and corrections. There is merit to the common saying “The first step to solving a problem is recognizing there is one.” Although mindfulness is generally associated with Buddhism, it can also help Christians identify their own negative thoughts. One Christian writer proposed a Christ-focused form of mindfulness that he calls *watchfulness* (see, for example, Matthew 26:41, Luke 21:36 and 1 Peter 5:7-9) [26]. Other methods for overcoming prejudicial attitudes include honestly acknowledging discrimination adversely affects society, systematically examining our own histories and identities to identify our biases, and learning about and actively seeking opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds. These types of coping strategies are effective tools for personal growth and increase the sense of well-being.

V. LIVING WITHOUT LIMITS

Racial discrimination and substance abuse are matters of concern for both individuals and societies. They weaken our relationships, impair social functioning, and limit potential [27]. Fulfilling potential and realizing God's plans is the subject of Nick Vujicic's inspirational personal memoir entitled *Life Without Limits* [28]. Nick Vujicic's seemingly insurmountable limitations were first revealed at his birth. Nick's mother was twenty-five when she became pregnant. She was a midwife and a pediatric nurse in a hospital delivery room, providing care for hundreds of mothers and children. She followed all the proper procedures to ensure she had a healthy baby: she watched her diet, did not drink or take painkillers, and had regular checkups with the best available doctors. Still, Mrs. Vujicic had dark premonitions, and several times, she told her husband, "I hope everything's okay with the baby." The doctors could not see anything concerning in the prenatal tests or ultrasounds. However, when Nick was finally born, in December 1982, the delivery room fell silent. Instead of handing the newborn to his mother, the nurses quickly moved the child away for further examinations. After witnessing the delivery, Nick's father suddenly felt sick to his stomach and he was escorted outside. Mrs. Vujicic asked, "What is it? What's wrong with my baby?" The doctor replied, "Phocomelia," meaning the baby had no arms or legs. The nursing staff and Mrs. Vujicic broke down in tears. Mrs. Vujicic was a devout Christian, but she wondered, "If God is a God of love why would He let something like this happen?" [29]. It took years before Mrs. Vujicic learned the answer to her question.

Not surprisingly, Nick Vujicic had a difficult childhood. His parents decided to place him in a "mainstream school," but he became a target for bullies. Nick fell into a deep depression and he even contemplated suicide. He believed in the power of prayer, though, and he asked God to give him strength and a purpose in life. Around the time Nick became a teenager, his mother showed him a newspaper article about a woman who learned to deal with her own severe disabilities through prayer. Nick believed God was providing him with a purpose and he was inspired to devote his time to encouraging others. He began giving motivational speeches at school and at church-sponsored events. His message resonated especially with teenagers, who often go through periods of loneliness, confusion, and despair [30]. Nick's mother finally thought she understood why God allowed his physical condition: because people living with disabilities are often our most powerful and inspirational teachers [31]. Eventually, Nick Vujicic became a Christian evangelist and he founded a non-profit ministry called *Life without Limbs*. He also created a social-emotional teaching curriculum called *Attitude is Altitude*, which helps struggling middle and high school students make positive personal changes and contribute to their communities.

Through skillful adaptation, Nick Vujicic turned a debilitating physical limitation into an empowering spiritual agent that he used to affect others. He turned a negative into a positive, by seeing himself in a new way and by seeing himself as part of something greater. Adaptation is a powerful mechanism for coping. Psychologists define *social adaptation* as "adjusting to the demands and restrictions of society, and finding ways to live and work in harmony with others and engage in satisfying social interactions and relationships" [32]. Adaptation requires humility, the ability to put aside one's personal concerns or fears to serve a greater cause. Jesus Christ taught that humility is a virtue. He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:3-5). Theologians and psychologists recognize a direct connection between a person's humility and their level of self-awareness and potential for personal growth [33]. An episode in the life of Moses demonstrates that recognizing one's limitations can be a catalyst for improvement.

Moses was an ancient Hebrew prophet and leader who delivered his people from Egyptian slavery. The *Pentateuch* or *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, describe his life. Many people are most familiar with Moses as he was portrayed in Cecil B. DeMille's (1881-1959) epic film entitled *The Ten Commandments* (1956). The American actor Charlton Heston (1923-2008) portrayed Moses and gave an unforgettable performance that critics praised and audiences cheered. One of the most powerful moments in the movie is when Moses confronts the Egyptian Pharaoh, played by Yul Brynner (1920-1985), and fearlessly demands - in Heston's famous booming baritone voice - "Let my people go!" (Exodus 5:1). Pharaoh refuses and Moses must repeat the demand "Let my people go!" several more times. Each time his voice grows in power

and confidence. Later in the film, when the Hebrew people are in fear of Pharaoh's vengeance, Moses reassures them: "The Lord of Hosts will do battle for us. Behold His mighty hand!" This is a paraphrase of the words of Moses recorded in the book of Exodus: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. ... The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:13-14).

