

BREAKING FREE FROM STRESS



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Introduction

Baseball and apple pie once represented all that was good about the American way of life. Now, a night at the ballpark is interrupted by the constant buzz of cell phones, while store-bought apple pie comes from the microwave with barely a hint of cinnamon and spice to scent the kitchen.

The pace of life for most families feels like a non-stop sprint, and stress is a constant companion. Health and relationship issues, commonly connected to stress, fracture families as we struggle to meet every obligation. Incredibly, some people seem to consider stress a mark of success.

How big of an issue is it? A recent survey revealed that 89 percent of Americans reported experiencing high levels of stress every day ... 89 percent! That's nearly all of us!

When I was a child, my mother frequently prepared meals using a pressure cooker. Every now and then, I would come in from playing outside to find that silver pot starting to shake, rattle, and roll. The hint of a whistle would grow into a scream as the pressure mounted inside, and before you knew it, our kitchen ceiling was dripping with potatoes and green beans!

I've never forgotten that pressure cooker. In fact, there were seasons of my adult life when I *became* that pressure cooker, and ultimately, my top would blow.

Perhaps you can relate.

Maybe you know what it's like to be a living, breathing pressure cooker, the type of person who is maxed out, burned out, and ready to explode. The demands on your life—those things you want to do, need to do, can and must do—overwhelm the amount of time that you have to do them. The end result is a great deal of stress. It's not a fun place to be.

The bad news is that far too many Christ-followers have chosen this way of life. The good news is that another option exists! We can stay inside our stress or we can move to a place of peace.

As a pastor, I feel compelled to address the spiritual dimension of stress and help you find a biblical response to the pace of life we so often keep. There are thousands of guides claiming to have the cure for stress. Websites, books, and podcasts promise foolproof results for the severely stressed out.

If you've tried the remedies and failed, I have some hope and encouragement for you that doesn't need a money-back guarantee. I promise you that the Good Shepherd will listen and bring you to a place of peace. Remember, He knows you better than anyone.

Resting in Him,

Jack Graham

LIFE UNDER PRESSURE

The Effects of Stress

Stress has infiltrated our homes, our schools, our jobs, our minds, and our relationships. Stress attacks, debilitates, and destroys us physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

We've all heard the reports of what stress and worry and pressure can do to us—these things damage the cardiovascular system, the digestive system, all systems of the body, it seems.

The physical signs of stress include: fatigue, headache, insomnia, sore or achy muscles, heart palpitations, frequent colds, chest pain, abdominal cramps, nausea.

Forty-three percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects due to stress. Ninety percent of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related complaints or disorders. Stress has been linked to all the leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide.

We certainly know what it can do to us emotionally—who doesn't know someone on anti-depressants these days? A three-year study conducted by a large corporation showed that 60 percent of employee absences were due to psychological problems, including stress.

The emotional signs of stress include: anxiety, nervousness, depression, anger, frustration, worry, fear, irritability, impatience, short temper. It affects our behavior, too: pacing, fidgeting, increased eating, addictive or excessive behavior, crying, blaming others, outbursts such as swearing, yelling, throwing things, or violence.

Nearly half of all American workers suffer from symptoms of burnout, a disabling mental and emotional reaction to stress on the job. Mental reactions to stress include: a decrease in concentration and memory, indecisiveness, mind racing or going blank, confusion, loss of sense of humor.

And then there are spiritual ramifications as the pressure inside of us builds. The Bible is filled with patriarchs, prophets, and disciples succumbing to the pressures of stress. Moses disobeyed God by striking the rock in anger. Elijah ran from Ahab and Jezebel. Peter denied Christ three times. All were sins of anger, disobedience, and fear caused by stress that negatively affected their faith. Therefore, do not lose heart, be encouraged, for even the mighty heroes of the faith struggled.

The Origins of Stress

But where does the pressure come from? And why do we take it so hard? In my experience, I've seen at least five sources of stress. See which, if any, apply to you.

The first source is temperament. Some people are wired to be pressure cookers. If life doesn't present a dramatic situation, they'll create one of their own. They thrive on stress—or so they think—and expect others to do the same.

A second source of stress is what I call the desire to acquire. You would think that wealth and riches and success would provide more security and greater serenity in life. But in fact, the opposite is true. If your possessions get a grip on you, anxiety surely will follow. As Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, “The full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” Frankly, I’d rather be poor and well rested!

