

STRESS BUSTERS

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1. An Introduction to the Problem of Stress

The idea for this study comes from the little book "Stressed Out: Keeping it Together When Life is Falling Apart"(Lyman Coleman). Before we begin discussing the subject of stress, I want you to understand the perspective that I'm taking with this particular problem. As a minister, I'm often asked why Christians, people of faith in God, experience stress and become "burned out?" After all, shouldn't their faith be a guard against this type of problem? And so, my approach to this topic is to discuss the problem of stress and how it affects the person of faith, the believer, the Christian. For this reason, I'll be looking at passages and teachings from the Bible that will guide us in our study.

Having said this, I also can say that stress affects believers and non-believers alike and the solutions are similar, whether you are a faithful, church-going Christian, or you are a person that has very little interest in religion. I believe that everyone can benefit from this material, regardless of their level of faith, because everyone is subject to stress.

Which brings me to my first point when it comes to understanding stress. There is this idea that says that stress is associated exclusively with modern times and lifestyles. For example, the businessman / woman busy with their workload, extremely active and very stressed out because of it. Then there are those people who live in the country, or those who operate small shops or boutiques who are naturally relaxed with no stress in their lives.

A good example of how unrealistic this is comes from someone in my own family. I remember when I was a boy, my uncle Maurice Rivard owned a bike shop. He rented bikes and also repaired them. I remember going to his shop as a boy and always being fascinated by all the bikes in the store and watching him work the repairs in the back. He owned the building where the shop was located and lived in the apartment with his wife and five children upstairs. He would lock up the store, go upstairs for lunch, maybe take a nap and then at about two o'clock in the afternoon, he'd go back downstairs and do some more work. I thought, what an ideal life! There must be no stress involved with that kind of schedule and routine.

As I grew up, I began to realize that my uncle Maurice had five kids to feed. He explained to me how, sometimes, the repairs that he undertook on these bikes took longer and cost more money than he had quoted at the beginning. He talked about angry customers who didn't get their bikes on time, or people who would actually steal merchandise in the store while he was in the back repairing the bikes, and he would tell me that it was a very stressful life. Here I was as a youngster thinking that, "Boy, if you wanted a life with no stress, a relaxed life, all you had to do was open a bike store." My uncle explained that the truth was quite the opposite from what I thought.

Another misconception is the naivety of people in the city, who think that farmers have no stress. Farm people, they think, live close to the earth. When you drive by in the country, it is so peaceful and beautiful with the rolling hills, the farmhouses, the barns with cattle leisurely feeding in the picturesque meadows. We think, "I should give up my stressful life in the city, move to the country and go into farming." People who think this have probably never experienced a random hailstorm killing a season's worth of crops or a cow stepping on your foot or perhaps the tractor breaking down at a critical moment or the bank stopping their line of credit without warning.

And so, it goes for everyone who is alive:

- Moms stressed out at home
- College students stressed out at school
- Elderly coping with the stress of aging
- The Young dealing with the stress of coming into adulthood
- Men and women feeling the pressure to succeed, to provide, to maintain, to survive or looking for a life partner

Truth #1 for all of us, therefore, is that everybody, regardless of age, gender, or social position experiences stress in one way or another.

FACTS ON STRESS

Stress, of course, is not a bad thing in itself. It is merely the body's chemical and psychological response to stimulus enabling the body to deal with various situations in life. It's very natural to get pumped up for the "big" game, or the stress in anticipation

and preparation for company you will be hosting in your home for the first time. These are examples of controlled stress helping you rise to the occasion, so to speak. Stress is needed to have mental alertness, when you have exams or complex work and need to focus. It is the body's stress that elevates your attention when you need it to do certain tasks, or require a certain mindset that focuses your energy to get the job done despite obstacles.

We have been designed by God to function under stress, even function more efficiently when stress is brought about by the situation at hand. Stress is the catchword for all of those things that come together within us, mentally, physically and spiritually, in order to "turn up" our level of awareness, efficiency and energy to deal with the various concerns in our everyday lives.

A problem occurs, however, when this level is turned up too high for too long. Then, stress turns into chronic stress and burnout which is harmful to the individual.

Some symptoms of overstress, which leads to burnout:

- Fatigue and exhaustion
 - insomnia
 - various physical pains
 - stomach upsets
 - headaches
 - muscle aches
 - chest pains
 - heart palpitations
 - high blood pressure

- Some emotional and spiritual symptoms are:

- irritability
- anxiety, depression
- excessive anger
- a feeling of isolation, cynicism, or bitterness

Based on some national samples in the U.S.A. it is estimated that:

- \$50-70 billion a year are lost in businesses due to stress-related illnesses.
- Overstress is one of the major contributors to heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidental injuries, cirrhosis of the liver, Parkinson's disease, and even suicide.
- Two-thirds of office visits to doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms.

The key, of course, is not to eliminate stress altogether (stress has a very important function) but to reduce the intensity and the frequency of overstress.

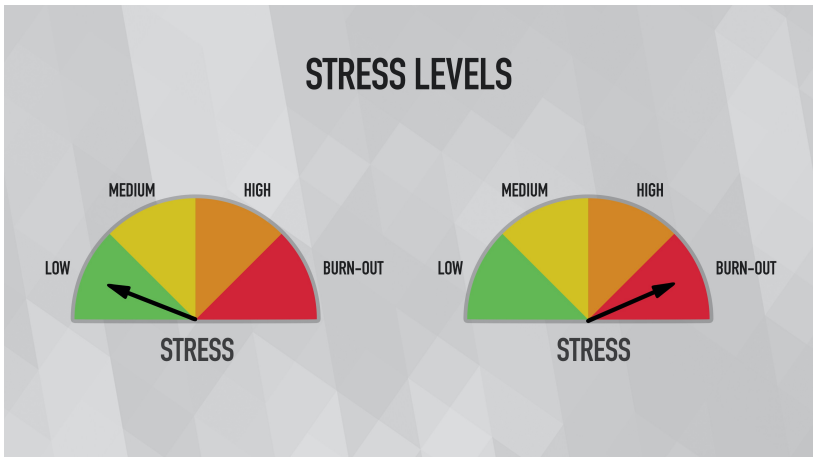
DEALING WITH STRESS AND BURNOUT

Stress does not happen all by itself. It is a response or reaction to what is happening to us, a preparatory stimulus to enable us to act and to think.

People who are overstressed for no reason at all are those who suffer from an illness called "anxiety disorder", some call it "panic attacks". Panic attacks have all the symptoms of stress overload (a heart beating faster, various physical and emotional symptoms of overstress and burnout) but there are no co-related reasons for the symptoms.

Most people will work too hard, too long, suffer business ruin and family problems, and begin to show signs of burnout from overstress brought on by the things that are actually happening in their life.

Another person, however, will be going along fine without any particular problems or overstress situation, and suddenly will feel all of the same symptoms of burnout, and feel these even more acutely, to the point where they will be incapacitated by the symptoms for a time. This is a panic attack (anxiety disorder) and is not the same as burnout, and not treated in the same way either.



A panic attack is caused by an imbalance in the chemical composition in the body. It has all of the same symptoms as burnout, but the reason for it is not your lifestyle, but rather the way that you process the chemicals in your body (i.e. the Hypothalamus secretes too much adrenalin, we don't know why, it just does).

Burnout, however, happens when a person is stressed out for too long, or too intensely, over too many things. The stress needle is in the red zone continuously.

There is no change in lifestyle that will help eliminate panic attacks, medication, and an understanding how they work help diminish their frequency and intensity.

Burnout from overstress, however, requires several things in order to find rehabilitation.

1. Knowledge

A person has to understand what they are doing and how it is affecting them emotionally and physically. Usually, burnout victims repeat and reinforce their overstressed lifestyle as a means of dealing with their problem. For example:

- Workaholics will work twice as hard to make the extra money they need to take a vacation so that they can relax. Their solution is "I'm burned out, I need to relax, so what am I going to do? Well, I'm just going to work a lot of overtime, as well as work on Saturday and Sunday for a couple of months to save up some vacation money, and then I'll relax." It's easy to smile at that solution but many times this is the answer that burned-out people come up with as a solution and thereby make things worse.
- People who are stressed out because they've suffered the loss of a loved one will often isolate themselves in order to deal with the pain and stress caused by this event, but this type of action usually makes matters worse instead of better. It is a natural human tendency, especially in the loss of a loved one, to pull back. Many

people want to go into a corner and hide. They don't want to see or talk to anyone and think that this is the best way to handle the stress and pain they are going through. However, doing this is exactly the opposite of what they actually need to do. They need to come out into the light and be with family or other people to receive comfort, encouragement and strength.

We need to understand ourselves and know how we handle stress.