Moses was a prophet, meaning he was a spokesperson for God, and his words were appropriately commanding and firm. Surprisingly, though, Moses was not a naturally eloquent or confident public speaker. In fact, when God appeared miraculously to Moses in a burning bush and told Moses he had been chosen to free the Hebrews from slavery, Moses responded, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? ... Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue." God responded, "Who gave human beings their mouths? ... Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (Exodus 3:11, 4:10-11) (fig. 4). According to Nick Vujicic, God said the same thing to him thousands of years later: Have no fear. I will help you find your voice. I will teach you what to say. Christians like Nick Vujicic believe God has the ability to help them overcome their limitations and fears to fulfill his mission.



Figure 4.
Marc Chagall. *Moses' Doubt at the Burning Bush*.
Public Domain.

Moses had a fear of public speaking (what psychologists call *Glossophobia*). Glossophobia's symptoms range from slight nervousness to full-on panic. It is a very common type of social anxiety; it affects up to seventy-five percent of people [34]. There is good news, though. A person can conquer their fear of public speaking through *exposure therapy*. People tend to avoid situations and activities that they fear. For example, Moses tried to circumvent the necessity that he address Pharaoh and his court. Avoiding fears may reduce stress in the short term, but it actually can exacerbate problems in the long term, creating more stress and damaging self-confidence. In exposure therapy, therapists slowly subject patients to what they usually avoid, at first in a "safe space," or supportive environment. Patients practice confronting their fears and replace limiting, irrational thought patterns with self-assurance. Exposure therapy is not only for the fear of public speaking. It has proven helpful in treating a variety of maladies, including many fear-based phobias, *Social Anxiety Disorder*, post-traumatic stress disorder, and *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder* [35]. Today, Christian counselors combine Bible-based strategies with other cognitive strategies (such as exposure therapy) to provide a holistic approach for overcoming anxiety disorders.

VI. DEFEATING GUILT

Research suggests that anxiety can come directly from feelings of shame or feelings of guilt. Not everyone, however, understands guilt primarily as a feeling. In the realms of morality, ethics, and law, guilt indicates a violation of a standard or rule, and a person may "be guilty" without "feeling guilty." Similarly, a person who is guilty of violating God's commands may or may not feel guilty. Secular psychologists tend to view guilt as an emotion, rather than a status. The American Psychological Association defines *guilt* as "a self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong and often by a

readiness to take action designed to undo or mitigate this wrong.” *Shame* is similar, but also includes a “strong fear of one’s deeds being publicly exposed to judgment or ridicule” [36]. Guilt usually relates to past actions or thoughts; shame relates to the self and feeling of inadequacy or unworthiness. Guilty feelings are not necessarily a bad thing; they can act as a stimulus for positive change and prevent future harmful actions. Chronic guilt, on the other hand, can lead to depression and other severe mental health concerns, as well as physical symptoms, such as insomnia, digestive problems, muscle tension, and headaches.

A person may view their guilty feelings as an invitation to reflect on whether or not they have been behaving in accordance with their beliefs and values [37]. A severe type of guilt involves the lingering effects of *moral injuries*, “the painful aftermath of experiencing something that goes against one’s moral upbringing” [38]. People suffer moral injuries when they violate their sense or code of right and wrong. King David, the famed monarch of ancient Israel, endured self-inflicted moral injuries. The Bible describes David as “a man after [the Lord’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), however, David had a complex personality. He was capable of performing great acts in God’s service, but he was also capable of committing ungodly acts causing great harm. The second book of Samuel describes one of David’s darkest moments (2 Samuel 11-12).

Although King David was a great general and warrior, when his Israelite army was battling the Ammonites, far from home, he decided to remain in Jerusalem and enjoy his leisure. David paced the roofs of his palace overlooking the city and he caught a glimpse of a beautiful woman bathing down below. David sent a messenger to determine her identity and he learned she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David’s soldiers fighting the Ammonites. Although David surely knew it would be a violation of his moral code and would offend God, he initiated an illicit affair with Bathsheba (fig. 5). Soon she was pregnant. Fearing his people would learn of the affair, David recalled Uriah from the frontlines. David hoped Uriah would quickly have relations with Bathsheba and the people would assume he was the father of her unborn child. Uriah refused to be intimate with his wife, though, while his fellow soldiers were busy fighting far away. David was angered his plan had failed and he sent Uriah back to the war. David had Uriah placed on the front lines, and told his general to allow the Ammonites to kill Uriah, which they did. David had committed adultery and he was responsible for an unjust death. God sent the prophet Nathan to David to express his disapproval. David finally came to his senses and realized the error of his ways. He confessed to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord,” and Nathan replied, “The Lord has taken away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13). Jesus and his disciples taught that “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

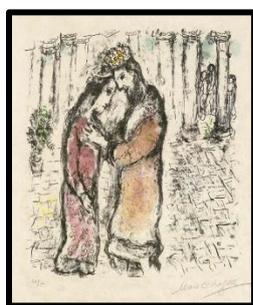


Figure 5.
Marc Chagall. *David and Bathsheba*.
Public Domain.