And then there’s media hype. Our grandparents never saw crime in the streets six states over and wars exploding around the world. But with a thousand TV channels at our disposal 24 hours a day, we can be as informed as we want. The result of all that information is more than a well-informed mind; it’s also a well-stressed life. Think about it: Have you ever heard a news anchor come on the air and say, “Well, there’s really nothing to report tonight, so we thought we’d show a few cartoons instead.”? Of course not! There is always something to report. And it is typically reported in dramatic fashion. This is called media hype, and it’s taking a significant toll.

A fourth cause of stress is simply our life experience. None of us was born a worrier. Worry is a learned behavior, and the way we learn it is through our experiences in life. As we grow up, I’ve realized that sometimes bad things happen. People lose loved ones. They lose their health. They lose their jobs. They lose financial security. Eventually, after observing enough of these losses, we begin to worry that we’re next. We play the “what-if” game and devote more energy to imagining all of the terrible trouble that could befall us than we do living the life that is real.

There is a fifth source I’ve noticed, and that is the pace of life. We pile too much onto each day, we rarely take time to relax, and then we wonder why we feel so tense. We hop on airplanes every week, hit three cities in four days, drive more miles than a long-haul truck driver to get our children to and from school and practices, work far too many hours, work at home, and work in the car. We have no down time. We have 16 minutes to eat dinner before heading to the next practice or event, and fall into bed exhausted and unfulfilled.

The Solution to Stress

We all know that stress is a relentless enemy. But we fight to the point of exhaustion, trying to keep up, always losing small battles along the way in the form of tension and pressure. If this sounds familiar, then I have good news for you.

God gave us a biblical plan for stress relief. Consider the words of Paul, a man who having been beaten, exiled, tortured, shipwrecked, starved, and imprisoned, knew something about stress:

Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:35, 37).

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).

What amazing promises! Whether you are winning or losing your personal war against stress, you will find inspiring hope and practical guidance in the Word and particularly in God's plan for internal peace.

That plan is Psalm 23. A recipe for dealing with stress and finding peace, it also provides a compelling picture of what the *place called peace* is all about. The words are well known—*green pastures* and *quiet waters* and a life lived without fear—but enjoying these realities is not. We know a peaceful existence is possible; we're just not all that good at living it out.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

—Psalm 23:1–3

PEACE IN THE STORM

Resting in God

Stress has waged a war. It has infiltrated our homes, our schools, our jobs, our minds, and our relationships. It seems all-powerful and all-encompassing.

So before we learn how to defeat stress, I want to remind you of the amazing hope you have in the war against stress. If you know and follow the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, you can be sure that you are not fighting a losing battle. *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”*

If you’re ready to stop the madness and breathe, to arrest your worry and find peace, to slow your pace and pause, your God is ready to guide you. Remember, *“... my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:19).

When life’s storms gather above us and when turbulent waters rise, we can rest in the knowledge that our Good Shepherd is working diligently to seek out a silent, still stream.

Mark 4:37–41 tells the story of a crashing storm that erupted over the boat carrying Jesus and His disciples one night. The disciples thought their earthly time was up, but Jesus knew Who was in control. Instead of trembling, He took charge. He looked into the wind-torn clouds and said simply, “Peace! Be still.” The clouds, of course, complied.

In the same way, Jesus comes to us in turbulent times with those same three words that carry such comfort.

“Peace!
Be
Still.”

Are you facing circumstances that you can’t seem to bear?

Are you afraid you’re going under, that you’re in over your head this time?

In the poetic verses of Psalm 23, you and I are promised a destination marked by rest, refreshment, and restoration.

Personally, I could use a dose of all three.

Finding Rest

Not surprisingly, the stress-laden era in which we live has been called the “Age of Anxiety.” There is pressure on business owners to stay competitive in the marketplace. There is pressure on workers to hold down a job. There is pressure on moms and dads to raise responsible kids. There is pressure on those kids to juggle increasingly busy lives. So many people are stretched these days as they’ve never been stretched before.

But in the midst of that stretching, God's rest can be real. "*The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want,*" the psalmist wrote in the 23rd Psalm. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.*"

We can only guess as to the type of "stretching" that led David to write these words. But whatever it was, it shows the tender care our peace-giving God provides. The same God who cushions our falls is the God who commands raging torrents to "Be still."