2. Change

Understanding what we do that causes stress and burnout and how it affects us is important, but incomplete in the healing process. Unless we change, there is no healing. Knowledge will help diagnose the problem, but change is the medicine that will help the problem go away.

Burnout is the result of overloading our system and pushing it beyond its ability. Many times, it is due to a failure to recognize that God has placed some physical, financial or emotional limit on us and we refuse to accept these limits. Each person has a different limit. When we surpass these limits, especially for an extended amount of time, something will give and usually it is our ability to cope and maintain a balanced emotional state.

The change necessary is not a change to become something different but rather returning to a more realistic version of what and who we are. We burn out many times because we try to go beyond the limits of who and what we are. The answer, of course, is to accept what our limits are and where God has stationed us in life.

3. Faith

Insight into the problem and a change to live more within the confines of who we are help those who merely live in and for this world that exists here with some level of satisfaction.

For those who are disciples of Jesus and experience burnout, a faith adjustment is required since the road to burnout has usually been caused by or resulted in a damaged faith.

¹⁴ When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him. ¹⁶ And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" ¹⁷ And one of the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it." ¹⁹ And He answered them and said, "O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!" ²⁰ They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" ²³ And Jesus said to him, "'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe; help my unbelief."

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again." ²⁶ After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, "He is dead!" ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up. ²⁸ When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" ²⁹ And He said to them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer."

- Mark 9:14-29

In this episode, the father is stressed to the max because of a lifetime of worry, anguish and fear over a son who is, it seems, hopelessly tormented by a demon so he cries out, "I do believe, help my unbelief."

Not only was the boy sick, but the father was burned out as well and one of the signs of this condition was a faith that was beginning to sag.

For the Christian, there is no healing without a renewal of faith. For the unbeliever, there is no total healing without a recognition that Jesus is one's Lord and Savior. In the end, burnout is largely due to man's ongoing effort to save himself or to care for himself without reference to God.

SUMMARY

We all experience stress and the key is to manage that stress and be aware of when we are overstressed. When we can pinpoint the times and the occasions for this overstress, we are better equipped to lessen the intensity and frequency of this situation.

In our next chapter, we will be focusing on particular types of stressors in our lives and how we can effectively deal with these. For example, we'll talk about stress from worry, work, failure, loss and finally the story of one Bible character who suffered from burnout and how God personally ministered to him.

For now, I'd like to leave you with a stress vulnerability scale so you can evaluate, in a general way, your own stress level.

Download the Stress Vulnerability Scale:

<https://bibletalk.tv/stress-scale>

2. Stress from Worry

Here are some of the main ideas from the first chapter:

1. Everyone experiences stress, which is the body's way of preparing us to carry through various activities that are demanded of us.
2. When we are in the stress mode too long and too intensely, however, we become overstressed and can burn out.
3. Burnout from over stress has a variety of symptoms including stomach problems, headaches, muscle aches, chest pains, anxiety, anger, depression, etc.
4. Panic attacks have the same symptoms as over stress but are caused by chemical imbalances in the brain and not lifestyle. Sometimes there are psychological reasons that lead to the condition called anxiety disorder.
5. Burnout victims from over stress need three things for rehabilitation:

- A. Knowledge of their condition. Why am I like this? Denial is usually a big problem.
- B. A change towards a more realistic view of who and what they are as well as their natural limits.
- C. Faith adjustment because burnout damages faith

This study was developed to help shed knowledge on the problem of stress and overstress from a Christian perspective. In this chapter we will examine the stress caused by worry.

STRESS CAUSED BY WORRY

What is worry?

To begin with, worry is a feeling. It is a feeling of fear or unhappiness regarding something or someone. Usually, it is a negative speculation about something that may happen in the future. We feel regret, shame and guilt to name a few of the feelings for past events, decisions etc., but stress is reserved for thinking about the future.

What do we worry about?

Health, family, and security are the top three. We are able to worry about anything that we focus our negative speculation on our hair, our reputation, the car driven by our children, etc. There is a difference between worry and concern (which is focused attention).

What does worry accomplish?

- A. It produces nothing except over-stress. This is the only tangible thing that worry produces.
- B. It empties us of energy, wastes time, is discouraging and robs us of all the enthusiasm we need to invest in productive and joy producing activities.
- C. We worry about tomorrow but don't know what tomorrow will bring. If we did, we could do something about it and change worry into action but we don't and so waste energy and time worrying, and create unneeded stress that leads to burnout.
- D. We know all of this but continue to worry. Is there anything to do?

Jesus and James teach us valuable lessons about worry and how to convert this negative energy to something positive.

GETTING THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE - MATTHEW 6:25-34

²⁵ "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷ And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸ And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹ yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed

himself like one of these.³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!³¹ Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?'³² For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things³³ But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴ "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

- Matthew 6:25-34

Notice in this passage that Jesus deals head on with the problem of worry (which suggests that stress caused by worry is not just a 21st-century problem - people in every generation worried about something) and in dealing with worry He gives us the correct perspective concerning it as well as an alternative action.

1. A Correct Perspective

The new perspective is found in verses 25 to 32 and basically puts forth two basic ideas:

1. Understand that God knows exactly what it is that you need in every area of your life.
2. Whether it be food, clothing, work, housing, sex, medical help, family, recreation, etc. God knows, God cares, and God is able to provide everything that you need.

When we look into the future and begin to worry about having the wherewithal to finish the job, provide for our family or the

strength to face illness and death - we are taking on a responsibility that belongs to God.

He is responsible for the future and has promised to provide the resources to meet that future when it comes. As for myself:

- I can be attentive to the future
- I can prepare for the future
- I can be hopeful about the future

However, to worry about the future is not only futile but disobedient because Jesus says, "do not worry...." (vs. 25).

Once we have a correct perspective (vs. 34 using today's resources to take care of today's needs - because God always provides enough for today) we need an attitude shift.

2. Attitude Change - vs. 33

For those who are over-stressed the major attitude in their lives is usually that of worry (about the past or future). Jesus explains how things are in the "real" world. God supplies what we need one day at a time. If you don't know this you worry about having enough, being okay, surviving in the home, work, society, etc. because **you** have to make it happen!

However, once you are presented with this fact about God and His Providence your attitude needs to shift from worry to faith and your lifestyle needs to shift from being acquisition centered to becoming righteousness centered.

We worry because we think we are responsible for providing everything and in this world that can become quite unsettling (because so many fail at it) so we focus on acquiring and

stockpiling in order to feel safe and secure - this attitude and activity naturally creates worry which produces overstress which leads to burnout.

To avoid the overstress that comes from worry we need to concentrate on God's promise to provide each day what we need on that day and change the focus of our lives from creating and maintaining wealth to creating and maintaining a pure conscience before God (This is the true work of a Christian - doing God's will).

This means that we will have the normal stress that comes with working at the challenges that face us each day but we avoid the overstress that comes with either the concern that we have to provide for ourselves and our families without help, or the worry over the non-existing concerns of tomorrow. God has promised to provide what we need when we need it and not usually before.

CONVERTING STRESS INTO JOY - JAMES 1:2-8

James' approach to worry and stress is to demonstrate that even negative things that happen to us don't have to create worry and consequently overstress and all of the negative things that come from it.

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

- James 1:2-4

In verses two to four he explains how to short circuit worry and its negative effects. Understand that when trials (and these could

include physical things, temptations, disappointments, etc.) come your way they can be the cause of some good in life.

If one meets them with perseverance (patience - willingness to bear under) then the constant perseverance mode, instead of worry mode, will eventually produce a mature character and experiencing this mature character (peace, joy, love, patience, kindness, etc.) will be a joyful thing. Wholeness or maturity is what our spirit craves whether we realize it or not (usually we are distracted by the things of this world).

⁵ But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.
- James 1:5-8

In verses five to eight James explains that doing this is not always easy and so if one desires this and has problems, he should ask God for help and do so with faith knowing that God, who provides for each day's needs, will also provide the spiritual help necessary for each day's challenges.

So many times, we won't quit a bad habit or attempt to give up a sin which is blocking our spiritual growth because we feel we'll never be able to bear an entire lifetime without it. According to the Scriptures we've just studied, we should get help for only today - and tomorrow God will provide the help that we need for that day's temptation - if we'll still need it. The same strategy works for the help we need to develop our talents, reach our goals, convert our family and friends.

James tells us that trials don't have to be our enemy, producing only pain and inconvenience but also causing us to worry and producing damaging stress in our lives. No, trials can be used to develop the spiritual maturity we need and desire, and often result in peace and joy. Knowing this enables us to short circuit the worry that is caused by everyday trials.

SUMMARY

The stress that comes from worry is caused by two things:

1. We worry about the responsibility to provide for ourselves.
2. We worry when trials interfere with our efforts to acquire and hoard in order to provide for ourselves which we think will make us happy.

