

Managing Stress And Finding Peace

Series on Philippians

In November 2004 the Federal Statistics Office conducted a survey which found that 44% of the working population in Switzerland suffers stress at the workplace. In 2005 a survey of European countries by Kelly services rated the highest stress levels amongst their workers. The highest stress levels were found to be in Switzerland and Sweden. About 41 percent of all Swiss employees say they suffer from mental stress at work with about 10 percent feeling anxiety, according to the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs in Bern. Those working in finance, health care and social work are particularly at risk. Since the onset of the financial crisis there has been a measurable increase in the stress levels of workers in the financial sector in Switzerland. Zurich insurance is paying out about 200 million CHF every year to cover the wages of sick workers, and an increasing amount of that is due to burnout.

But stress is not just experienced in the workplace. There are many situations which cause stress. Some are obvious, such as an excessive work-load, coping with a death, or the break-up of a relationship, an uncomfortable physical environment, not enough sleep, ill health, financial difficulties, leaving home, moving house, pregnancy, or living in a different culture. These are just a few of the things that can cause us stress. There is plenty of useful information from medical professionals to help us reduce stress in our lives. They encourage us to develop a lifestyle which addresses our physical, mental and emotional needs. There are good practical suggestions like exercise, sleep and nutrition; taking time out each day for rest and recreation and social activities; and establishing supportive relationships. All this is good advice, but I want to address the question of stress from the spiritual standpoint, for the Bible has some God given wisdom about handling stress and finding peace.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was aware of a situation that was causing stress in the lives of two individuals in the church. Two of the women in the leadership of the church had got sideways with each other, so Paul addressed the matter in a letter he wrote to the whole church.

***"Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life."*(Philippians 4:1-3 NIV)**

1. Take The Initiative With Forgiveness.

One of the sources of stress that we experience in our lives is through broken relationships. When there is unforgiveness that we are carrying around in our heart toward another person that causes constant stress. Euodia and Syntyche weren't bad people. By all accounts they were well respected people in the church, who were serving in leadership positions. Even good people can fall out with each other. But somewhere along the line, they had got out of sorts with one another, and their dispute was spreading like a poison through the whole church. People were taking sides. Everybody's stress level was going up. Whatever it was that they were uptight about, more and more people were getting dragged into this thing.

I heard recently of a church that has split. 60% of the members have left. The bad feeling was triggered when the Youth Pastor lost her key to the church building and the leaders decided not to give her another one. I'm sure there was much more background to it than that, but that offense was taken up by a whole lot of people, and the unity of the church got destroyed by it. I've seen Christians do this too many times. We take on the offenses of others. Someone we care about gets hurt in a relationship, and we immediately jump in and make their offense our offense. One person harbours a grudge over some incident, and before we know it, there are ten people harbouring a grudge, when the original incident wasn't anything to do with them.

When we harbour a grudge towards someone, or we won't forgive a wrong that has been done to us or to someone else, we carry the stress of that around with us all the time. The way to break that stress is to forgive. Paul says to agree with each other in the Lord. Agreeing in the Lord means that because we both belong to Christ, then for Christ's sake, we have to be willing to ask forgiveness for the hurts we have inflicted on others and forgive the hurts we have received. Forgiving others, and being forgiven, is a huge stress reliever.

2. Take Your Stress To The Lord In Prayer.

Paul gives good advice. ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4 – 7 NIV)***

When I was a kid in Sunday School they taught us a little chorus that went something like this - "Why worry when you can pray?" But many of us have turned that around in the way we live. Why pray when you can worry! Go to seminars on dealing with stress, and it's unlikely they will teach you to talk to God in prayer. They might teach you hypnotherapy techniques, or meditation based on an eastern religion, or sitting in a lotus position until you make contact with something deep inside you. But God has given us an open line to Him in prayer. All we have to do is use it. The Lord is saying to us, "Why don't you talk to me about all the things that are stressing you out?" Jesus said ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11: 28 – 30 NIV)***

When You Are Stressed, Pray Using The ACTS Pattern.

- **Adoration**

When you are stressed, start your prayer with adoration. Tell God how great he is. Remind yourself that God is in control. When Theodore Roosevelt was President of the United States, he used to have a little ritual that he would go through with his guests at the end of an evening. After dinner, Roosevelt would sit with his guests discussing the state of the world. Often these people would be men of great intellect and great power, who held the destinies of nations in their hands. But at the end of the evening Roosevelt would take his guests outside and get them to look up at the stars. He would point to a small patch of light near the constellation of Pegasus and then recite this almost as a litany "That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun." Then he would turn to his guests and say "Now I think we are small enough, let's go to bed!" Worshipping God in adoration puts things in perspective. Try it when you are stressed.