Our Shepherd leads us—His weary, stressed-out sheep—into lush, green pastures and makes us lie down and rest. Said another way, *Come to Me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light* (Matthew 11:28, 30).

You and I are just like those sheep. Watch for your Shepherd, my friend, because He's on His way. He carries a staff in His hand and He promises peace.

Come Apart

True rest may only be found when we first "come apart."

I look back on my most recent series of pressure-cooker days and realize it's no accident that the verse says God *makes* His people lie down in those green pastures He graciously provides. The psalmist doesn't say that God "invites" us or that He "encourages" us to lie down. It says quite specifically that we must be made to stop and rest.

Stopping and resting isn't something I'm particularly fond of. When I come to an intersection and the light is yellow, I grip the wheel and gun it. Why? Because I don't want to be forced to wait!

But before you judge me, think about your own life. Maybe you don't race through near-red lights, but are there other warning signals you blow through instead of slowing down and taking a closer look?

Heart palpitations.

Irritability.

Inconsistency in time spent with God.

What do your warning signs look like? Do you know them when you see them show up? If we ignore enough warning signs, one day we are sure to crash. That is precisely why God forces us to rest. "Come over here," our Good Shepherd says. "Come apart from your work, please, and pause."

Sometimes we comply, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes God has to put us flat on our backs to get us to suspend our busyness and be still. He's done it in my life, and likely he's done it in yours, too.

Jesus once said to His disciples on a very stressful occasion: *Come away by yourselves ... and rest a while.* (see Mark 6:31).

He knows what we are sometimes slow to figure out: “If we don’t come apart to be with the Lord,” Christian author Vance Havner once said, “we will surely come apart.”

We all know this is true, so why do most of us find it so hard to stop and rest? Why does our Shepherd have to make us lie down?

I think it’s because we have convinced ourselves that we aren’t accomplishing anything unless we’re busy, unless we’re running in several directions at once.

If we stop and rest, someone else might catch up and pass us. But have you ever noticed that it’s the pauses in life that refresh us?

Pausing is a necessary practice in so many facets of life. For example, think how terrible your favorite song would sound without any breaks. You and I appreciate periodic pauses in music because we understand that it’s the notes that are held for a beat or two—a *fermata*—that keep a tune from running together into a jumble of dissonant sound.

We also appreciate breaks in conversation. Without them, we’d be relegated to constant interruption or enduring an interminable monologue by that aging aunt who drones on and on.

We appreciate breaks in literature as well.

Afterallewithoutanypunctuationevenabriefsentencelikethisoneseemsexhaustingtoread (sic.). See what I mean?

Appropriate pauses ... necessary breaks ... a chance to stop and breathe—whose life wouldn’t wind up better with a few more of these things?

A life without rest, an existence in which we never pause to commune with our Shepherd or find out what He expects of us, is not life as God intended it to be.

Chew the Cud

The second key to finding true rest is when to “chew the cud.”

Sheep are so action-oriented that when they finally are made to lie down, they can’t help but find something to do. Usually that “something” is nothing more than chewing the cud, but at least there’s movement involved. I’ve noticed that overly stressed people are a lot like antsy sheep. When they first endeavor to lie down—to slow their pace and seek peace—it takes 100 percent of their willpower to simply sit still. They need some cud to chew.

Two practices I adopted many years ago that help train my focus on God during my periods of peace follow below. Consider them my gift to you, from one pressure cooker to another.

Meditate on God's Word

The first “cud” to chew when you’re in a place of peace is to meditate on God’s Word. Especially for people like us, who thrive on constant activity and growth, it is critical to power off all devices every once in a while and take time to hear from God.

You can’t follow your Shepherd into green pastures and then, like a restless kindergartner, say, “OK, Lord, I’ve been still for a whole minute. Can I get up now and go play?” It doesn’t work that way because the resting times in life are the growing times.

“In quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).

God is more interested in our spiritual growth and strength than He is in our frantic activity. He knows that we will be right back to our totally stressed-out existences if we don’t take our times of rest with Him seriously. We grow and get stronger when we wait on Him. *Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!* (Psalm 27:14).

