



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 3: When living through stress

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1 Peter 5:7

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

As I continue this present series, looking at 21st century pastoral challenges, it is inevitable that at some point I should address the issue of ‘stress’. It is a real matter in our contemporary sophisticated and developed world. What sort of picture comes to mind as you think of ‘stress’?

So then let’s explore exactly what thoughts you have when I open up this theme. We are bound to put a negative view on it because there are negative effects of stress on our lives. However, we must at least begin by saying some of the positive things about stress. We all need a certain level of stimulation to perform tasks in life and to achieve goals. But, when stress becomes extended or excessive, it becomes ‘distress’.

You are likely to experience the more negative signs of stress when you face a challenge or when you perceive a threat ... and you see that there may be an imbalance between demands made upon you and the resources you feel you have to respond to those demands. Stress, therefore, arises in a specific interaction between you and your environment.

When looking at stress from a Christian perspective, I want to explore how we can live meaningfully in a pressured world. Jesus not only helps us to put our lives together, but he provides us with a way in which we can live in the midst of life’s stress and exercise his peace by recognising his presence with us.

Stress gets plenty of air-space these days. Increasing numbers of people seem to be living with the impact of stress. Is it actually true that there is more of it about? If so, why? Or is it a new name for an old problem? One of the ways to address the issue is from examples in people’s lives ... and I wouldn’t propose to do that in the context of our Sunday worship, but I believe that the subject matter is relevant and will have a ring of truth for some within earshot of my voice.

The very successful film *Rain Man* won four Oscars in April 1989, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Dustin Hoffman. For those who have not seen it, it centres on two brothers following the death of their father, who left all his estate to Charlie’s brother, Raymond. In the film, Hoffman plays Raymond—corrupted into the name ‘Rain Man’. He is autistic and possesses prodigious intellectual powers—for example, memorising the phone numbers in the telephone directory.

One is struck by the many things which are insignificant to most people and how Raymond arranges these things to keep his little world from coming apart. He has to have his bed in a certain place and always eats the same food. Any deviation upsets him ... and his world

disintegrates. There are challenges in using this particular illustration because of the particular context, but the impact of stress upon life, causing it to fall apart, is not unrelated. Stress can so impinge upon our lives that we come 'unstuck' in the worst possible way. Life can feel it is ganging up on us and we say we are 'under a lot of stress'. We can have stressful days, stressful weeks, even months or years of stress. Managing it in our strength can mean that we come to a point where we are overwhelmed, overwrought and overburdened. As in each of these addresses, I want to point you to scripture:

Text: 1 Peter 5:7

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

There is a close relationship between what we know as Second Peter and Jude—and the relationship between these two epistles is evident from their startling resemblances in subject matter, vocabulary and phrasing, and even the order of ideas.

Both letters address their recipients as 'Dear Friends'—and they are circulars addressed to the Christian world at large, as opposed to letters sent to particular communities or individuals.

Both point to an understanding of our faith as an absolutely sure fortress against error, which is able to sustain people in times of difficulty.

Anxiety is of itself a dangerous thing. Ian McLaren wrote, "What does your anxiety do? It does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, but it does empty today of its strength. It does not make you escape the evil; it makes you unfit to cope with it if it comes."

Some of the recognisable symptoms of stress are fatigue, restlessness, lack of emotional response, heavy sleeping, sleeplessness and compulsive activity of various kinds.

Thomas à Kempis: "Oh, how great peace and quietness would he possess who should cut off all vain anxiety and place all his confidence in God."

Here a distinction is made between vain anxiety and daily concerns which we all must face. A Christian understanding of life needs to be honest and not falsely pious. A major obstacle to our stability grows out of the fact that we feel (and can even suggest to others) that we ought to be able to handle pressure. It is from this context that people can feel guilty when they just can't!

For many Christians it is doubly disturbing because we feel that general desire to handle things is compounded by the 'surely a Christian of all people!' type of scenario.

What must we do when living through stress?

Recognise it!

It may seem obvious, but just recognising it, naming it and owning its challenge is an important starting point. There are many common causes of stress—things we may have to deal with in our lives, and we know these are well-rehearsed. I am certain that before we cast our burdens on the Lord, firstly we have to recognise them ourselves.

There are many myths about stress and I share just four:

- Stress-related symptoms are in the mind and they can't actually harm me
- Only weak people suffer from stress

- All people respond to stress in the same way
- When I suffer from stress, all I have to do is sit down and relax.

We must dispel myths about stress to enable us to recognise it for what it is—and to be able to exercise faith to sustain us when we are caught in its grip.

There are many approaches we could explore ... we can ask questions about the body and the way it reacts—and how the body can find itself under the influence of increased adrenalin, an increase in heart rate, a diversion of blood and therefore oxygen to the muscles of the body—and there is the well-documented and experienced phenomenon of ‘fight and flight’. This can lead to panic attacks!

We could consider the stressful situations which affect our ability to cope, to relate and to express ourselves. The loss of the appetite for life is just one of the very real experiences related to stress.

Knowing ourselves is at the heart of dealing with or managing stress. This is something that each person is best equipped to face themselves ... and we have no place to try to do it for someone else. God’s work is always best from within and, as we acknowledge this issue, we can begin to do the things that are necessary for the bringing of wholeness.

