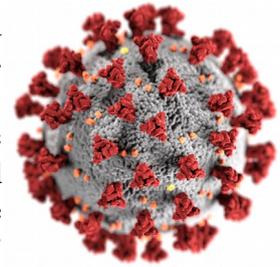


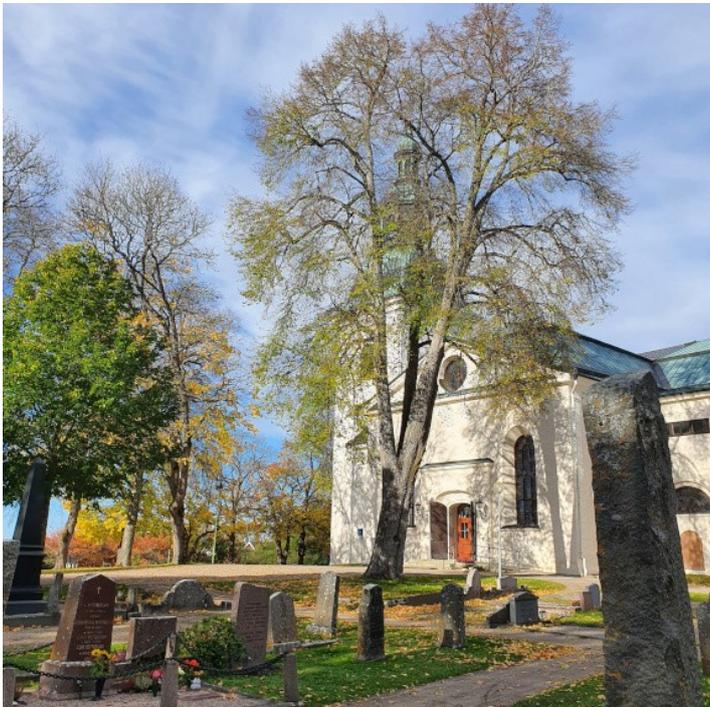
# Autumn with Corona

Written by Emil Persson, all bible quotations from the New International Version

As I write these lines, the second corona wave is accelerating rapidly. Already the first wave and the lockdown in spring did hit us hard, cost us strength and hope: Homeschooling, park closures, not being able to meet friends and acquaintances in person; home office, reduced working hours or even losing our jobs; closed museums, theatres and churches. And now it goes on with the second lockdown. It seems endless - will it never end! It can easily make us tired, we become lethargic, downhearted, anxious and lose hope. It can also be that we become sarcastic or indifferent and develop dull feelings. In addition to this, it is now the cold and dark season, where we can easily become melancholic or depressive already without corona and social distancing. How can we deal with this? How can we find a way to keep hope and enthusiasm alive? How can we continue to find strength to live? And where is God in all of this?



How we react to problems and tensions and how we deal with life's shortcomings has a lot to do with how we see, perceive and assess the things around us. So what do we see? Below I have included a picture from my home country. Take a little time to look at it. What do you see? Describe not only the picture, but above all what kind of associations you get when you see the picture. What do you think about? What do you feel? What does the picture remind you of? If you like, you can write this down.



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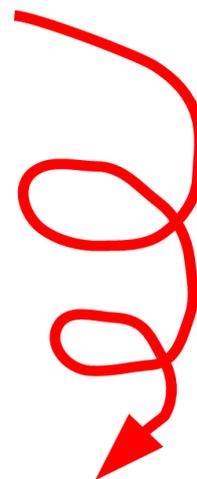
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*The church in Vingåker, Sweden, autumn 2020*

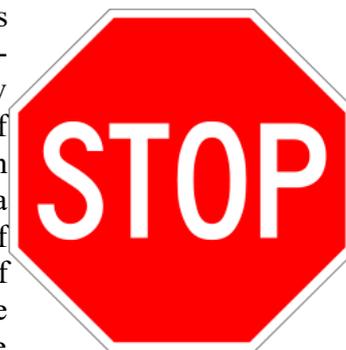
At the bottom of the picture you can see the graves. Maybe you think about friends and relatives who died and become sad. Or you think about the fact that life is short and that we all have to die. Or, maybe, you think about eternity, the certainty that God will take us to his eternal kingdom after death. In the middle of the picture there is a big tree, which is about to drop its leaves. Maybe you are mourning the summer, that the strength and vigour is fading and the cold and dangerous winter

is just around the corner. Or maybe you see that the tree is preparing for the resting period, so that it can blossom full of power in the next spring. From this point you cannot see the church tower in summer. Maybe you can notice that when the tree drops its leaves, the view becomes clear. That right now you can see the symbol of hope, the top of the tower pointing to the sky, pointing to God and his love and power.

