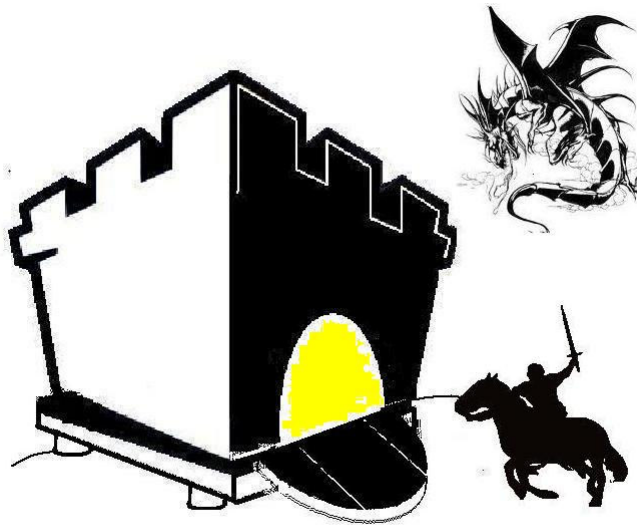

Fortress Living

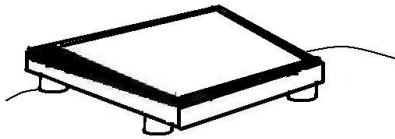


Three Solutions for Your Greatest Problems in Life

Fortress Living: Three Solutions for your Greatest Problems in Life

Lesson Thirteen *The Fortress Solution to the Greatest Problem of Failure*

God-Centered Norms: A Solid Foundation



If we've learned anything in our study of normative solutions throughout history it's the importance of a solid foundation. Norms represent the rules and principles for living. Without a solid foundation there can be no confidence that what we think or believe about life and reality accurately reflects what is there.

Though I reserved special disgust in the last lesson for Post-Modern Nihilists who are bent on deconstructing the traditional foundations upon which normative solutions have been built, I have some appreciation for the result. By clearing away more and more rubble and debris, deconstructionist philosophers at least demonstrated the inadequacy of traditional solutions to the three greatest problems of life—danger, pain and failure.

But the time for demolition and deconstruction is past. It is now time to lay a new foundation and in this lesson I propose to do just that. If it seems presumptuous of me to insist that this new foundation is more solid and enduring than any other in history, so be it. For it is not a foundation of my own making. I am describing it to you but I didn't lay it. That work belongs to another.



Deductive Logic, Apriori Reasoning and Faith

In earlier lessons I discussed three categories of logic and reasoning. Deductive Logic relies on apriori reasoning. The word apriori describes the source of knowledge: it comes "prior" to experience. How can we know something before we've experienced it? It must be given to us by someone who already possesses it. And in order to insure the information is accurate that someone must be a trusted authority who not only possesses the facts but can communicate them in a way we can understand.

Once such a fact has been communicated, we can then use logical deduction to put it to use in our lives, reasoning from those facts, guided by the Law of Non-Contradiction. This doesn't eliminate all the riddles and mysteries of life, but it takes care of many of them. So now the question remains, where do we find a trusted authority who can supply us with our facts?

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It should be evident from the past lessons where I believe that trusted authority exists: God the Creator of the universe. What more trusted authority could there be than the one who made it to begin with?

Of course, bringing God into the solution at this point may pose a problem for some who imagine that there is no God or who argue that there is no proof for his existence. Certainly this has been the consensus over the past several hundred years since Immanuel Kant relegated belief in God to an upper level, unknowable experience.

But Kant was wrong. God's existence can be known and can even be discussed meaningfully. The evidence of his error is the Christian Bible itself which is the testimony of hundreds of men, women and children who have known God and are not ashamed to talk about it to others.

I'm going to say something that may sound shocking to our post-modern, post-kantian ears. I didn't invent the phrase but I believe it's true: All atheists are liars!

