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Alice: We've been talking together in our sessions about how we come alongside people who are experiencing pain. Of course, we began, Karen, in our first session talking about what pain is, and we explored the wide variety of experiences people have that cause them pain.

And then we moved on in our second session to talk about what it means to minister to people in pain. How we come alongside and bring the gifts that God has given to us to them as we minister to them.

In our third session, we tackled a difficult subject. We looked at how we can view pain in the lives of people like ourselves who believe that God is all-powerful. God is love, completely good, and yet people suffer; and we had to talk about how we can understand that.

But then in sessions 4 and 5, we began with some of the interventions that we can use and, Karen, you helped us understand about listening. How important it is that we listen without judging and really try to understand where the person is coming from. And in our last session, we also talked about helping people come to a point of changing how they think. That was not an easy one, and I think very often when we are dealing with people we think, "Well, wait a minute. In session 4, we said you have to listen without judging. But now in session 5, we said, oh, but you have to help people change the way they think. How can you do both at the same time?" Well, we have to keep moving on this one, because now we want to explore further this whole business of helping people change the way they think, because sometimes the way we think has to impact what we do. We have to change our circumstances.

So what we are dealing with today is stress. And stress is something that all of us experience. There's no way that we can get around it.

We get in a traffic jam; we're late for a meeting. Somebody doesn't show up. Something happens, and we are dealing with stress. It's there in every person's life virtually every day of their lives.

Karen: The copier breaks down; the car has a flat tire; the supper gets burned; all kinds of things can go wrong and create stress.

Alice: That's exactly right. And so how do we deal with our stress? Because it is something that we're constantly having to manage in one way or another, and it seems to me that there are times when a certain amount of it is not a bad thing.

Karen: In moderate amounts, stress can actually be very helpful. A little bit of stress or a moderate amount of stress can actually help sharpen our performance, and our brain actually works more clearly in a sense with just a moderate amount of stress. It's when it gets into those higher amounts that things can go awry.

Alice: Oh yes, because when we have chronic stress, when we deal with stress day after day after day, those very things that push us to perform and to excel in moderation can become triggers for all kinds of disease in our bodies and in fact really mess us up. And so what we need to look at in our time together in this session is how we deal with stress in daily life. That's really what matters. And I remember a study that was done many, many years ago by two researchers called Pearlin and Schooler, in which they examined how more than 2,000 Americans handle stress in daily life; and they found that we usually use one of three different ways of managing stress.

The first way that some people choose to manage stress is that they change the situation that's causing them stress. If you're stressed out about money problems, you change the way you handle money. You just don't make all the stops at the coffee shop, or you don't make all the trips that you once made. You just simply change the way you live until you have the stressful situation in hand.

Karen: You might cut up your credit card. You might visit a debt agency that helps you get out of debt. And I'm thinking too about when we first moved to Haiti. It was just hot (oh yes), and we needed to just buy some fans.

Alice: And that was a way of changing the circumstances.

Karen: Right. There are so many ways where that comes up in life, and I think it requires wisdom to know when you need to just change the situation.

Alice: That's exactly right, but I'm also thinking about the fact that there are situations in life that can't be changed. An incurable illness, an accident that takes someone we love, these you can't change. You can't go back and do them over, and so not everything that causes us stress can be changed.

There are two other ways that, according to the stress researchers, people use to manage stress. And the next way that very often people manage stress is to manage their emotions about what is causing them stress. This thing that is causing them stress gets inside their emotions and they don't deal with the stress itself, they just obsess about it. They think about it constantly, and this actually makes the stress more difficult than it had been originally. The original stressor is enlarged when people manage their emotions about what causes them stress.

Karen: So, for instance, to get back to the example about fans in Haiti, if I were just saying to myself, "Oh, it's not hot; it's not hot; it's not hot. It's not a problem," and I didn't buy any fans, that would be managing my emotions.

Alice: Trying.

Karen: Trying to manage my emotions, pasting a happy face on something that's kind of a challenge.

Alice: Exactly, and the stress researchers find that this is completely inadequate. It just simply magnifies the stress, and yet it's something that a great many people do all the time. They paste on a happy face, as you said, Karen. They say, "I'm not angry. I'm not angry. I'm not sad. I'm not sad," when in reality they are either very angry or they're very sad.

But there's a third way that people manage stress, and that is not to manage their emotions about what causes stress but to change the meaning of the thing that is causing stress. When you can't change the stressful situation itself, you can change the meaning of what causes stress; and I'm thinking of two biblical examples that have been helpful to me in trying to understand what this is all about.

Back in Isaiah chapter 7, we meet a king named Ahaz. Ahaz faces an enormously stressful situation. His little nation of Judah with its capitol in Jerusalem is under siege by two much stronger powers. Both Syria and the 10 tribes of Israel in the north, called Israel, have combined and have come down and laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. And Isaiah chapter 7 tells us in verse 2 that the king and all of his people were under terrific stress. The text tells us that Ahaz's heart was shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken in the wind. Now that's stress.

Karen: That is stress.

Alice: That is stress.

Karen: Fear.

Alice: Oh yes, huge amounts of fear. But as the story unfolds in Isaiah chapter 7, we find God speaking to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah. And he sends Isaiah to meet the king, and he says to him in verses 7 through 9, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'It will not take place, it will not happen.'" Ahaz, it's not going to happen. I know you're looking over the walls of the city. You're seeing these huge armies laying siege to the city out there. You're shaking like the trees of the forest in the wind, but it's not going to happen. But God went on to say, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." And it becomes obvious in the verses that follow that Ahaz just simply did not listen to what Isaiah was saying, and he didn't believe that God was right in telling him that this wasn't going to happen.