So the same image can either make us sad, fearful and downhearted and rob us of our last strength, or it can give us hope, strength, enthusiasm and confidence. But, why is it so? Well, it is first of all related to how our brain works. To give us orientation and support in life, the brain always tries to build connections between what we are experiencing and our memories, experiences and habits. These associations are mainly controlled by our emotions. So when we feel bad, we remember bad things from the past, and when we feel good, we remember nice things that happened to us. However, the process of these associations is not very transparent. At the end of the chain of associations we often do not remember what we felt and thought before, i.e. what triggered our associations. Often the real reason is something concrete (e.g. you just had that subliminal conflict again with one of your colleagues at work), but the negative feelings swing up (the chain of thoughts goes from interpersonal conflicts to the graves and on to death and war). Such negative thought- and feeling spirals can have fatal effects. To begin with, they can make us feel bad emotionally, even if the external circumstances are not that bad. And when we really are in a difficult situation, bad feelings are the last thing we need - much more we then need a glimmer of hope. The negative spirals can also lead to a so-called problem hypnosis. The thoughts circle around all kinds of problems and everything that went wrong or could go wrong. But, although you describe and picture the problems in detail, you will not discover any solutions. The negative feelings make that you only get negative associations, but no positive ones that could help to solve the problems (although you are annoyed by your colleague all the time, you do not get good ideas how to better cope with the situation). If you are stuck in such thought spirals, you often don't notice it yourself, but you pull yourself down further and further and let yourself feel generally bad. These spirals can be so strong that one gets the impression that a small devil is at work<sup>1</sup>.



In order to get out of these diabolical spirals, we can take Jesus as a model. Read the story of Jesus' temptation (Matt 4:1-11 or Luke 4:1-13). First of all, Jesus is fully aware that he is being tempted. If we know that these negative thought spirals exist, we can make ourselves aware of them when they come ("Oh, Emil, now you are pulling yourself down again"). Jesus does not argue with the devil for long, but replies in a concise way: "It is written!" If you feel that you are pulling yourself down, just say "STOP, not with me!" and then consciously think of something in your life that is positive. Concrete and here and now! (the fact that I can be annoyed with my colleague after all means that I live and have powers!) A positive Bible word can also be very helpful, e.g. Psalm 40:3-4 „[The Lord] lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.“. But the devil can be very persistent. When he comes back, Jesus does not get angry with himself ("I have already turned away the devil so many times, why does he come back? Am I too weak or what?"). Jesus takes it with composure and he remains confident, persistent, short and brief. And at some point the devil leaves him alone and the angels come and serve him.



But, I have to admit, I am not Jesus. To break the spiral of thoughts is not always easy for me. Sometimes I don't even notice it, and I just feel worse and worse. If I notice it and say STOP, the thoughts might go away for a short time, but it happens again and again that they come back

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<sup>1</sup> Whether the devil exists as an actual power or the cause is nothing but an overshooting reaction of the brain shall not be further discussed here. In any case, imagining the binding forces in a personified way can be helpful.

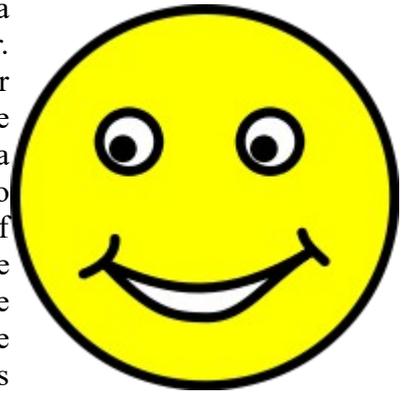
quite fast. Sometimes I can very well understand the story of the return of the expelled evil spirit in Matt 12:43-45/ Luke 11:24-26. Therefore it is very important for me to know, practice and apply good and effective methods of how to say STOP. God has created many possibilities in us human beings how we can feel better. I would like to mention a few of them that have helped me. Maybe some of them can help you to cope with the corona autumn.

1. **Being aware of the body:** When the brain goes roaming, pulls us down and makes us tense and anxious, it can be good to take a break from thinking. The opposite of the brain - our body - offers many possibilities for this: Endurance sports such as jogging or cycling; creative activities such as handicrafts, painting or cooking; singing songs of praise, gesture prayers or dancing before God. Through autogenic training, mindfulness exercises or other forms of meditation, stop the flow of thoughts and focus attention entirely on the body. Choose a method that suits you the best to give you a break from the circling thoughts! To consciously perceive the body can be very exciting - you may discover new and unexpected sides of yourself - and at the same time it is incredibly healing, for mind and body.
2. **Accept the unchangeable:** The negative thought spirals can always arise in the brain and since they are automatic, unconscious processes, they cannot be stopped so easily. Even worse, if you get angry about it or even condemn yourself, "the devil" has won, because then the spirals grow stronger. It is much better to accept them calmly and then let them go: "Yes, there are the evil thoughts again, but so what, they do not correspond to the facts here and now". As described above, it sometimes works to say STOP and consciously focus attention on something positive. Sometimes it works better if you anchor your awareness in your body.