The scriptures tell us that David was not only a king, general, and warrior; he was also an accomplished poet and *psalmist* (or sacred songwriter) (1 Samuel 16:18). David was so talented, he was called “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1KJV). Many of David’s psalms celebrate the glory of God; but others express his personal regrets. David seems to have dealt with his anxiety with self-administered *music therapy* and *poetry therapy*. Modern psychologists use music therapy as “an adjunct to the treatment or

rehabilitation of individuals to enhance their psychological functioning”[39]. It involves singing, writing, and performing music. Poetry therapy “uses the reading or writing of poetry to facilitate emotional expression in an individual and foster healing and personal growth” [40]. In his 51st psalm, David poetically pleaded for God’s forgiveness following his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah [41].

“Have mercy on me, O God,
According to your unfailing love;
According to your great compassion
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. ...
Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”

David was suffering the lingering effects of a self-inflicted moral injury and he could not simply ignore his feelings or the accusations of his moral conscience (see, for example Romans 2:14-15). Therefore, he took positive steps to cope with his guilt. “Guilt and shame fester inside us. [If left untreated] these emotions can lead to severe sadness, changes in appetite, loss of sleep, and even recurring thoughts of death” [42]. The scriptures show David realized his errors, he confessed his mistakes, and he sought God’s forgiveness in prayer and through the creative processes of writing poetry and music.

Dr. KalMcAlexander is a Christian counselor who served for many years as a chaplain in the U.S. military. He helped military personnel who were struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder and ethical decisions made while in combat. Many of these men and women reacted to their traumatic experiences by having extramarital affairs or acting abusively, or by going through addictive cycles, which led to more feelings of guilt. Dr. McAlexander used David’s psalms to comfort Christian soldiers. He suggested they follow David’s four-step process to ease guilty feelings: 1) identify your emotions; 2) confess the acts or thoughts that caused guilt; 3) seek forgiveness; and 4) resume conforming to your moral and spiritual principles [43]. *Couples counseling* can address guilt related specifically to marital infidelity and lead participants to recommit to their neglected relationship. As in Christian therapy, secular therapy frequently involves accepting past mistakes, making amends, and learning to make better choices in the future [44].

A modern example demonstrates how David’s four-step process works. A young man named Charles made an appointment with a counselor because he was feeling guilty about something he had done when he was a teenager (Charles identified his emotions). Charles told the counselor that he and his friends had repeatedly harassed two homeless men they saw in a park near their home (Charles confessed his acts). They taunted the men with crude insults and threw garbage at them. When Charles went away to college, he felt tremendous remorse. During a school break, Charles came home and decided to seek out the men and apologize, but he could not find them (Charles sought forgiveness). The counselor advised Charles to spend some time volunteering at a local homeless shelter. After doing so, Charles still felt badly about what he had done, but he was glad that he was helping people in similar circumstances (Charles returned to his moral principles).

If Charles had met with a Christian counselor, the counselor would have probably given similar advice but would have also recommended that Charles confess his sin to God and ask for his forgiveness [45]. The apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). That, briefly, is the Bible’s positive coping style. Do not succumb to anxiety when life presents challenges. Instead, 1) Pray for God’s assistance; 2) trust that he will help; and 3) embrace the “peace of God” that can calm your heart and mind. God may bring his peace through enlightening Bible stories, through Christian counselling, through secular therapy, or in some other way.

VII. CONCLUSION

A young man visited his father who was suffering from a terminal illness and at the point of death. The father told his son the one thing he regretted most about his life was the amount of time he spent worrying about it. "All my worrying achieved nothing. I wasted so many chances to make things better, and now here I am an old man." Life does indeed come with its "ups and downs," but employing positive coping strategies can help a person control their stress, deal effectively with unpleasant situations, and make lasting improvements. When people fail to attend to their anxieties, they continue to "fester inside" and often lead to worse, long-term problems or simply avoidable regrets. Similarly, destructive and avoidable attitudes and behaviors, like racial prejudice or substance abuse, prevent people from achieving their full potential. Productive strategies, including both spiritual reflection and therapeutic techniques, can lead to a life with fewer regrets, and a life with less limits.

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