According to the Bible, the knowledge of God's existence is given to all creatures in a number of ways. Notice these statements:

¹ *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

² *Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.*

³ *They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them.*

⁴ *Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)*

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:19,20)

Statements like these, and many others, if true, deductively prove the following: *"The fool has said in his heart, there is no God." (Psalm 14:1)*

If all this evidence exists around us—both within our minds and outside them—only a fool would deny the existence of God. Or a liar. And that's precisely the point. Anyone who rejects or denies the existence of God does so out of folly, not honest doubt. And once that boundary has been crossed, it's deductively conclusive that if such a God exists, he would speak to his creatures in a way they could understand. That's what the Bible is: the testimony of God's words to his creatures and their own reflections about him.

What then does it mean to accept this premise? That God exists and has spoken in the Bible? There's a simple and familiar word to describe it: "faith." In very practical terms, faith means we receive the authoritative propositions from God as revealed in the Bible and then act upon them in appropriate ways. The Bible puts it this way: *"faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).*

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Such a statement seems to beg an obvious question, however. If the existence and knowledge of God is so “obvious” and if only a fool rejects it, why are there so many people who either deny or live as if there is no God? The answer is found in the text I quoted above. Let me cite a sentence before:

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

In other words, since God has made these truths evident in and to all, their denial is a result of “suppressing the truth” and note how: “by their wickedness.” In other words, the reason so few accept the truth claims from God and live lives of faith is it involves exposing something about us we don’t want to deal with: the wickedness in our hearts.

The writer goes on in this passage to describe the tragic results of this refusal. If this doesn’t sound like the 2500 years of history we just explored, I don’t know what does:

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:21-32)

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Modern psychological theory warns of the danger of holding two or more contradictory viewpoints in one's mind at the same time. It's called "cognitive dissonance." Cognitive dissonance ultimately results in madness and insanity. Why? Because it crashes into the most basic law of rationality: the Law of Non-Contradiction. One who denies the Law of Non-Contradiction, is by definition, irrational and insane.

According to these passages from the Bible, cognitive dissonance, particularly related to the knowledge of God, is a universal problem. On one hand, people know that God exists and has established normative, situational and relational solutions for the greatest problems in life. This is the "truth" we read about earlier. On the other hand, these very same people suppress that truth. They ignore it, deny it, or try and explain it away.

This cognitive dissonance explains another universal cognitive malady we today call "cognitive distortion." Simply, cognitive distortion means a person doesn't think straight. Their thought processes, based on the deep-seated cognitive dissonance, result in erroneous thinking. Though there are all kinds of cognitive distortions, one is especially troublesome: a distorted view of our identity—the self. We don't see ourselves as we really are. The testimony of the Bible is that there are two main reasons why cognitive distortion of self is such a problem:

- It Diminishes God's Identity

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Those who refuse to serve God ("glorify him as God") end up with futile thinking and dark hearts. I'll say more about that in a moment. They also end up creating their own false gods—gods (idols) more favorable to them. The writer above talks about "images made to look like a mortal human being." This is the ancient description of idols. But it's not the only description. Since Enlightenment times, idolatry has increasingly moved away from "birds, animals and reptiles" to such creations as science, technology and prosperity. Those who live their lives in service to these modern idols of the mind diminish God's identity.

- Exalting Our Identity

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

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Every one of the actions and thoughts described here results from cognitive distortion—exalting ourselves at the expense of God and others. When the text says “God gave them over to a depraved mind” it’s the image of a parent dealing with a petulant, rebellious child. The father carefully lays out the rules and norms but the child angrily refuses to obey them, having a temper tantrum to try and regain the control of his situation.

At that point, God sadly steps back and lets the tantrum continue, knowing full well how it will end for the rebellious child. By “giving them over” to their own stubbornness, God demonstrates the futility and misery of a life without him. It seems to me this is the final word about Post-Modern Nihilism. It demonstrates conclusively the futility and misery of a life without God.