The Lord and His earthly brother provide the answers for those who are stressed out because of worry.

1. God will supply what we need each day when we focus our attention on doing His will rather than just focusing our attention on acquiring and hoarding.
2. We shouldn't worry about the suffering brought about by trials, we should, instead, invest our energy into perseverance when we suffer. If we worry, it will make the suffering worse and accomplish absolutely nothing. If we choose to persevere, however, this will create a greater maturity and joy in us which in turn will help us endure the pain and lower the stress level caused by the pain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions and then share your response with your group.

1. **Which 2 areas of your life were of most concern to you 5 years ago? Which 2 were most worrisome 12 months ago? Which 2 did you find yourself worrying about last week? Do you find a pattern of concern from year to year, week to week? What does that tell you?**
 - A. Job, Sex, Money, Marriage,
 - B. Parents, Politics, Health, Relationships
 - C. Fulfillment, Children, Spiritual Life, Retirement

2. **Read James 1:2-11 and discuss the following questions:**
 - A. Who is the "tower" of strength in your family during hard times?
 - B. Why should anyone feel joyful about trials and hard times?
 - C. According to this passage what are the "by-products" of perseverance?
 - D. How is true wisdom obtained?
 - E. What conditions are necessary for our prayers to be answered?
 - F. According to these verses, how can you win over the worries that come with hard times, the lack of wisdom and lack of money?

3. Take the problem mentioned in the earlier exercise that you found most worrisome and answer the following questions:

- A. How does this new perspective help in dealing with this worry?
- B. In what way does faith apply to it?
- C. How can I pursue righteousness in the light of it?

3.

Stress from Work

In this chapter we're going to talk about stress from work and deal with the general problem of burnout caused by continual overstress and how to deal with it:

- Knowledge of the way that stress affects you
- Change towards a more realistic view of your limits
- Faith adjustment in drawing nearer to God

In the last chapter we discussed the nature of stress from worry and how worrying created unnecessary stress which was harmful to us. Dealing with worry meant that we had to:

- **Correct our perspective** - trusting that God would provide one day's resources to deal with one day's problems.
- **Change our attitude** - shift from an acquisition-based lifestyle to a righteousness-based lifestyle.

Making these changes would lower the worry level and diminish the overstress that causes so many of our problems. This time, we're going to talk about overstress that is produced by our work, jobs and careers.

STRESS FROM WORK

Here are two questions about stress in the workplace that I want you to find time to answer and discuss with family, friends and co-workers.

1. Did you ever work at a job where you were overworked and underpaid? What were the circumstances and how did you feel?
2. Under what circumstances would you willingly take a lower-paying job? What nontangible incentive would make you work for less money?

Here are a couple of quotes that I want to share as we begin.



I may be a lousy father and husband but when Merrill Lynch needs me, I'm there.

- **A stockbroker**



My father taught me to work, but not to love it. I never did like to work and I don't deny it. I'd rather read, tell stories, crack jokes, talk, laugh – anything but work.

- **Abraham Lincoln**

The stress caused from work is usually caused by one of two extremes:

1. Stress from Job, Employer or Fellow Employee

One type of stress is caused by a job or an employer or fellow employees that cause our stress.

- Too much work with not enough time, support, equipment or money to do the job.
- An unreasonable or unfair boss

- A job that is dangerous or monotonous
- A job that is insecure or a company that is failing

In other words, sometimes the job and the way that the job is (whatever) is the thing that causes the overstress.

A biblical example of this is in II Corinthians 11:21-33. Paul the apostle is reacting to the danger of false apostles that have crept into the church. They are preaching a different Jesus, a different gospel, and in doing so they were damaging the church and getting away with it because they boasted of impressive speech and important credentials. In warning the church against them Paul describes his own "credentials" both as a Jew and as a Christian Apostle. In this description we get a glimpse of the type of situation where the "job" was the thing that created the stress.

^{21b} But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ Apart from such

external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

³⁰ If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, ³³ and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

- II Corinthians 11:21b-33

Paul's job definitely caused overstress. For a variety of reasons, we may have a situation that is somewhat like this and if we do we have a variety of options:

- We can change our job or careers.
- We can try to deal with the people or responsibilities in such a way as to reduce their negative effects on us.

But sometimes we don't have the luxury of doing these things:

- Caring for a sick spouse or raising small children.
- We've invested many years into this career, and we can't afford to leave it.
- We own the business and too many people depend on us.
- The boss doesn't care what we think; the nasty fellow employee may not change or go away.
- The mission we've undertaken is incomplete and we cannot let it go (like Paul) no matter how much stress it's causing us.

In a case like that, what do we do?

The relief from this kind of stress is given again by Paul in the following chapter. He says that in addition to all of this, the Lord gave him a "thorn" or a trial in his life that just would not go away. One more stressor to make the meter go into the overstress zone time and time again.

⁸ Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.
- II Corinthians 12:8-10

Paul explains the way to deal with this ongoing stress of being cornered, this no way out type of stress caused either by the job or anything else that continually drives us into the overstress zone.

The power that we need to deal with this kind of stress does not and cannot be self-generated.

The power perfected in weakness is the situation where we finally arrive at the realization that "this job, people, situation, etc. is killing me. I can't do it. It's beyond me. I need help!" And this is where we begin to experience the power of Christ.

The overstress caused by the job that's eating our lunch can temporarily be dealt with by change and adjustment but

ultimately as Christians, we need to learn how to live and work under and through the power of Christ.

In verse 10 Paul resigns himself to the fact that the job he has will kill him in the end, but he has finally found contentment because he operates no longer with his power but has surrendered control to Christ and is content to deal with his ministry under the power of Christ. Christ's power kicks in when yours is exhausted or relinquished.

2. Stress from a Workaholic Attitude

One type of stress is from our job, the other type of stress in the workplace is from the attitude that we have regarding our job. Some people are workaholics. They live to work. A stressful job or a demanding boss destroys our sense of self and ruins our bodies in the long run. Too much attention to work and too much work destroys our souls. What is needed in this situation is balance.

A passage that addresses not necessarily a workaholic point of view but an improper attitude about work (which is workaholism) is found in Matthew 20.

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴ and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to

them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'

⁹ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. ¹⁰ When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' ¹³ But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last shall be first, and the first last."

- Matthew 20:1-16

We see here that Jesus places man's attitude regarding work next to God's attitude in order to compare the two.

Man sees work as an equation. "I work hard. I'm talented. I get paid more and I accumulate more." God's attitude is that all talent, opportunity, and gain are a matter of grace and not payment. The stress in the parable was not a matter of wages - everyone was paid a fair wage (the wage was in keeping with the time). The stress was caused by jealousy since the boss decided to reward the workers equally regardless of effort. The idea is that the stress was caused by the attitude the people had about the work.

Of course, in this world there needs to be consideration for effort and skill. The parable taught how God rewards in the Kingdom, not how General Motors ought to be run. In the physical world there is an equation for effort, skill and time worked because this provides motivation. The parable teaches us, however, that those things that are imperishable (eternal life, joy, forgiveness, peace, contentment) are not earned in this way - they're given freely.

For the workaholic the danger is in thinking that his or her attitude about work can be transferred to the Kingdom - it can't, it doesn't work.

You can't earn contentment/peace from your work, good work, hard work, etc. You may get momentary satisfaction but not contentment that just stays with you.

¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; ¹³ moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God.
- Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

Contentment is a gift from God and comes through faith and thanksgiving. It doesn't come through earning or striving.

SUMMARY

The overstress that comes from the workplace is usually a question of imbalance. We are overstressed because the job is either too much for us for some reason or other (the job takes too much out of us). When this is so, we need to allow the Lord to provide His power to sustain us in what we do. This requires:

- recognizing that we really can't
- recognizing that He can
- asking for help and persevering with confidence, not resignation.

We are overstressed because we put too much of ourselves into the job. When this is the case, we need to remember that what we are giving up of ourselves will only gain earthly treasures. Workaholics need to understand and take the time to experience the treasures of heaven given out for free (love, joy, peace, contentment, purity, fidelity, hope, patience).

If we do, we will have a balanced, productive and satisfying work life.

4.

Stress from Failure

In our study thus far on stress, we've discussed the problem of stress in general and also the stress caused by worry at work.

I've talked to some people, and it seems to me that they think that reading this material is what's going to lessen the stress in their lives. The lessons may be soothing and perhaps you might feel reassured that someone understands your issues with stress.

However, nothing changes the stress or the stress level until there is a real change in your life. For example, if you have begun to live your life one day at a time as Jesus teaches - you may still experience overstress from time to time.