When you hear a stirring message, do you take time to meditate on the things you’ve heard? The best time to absorb the real truth that God would have you grasp is immediately after hearing or reading His Word.

God speaks to us through His written Word and the spoken Word. People tell me they watch a podcast a few times, and every time they listen, the Lord gives them a deeper understanding of how to apply His Word to their lives.

As we sit down to rest and focus our hearts on God and on His Word, He can speak to us. Remember, God doesn’t speak in the thunder or in the lightning. God speaks in the still, small voice of His Spirit as He deals with us through His Word.

We need to be sure that we quiet our lives enough for us to hear His voice. When we learn to rest in the Lord, it simplifies our lives and our perspective.

For ultimate stress relief, we need to follow our all-sufficient, ever-present, fully-satisfying Shepherd into the green pastures and lie down there.

I think you’ll be blessed as a result.

Be Made Strong

A second form of “cud” to chew is based on a powerful verse in Isaiah 30:15, which says, “... *in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*” Interestingly, it is possible—probable, even—for us to grow stronger when we’re doing nothing but waiting on God.

Our gracious Good Shepherd has designed a system whereby we can find true rest only in Him. And it is when we choose to “be still and know” that He is God that we see our shoulders loosen, our heart rate ease, our lives become sane once more. When we trust God for true rest, the complexities of life untangle, our emotions ease, and we can push the pause button on the next must-do assignment on our always hectic schedule.

The psalmist advised us to meditate day and night upon the Word of God (Psalm 1:2). Later, he reminds us we will find strength from His Word. *“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer”* (Psalm 19:14). We must take time to hear from God, to listen to God, to meditate upon the Word of God, and then we will find strength.

You and I both have a choice. We can heed God’s instruction to be made strong by His strength, or we can work to power up in ourselves. I think you know which option I advocate.

Finding Refreshment

Not only does our Good Shepherd provide rest, but according to the end of Psalm 23:2, He also provides refreshment.

“He leads me beside still waters,” promises this verse, which is important when you consider how sheep feel about still waters. Being the easily disturbed creatures they are, sheep will not drink beside a raging, rushing river. They are too afraid they might fall in, and who wouldn’t be worried about the prospect of swimming in a woolly overcoat?

So, in deference to the sheep’s desire on this front, the good shepherd will hunt high and low for a silent, still stream. If he can’t find one, he will dip the crook of his staff into the rough water and move stones around until he forms a little dam to still the water. He is that committed to his sheep’s refreshment. He is that committed to their care.

No matter what we accomplish or acquire in this life, if we neglect or ignore our spiritual life we will never feel truly satisfied. Many people go to great expense to find satisfaction and fulfillment. But joy without Jesus is an impossibly elusive thing. Happiness is only found through faith in Jesus Christ. The Scripture says, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”* (Matthew 5:6).

Do you need a calming, cooling, refreshing drink of water right now? Perhaps the stream of your life is rushing by with such speed and turbulence that you cannot find “still waters” from which to drink. Seek Him and you will find rest and refreshment beyond explanation.

The God who created us knows exactly what we need. Allow God to speak to you and guide you as you rearrange the stones in your stream and provide a still place for your spirit. He has already provided a regular place of still waters for us in His commandment of Sabbath rest.

God commands us to take one day in seven to come into His house to worship Him, to be strengthened in Him, to be refreshed in His presence—and then go out encouraged and revitalized spiritually and emotionally and, yes, even physically.

Jesus wants our lives to be overflowing. Life was not meant to beat us down and drag us around. Instead, we ought to be living with expectancy and joy because we are drinking daily from the still waters provided for us by our Shepherd. He gives us green pastures to feed us as we rest, as

we study, as we store up His Word. He gives us still waters that we might be revitalized and refreshed. But our all-sufficient, ever-present, fully-satisfying Shepherd isn't done yet!

Thirst for Righteousness

I love Jesus' promise in John 10:10, which says that Christ came that we might have abundant life—a life overflowing with goodness. This is our Good Shepherd's desire for us. But for us to enjoy it, we first must be clear about what this “abundance” really means.

Matthew 5:6 says, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*” So many people are unsatisfied today because they are hungering and thirsting for happiness instead of righteousness. But God doesn't say that temporal happiness will satisfy our hearts and souls. He says that only righteousness will do the trick. And it is along the path of righteousness, Psalm 23:3 says, that our God will lead us.