In Lesson Five I introduced the phrase “evil genes.” I noted how current genetic research demonstrates that every cell in our bodies is wired for survival and self-protection. This is why even an atheist like Richard Dawkins uses terms like “selfish genes” to describe our predisposition to putting our own interests above everyone and every thing else. Perhaps this is the reason human are so quick to suppress the truth by their own wickedness, to diminish God’s identity and to exalt our own. It’s in our very DNA!

Of course, the Bible has different terminology to describe all of this. In the ancient world nothing was known of the human genome or survival of the fittest. Even so, the simple word “sin” encompasses them just as well. And so, in the final analysis, the reason we don’t accept the normative, situational and relational solutions God has given us comes down to one thing: sin. Even when we’re not conscious of it, we are always resisting his answers, always pitting our will against God’s. While a life of faith is the first solution to the greatest problems of danger, pain and failure, the reason we don’t practice it is that it requires something contrary to our natural disposition toward self-protection: “self-denial.”

Living by Faith: Repentance

Let me give you another important word from the Bible that describes how we must respond to the problem of cognitive distortion brought on by our willful rejection of God’s truth. It’s the word “repentance.” I like to say that “faith” describes what we must do, “repentance” explains how we do it.

The word “repentance” is found frequently in our English Bibles. It is a translation of a Greek word, METANOIA, that means literally, a “change of mind.” Repentance thus means a new way of thinking. Repentance is the process of overcoming cognitive dissonance and cognitive distortion in our lives. When we learn how to practice repentance we actually learn how to think correctly about God and about ourselves.

In the practical outworking of this process, there are three components. I call them the “three faces of repentance.” They are not really three separate steps as much as three sides of a triangle:

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The Three Faces of Repentance

- **Judgment – Activating the Transformed Pre-Frontal Cortex**

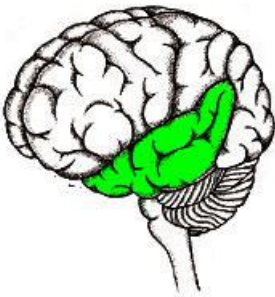


Though it's the last to mature in our natural brain development (usually in young adulthood), it's the first to be transformed in repentance. The Pre-Frontal Cortex (PFC) is located directly behind the forehead (forebrain) and is called the Judgment System of the brain. It is our super-computer, making thousands of calculations and decisions every day. It does so based on information gathered from the lower hierarchy (it cannot function autonomously). Think of the PFC like the chief executive officer of a large corporation. It relies on the information and input from others.

Where does this information come from and how is it evaluated? Certainly it receives inputs from lower brain formations, but it is also able to prioritize and evaluate it based on its advanced capabilities. It can step back from all the evidence in the lower regions and compare it. This is where the Law of Non-Contradiction becomes so important in rational processing. The PFC utilizes it to compare and analyze the data streams from below.

It is for this reason the PFC and its judgment capability is a key brain system in repentance. Indeed, once a judgment is made—to accept truths long before rejected—an entirely new chain of events begins involving every other aspect of brain function. Simply stated, when the PFC responds in simple faith to the normative solutions revealed by God, repentance begins and the miserable condition of cognitive dissonance and cognitive distortion is gradually overcome.

- **Language – Activating the Transformed Temporal Lobes**



Located on the side of the brain, behind our ears, are the two Temporal Lobes. The lobe on the left primarily interprets the meaning of language. The lobe on the right generates language. If people experience damage to one or both lobes (such as a brain stroke) it interferes with either their ability to understand what others are saying or their ability to form words to communicate to them.

The Temporal Lobes work closely with the PFC in the processing of information so the words we speak, both to ourselves (self-talk) and to others actually participate in our understanding of them. For example, if you tell a child something is “hot” he will often avoid it in the future simply based on the warning—especially if he’s gotten burned in the past. There may be entire categories of food (such as spicy flavors) he learns to avoid not based on actual experience but on the basis that a trusted authority called it “hot.”