Unless you balance your workload and attitude towards your work in the ways previously discussed, you will not achieve the peace of mind you seek in your career. This study won't help unless you internalize and live the principles taught.

In this chapter we look at the stress that is created by failure and how to properly understand and respond to failure when it happens to us.

THE CONNECTION

Our society rewards success and punishes failure. There is great pressure to "make it" to "get it together" and to excel at something or another. To excel is admired and rewarded but to be ordinary is considered a failing of some kind. We love winners and ignore everybody else.

From Little League to college and careers, the message is the same: "making it" is what life is all about. As a result, we grow up with a deep-seated need to succeed. We are not always conscious of this pressure, but it becomes visible in the highs and lows we feel as we chase success.

Not surprisingly, therefore, there is great stress associated with the pursuit of success. If we succeed, we're stressed in order to keep that success, and if we fail we're stressed to overcome our failings in order to succeed.

There are two types of stress associated with failure:

1. Stress caused by the failure itself

It is stressful to fail because failure brings all kinds of negative consequences.

- loss of health (accidents)
- loss of wealth
- loss of reputation
(online foolishness, crime, immorality, etc.)
- loss of self-esteem (self-hatred)
- loss of relationships (divorced people often feel rejected by people in their circle)

Whatever the failure, there is usually pain or loss of some kind experienced and these create the stress. For example, some people are so afraid of admitting they may be failing at marriage that they keep it a secret because they know that there are a lot of negative consequences that come with this type of failure. Unfortunately, keeping these types of difficulties hidden only make them worse, not better.

2. Stress caused by the fear of failure

We worry about failing, not making it, not being good enough or living up to someone else's expectations. For example, the student who knows the test material front and back, aced every exam so far but is worried sick until the results are in.

Whether we fail or we're afraid of failing, the experience causes stress and this stress can immobilize us and keep us from either enjoying our success or keep us from trying anything that involves any degree of risk.

DEALING WITH STRESS FROM FAILURE

There are two main ideas that will help Christians deal with the stress that accompanies failure and the fear of failure.

1. Failure is Normal

The problem with the success-oriented evolutionary mindset that exists in this world is that failure is seen as some form of aberration instead of being the norm. The basic concept of the Christian religion, taught in the very first chapters of the Bible, is that failure (once begun by Adam's sin) is inevitable. We live in a technological bubble and in a social time warp here in North America. Look at history. One war, one disaster and one pandemic after another - never stopping, always increasing - a

testimony of God's pronouncement in the Garden of Eden that the earth was cursed, and society would be in labor because of sin until the end.

Technically, we are advanced and because of this we have the illusion that the world is actually a better place but in reality:

- The earth continues to deteriorate
- Man is as evil, selfish and cruel as he ever was.

However, because of this illusion and godless philosophies that for a century have made our society believe that we are simply evolving to higher and higher life forms - we see failure as something that needs to be eliminated, unnatural and impeding the general progress of humanity.

Because failure is seen as something unnatural, those who fail are considered less than human, less than what they naturally "ought" to be and this creates stress.

The truth of the matter is that there is an inner principle in all people that induces them to fail. Failure is normal, success is the surprise, this is why we honor it. That principle within all human beings is called sin. The Bible tells us that because of sin man fails. He fails to do what he should and fails to avoid doing what he shouldn't do.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
- Romans 3:23

When we understand that failure is normal it helps relieve the stress from failure in several ways.

1. It allows us to be just a little more charitable with ourselves and others who fail because we all share this

characteristic. Criticism of self and others for their failings is the single greatest generator of stress. There is an entire psychological method of therapy that is based on developing positive self-talk to silence the critic within us.

2. Understanding the normality of failure gives direction and motivation to our actions. We help others out when they fail because we can relate and perhaps, we'll be the ones who will need help one day.
3. This knowledge sends us searching for an answer to failure outside of ourselves (our achievements, our willpower, our success, our philosophies) because if all fail, then no one really has the answer.

Like Paul in Romans 7:25 who recognized the overwhelming failure of his own life (regardless of his superior efforts at success) and cried out, "Oh wretched man that I am, who can save me from this body of sin (failure)?"

When failure brings us to this point, we finally learn the ultimate answer to our failings given to us by God in Romans:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

- Romans 8:1

The ultimate answer to failure is not success but faith in Jesus Christ and with that faith comes peace that eliminates the stress that accompanies the impossible race for perfect achievement at work, at raising children, at understanding the world and ourselves, and the effort to succeed at whatever we try to do. Jesus forgives failure and that forgiveness is the ultimate stress reliever.

Another idea about failure we need to know:

2. Failure is a good teacher

Failure is not pleasant but man's approach to failure should not only be a quest to eliminate it but also an effort to learn from it. A quick look at history will show us that those who saw failure as a teacher didn't succeed in eliminating failure from their lives but they did achieve great things despite failure.

- Abraham Lincoln, for example, failed at many attempts to gain political office before he became the President of the United States.
- Thomas Edison did 2,000 failed experiments before he found the correct elements for his first incandescent bulb.
- Winston Churchill said, "Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm."
- In the Bible we have countless examples of men and women who failed in their lives and relationships but were used by God in great ways.

If we choose to, we can learn many things from the failures in our own lives. For example,

1. We can learn about God

There is a great deal we can learn about God, and failure is an effective teacher because when we fail, we usually are able to see the difference in righteousness between ourselves and Him. When we try to justify, hide, or deny, we lose the opportunity to interact with God which usually brings us great joy and peace.

David rejoiced in his newfound knowledge of God's gracious and forgiving spirit, but only after he acknowledged his failure with Bathsheba.

- ¹ How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin (failure) is covered!
- ² How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not
impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit!
- ³ When I kept silent about my sin (failure), my body
wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of
summer. *Selah.*
- ⁵ I acknowledged my sin (failure) to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord";
And You forgave the guilt of my sin (failure). *Selah.*
- ⁶ Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a
time when You may be found;
Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach
him.
- ⁷ You are my hiding place; You preserve me from
trouble;
You surround me with songs of deliverance. *Selah.*
- ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you
should go;
I will counsel you with My eye upon you.
- ⁹ Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no
understanding,
Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in
check,
Otherwise they will not come near to you.
- ¹⁰ Many are the sorrows of the wicked,

But he who trusts in the Lord, lovingkindness shall surround him.

¹¹ Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones; And shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart.

- Psalm 32

2. We can learn about ourselves

Failure is the way that God draws a kind of a chalk line around our physical abilities, our spiritual maturity or our emotional strength. Without failure we rarely are able to get an objective view of ourselves.

3. We can learn what is important

Failure brings loss and loss helps us to reevaluate what is truly valuable to us in our lives. I knew a Christian man who suffered a heart attack and realized that his truck, his guns, and his buddies were not going to be missed as much as his little children. He learned that it was his family that was truly important to him. Even though he'd been "preached at" for 30 years, the threat of losing them finally brought the lesson home. Failure, even if it's the failure of our health, acts like a pair of glasses that bring into perspective what really counts, who is really important and what we really need in this life.

A lot of the stress caused by failure is due not only to the loss that we encounter but also the fact that we failed to learn the lessons of failure and we continue to produce the stressful things in our lives caused by the ignorance of God, ourselves, and our lives. We don't let failure teach us and so we continue to repeat the mistakes that cause failure, and we gain the accompanying stress that comes with it.

SUMMARY

So, what have I said so far? Stress can be caused by failure itself and the fear of failure. We live in a world that is unkind to failure and so we are stressed even more at the mere thought of it.

Dealing with the stress caused by failure is possible. We have to understand that failure is normal. We're going to fail and sometimes fail spectacularly so we better get used to the idea. We must not be afraid of trying because of the risk of failure. As forgiven people, we have a right to start over again and learn from failure so that we can avoid repeating our mistakes and in so doing enrich our lives.

Let's apply the lesson to Christians and have a spiritual exercise:

1. **Think of your worst failure**
(money, family, crime).
2. **Ask God to forgive you**
(If God forgives you, then you can forgive yourself).
3. **Write down two things you've learned from that failure.**
4. **Move on with your life.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you generally react when you experience failure?
2. What important lesson would you want to pass on to your children about the failures in your life?
3. Read Luke 22:54-62 and discuss the following questions based on this text.
 - a) Why do you think Peter denied Jesus?
 - b) If you were in Peter's shoes what might you have done?
 - c) What was significant in Peter denying Jesus 3 times?
 - d) Why did Peter weep?
4. All of us have experienced failure in life, share a particular failure and how it has affected you.
5. In what way has your faith helped you in times of disappointment and failure?

5.

Stress from Conflict

I suppose one of the most stressful experiences in my own life is the time when I am in conflict with someone else. Someone does or says something to hurt me or, worse still, harm my family or perhaps someone at work needs to be "talked to." At Oklahoma Christian University my entire job dealt with conflict because I had to continually deal with students (and their angry parents) who were in trouble.