Your life can be revitalized and refreshed. Your God will fully satisfy your hunger and quench your thirst if only you seek the abundance that He alone can provide.

Finding Restoration

There's a final promise that awaits us at the place of peace. Not only does our Good Shepherd make us lie down in green pastures to provide us rest and lead us beside still waters to provide us refreshment, He also provides restoration for anyone who seeks it.

In Psalm 23, Jesus Christ is portrayed as a shepherd, one who is wholly devoted to the care of His sheep. And if there is one thing that sheep need, it's a dose of devoted care. Sheep are dirty and dumb, but more significant than that, they are easily distracted.

Sheep can be grazing right in the middle of the most pristine plot of pasture, and then forsake that fertile ground in hopes of finding something better. Determined to get to that “greener grass,” they'll wander away from their flock, their shepherd, and their security. Often it happens gradually, as they munch just a clump of grass at a time. One little lamb lingers longer at lunch, and before you know it he's over the hill eating way outside of camp. Night falls, and encroaching wolves start tasting mutton stew.

The late American humorist Erma Bombeck wrote a book titled *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*. If, like me, you've ever gone searching for whatever “greener thing” you craved, then you know those words ring a little too true. We graze just like that sheep. We linger a little too long, we fall into easy distraction, and before we know it we've become easy prey for our awaiting enemy. It's into that reality that God shows up, for when we, like sheep, go astray—as everyone does, according to Isaiah 53:6—our Good Shepherd, in His magnificent grace, seeks us and finds us and leads us back to camp.

For many sheep—and people like you and me—being dragged all the way back to camp is enough to convince us to stay. But sometimes, a sheep develops a habit of going astray. The shepherd will bring in his flock at the close of the day, then realize as he counts his sheep that one has gone missing.

So, the good shepherd who willingly risks life and limb for his sheep, will light a lantern, grab his staff, and retrace the day's steps until he finally finds that lost little lamb. He calls for the lamb by name, hoists the lamb onto his shoulders, and carries him all the way back to the flock.

But if the lamb still doesn't get the message, the shepherd will take more drastic measures. When he chases down his straying sheep for the umpteenth time, he'll grip that lamb's leg with both hands and break it right in two. He will ease the lamb onto its back, cradle it close to his chest, and carry it back to camp.

Once there, the shepherd will mend the bone, fasten a splint onto the broken leg, and carry the sheep around his neck until the injury is perfectly healed. This is the picture of restoration that we are to carry with us at all times. Jesus promises to restore not just our broken bones, but also our broken souls.

Lay Down Your Burdens

The Scripture says, *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:6). Our Shepherd took our sin and bore it in His own body. He became one of us, *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* (John 1:29). We truly have victory in Him! Such love demands loyalty and devotion from His sheep!

Jesus Christ is not only our sin bearer, but He is our everyday burden bearer, too. He carries not just some of our grief, but all of our grief and all our sorrows, all of the days of our lives. The psalmist understood the all-sufficient nature of his God, which is why he said in Psalm 23:1: *"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want."*

God was all that he needed, and all that he could want.

The "psalmist" I keep referring to, of course, is David. I imagine that as he wrote the words of this psalm he was thinking back to the times when he wandered away from God. You probably recall the circumstances of his most dramatic wandering. At one point during his reign as king, David took a woman who was not his wife for his own. He slept with her, and together they conceived a child. Worse still, he tried to cover up his sin by arranging the murder of one of his finest soldiers, who just so happened to be the husband of the woman with whom David had the affair.

Through a swirling series of events, David eventually came face to face with his wrongdoing. He confessed his sin, and returned to God. Yes, he was broken. Yes, he was hurt. And yes, he clearly was wounded. But as he stood once again in the grasp of the God he adored, he discovered the powerful truth that it is far better to be wounded at the side of the Shepherd than to be willfully wandering away.

No matter what sins you have committed, no matter what burdens you carry today, God craves your presence right by His side. Lay your burdens down into His strong and capable arms, my friend, and you'll walk as a new person right now. This is the first gift of restoration ... and what a marvelous gift it is!

Aren't we glad to know our Good Shepherd will not let us wander forever? He will come to us, call us by name, and restore our lives in full.