- **Confession**

Examine your heart and ask yourself if there is some sin that you are holding on to that is contributing to your stress. Is there unforgiveness, or some bitterness that you have been carrying around that you need to deal with? Are you carrying around worry about tomorrow? If you are, let me ask you if today is better because you worried about it yesterday? When we confess our sin, we receive his peace. If the Holy Spirit speaks to you about some sin, confess it to the Lord and receive his forgiveness and his peace.

- **Thanksgiving**

Thank him for the way he has supported you and carried you in the past. As the old song says "Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your blessings see what God has done, count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." Most of us are better in the forgetting department than the remembering department. We forget the things God has done in the past. The times when he has carried us. The times when we were feeling down and he sent someone into our lives who was just the right person at the right time. Times when we had a physical or financial need and the Lord met that need in an amazing way. Thanking God is therapeutic. It lifts us out of ourselves.

- **Supplication**

That's just a fancy word for asking. Tell the Lord what you need. Tell him what worries you. Tell him where the pressures are. Talk to him as you would talk to a friend. Share your feelings with him as you pray. Because he is your Father who loves you, he wants you to talk to him. Ask him for what you need.

When we make a conscious choice to do this in prayer, the peace of God moves in to act like a sentry, guarding our hearts and our minds. In the Greek language, which is the language Paul used to write this letter, the word "Anxious" means to be pulled in different directions. Isn't that what stress does to us? We feel as though we are being pulled in different directions. Dealing with stress is an inside job. The antidote to stress is a secure mind and a quiet heart. When you have a secure mind and a quiet heart, the peace of God guards you and the God of peace guides you.

3. Take Your Thoughts Captive.

This one is so important. The battle over stress is won or lost in the mind. Many of the situations that cause us stress are beyond our control. We can't change them. If your husband or your kids or your boss or your neighbours are causing you stress, you can't get rid of them, but each of us can choose how we respond to them. Listen to what Paul says as he writes to the Philippians. ***"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."* (Philippians 4:4 - 9 NIV)**

There is a saying in the IT industry that goes like this- "garbage in - garbage out." If you programme garbage in to your computer, guess what is going to come out? Garbage. Whatever you are programming into your mind, that's what is going to come out in your life. Think for a moment about the magazine content you are feeding into your mind. Are you mainly reading about celebrity marriage break-ups, descriptions of royal family scandals, endless feature articles on other people's sex lives, and gossip that does nothing to build you up? What about the videos and DVD's you are watching and the music you are listening to? Are they full of bad language, violence and sex? How about the movies you go to see, or the novels you are reading? What about the computer games you are playing, or the web sites you are visiting on the internet? Whatever you are feeding into your mind, that's what's going to come out in your behaviour. There are some Christians who are as stressed as people who don't know Christ, and they haven't figured out why. It's because they are feeding garbage into their minds that increases their stress. Paul says "Think on whatever is true. Think on whatever is noble. Think on whatever is right. Think on whatever is pure. Think on whatever is lovely. Think on whatever is admirable. Think on whatever is excellent and praiseworthy." Today can be the day you decide to ditch some of your magazines and videos and favourite TV programmes, and choose to fill your mind with things that honour Jesus. I believe you will find your stress levels will go down if you do. Try it and see.

4. Take These Principles And Make Them Part Of Your Lifestyle.

Or as Paul says, put it into practice. Making a commitment before God in church on a Sunday doesn't necessarily change your lifestyle. It's making the same commitment before God on Monday, and Tuesday, and Wednesday and Thursday and every day until the new behaviour becomes so much a part of you that you just live that way out of habit. I don't have to ring up my kids each morning and ask them if they have brushed their teeth. They learned to do that when they were little children, and they have been doing that for so long, it's become a part of the way they live.

We have to learn to forgive, and then we have to keep practising that for the rest of our lives, until forgiveness comes as naturally to us as breathing. We have to learn to take our anxieties and stresses to the Lord in prayer, on a daily, and sometimes hourly basis, until praying about our worries becomes as natural to us as eating and drinking. We have to learn to take our thought life into captivity so often that the idea of watching or reading or listening to

something which would embarrass Jesus, becomes so unthinkable that we just shrink back from doing it. The great thing is, that the more we practice these disciplines, the less stress we experience, and the more we experience the peace of God. Do this, and the God of peace will be with you.

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