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This points to the importance of transformed Temporal Lobes in a life of faith and the significance of words and language in that transformation process. Practically, it means we repent of our natural language patterns—those grounded in distorted cognitions—and begin using new ones. The new language patterns are not found within ourselves but from God himself. This is yet another reminder of the necessity of the Bible in activating faith.

- **Identity – Activating the Transformed Corpus Callosum**

I've already mentioned there are two Temporal Lobes, on the right and the left side of the brain. You may also recall there are two halves of the brain itself. Experts call them "hemispheres." Actually, if you cut a brain in half you would see many of the organs inside come in pairs. There are several reasons for this design, not least of which is that it permits "dual processing" of information. When both sides of the brain are activated information processing can occur simultaneously and at twice the speed. Dual processing also permits redundancy of function so if one part of the brain gets damaged, often the same function can be picked up by the other side.



Mediating this dual processing is a complex web of neural fibers between the two halves of the brain called the Corpus Callosum. It has many interesting functions and a discussion of them would take us far from our path, but I do want to highlight its role in the development of our self-image: our identity.

How we come to view ourselves—for example, our personality—is the result of complex interactions in the Corpus Callosum.

I like to think of the Corpus Callosum as a traffic cop directing cars out of a jam. The cop tells one car to go left and another to go right; he tells one to stop and others to go. That's what the Corpus Callosum does with data, moment by moment. And over time, familiarity with particular traffic-data patterns allows us to reflect on them and analyze them.

Natural biological development in the Corpus Callosum begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. The distorted views of self I described earlier result from traffic collisions (cognitive dissonance) in this part of the brain. And most often those collisions create wreckage and destruction. As we've seen throughout history, the natural solutions to the greatest problems of life are based on the wrong foundation. As a result, the unaided Corpus Callosum creates destructive traffic patterns of self-image, for example, diminishing God's identity and exalting our own.



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However, when the PFC responds in faith to the truths of God, and when the Temporal Lobes begin internalizing and verbalizing those new truths, a new identity in the Corpus Callosum emerges. A transformed Corpus Callosum is one in which we begin to see ourselves more accurately: as dependent creatures, helpless and desperate without God's involvement in our lives. After all, that's the way God created us: to depend totally on him for every need. His destiny for his creatures is not to make us independent and isolated from him but to link us inextricably to himself.

Fortress Living and the Great Problem of Failure

As I've said all along, the greatest problems in life are danger, pain and failure. Throughout history normative, situational and relational solutions have been offered intended to answer them. But as we've seen, those solutions have never been satisfactory. Let's see how Fortress Living on the Solid Foundation deals with the greatest problem of failure.

In an earlier lesson, we learned that deductive logic and apriori reasoning require a trusted authoritative source. In this lesson we've seen that God alone provides it and we learn how in the Bible—his words written to humanity detailing those solutions.



Failure is a great problem with which all of us struggle. We want success and spend our lives trying to be successful. What is success and why is it so important to us? Ultimately, it's a form of validation in which we get the attention and recognition we feel we deserve.

Children, teenagers and adults long for this kind of validation and seek it in many ways: in our jobs, our families and friendships, our hobbies and even our amusements. But success, even for the best and the brightest, remains an elusive experience. There is always someone just a bit better and brighter. There is always someone getting more recognition and affirmation. This creates even more cognitive distortion as we look for ways to get what we believe we deserve.

So how does Fortress Living solve this problem? Ultimately, the problem of failure is a result of pride. The Bible doesn't use the term "cognitive distortion" but it does have a lot to say about pride. They are the same thing. Pride means we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. An accurate view of self is one occupied not by self-validation strategies, attempting to give ourselves central significance; rather, strategies designed to validate and affirm God. To put it another way, self-validation, as a response to the problem of failure, only creates greater distortion and dissonance for it does not accurately reflect reality. We aren't really the center of the universe! God is. Thus, self-validation is actually a form of idolatry and self-worship (the term "self-worth" literally means, "self-worship"). Only when God is given his rightful place as the object of our worship and the central figure of our world, can we solve the greatest problem of failure in our lives.