According to the World Health Organisation, health is not merely the absence of disease, but a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing. Using this definition, it is obvious that stress can cause ill health. When under stress, we are not in a state of total wellbeing. Whether it is a large or a small problem to others is not what matters. There is no mathematical standard of measurement for personal anxiety. So recognising it is profoundly important.

Put things into the perspective of Jesus Christ

Perhaps this is near to what we might call Christian meditation—whereby we visualise Christ in every part of life, especially those hurt or pressurised parts.

- No-one lived a more pressurised life
- He did not avoid pressure
- He demonstrated a way of reflection and peace, facing darkness with light and the most painful with joy.

The special needs that exist for the person who lives under stress require recognition—and yet, as Christian people we place our lives under the Lordship of Christ.

No hymn asks as many things as Frances Ridley Havergal’s ‘Consecration Hymn’—which touches on those parts of our response to God.

What I am NOT saying is that all our troubles would disappear simply because we think about God at a moment of intense pressure, but I think I am prepared to go as far as to suggest that we are best able, in God’s strength, to deal with those pressures when we live our lives in the light and peace of Christ.

I remember reading a small helpful book—Why Christians Crack Up—I chose it for two reasons:

- To understand why so many Christians have emotional problems
- To guard against the potential ‘crack up’ in my own life at a time of stress.

When we journey through the experience of stress, we can develop such a poor view of ourselves. When troubles come, they inhibit personal prayer and the desire to worship. So the very things that help are damaged by the stress itself.

There is a danger in reading God into the ordinary experiences of men and women. Relationships can become difficult; friendships are betrayed; finances become tangled; health is threatened; job security is lost and the future can look very dark.

As we put things into the perspective of Jesus Christ, we discover we can share everything with him. There needs to come an opening up to the One who John says "is greater than our hearts and knows all things."

It is a normal part of healthy Christian living to put our lives into the perspective of Jesus Christ. A renewal song of some years ago was "Living under the shadow of his wing". It talks about how "we find security".

This love and power in Jesus will sustain you and, if you reach out this evening, you will find it. If you feel you don't need it, then may God help you to deal with your unhealthy self-security, and may his Holy Spirit lead you to a place of real wholeness in the light of Christ.

Hand over your living to God

Perhaps it is more important than ever, when living through stress, that we learn to hand over and leave things with God.

Very often we have a desire to give our burdens to God ... but in practice we take them back again. Leaving it with him must be the key ... and then he can bring healing and wholeness into our lives.

I wonder if you have ever asked yourself the question as to what healing really is. I am sure it is far more than a return to a former condition. It is related to wholeness and the life of Christ itself.

Phillips Brooks penned these helpful words:

The little sharp vexations
And the briars that catch and fret;
Why not take all to the Helper
Who has never failed us yet?
Tell him about the heartache,
And tell him the longings, too;
Tell him the baffled purpose
When we scarce know what to do.
Then leaving all our weakness
With One divinely strong,
Forget that we bore the burden,
And carry away the song.

Our willingness to leave things with Christ asks of us what kind of picture we have of him! Is it a real living and powerful faith?—and isn't faith really giving as much as we know of ourselves to as much as we know of God? This may change and involves a continued deepening. I have found this to be one of the most helpful insights into God's nature and my own.

In preparation for this series, I turned to a number of books on pastoral issues. You would be surprised how many chapters are headed “Coping with Stress” ... almost as if this is the best we can hope for. I am sure there is more to say than that.

A biologist tells of how he watched an ant carrying a piece of straw which seemed too big for it to drag. The ant came to a crack too big to cross. It stood still for a time, as though perplexed—and in the end it put the straw across the crack and walked across it. Have we ever thought of converting our stress and burdens and letting them bear us up, instead of us bearing them up?

I’ve asked myself why it is that there is such a problem in talking about trusting God—and that what is so straightforward is, at times, hard to both communicate and receive. Perhaps it is our human propensity for distrust. We start from the assumption of non-trust and just hope for something better.

I don’t think I’m abnormal as a parent or grandfather in feeling a tremendous sense of joy when a child or little grandchild has felt able to jump from the fourth step and abandon themselves to me. It’s that confident assurance we feel in God that matters. We may leave our anxieties or burdens or stress with him and ask him to use them to make us better people.

Our text comes as part of a concluding section of advice and encouragement. The Christian life has always involved a curious blend of our trust in God and our response to him. Peter tells his readers to trust in God’s power because of his care for us. So even if we feel that people don’t care for us ... God does and always will.

When undue stress occurs, it can bring all kinds of dangers which trigger other impacts:

- It can predispose us to illness or delay recovery
- It may increase our sense of indecision
- It can encourage workaholic attitudes or absenteeism
- It invariably causes over-reaction to normal events.

It is, therefore, important to deal with stress ... and God is ready and willing to receive our lives and our anxiety, because he cares about us.

The church to which Peter wrote was a young church in a hostile environment ... and the note of encouragement was important. The text is drawn from Psalm 55:22 and so anxiety is no new thing. Edmund Clowney, in his commentary on 1 Peter, uses the visit of Jesus to Bethany and the example of Martha and Mary. They had two contrasting attitudes and Martha’s anxiety about the dishes and the dinner meant she lost her real focus. I found Clowney’s introductory sentence helpful: “The very act of casting our cares upon the Lord often changes them.”