

## "An Alternative to Stress"

The Chairman and CEO of Home Depot is said to have once told this story at a business conference. Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning, the lion wakes up, and knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you're a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up you'd better be running." I guess you could say that both lions and gazelles live with a certain amount of *stress* – whether you're the hunter or the hunted.

They're not the only creatures with *stress*! *Stress is a byword for today!*

People are stressed out *in their jobs, their work*. Owners and employers are stressed out trying to get workers, stressed about being outmatched by their business competitors. Employees are stressed out about having to do the work of 2 or 3 people, what with company mergers and understaffing. *Parents* are stressed out. In most families, couples are both employed, trying to raise the kids. Getting them to all their activities. *Teachers and students* have had 3 years of extra stress trying to manage with COVID interrupting the normal education process. *Life in general* is faster paced, more complex, and more stress-producing.

S – T – R – E – S – S ! There are books and seminars galore on how to cope with stress in today's world! I Googled "Stress Management" and it lists about 1 billion, 900 million sites!

But you know what: ***Not all stress is bad!*** Stress can be a very positive and necessary thing! It can energize us for a new challenge, spur us on to change or adapt. Some of humankind's greatest achievements and advancements have come because someone felt a lot of pressure to do something about a problem or bad situation.

***If we're a follower of Jesus, the goal of life is not to be totally free of all stress!*** I can think of 2 famous people who experienced a tremendous amount of stress: *The Apostle Paul*: "As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger..." (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). Don't you think all of that would be a bit stressful!

Then there is *Jesus*: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and *what stress I am under* until it is completed!" (Luke 12:49-50). Jesus felt tremendous stress to accomplish the work God appointed Him to!

If we're really a follower of Jesus, we're engaged in *spiritual warfare* – battling sin and evil in us and around us. Everything's not calm and peaceful in warfare!

***However.....too much stress, prolonged stress, can be harmful.*** *Stress can trigger physical illness.* From all I've read it appears that stress can weaken our immune system and open us up to all kinds of infections and diseases. Stress can adversely affect our gastro-intestinal tract, and contribute to high blood pressure and heart disease. In one church I served one of the church leaders had a high paying, but very stressful, job. (D. Hunt). He suffered from chronic gastro-

intestinal issues. He decided to retire early, and when he did, those physical problems cleared up. *Stress can affect our emotional well-being.* It can drain our energy, hinder and paralyze our effectiveness, make us moody and irritable, or perhaps depressed. Managing stress is important if we're to be at our best!

***How can we manage stress more effectively?*** I've already said when I Googled "Stress Management" there are close to 2 billion sites to check out! (None of us will live long enough to do that, even if we were crazy enough to try). If we started, we'd find suggestions like hypnosis, bio-feedback, meditation, power positive thinking, relaxation techniques, natural herbs, time management, aromatherapy – just to start!

Let's look at a Scripture that shows how Jesus dealt with a stressful situation. Turn to Mark 4. We'll start with Mark 4:35-36: "On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with them."

Jesus had had a busy day – teaching and preaching before a huge, pressing crowd, and I can imagine he was feeling exhausted and drained. If you read between the lines, it seems like there's an abruptness to what's described in verses 35-36. It's like He interrupts what He's doing and says, "Let's go to the other side (of the Sea of Galilee). Verse 36, where it says, "leaving the crowd" the word "leaving" in the Greek could also mean "abandon". It says the disciples took Jesus in the boat "just as he was". The whole description seems to suggest that this is no gentle easing away or gradual closing up shop from teaching – it's more like Jesus all of a sudden stops what He's doing, and says, "We're outta here!"

*Jesus knew when He needed a break from the exhaustive work He was doing, and the incessant demands of people.* There are other times in the gospels when Jesus simply withdraws from a crowd, though there were still people wanting to hear Him teach or have Him heal them.

*This is a very important component of stress management: Know when it's time to get away, when to take a break, when to say "no".* Some of our stress is caused by our taking on too much, maybe trying to do things we're not suited for, or simply because we find it hard to say no to people. God wants us to use our talents and gifts for ministry and service, but God doesn't expect any one of us to do *everything*, or things we're not *gifted for*.