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How to Activate Repentance: Meditation on the Word of God

This is how to build a solid foundation or base for life. Using Jesus' terms about the wise and foolish builders, it is how to build our house on the "rock" instead of the "sand" (Matthew 8). But there is more we can say about how to implement it in our daily lives. Faith is the key that opens the door, repentance is turning the key. But how, specifically, does faith become active in this process? What will our lives look like if we are living in faith and repentance? In short, a building on this new, solid foundation means we will learn to meditate on the Word of God. Since the Bible represents God's words and thoughts, it only makes sense that if we would overcome our cognitive distortion, it involves learning to think like God thinks instead of how we naturally think. That's exactly what it means to meditate on the Scripture.

Meditation is not just a good idea. It's a command. In fact, meditation on the Scripture is directly linked to overcoming the great problem of failure. When the people of Israel were preparing to enter the Promised Land, crossing the Jordan River, led by General Joshua, God warned them about the necessity of thinking correctly about him and themselves. God said,

"This book of the law [the Law of Moses] shall not depart from your mouth but you shall meditate on it day and night, for then, your way will be prosperous and then you will have good success" (Joshua 1:8).

Notice how success in life is linked to meditation. This was true for Israel as they prepared to enter the Land, but the principle applies to God's people of all times. Meditation is the means by which we think like God thinks.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word translated "meditation" in passages like Joshua 1 literally means "rumination." In case you're not familiar with that word, rumination is what many animals do when grazing.



Take for example sheep. Sheep do not just eat and swallow like humans. They ingest, chew, swallow, regurgitate and chew some more, swallow again, and repeat the process multiple times. This is what we mean by a sheep or cow "chewing its cud." The "cud" is a mouthful of grass that has already been swallowed and regurgitated but there is more processing to be done.

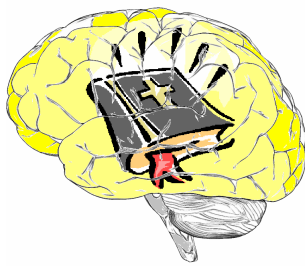
And that is why rumination is such an apt metaphor for the process of meditation. It explains why the word was used. Meditation on the Word of God involves three steps. If we hope to experience success and overcome the great problem of failure, it will mean we begin practicing these three steps on a daily basis. You may recognize these three steps because they are commonly described as Bible Study Methods:

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➤ Select the Right “Pasture”

Where do you begin to meditate on God’s Word? Do you start at “page one”? Do you take the “lucky dipping” approach? Like a sheep, you must look for pasture that will supply your needs at the moment. Many find that the Psalms are a good place to begin. Although all of God’s Words are “good pasture,” not all passages are relevant for every need in our lives. If you don’t know where else to forage, go to the psalms.

➤ “Ingest, Chew and Swallow”



A sheep not only finds good pasture, it ingests it, chews it and then swallows it and then repeats the process. So with God’s Word. The process of ingesting, chewing and swallowing is so basic even a baby can do it. How sad that few take time to “ingest, chew and swallow” the Scriptures. What does it mean?

“Ingesting” means that we take something into our mouth. A sheep does this when it buries its nose in the tall grass and begins to bite off stems. We “ingest” the Word of God when we “take it in” to our minds through reading it ourselves or hearing it spoken by others. This is what is meant by the Observation of Scripture.

