

“Dealing With Stress”

By: Doug Warren

How can I handle the stress of my life?

I am often asked for help dealing with stress. I am not quite sure how to take this. I don't know if folks ask me because they think I should know as a pastor or because they figure that with four young children I am already as stressed out as anyone can get. For whatever the reason, I am asked about stress a lot.

While there is much about our busy schedules that exacerbates our stress level, the problem of worry and tension is an age-old difficulty. The primary cause of stress is lack of control. We feel stressed when there are things we are uncertain about, when we are afraid that something might happen (or not happen), or when the number or complexity of tasks we are trying to manage seems beyond our abilities.

All of these things relate to our ability to control our lives. It may be manifested most acutely through something at work, or with our family, or with our finances, but all of these specific areas affect our sense of well-being and our subsequent stress level. The really annoying problem is that the more you try to control everything so that you are not stressed, the more stressed you will become as you realize how much you are not in control.

There are many things that you can do to *manage* your stress level such as better scheduling, planning, or relaxation techniques. But as helpful as any and all of these approaches may be in addressing the results of stress, they cannot alleviate the underlying anxiety itself. Managing your stress is simply another attempt at control. Any temporary illusion of control is a counterfeit for our real need—rest.

The biblical promise of rest is the only ultimate solution for stress. It is more than just a holiday or some R & R. We can only experience rest as the Scripture describes it in the loving presence of someone who is utterly in control. Wrapped up in this concept of rest is peace, safety, provision, and contentment. It is not a slothful escape from the demands of our frenetic world, but rather a dependency upon the God who cares for us.

So how do we experience this kind of rest? God tells us that He alone can give it to us. It was the promise to Israel as He brought them up out of Egypt. It was the sign of God's blessing to King David that He gave him rest on all sides. It was the anticipated deliverance from captivity in Babylon. It was the reason that Jesus went to the cross—so that we could know His rest.

All our attempts to gain God's favor only increase our stress. All of our designs for justifying ourselves only raise the disturbing question, “How much is enough?” The reality is that we cannot do enough. It is beyond our ability to control and will either lead us to denial or despair.

You might object at this point and remind me that you were not asking about how to gain favor with God, but merely how to handle your ulcer, panic attacks, or other stress-related symptoms. But you see, what is keeping you up at night, the thing that is eating your lunch and stressing you out is intricately tied up in your inability to control your life. No matter how much you manage to get in order, there are always things that are beyond your ability to control. It is precisely at that point that you have an opportunity to recognize your need for the only One who is not so limited. Our stress is evidence that we are not trusting Him.

Rest is not some disembodied state of being. We rest *in Christ* because He has earned our peace through His work in our place. We can know His peace because He has won the war against our unbelief.

So how do you do it? Resting in Christ requires us to trust in *His* sufficiency rather than our own. If we are stressed about something at work, we need to first recognize that He is the One who gave us our job. We need to trust not in our ability to do the job and hence please our boss and get the paycheck and make the mortgage, but trust in His provision for us. His care for us is recession proof. No matter how gifted we are, we all make mistakes. Instead of worrying ourselves about whether or not we might make a mistake, Christ invites us to thank Him for how he has gifted us and serve Him with those gifts instead of hoarding them for our own security.

As it has been rightly pointed out, “Even if you win the rat race, you are still a rat.” Gratitude to Christ frees us to transcend the rat race, because it doesn’t depend on us but on Him, and He is utterly trustworthy. His sufficiency liberates us to labor out of joy instead of fear. Not only has He gifted us for the work that we are doing, but also He has called us to do it for His glory. We are no longer scrambling to keep it all afloat; instead we are beneficiaries of the One who has all the world in His control. Therein is rest from the stress that so easily consumes us.