*Not allowing ourselves to get overscheduled* can help cut back on stress. *Taking breaks* that provide diversion from work or a stressful activity can help. *Developing relaxation techniques* that provide quickie diversions are good. There was a lady in one of my churches who was an artist; she was a painter. One Christmas she gave me a painting of a view we had from our house. It was a view of Big Boulder Mountain in the Poconos. I'd often just look at that painting and imagine I was at the end of our driveway, looking across the fields to Big Boulder – smelling the fresh air, feeling the gentle breeze. It was very relaxing. (Unfortunately, in our last move I somehow lost that painting. So if you accidentally come across a painting of Big Boulder viewed from our parsonage front window – please return it! It's ours!).

*Taking days off and vacation time, getting away* can reduce stress (although sometimes vacations are stressful, especially if we plan them out to the minute!).

We can add a few other practical pointers for "taking a break" from stressful situations. *Take a nap. Get enough sleep. Exercise.* Take a walk, go jogging (if jogging is still an option for us!). *Laughter. Humor.* Just looking for the humor in a situation, or get a good joke book. Or look at yourself in the mirror (that might just do the trick!). I once heard a surgeon say that often, during operations, the surgical team will tell jokes – not to be disrespectful to the patient, but as an antidote for the stress of their job.

After an exhausting day of preaching and teaching, Jesus says, "We're outta here", and He gets in a boat with His disciples...*and He falls asleep!* I love that Scripture! It makes me feel better when, after a long day, I fall asleep watching TV on the recliner in our living room! But look at what happens: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped" (Mark 4:37). The wind was howling. The boat was rocking, taking on water. The disciples were holding on for dear life! It must have been an exceptionally bad storm, because the disciples are terrified (some of them were fishermen, and spent a huge chunk of their lives in a boat). How did Jesus react to this sudden turn of events? He kept on sleeping! Curled up on a cushion, in a deep sleep!

*This brings up an obvious point: People react differently to stressful situations.* The disciples are screaming and panicking; Jesus is snoozing! Actually, a lot of our stress is regulated by *how we react to stressful situations: our response, our attitude.* Some of us are good at making mountains out of molehills! We fuss over things that don't amount to a hill of beans in the long run. One time in a church I decided to try to preach about things people tended to worry about. I put an insert in the bulletin and asked people to complete this statement: "I worry most about \_\_\_\_\_." One man responded: "I don't worry about anything. It does no good." I thought, well, if he can really pull that off, that's pretty good. He was in a difficult situation. His wife was in a wheelchair; she had Alzheimers disease, and he cared for her in his home. And he didn't really seem to be the worrying type. (Come to think of it, though, when that church merged with another church, and there was a chance we would drop the name of our church, he came into my office very angry, and threatened to sue the church if we changed the name. So I guess maybe he did worry a little bit about some things!).

Anyway...some of us can reduce stress *by responding differently* to stressful situations. Don't stress out so much when there's no need to stress out so much!

But there's more to the story that Mark tells. Mark writes, "And they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'"(Mark 4:38). Look at what happens next: "He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'" (Mark 4:39-40). Jesus stops the storm and calms the sea. Only God can do that! Then He says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still *no faith?*"

Why was Jesus able to rest right smack in the middle of a wicked storm? Because He is *God* – yes! But Jesus was fully human, just like us. He knew stress. Here, Jesus trusted His heavenly Father perfectly, and had that assurance of divine protection.

There are a lot of practical things we can do to relieve stress in our lives. These things can help us. But they can only take us so far.

*A lot of our stress and anxiety are rooted in the deeper question of whether or not we trust in God! Do I trust that God will provide for me when the storms of life are raging?*

I think Jesus asks us the same question He asked His disciples when we are stressing out over a situation: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Having a quiet trust in God is a potent stress reliever. Prayer is a great stress reliever. Meditation – just being quiet before the Lord – meditating on His goodness, His power, His love, His faithfulness – wonderful stress reliever.

I read an interesting article about religious faith and its positive effect on our health. Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard did research for over 20 years, and came to the conclusion that prayer and meditation actually alters our body chemistry – which in turn can lower blood pressure, relax our heart rate, and improve our body's immunity to diseases. He wrote a book about his research called *Timeless Healing*.

There are a lot of practical steps we can take to lower stress in our lives, but perhaps the best thing we can do is to have a strong faith in God – to be able to trust our faithful God, and His providence and protection.

As it says in Isaiah 26:3, "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you" (New Living Translation).

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