Corona has to be accepted as well. That the Covid-19 virus is here, neither you nor I can change. When it comes to the actions decided by the governments, many - me included - have definite opinions about it. But, neither you nor I can influence what will come upon us. Nevertheless we have one thing in our own hands: We can decide how to deal with the situation. We can get annoyed and find "everything wrong". We can get tense, become anxious, burn our strength uselessly and either become sarcastic or lose hope. Or we can accept the circumstances calmly and relax. As Christians we have a great treasure for this. We can look upon God and bring our worries and fears to Jesus. In him everything else then becomes less important, as it is described in a beautiful song: [Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.](#) By having Jesus as the most important thing in life, and thereby being able to accept reality as it is, a lot of recovery, hope and strength can emerge. When relaxing, creative ideas often come up about how we can cope better with life.

3. **Joy and gratitude:** Sometimes I am amazed at the misery guts that we humans can be, and how difficult it can be for us to be really happy. The news drag us down, we remember bad things and paint a gloomy picture of the future. Even when we are together with other people (real or virtual), we often talk about bad things and drag each other down. If you look at the situation here and now, we often are doing very well. We live in a rich country with a well functioning social care and health system. Of course, it is possible that something really bad has happened to you (death or serious illness of a relative/ close friend, loss of employment, accident or the news that you yourself have a serious illness). In such cases it is very important to take enough time for mourning, but, thanks be to God, these are rather rare exceptions. In all other cases, what is written in Phil 4:4 applies: „*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*“. Joy is one of the strongest weapons to break negative thought spirals. When we are happy, we remember wonderful things from the past, we tend to notice positive news and imagine the future positively. Closely connected with joy is gratitude. When we see the positive and wonderful things that God and other people have done to us, a deep and healing gratitude can grow within us. Gratitude can become a strong support that carries us in good and bad times.

So how can we become more happy and grateful? First of all, we can make a conscious decision for this. When the bad feelings come, you can consciously look for beautiful memories in your memory – preferably concrete things that you have experienced yourself! It can also be good to watch or listen to the news only once a day or to deliberately read the positive news in the newspaper. When we are together with others, we can cheer each other up and tell about positive experiences. The worse we are doing, the more important this is. Taking pity helps only in a limited way, it is much more important to help each other to find joy and gratitude. By doing so we can get a lot of strength, energy and inspiration. As last point here a quite "cheap" trick: force the corner of the mouth upwards! If the mouth is pointing upwards, the body believes that you are doing well. This relaxes all other muscles. Happiness hormones are produced and you start to associate positively. After a short time the feeling changes and you feel much better.



4. **Getting Started:** How we see reality determines much more about what we actually do than we generally believe. Whoever sees everything in a bad way, stiffens, experiences problem hypnosis, becomes tired and powerless, and does not get much done. A goal with the exercises above is also to act appropriately, without panic, excessive pressure and risk of burnout, but relaxed, reflected, appropriate and sustainable. When we come out of the negative spirals, many positive things happen. First of all we can relax, find rest, get new strength and find joy. Joy should not lead to a "fool's optimism" where all problems are pushed to the back of one's mind, but to a well-founded optimism: If you are inwardly convinced that you can solve your problems, you can also face the problems. In the peace and quietness often the good ideas come, the flashes of inspiration. You see how you can solve a problem properly, relaxed and effectively (by being aware of my body, I can be more relaxed with my colleagues and realize his needs). If there is something we cannot influence, acceptance makes us focus on the things we can actually change. When you go on to tackle something, you don't always feel the joy. Either because the task is difficult and you have to concentrate very hard or because it actually does not make fun. This makes it all the more important to take some time after the job is done to look at what you've achieved and be happy about it or to allow yourself a reward.

Especially in the lockdown it can easily happen that ones weaker self wins. You're not allowed to go out, so why should you do anything at all? But it pulls you down very quickly if you know that something has to be done, that you have the strength, time and possibilities to do it and still don't do it. Even though the possibilities are limited because of the lockdown, there are many things you can do. Some are necessary: work - for many in the home office, bureaucracy, cleaning. Many are simply nice: a hike in the autumn sun, a good book, delicious cooking. It is especially nice and important to keep up the contacts. Modern technology with video conferences, where you can see each other, is especially valuable for this. So if the power and inspiration is there, and you know what to do - go for it!

When it comes to what we do, it is very important to me that it happens in accordance with the threefold commandment of love. How God's love and the breaking of the negative spirals of thought are connected is very well described in 1 John 3:18-20: *„Let us love [...] with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.“* In other words, if we act in love, we can trust that God will stand by us, also against the inner accuser.

The Corona period is a challenging time for all of us. But, there are many ways in which we can cope with the situation better. Some I have mentioned in this text. These are based on the

fundamental insight that it makes a big difference how we see and assess a situation. Do we let ourselves be dragged down and discouraged by the whole thing, or do we manage to keep a basic optimism? I shared some thoughts on how to do this. But there are certainly other possibilities. Choose the methods that suit you best! We are not helplessly at the mercy of the situation, but can actively contribute to a better handling of the situation! We can trust that God will help and strengthen us. If we do our part to make things better for ourselves and others, he is faithful and helps us to succeed.

Amen.

Vienna, November 2020

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1. Corona Virus: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SARS-CoV-2\\_\(CDC-23312\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SARS-CoV-2_(CDC-23312).png)
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