Look to Christ for Rescue

There's a second aspect to the gift of restoration, and it is God's incredible propensity to rescue the ones He loves. After all, it's one thing to lay down our burdens, but quite another to be offered a loving hand up. Hold that thought for a moment as you indulge me one more sheep metaphor.

There are times when a sheep will become "cast down" because the poor animal has fallen into a crevice or has tripped into a hole. Either way, once a sheep is down, he will flail about on his back with all four legs straight in the air, with no way of getting up whatsoever. He just doesn't have the dexterity to rise from that pit. He's down and out, and the only thing that will deliver him is for the shepherd to happen by.

Four times in Psalm 42 and 43, the psalmist refers to his soul as "cast down." Surely you can relate to his plight. At one time or another, you and I have known what it is to have a downcast soul. Our spirits are low, our efforts feel futile, and we can't seem to stand ourselves up. It's at this moment that our Good Shepherd happens by. He gently picks us up. He graciously restores our souls.

Too many people believe that God is somehow out to get them; but that line of thinking could not be further from the truth. God loves you and His purpose is to restore you. I relish what Joel 2:25 says along these lines: "*I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten...*" Our very good God will restore even the years that found us wandering away, and He will return us to fellowship with Him.

What a wonderful Savior is Jesus, our Lord—our Restorer and Rescuer, too. For our weariness, He provides green pastures; for our worries, He gives us still waters; and for our wanderings, He restores us as only our Good Shepherd can. These are the promises that await us, my friend, when we willingly choose to seek His place of peace.

PUSHING PAUSE

If there is one person in Scripture who proves we not only can cope with stress, but conquer it as well, it is surely the apostle Paul. More than any other, Paul shows us what it looks like for the promises of peace to play out in the life of a believer.

As the Book of Philippians details, Paul was a man under pressure. He had experienced rejection, abuse, and now imprisonment. But still, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote in Philippians 4:4–7: *“Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

I find it interesting that while Paul was in the throes of the most intense injustice in his life—and certainly the greatest amount of stress—he pleaded for Christians to be *reasonable*. I don’t know about you, but when I’m experiencing a pressure-cooker moment, the last adjective people would use to describe me would be *reasonable*! And yet this is Paul’s heartfelt plea. *“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone,”* he said. It’s clearly instruction we need.

As years go by and you and I rack up more experiences in life, we can feel terribly beaten down. The pressures mount and the stresses take their toll, and worry becomes our constant state. The Anglo-Saxon word for “worry” is *wurgen* which means “to choke”—as when one animal chokes another by sinking its teeth into its neck. The victimized animal feels panic and then fear as strangulation has its way. Sadly, I know too many believers today who bear the same wild eyes of an animal cut off from its source of air. There is panic. There is fear. There is a perpetual sense of worry.

This is not the life of abundance God promised.

Jesus once said, *“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you”* (John 14:27). His answer to our gasps for air is not found in a pill. It’s not found in a bottle. It’s not found in a new outfit, a new car, or a new house. It is peace found only through the presence of God, peace that comes by fellowship with Him. As I look at Paul’s experience in the book of Philippians, I am reminded of the three practices that led him to the place called peace. I invite you to read each one carefully.

Pausing to Pray

Before Paul indulged his anxieties and concerns, he invited God’s presence through prayer.

“Do not be anxious about anything,” Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6, *“but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*

We have a choice in this life, which is either to fret or to pray. We can carry our concerns and try to fix them ourselves, or we can cast them at the foot of the Cross, fully confident that God

knows, He sees, He cares about our troubles and fears. Paul had every reason to fret, and yet he chose first to pray. I think there's a lesson here for us all.

Pausing to Praise

Not only did Paul pray, but he prayed, according to verse six, with thanksgiving. There is a beautiful old song that encourages this very behavior:

*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.*

When it seems the “things of earth” are overtaking the landscape of your life, look full into the wonderful face of the Good Shepherd and simply say, “Thanks.” Find something to thank Him for, and see if your troubles, like Paul's, don't seem so big anymore.

Pausing to Gain Perspective

There was a third practice that enabled Paul to experience the true rest that God alone provides, and it's found in verses eight and nine of Philippians chapter four:

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,
whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any
excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What
you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things,
and the God of peace will be with you.*

Paul understood that our character is the sum total of our thoughts. If we think healthy thoughts and holy thoughts, we'll become healthy and holy. If our thoughts are constantly pessimistic and sinful, we'll become the worst version of ourselves in a flash.