Some of the things that you go through when you are in conflict include:

- Talking to yourself a lot. You rehearse what you're going to say or do.
- Feel unbalanced. You're okay and then think of the person and get mad all over again.
- Headaches, sleeplessness, irritability, loss of concentration (all you can think about is the conflict).
- You think of the dumb things you said or did while in conflict with the person and now are wondering how to resolve the dispute.

Whatever your feelings while you are going through conflict, one thing is for sure - conflict produces stress. A lot of stress!

In this chapter I'd like to talk about the stress caused by conflict but in the context of the friction that we experience in the church. Hopefully some of the things we learn from this example can be applied to other conflict situations.

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

Since becoming a Christian, I would say that most of the conflict situations have been with members of the church and not with non-Christians. This is natural since we live in a closely knit community and we try to keep our contact level with brothers and sisters high. Conflicts in church are very stressful because many times you can't just "run away", you have to live with the person and see them quite often. In addition to this there is great pressure on us, as Christians, to resolve conflict (it's part of our religion!) and this creates even more stress because many times confrontation about conflict causes more stress than the conflict itself!

In I Corinthians 3:1-23 Paul reviews a series of conflicts in the Corinthian church and offers Christian guidelines in how to deal with them. The Corinthians were Greeks, Gentile converts who did not have the same background in moral training and living that their Jewish brethren had which would have greatly helped in stabilizing their church.

¹ And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and

are you not walking like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?

- I Corinthians 3:1-4

The Corinthians were creating divisions in the church and taking sides, appointing leaders for their causes. Even though they had the "spirit" because they were all Christians, they were acting like people who did not have the spirit - acting like "mere men", verse 3. The Corinthians thought that they were very spiritual because they had gifts (chapters 12-14) but the conflict they were involved in here showed that they, in fact, were quite immature.

⁵ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Paul refers to the "leaders" they claim to follow in their self-inflicted division and shows that they are all servants of the same master doing different tasks but for the same purpose.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Here the Apostle describes the church as a structure and those like Apollos and himself as workers whose task it is to build the church. There is no competition here, merely cooperation to achieve the same objective each using his own skill. Their work will be tested (idea of fire). This is a reference to the Corinthians, not the workers. Paul and Apollos have built on the right foundation - Christ, so they are without reproach, however, the building itself (the Corinthians) will be tested to see if it will stand. This is a warning concerning their division and conflict. Paul says that they will literally burn down the structure if they continue in their conflict.

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

He gives an even more direct warning to those who are causing problems. The structure is not just any structure but a holy temple of God, and to destroy it will be punishable by God. Actually, to destroy it is to destroy self!

¹⁸ Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become

foolish, so that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness"; ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless."

²¹ So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, ²³ and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

The problem in Corinth was that they had an improper view of wisdom (they saw it as worldly wisdom/philosophy). The practice of that time was to debate the value of one philosophy over another. They were seeing the gospel as simply another philosophy or system and they exalted one teacher over another to form philosophical parties in order to debate. Paul tells them that this not only created conflict (and the symptoms of stress that accompany conflict), but it also demonstrated their immaturity as Christians and the danger of them destroying what had been legitimately built by himself and others, and which belonged to each of them equally in Christ! No need for conflict in the church, we all equally own our part of the kingdom!

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

Our conflicts with people in the church may not be philosophically based. Maybe somebody forgot to return a book, or a brother's child hurt your child, or perhaps there is a conflict over how things need to be done, or how we feel we ought to be treated, or what we believe about a certain issue, etc. Whatever the conflict, this passage gives us several guidelines in the resolution of conflict. And reducing the stress that usually comes

with it. Remember, the conflict continues to create stress until it's resolved. Even if we don't think about it, it continues to produce stressful feelings until it is settled one way or another.

Here are four rules to help resolve conflict:

1. Look In

In marriage counseling the hardest problem in resolving conflict is to get people seeing what it is that they are doing that contributes to the problem. They notice the other person's faults but not their own. So, the first step in resolving a conflict is to try to see what we are doing that causes problems.

For the Corinthians the problem was their worldliness and immaturity in Christ that made them compare and use the gospel like they used worldly philosophies in the past, which automatically led to division.

Many times we don't "look in" before we try to resolve issues and even when we do, we rarely see what the problem is. A good way to "look in" is by asking someone else to advise us and tell us what it is that they see we are doing that may be contributing to the conflict. This is usually an eye-opener and leads us to a clearer vision of step #2.

2. Look Out

Looking out means trying to assess the "real" situation that is causing the trouble. Usually when we "look in" first we are better able to look out and see more clearly the true situation at hand. Most conflicts arise from one or more of the following:

- lack of communication
- confusion over the facts

- gossip
- a mixture of these three

The Corinthians were confused concerning the gospel and what the true role of the Apostles and ministers were, and this led to the conflict. Usually when we see ourselves clearly and are made aware of the true facts of the situation, the conflict is diffused and the stress caused by it is lowered.

3. Look Up

In the world, diffusing the situation is enough but, in the church, we consciously strive to go beyond just "not being mad at each other." In the church we strive to build each other up in love (Ephesians 4:16). So, as Christians, we not only look in and look out, we also look up.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were a "holy temple" and their conflict was a threat to a Godly structure. Our motivation to resolve conflict and avoid division is motivated not only by the desire to eliminate the stress that comes with it but also by the realization that we are Christians and that as Christians we are to love one another as a witness of our faith. Every time you are in conflict with a brother or sister- look up and ask God if He is on your side, if He is blessing your conduct or if He will declare you the winner at judgement.

4. Look Around

When we see the many physical blessings, we have and recognize the spiritual blessings we all equally share, that no one can take away from us - we realize that conflict is the devil's way to rob us of our peace and joy.

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to recognize that they already possessed what was valuable in Christ, there was no need to argue! Look around and see those who are suffering without the hope of Christ (ie. China, Iraq, Afghanistan etc.) and we will recognize that our reasons for conflict are usually petty, worldly, selfish and covered with pride.

We need to look around and see how our conflicts hurt others and destroy our blessings. We, therefore, need to ask Jesus for forgiveness and help to resolve whatever disputes we have, especially with those in the household of faith.

SUMMARY

1. Conflict causes stress, especially in the church.
2. Conflict continues to create stress until it is resolved.
3. Causes of conflict are usually misunderstanding, miscommunication and/or gossip.
4. Remember the four rules to help resolve conflict:
 - Look In - "The trouble with us is me"
 - Look Out - Try to see both sides at once
 - Look Up - It's not just who you are, it's Whose you are.
 - Look Around - You already have it all, don't spoil it!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When in your life and with whom have you had your greatest interpersonal conflict?
2. How do you tend to handle conflict? Give an example if possible.
3. Read I Corinthians 3:18-23 and discuss the following question:
 - a) According to vs. 18-23 how can we resolve all divisive conflicts between Christians?
4. Have the group select one of the conflicts identified in the first question and examine it in terms of the following principles.
 - a) Who are the participants and how did the conflict begin?
 - b) What, in your opinion, is the root problem?
 - c) What would an outside observer say is going on?
 - d) What resources do you have to deal with the problem?
 - e) What is one concrete step that could/should be taken to resolve the conflict?

6.

Stress from Loss

PART 1

Some of us have attended seminars dealing with grief and loss. And so, some of this material may be familiar. Hopefully it will be comforting to those who are dealing with loss and serve as a reminder for those people who have dealt with these issues in the past.

DEFINING LOSS

When discussing loss, we usually think of the loss of a loved one because of all loss this type generates the most stress and pain. But there are other "losses" that we experience that produce pain, grief and stress in the same way (perhaps to a lesser degree) than the loss of a loved one: loss of job, friends, marriage, business, freedom, health, home, security, money, self-esteem, idealism, etc.

When we lose any one or a combination of these, there is pain, grief and the stress that comes with these, usually experienced through the feelings of: despair, loneliness, bewilderment, anger, anxiety, sadness, fear, guilt, worry, depression, or hopelessness. So, in dealing with the stress generated by loss we need to understand the grieving cycle and have a strategy to help us find some answers to comfort us in our loss.

GRIEF AND LOSS

We begin with a basic relationship:

- Loss of any kind produces grief and grief brings on stress.
- When we understand not only this relationship but also the "grieving process" we will be able to reduce our stress.

One factor that causes stress in loss situations is ignorance of what's happening to us in the grieving process.