“Chewing” is the process of breaking food up into small, manageable bits. We chew with our teeth, grinding and pulverizing the food until it is like a liquid in our mouths. So, with the Bible. Chewing is the process of breaking a passage down into manageable bits that we can understand. Normally, we cannot chew too much food at one time. So with the Scriptures. Although we may read (“ingest”) an entire chapter or more, it is best to focus on one verse or even one phrase to really “chew” on. There are many steps involved in this part of Bible meditation also called Interpretation of Scripture. For example, noting the historical context of the passage—what was going on before and after. Chewing also means looking at the grammatical structure—the subjects, verbs and objects—for clues about what the author or speaker meant.

“Swallowing” means that the chewed up food goes down the esophagus and into the stomach. The only way food can get into our bodies to provide nourishment is swallowing it.

When we think about meditating on God’s Word, swallowing is akin to memorizing it. Scripture memory of some sort is essential in meditation. The psalmist said, *“Your Word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You”* (Psalm 119:11). To “hide” God’s Word in our hearts means we value it so highly that we remember even the smallest detail.

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➤ “Ruminate” Through the Day

Rumination is the process in sheep, goats and cows of digestion. As I said, these creatures digest food differently from us. We have one stomach. They have several. When one stomach is finished digesting the food, the animal regurgitates it (“brings it up”) and begins chewing it again. This process continues until the food is totally digested and all the nutrients are extracted.

It is no accident that God chose this word to describe what we must do with God’s Word throughout the day. Once we have “ingested, chewed and swallowed” a portion of Scripture, we are ready to “ruminate” on it at three key times during the day:

+ *When we have idle time* – Rather than allow our minds to remain idle it is important to use these times to meditate on the truths we have hidden in our hearts. For example, instead of going on a walk or for a bicycle ride and trying to “empty” your head of thought, meditation means directing your thoughts during those times to portions of God’s Word you have memorized.

+ *When we face trouble* – One of the most important times to meditate on Scripture is when in a time of trouble. For example, temptation to sin or feeling overwhelmed by questions and doubts is a time to begin reciting the Word of God to ourselves.

+ *When we lie down to sleep* – One of the most important times of your day is the time between waking and sleeping, after you lie down at night to rest. For many people, it’s a time of anxiety and worry as they reflect on events of the previous day or anticipate troubles for tomorrow. Rather than crowd our minds with anxieties or regrets, we must learn to use these moments between waking and sleeping to meditate on God’s Word.

As we implement these routines in our daily lives God uses the new thought patterns to activate faith, overcome cognitive distortion, and process repentance. How can these new patterns of life do all that? Because by putting them into practice we literally change the neural circuitry of our brains. It’s as if an electrician is running new wiring in a house. This is what the Bible means by the “renewing of the mind.” We are commanded not to be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Romans 12:2). In modern, scientific terms, “conformed to this world” means that we think the way everyone else in the world thinks. That’s what we’ve studied over the past several lessons: the various normative, situational and relational solutions throughout history. God commands us not to be tricked or confused by them, for when we are, our brains circuitry actually disposes us to cognitive distortion. However, when we meditate on the Word of God, new circuitry is established which disposes us to cognitive clarity. A new foundation is established for truth. And we find the solution for one of the greatest problems in life: failure.

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Quiz 13 Questions

1. It is a shocking statement but nonetheless true: all atheists are...
 - a. Smart
 - b. Stupid
 - c. Liars
2. Cognitive distortion is such a problem because
 - a. It diminishes God's identity while exalting ours
 - b. It diminishes man's identity while exalting God's
 - c. It has nothing to do with anyone's identity
3. God's solution for cognitive dissonance and cognitive distortion involves
 - a. Developing new patterns of thinking involving self-confidence and success
 - b. Developing new patterns of thinking involving friends and family
 - c. Developing new patterns of thinking involving faith and repentance
4. The Pre-Frontal Cortex functions like the
 - a. Garbage Collector of the brain
 - b. Traffic Cop of the brain
 - c. Doctor of the brain
5. The terms "ingest, chew, swallow" refer to what process:
 - a. Rumination
 - b. Illumination
 - c. Information