And so Isaiah comes back to Ahaz with another message from God, and God is now saying to Ahaz: Listen. I know up to this point you haven't been convinced, but I'm willing to give you a sign, any sign at all in the highest heaven above, in the deepest depth. You can ask for a sign. I will give it to you so that you know that what Isaiah has said is true. And do you know, Karen, what Ahaz said? He said, "I will not put the Lord to the test. I will not ask." And, as a consequence, Ahaz missed the opportunity to change the meaning of his situation, because then we find God coming back through Isaiah, saying: I am going to give you a sign anyhow, and the sign is of a baby named Immanuel, and Immanuel means "God with us." That was the sign to this shaking, stressed-out king that God was with him, but he refused to hear it.

Karen: And what was the meaning that God wanted him to take from that situation?

Alice: That even though our eyes are telling us that we are in great danger, if we have the promise of God that He is with us, that changes the meaning of the whole situation. And when God said it's not going to happen—while Ahaz didn't believe and couldn't reduce his stress by changing the meaning of it—the reality is that we as followers of Jesus Christ always have that option. Whatever situation we are in, we have the option of changing the meaning of every stressful situation, because we know that God is there, that God has promised to bring something good from it, and that God will work on our behalf.

Karen: We're back to the issue of faith.

Alice: That's exactly where it takes us every time.

Karen: Faith in God, faith in His hands being good hands, and faith that we are in those good hands.

Alice: That's exactly right. And we look at Ahaz. Ahaz is a negative example of what we must not do when God gives us the opportunity to change the meaning of every stressful situation because we know Immanuel. We know that God is with us.

But there are times when we need to change the situation, when it isn't enough just to change the meaning of the situation. And I'm thinking of another person in the Old Testament who for me is just an exciting example of what we should do, and this is a woman named Esther.

Now Ahaz was a king. Esther was a queen. Ahaz was a king because of heredity. Esther was a queen because the Persian king Xerxes—or in some Bible translations Ahasuerus—Xerxes was a capricious tyrant. He was a ruler who was absolute in every way, and he was a very difficult person. He had a queen whom he banished because he didn't like what she had done, and now he has chosen Esther to be his queen. And I think we have to understand something about Esther's situation, and it will help us understand why what she did was so extraordinary. Esther wasn't a queen the way we think of the queen of England, somebody who has power. Esther was really, simply, the first in the king's harem. She had her own apartment. She had seven eunuchs who did all of her exterior work, and she had seven maids who took care of her to make sure

that she stayed beautiful. But she had no freedom to come and go. She was really locked into that apartment, and her life was circumscribed as the queen.

But she had a cousin, a cousin named Mordecai, and he was sort of a middle-level official who had his office outside the palace gate. And one day, one of Esther's eunuchs came in from a little trip outside, and he said, "Your cousin wasn't where he normally sits, and I found him down in the city square sitting on the ground dressed in sackcloth and ashes and making all kinds of groaning, moaning noises in public."

Well, Esther, when she heard this thought, "Oh my. Maybe he needs new clothes. And so she sent him a new suit of clothes, which he promptly refused to accept. And he sent a message to Esther that would be devastating. It was that the people of God, the Jews there in Persia in exile, were going to be exterminated on a certain date and that Esther alone could intervene with the king. And you know the story as well as I do, Karen. When Esther heard this, she immediately sent a message back to Mordecai. She said: Wait a minute. You don't understand. I can't go to the king. I don't have the freedom to go to the king. If I go to the king without being summoned, I will be put to death on the spot. But of course Mordecai wouldn't settle for that, and he wrote back and said, "[Esther,] if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place . . . And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this." And you can just about see Esther straightening up with her backbone stiff and saying, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." [Esther 4:15-16 NIV] And you see Esther changing a situation by taking her courage in her hand and going to the king, not knowing for a minute what reception she's going to have, but going because it was the right thing to do. And sometimes that's what we are asked to do in dealing with stress.

Karen: We're asked to actually intervene. We're asked to change this situation that we find ourselves in.

Alice: That's exactly right. So sometimes when we deal with stress, we're in a situation in which we can change the situation. And at times, like Esther, we must use our opportunity to change the situation. But sometimes we're not able to change the situation, in which case we . . .

Karen: Change the meaning of the situation.

Alice: Because if we try to do what many people do, and that is simply to manage our emotions about the thing that causes stress, this doesn't work. It just makes the stress worse. We must make the decision, either to change the situation itself or to change the meaning of the situation. But as followers of Jesus Christ, we can do that. We can change the meaning of stressful situations because . . .

Karen: Because we are in good hands.

Alice: We are in good hands, that's right. And we know that God is with us, Immanuel, and that's enough. That's enough to let us know that whatever stressful situation we face, there is a way to deal with it. Either we change the situation itself, or we change its meaning because we are in God's hands.

Karen: That's an important intervention. That's our third intervention.

Alice: That's correct. That's right. The first intervention was that we listen with great care without judging. The second intervention?

Karen: The second intervention is helping people change thinking that is not biblically based.

Alice: But it is always biblically based to say we can change our thinking. We can change the meaning that we place on the stressful situation, because God is with us and that makes all the difference in our lives.