Dr. Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in the study of the effect of grief on people says that there are five stages that people go through when they grieve because of a loss of some kind:

1. **Denial** - the feeling of being overwhelmed. "This can't be happening to me" feeling.
2. **Anger** - at God, self, others for the thing that has taken place.
3. **Bargaining** - the "...if only" kind of thoughts. Dwelling on the past, making promises.
4. **Depression** - sadness, loss of energy, feeling of hopelessness.
5. **Acceptance** - submission to the new reality. You are able to deal with the change.

I think many of us have heard of these stages or experienced them in our own lives. When we experience loss and the grief that comes with it, there will be stress. We can reduce that stress when we realize the following things connected with what we're going through:

A. We are never quite ready for the pain and stress caused by grieving over the loss of someone or something.

It helps lower our stress level if we see grief as a process and not just a singular event. It's not just for the gravesite. It goes on for months, even years. It is a cycle as we travel through one emotion after another sometimes coming back to one stage over and over again (i.e., repeated feelings of anger at the spouse who left or the parent who died without resolving conflicts). When it comes to grief it's better to think long term rather than short term. The hurry to get "feeling better" causes stress.

B. Grief Resolution is Necessary for Recovery

We need to grieve! There is no way to feel better without going through the grieving process! Grieving is not a disease or a sickness, it is the body's natural way of dealing with loss.

- **Denial** is like a psychological shock absorber that helps us to withstand the initial pain that comes with terrible loss.
- **Anger** is the natural vent for hurt feelings, confusion at the changes caused by loss. We need to learn to express anger in productive ways. It should be used as a vent that allows us to release strong feelings without creating damage and hurt.
- **Bargaining** is our way of reaching out to find a solution to the problems caused by loss.
- **Depression** is the natural reaction to the difficult new reality that loss has brought about. It's the point where we're allowing ourselves to feel the pain.
- **Acceptance** is the final balance we find between the old and new realities in our lives caused by loss.

The object of the grieving process is recovery. A lessening of the intensity and frequency of the pain and sorrow that we naturally feel from loss. This does not mean a total elimination but rather a gradual decline of the discomfort level.

It takes time, you need to work at it and you need other people to help you but eventually the sun shines again and the thought of the event doesn't hurt anymore (it's still there, but doesn't cause pain). With the decrease of pain there is a lessening of stress!

C. There's Not Always an Answer

People's main question when loss occurs is to ask why? They want to make sense of what has taken place.

- A happy young wife and mother is suddenly left a widow. Why?
- Hopes for a bright career are dashed because of someone's careless mistake. Why?
- Someone who is doing so much good for others is rendered helpless through a crippling disease. Why?

This questioning is painful and stressful when no clear answer is found. Many people think that the reason for the grieving process is to find the answer to the question why. This is not so. One important insight that the process does give us is that God doesn't always provide the answer to the question why but He always provides what we need in times of crisis:

- Comfort through the Holy Spirit, the church and the Word.

- He provides the assurance that there are some things we will probably lose (health, wealth, loved ones, life) but there are some things we will never lose.

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ Just as it is written, "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Romans 8:35-39

I am reminded of the story of Lisa Coffee, a young mom who suddenly contracted cancer and subsequently died soon after her diagnosis leaving a grieving husband and two small children.

Don Coffee, her dad, told me at Lisa's funeral, that he didn't understand how people without faith could go through horrible ordeals like this and survive. We concluded that unbelievers do face terrible tragedies and come out:

- resigned
- bruised
- better
- frightened
- or in permanent denial... but they don't come through hopeful.

The pain and suffering are the same for Christians but what awaits them on the other side of grief is hope. Don was thankful that Lisa's suffering was over and he was hopeful that he would see her again in heaven. That hope keeps the spirit up, helps us to let go for awhile, gives us the courage to go on with:

- a loving heart
- a cheerful attitude
- a thankful spirit
- an enthusiastic approach to the rest of life
- and a greatly reduced stress level

Paul says that unlike those who have no "hope" when they grieve, Christians can look forward to a very specific event in the future that will reunite them with both their God and their loved ones after death.

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.
- I Thessalonians 4:13-18

SUMMARY

We have learned that stress is caused by the grieving process that necessarily follows loss of any kind. Over-stress (the bad kind) is created when:

1. We are ignorant of the process and have no way of understanding and dealing with those natural feelings that come about as a result of loss.
2. We remain too long in this process, refusing to move on from anger or depression to acceptance.

The world's answer is to understand the grieving process and get help to go through it in a normal time (i.e., counseling, medication or support groups). This is the best answer the world has to offer, accept what you can't change. Christ's answer doesn't circumvent the natural grieving process, it goes beyond the stage of acceptance to hope. Through Jesus Christ we have the hope of eternal life after death and so, for us, death is only a temporary separation that will be abolished forever when Jesus returns. This is what we look beyond death to, in order to lift our spirits and keep the link with the one we've lost alive. This is our hope and the promise that helps us end our grieving with a whole heart rather than with a hole in our hearts.

The resurrection of Christ is central to our faith and the promise of our own resurrection in Christ is central to our hope. It's what makes the death that surrounds us bearable.

7.

Stress from Loss

PART 2

In our last chapter we talked about the stress that is caused by loss. Basically, the relationship between stress and loss is that loss (any kind of loss) produces grieving and grieving is stressful. I mentioned several things about grieving:

- A. It's a process that has five identifiable stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
- B. It was necessary for recovery. Grieving is the body's way to cope with loss. Each stage has a purpose.
- C. Everybody grieves whether they're conscious of it or not, and we're never quite ready for the experience when it comes.
- D. Grieving produces stress and a way to lower this particular stress is to understand the process because most of the stress is caused by the fact that we don't understand what's happening to us.

In this chapter we'll look at how other people react to us as we grieve and study a biblical strategy for grief recovery.

HELPERS

Usually, the first stage of grief is denial. We don't want to believe that what's happening has happened. Some typical responses:

- Refuse to face the facts
 - No, he's not dead
 - I can still do everything I used to do
(often the attitude after a first heart attack)
- Avoiding the subject
 - Denial by neglect
- Putting off grief through activity
 - Overdo work, hobbies, abuse things like food, drugs, improper sex, etc.

It is important to get beyond denial because we cannot heal until we do. Sometimes our family and friends who are witness to our loss go into denial themselves. For example, a person's pain is minimized by others in order to rush them through the grieving process and thus denying its legitimacy. The idea is if they get better quickly then it's not really that bad.

At other times the pain is "explained" away by using platitudes or rationalizations that serve only to protect the **helper** from dealing with the unpredictability and difficulty of life and offers no real comfort to the one grieving. Little phrases to make you feel good like:

- Think positive
- Don't let yourself go
- Think of the children
- Grow up
- It's better this way

The book of Job provides a wonderful illustration of this kind of ineffective consolation given by friends (Job 8). Job has lost everything (family, health, home, wife). His friends come to console him as he sits in dust and ashes covered with sores over his body. At first, they sit quietly with him but then begin to speak to him. One of his friends, Bildad, begins to talk to him about his (Job's) attitude because Job had been lamenting and crying out to God for an explanation of the things that have happened to him.

¹ Then Bildad the Shuhite answered,
² "How long will you say these things,
And the words of your mouth be a mighty wind?
³ "Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert what is right?
⁴ "If your sons sinned against Him,
Then He delivered them into the power of their
transgression.
⁵ "If you would seek God
And implore the compassion of the Almighty,
⁶ If you are pure and upright,
Surely now He would rouse Himself for you
And restore your righteous estate.
⁷ "Though your beginning was insignificant,
Yet your end will increase greatly.
⁸ "Please inquire of past generations,
And consider the things searched out by their fathers.
⁹ "For we are only of yesterday and know nothing,
Because our days on earth are as a shadow.
¹⁰ "Will they not teach you and tell you,
And bring forth words from their minds?
- Job 8:1-10

Bildad is concerned that Job's questioning shows a lack of respect for God's justice, so he leaps to God's defense. Bildad

thought (as was the thinking of that era) that God visited immediate justice and blessing on people (rich = righteous / illness, tragedy = sinfulness).

He tells Job to "own-up" to what he's done wrong, and it will all be okay. His theory is nice and neat and enables him to avoid emotional entanglement with Job - he just points out his mistakes. Job doesn't buy it (even though, he used to believe in the same theory) because he's done his best to serve God and yet he's still suffering.

This story highlights some ineffective methods that friends, and family have of avoiding the grieving process themselves when loss occurs close to home.

There are ways that we can help grieving people that will assist them in times of need and help reduce the stress caused by grief.

1. Offer physical affection (hug, arm around the shoulder, holding the hand). Communicate caring without words.
2. Say, "If you need to just talk, call me." Be available; repeat and present the opportunity to show sincerity.
3. Offer a specific service (food, mow the lawn, etc.).
4. Express your love with words of encouragement.
5. Share some of your own feelings and experiences in similar circumstances.
6. Include the person in your life (dinner, sports, etc.).
7. Offer to pray or study the Bible with them. Help them to make it to church and stay with them.