What you think about constantly and consistently is what you become. Your thoughts form your perspective of the life you now live. So, if you wish to get rid of worrisome thoughts that can plague a divided mind, then fill up your heart with the living Word of God. Those things that are good and holy and wholesome, Paul says. Treasure these things.

You say, “Well, I can't help what I think. I've got all these problems in the past, all these pressures today, and I just feel completely consumed.” If that's you, then I challenge you to take a timeout and get still before God. Train your brain to think of what's pure and noble and just, and stand back as your thought process is utterly transformed!

Psychologist Archibald Hart says:

*“Who you are as a Christian believer can be no better and no worse than the
thoughts you entertain in your head. Who you are emotionally can never
transcend your level of thinking. Your thought process is a ceiling beyond which
you cannot aspire. Your brain is no stronger than your weakest thought, and your*

character no more virtuous than your most private reflections. Everything about us is constantly being shaped by the stream of our ideas.”

It’s a pretty profound assessment in my view.

Whatever is honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable—meditate and think on these things, Paul says.

God has so constructed us and created us that we can only think one thought at a time. And if I’m thinking *what is right*, I can’t be thinking *what is not right*. If I am thinking *what is good*, I can’t be thinking *what is not good*. If I’m thinking *what is positive and uplifting and praiseworthy*, then I cannot be thinking that *which is damaging and detrimental and driving me downward*.

Whenever I feel myself fretting and becoming fearful, I quote a Scripture silently in my mind. Often this occurs at night, and I notice that as I mull over the inspired Word of God, I am able to pillow my head on His promises and sleep like a baby all night. I am able to awaken in the morning with my thoughts focused on Him and my heart ready to worship Him one more day. What a priceless gift straight from God, this ability to train our thoughts!



Several years ago, my doctor ordered me to take a stress test. Electrodes were attached to my chest and arms while a big machine was rolled into position, and once everything was all set, I was asked to run on a treadmill for a while—a *long* while, if you ask me.

Fortunately, I made it through the test without passing out, but the experience still left its mark. I discovered that no matter how hard or fast my weary legs ran in their futile attempt to keep up, to avoid falling behind, I just couldn’t keep going forever. Eventually I had to stop.

Life works like that, too.

In the same way that I had to stop running during that stress test, you and I have to halt our reckless pace for God to intervene. And I’m talking about a shift that’s more than superficial here. Sure, we can *appear* peaceful and tranquil and still. We can paste a smile on our face, steady our gaze, and pray that our harried, hurried, and hassled state doesn’t betray us to everyone we know. But the One who first loved us, Who created us, Who longs to set our lives right, sees right through us. “If you will earnestly slow down and seek me,” He offers, “I’ll lead you to a brand new place—a peaceful place.”

I want to draw your attention to the fact that it was only when Paul was willing to pause that he experienced the full peace of God, the full power of God. Through his prayers, his praise, his regained perspective, he was able to have his heart and mind guarded by the “peace of God” as verse seven says, “which surpasses all understanding.”

I've seen this dynamic firsthand. It would be impossible for me to count the number of times that I have been by the side of pain-wrought people attending a family member in an ICU unit, or standing steps from a close friend's gravesite. Despite the sense of loss and the tears, there is incredible peace. It's the peace that passes understanding, and if you are walking in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ today, you know exactly what I'm talking about. There is serenity and security to be found in Christ that is available nowhere else in the world. This is the peace that Paul spoke of.

I never tell people that their problems will magically disappear when they surrender their lives to Christ. It just doesn't work that way. It can't work that way because peace is not the absence of problems and pressure. Peace is the addition of God's strength to face the storms. This is the hope we can inhabit, each and every day.

A Prayer for Personal Peace

This day, and when life's stresses seem to overwhelm you, ask God for the ability to exhale all that ails you and to breathe in His righteousness, His peace. Your soul will relish its long-awaited revival, and your body will thank you for the break.

*Good Shepherd, I thank You that You lead me and You feed me.
Help me to learn to drink deeply from the still waters.
Lead me to green pastures so I can experience Your rest.
Lord, help me to gain the strength I need to live for You.
Thank You for tracking me down,
for seeking me out and bringing me home.*

Amen.

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