These are some of the things a person can do to support the one who is grieving. Here are some things you **can't** do:

1. You can't grieve for them. They have to experience it themselves. Don't "wish" you could do the suffering for them.
2. You don't have to give them the answer to the question "why?". Only God knows all of the why's and if He wanted to reveal the why of the person's suffering, He could do it without our help.
3. You can't shorten the time of suffering. If you try to do this, you simply put more pressure and stress on the grieving person.
4. You can't fix everything. Some people are natural born fixers. When something happens to someone else, instead of helping the other to arrive at acceptance they try to fix everything (broken marriage, lost dreams, etc.). Some things can't be fixed, and part of acceptance is realizing that.

So much for the things we need to avoid in helping others grieve, let us now look at a strategy for renewal - especially for Christians who experience over-stress brought about by grieving and loss.

STRATEGY FOR NEW HOPE

Much of the grieving process is designed to help us deal with the past and assist us in adjusting to the present. Loss, however, affects the future and much of the stress caused by loss comes from the anxiety we experience when considering what will happen to us in the future.

In the secular world the answer to this anxiety is usually said to be within oneself:

- Believe in yourself - sports heroes
- Become a "new you" - exercise education
- Find yourself a new person - get out there

These are fine things, but they assume that there resides within ourselves or in others all of the resources needed to renew ourselves after the pain of loss.

As Christians, of course, we have similar experiences and emotions as others do but our perspective on these is different as is our strategy to find renewal.

In order to find new hope and renewal after loss we can follow the example of the Apostles after their loss of Jesus. They had a love and fellowship with Him that was deep. They had great hopes and expectations for themselves, their faith and their people. When Jesus was taken and killed:

1. They lost a friend and leader.
2. They lost self-esteem and faith because of their own cowardice.
3. They lost hope for the great Kingdom they were to build.

After His resurrection, however, Jesus sent them to wait for Him in Jerusalem and while there the process of renewal was taking place in the following ways.

1. They were together

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they

went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James.

- Acts 1:12-13

Luke says that they were gathered with others in the upper room. Grieving is not a solitary action. We need fellowship not only to help us during the grieving process, but it is through our interaction with other Christians that our faith is strengthened and our desire to carry on is encouraged. We don't realize how much we love and need the brethren until we grieve. They carry us until we can walk by ourselves again.

2. They devoted themselves to prayer

These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

- Acts 1:14

Prayer doesn't change the past, but it does help shape the future. Loss brings change, change brings decisions and making decisions is stressful - especially when they have to be made in the difficult circumstances of a death, divorce, or serious illness.

James tells us:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

- James 1:5

Note he says that God doesn't give the answer, nor does He make the decision, God gives us the wisdom we need to make the best decision in the light of His Word and the circumstances that we are in.

Most of the times our dilemma isn't about right or wrong, but what's best and when we're grieving God helps us to see more clearly our options. This clearer vision comes through long and thoughtful prayer time with our Lord.

3. They took action

¹⁵ At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said,
¹⁶ "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead be made desolate, And let no one dwell in it'; and, 'Let another man take his office.'
²¹ Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— ²² beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one

of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." ²³ So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen ²⁵ to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶ And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

- Acts 1:15-26

Despite their discouragement and in the wake of their constant prayers, Peter found the courage to stand and take action. They hadn't received the Spirit or preached the gospel yet, but they did what was necessary and at hand - they filled the vacant space left by Judas in preparation for their great mission.

The longest journey always begins with the first step. New life, new hope, renewed action has to begin somewhere, somehow and it usually does with one small action:

- packing up the old stuff
- writing away for information
- throwing out what you're not going to use anymore

Many times, we want renewal in one instant but usually it begins with a series of small actions that are in the direction of the new goal. With the help of the brethren and prayer for wisdom we can usually find a step that's small enough to handle but in the right direction that will take us to a new hope and life.

SUMMARY

Loss creates stress but we can reduce the stress created by that loss if we:

1. Understand the natural grieving cycle that accompanies all loss great and small.
2. Use a biblical strategy for our renewal - fellowship, prayer, action guided by God's wisdom

Finally, please realize that all of us suffer loss from time to time in life, don't be surprised, angry, disappointed, or guilty when this happens. To lose something or someone important is a natural part of life. If you accept that loss is not beyond God's notice or concern, the stress caused by these events will be manageable and your recovery from loss less painful.

8.

Stress from Burnout

Burnout is a term which has come into popular usage in the last 40 years. The most common definition of burnout is, "a state of physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual exhaustion."

It is most evident in people who work in the "helping" professions: nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers, ministers as well as public safety individuals.

Everyone, however, is subject to burnout and its effect on the individual. For example, athletes burnout from the pressure of intense competition, parents burnout from the insistent demands of providing for their family (especially young children), students burnout because of their need to succeed and the many deadlines that they have to meet.

In the relationship between stress and burnout we can say that burnout is the final stage that overstress produces. In this chapter we are looking at things that cause not just stress, but burnout.

BURNOUT

Let's talk about the experience of burnout itself, what it feels like and what the symptoms are. The experience of burnout is more like a "fizzle" than an explosion. It resembles a balloon that is slowly losing its air.

It is important to identify and understand the process because, like grieving, much of the pain is caused by ignorance and many times burnout victims are their own worst enemies. In most cases they do not realize what is happening and double down on the very behavior that is causing the problem in an effort to find relief (i.e. working extra overtime in order to earn enough to take a vacation and relax).

There are four stages in the "burnout" process:

1. Mountaintop

The mountain top stage usually starts with a new beginning, a new job, a new marriage or a new career. It is a time of high idealism, enthusiasm and energy. In many instances this intense enthusiasm and idealism begins to grate against the unexpected grind of every day life. This leads to stage two in the burnout process.

2. Reality Check

This is the moment when our expectations and idealism come into contact with reality. There is usually a dip in enthusiasm, we become emotionally and physically tired. We become detached from people that we care about and things that are important to us.

For example, I used to see this happen to Freshmen in college when I worked as the dean of students for Oklahoma Christian University. They would arrive at orientation with the recruiting brochures in hand and were full of energy and enthusiasm.

- girls, girls, girls; boys, boys, boys
- freedom from parents, curfews, regular chores and limits for screen time and the phone
- life in the dorms with friends staying up late, midnight pizza and talking till 4:am

Then the five-week grades would come in (D-D-F-C-Incomplete) and many students hit the "reality check" wall and began to sleep all the time, lose interest in class requirements and even ignore their friends in their downward spiral.

If there wasn't some form of intervention at this point these students would easily slip into the next stage of burnout.

3. Depression

This stage is characterized by chronic exhaustion. People become so physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of a "normal" day that sleep is not enough to restore them.

This is also the stage where there are various physical symptoms as well:

- Headaches and heart palpitations
- Increased blood pressure and stomach problems
- Emotional symptoms like irritability, resentment, and depression

Some people get to this stage and stay there for a long time before getting help or getting worse. They're not themselves but they do not know what is wrong so they "gut it out" as best they can and eventually slide down to the next stage.

4. Obsession

This is the most serious stage and one where the burnout becomes evident to everyone except the person suffering from it. The individual begins obsessing with what is happening to him and can no longer see what is occurring to anyone else. He becomes completely self-centered and inwardly focused, obsessive, totally apathetic and tries to avoid work or responsibility. He changes into an impersonal, detached person with little sympathy towards other people. Physically, the symptoms of burnout can become life-threatening. It is at this point that those with burnout are emotionally and spiritually worn bare.

There may be some people reading this book who have been at this point or are on their way. I've been to stage three several times in my ministry life but thanks to God and a wonderful wife, I've been able to find my balance again before entering the fourth stage of symptoms.

Three important things to realize about burnout, however:

1. **It is not a sin.** There is no shame involved. It is usually a result of too many things happening too quickly and not enough personal resources to handle them.
2. **The sufferer is usually the last person to know.** It seems that everyone recognizes the problem except the one with the problem and the individual suffering only accepts it at the final stage when it can no longer be denied.

3. **There needs to be some changes made in order to recover and avoid it in the future.** I kept going around in the same cycle myself of reaching the mountain top and then slipping down into depression until I changed some things in my life.

We learned in the very first chapter of this study that stress is good and necessary in order to be productive. It is when we are overstressed that we have problems, and burnout is usually the extreme result of constant overstress or over stimulation.

DEALING WITH THE BURNOUT CYCLE

Everyone is subject to the burnout cycle because life has a variety of experiences that cause stress that can lead to burnout. Here are some practical ideas to help you, as Christians, deal with stress in general and the burnout cycle in particular.

1. Realize that there is a time for everything.

¹ There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—

² A time to give birth and a time to die;

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

³ A time to kill and a time to heal;

A time to tear down and a time to build up.

⁴ A time to weep and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

⁵ A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;

A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.

⁶ A time to search and a time to give up as lost;

A time to keep and a time to throw away.

⁷ A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;

A time to be silent and a time to speak.

⁸ A time to love and a time to hate;
A time for war and a time for peace.
- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

We are conditioned to think of life in evolutionary terms in our society. Things should just go smoothly from zero to 100 or from poor to excellent without interruption and when this doesn't, we become upset, frightened, guilty, worried or stressed. There is and will be a time for everything in your life - happiness, sadness, prosperity as well as want. There is, therefore, no use being upset or worried about avoiding one or constantly maintaining the other.

Some people are stressed when they are in a state of prosperity because they are afraid of losing their wealth. Others are stressed in times of want because they are afraid that the good times will never return. Solomon teaches us that we have to learn to enjoy the times of our blessings and to be patient during our times of want since one usually follows the other.

We need to be thankful when the good times are here. We also need to trust God and know that He will sustain us when there are difficult periods. I've found that within each day, there is usually a mixture of sun and rain type events.

2. Realize that you may not be able to change what is happening to you, but you can control how you react to it.

But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer;
- II Corinthians 1:6

Paul talks about the suffering that he has had to endure as an apostle. And this, not because he has sinned but because of the gospel that he has preached. He was a victim of the evil done by others.

Notice his attitude, however. He didn't simply accept his hardship as a grim reality or resign himself to suffer in silence. He was actively overcoming his ordeal and injustice by observing how his perseverance while in difficult circumstances was encouraging his disciples. We have to learn how to suffer, to move beyond simply enduring pain and loss and use our suffering to glorify God and edify others.

We need to see the difference between suffering that merely produces stress, and suffering that produces growth. The difference between these two outcomes is the attitude we choose to have towards our situation.

3. Realize that there is a relationship between how far we are from God and how stressed we are.

People report that one of the major benefits that they received from some form of suffering was that it drew them nearer to God. The results of both moral and natural evil is suffering (Romans 6:23). Suffering creates stress and in the context of this study stress creates burnout. Many times, we can't...

- change past events
- heal the disease
- repair the relationship
- bring back what was lost

... in order to ease our suffering and lower our stress, but we can always "draw near to God and He will draw near to us" (James

4:8). In doing so we will receive not only the comfort we need to deal with the situation but the strength to handle it in a victorious way and in a manner where it builds us and others up as well.

SELF-EVALUATION

Burnout happens as a result of wear and tear on the individual from a variety of factors. Psychologists have been able to identify the things in life that are especially stressful and, when combined, can lead to burnout. This chapter has two exercises that you can complete.

- **Exercise #1** - requires that you mark how frequently you have experienced each of the statements that are listed, and then make a total score. Once completed, compare your score with the legend at the end of the sheet.
- **Exercise #2** - helps measure the degree of stress that you may be under at the present time. In this exercise you circle the number of stress points awarded to each event that has happened to you in the last year and then total the points. Once done, compare them to the legend that is at the beginning of the sheet. A score of 150 points or higher indicates a high stress level.

These exercises will help you obtain a general idea of how stressed or how close to burnout you might be. Remember, one of the major problems with stressed out people is denial. They refuse to admit that they may be burned out or they may be extremely overstressed. Hopefully, these tests will help evaluate objectively the level of stress that may exist in your life.

Download the Exercises:

<https://bibletalk.tv/burnout-exercises>

9.

God's Prescription for Burnout

I KINGS 19:1-18

This is the last chapter in our study of stress and burnout. Of course, there are more studies and information available on the subject of stress. This short book has simply been an introduction to the subject. Our approach to the problem of stress was a little different, however, because as believers in Jesus Christ, we propose that the most satisfying solution to stress problems can only be found through faith.

With this in mind, I'd like to complete our series with the story of one man's struggle with stress and burnout and how God helped him recover. This is the Bible account of the prophet Elijah.

1. Background

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make

your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." ³ And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

- I Kings 19:1-3

Elijah lived in the 9th century BC. He was a prophet who served God during the reign of several kings and one especially bad ruler, Ahab, who was married to Jezebel. Much of Elijah's ministry involved the conflict between himself and the royal couple over their introduction of pagan worship to Israel.

Jezebel was from Tyre and through her influence the worship of Baal-Melquart, the official nature god of Tyre, was being actively brought into the kingdom of Israel. In response to this, Elijah had prayed for a drought to come over the land and it did not rain for three years. Since Baal was a deity that was suppose to control nature, this drought was a demonstration of this pagan religion's emptiness. Of course, the drought also made the king and queen greater enemies of Elijah.

After three years Elijah challenged all the prophets of Baal to meet him at Mt. Carmel in order to demonstrate who was greater, Jehovah or Baal. At this meeting Elijah taunted and ridiculed the prophets of Baal and performed a great miracle before the assembled people to show that the God he served was the true God and Baal worship was futile. After this demonstration he ordered that the 450 prophets of Baal (prophets appointed and supported by Jezebel) be killed. As if this was not enough, Elijah also offered another prayer asking God to send rain, and after three years of drought, the heavens opened, and the water poured forth. After doing these things, realizing that he may be in danger, Elijah escaped on foot to another town.

Elijah experienced a physical, emotional, and spiritual roller coaster for three years culminating in the great showdown at Mt. Carmel; he was only a man and was close to burnout.

2. Symptoms of burnout - vs. 4-14

Elijah experienced things that were beyond the normal life of ordinary people:

- Miracles
- War
- Natural disaster (drought)
- Threats of death
- Forced travel and hiding
- Rejection by society

People can manage some of these things, but when too many good or bad things happen too rapidly, we burn out as a protection against total destruction (like a surge of electricity will blow a fuse as a protection against starting a fire). Burnout has symptoms and we recognize these symptoms in Elijah's dialogue with the Lord:

A. Despair - vs. 4a

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die

Even though the prophet had accomplished a great victory and witnessed mighty miracles at the hand of God, he was in despair and felt that he had no hope. His loss of hope was not because

there was nothing to believe in or no proof to support his faith, Elijah lost hope because he couldn't function properly to see these things clearly.

B. Self-deprecation - vs. 4b

"It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers."

Burned out people are hard on themselves; no matter what they've done, it's not good enough. Burnout makes you feel like a failure, and nothing can convince you otherwise.

C. Anger/resentment - vs. 10

He said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

Elijah felt angry about how he felt. If you do your best, if you try your hardest, if you succeed: you should feel good, not bad. When the only reward we get from all of our efforts is fatigue and depression, we need to step back because we're close to burnout.

D. Loneliness - vs. 14

Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

Here Elijah repeats his complaint and with it his greatest worry - that he be left alone. Burnout makes us feel that no one understands, no one cares, no one knows how we feel or why we feel the way we do. Elijah repeats his complaint to God as if the Lord can't possibly understand. This man lived nearly 3000 years ago yet his symptoms and feelings are so very familiar to us today who struggle with depression: low self-esteem, resentment, and alienation in our modern pressure-cooker society.

3. COMMON MISTAKES CAUSED BY BURNOUT

Aside from the physical feelings of fatigue and the emotional problems associated with burnout, this condition also pushes us to make mistakes that we wouldn't normally make if we were balanced and rested:

Mistake #1 - We focus on feelings rather than facts. Elijah prayed that he might die. He looked inward and saw the world through the lens of his feelings, not through the facts of what had just happened; I feel like a failure therefore I am a failure. This is called emotional reasoning, and it's a mistake.

Mistake #2 - Comparing ourselves to others. Elijah cried that he was no better than his fathers. We usually compare our weaknesses to other's strength and always come out losers.

Mistake #3 - Motivating ourselves with negatives. Elijah complained that he had been zealous for God, but the people had rejected God and his preaching (verse 10). We blame self, we push ourselves with criticism and label ourselves with harsh judgments; it's no wonder we feel bad, we become our worst critics!

Mistake #4 - We exaggerate the negatives. Elijah cried, "I am the only one left." This attitude degenerates to self-pity and despair. The cycle works like this:

- A. We are over-burdened, over-stimulated, over-worked, over-stressed.
- B. This leads to weakened physical and mental resistance as well as spiritual let down.
- C. This condition produces a variety of symptoms such as anger, depression, and low self-esteem.
- D. These attitudes drive us to make critical mistakes such as emotional reasoning, false comparisons, negative self-judgment and further alienation from others.

And finally, these errors produce more stress on our system which perpetuates the vicious cycle leading to total breakdown.

4. God's 4-part remedy for burnout

God is aware of the body's frailty, especially when under stress. In this same passage we see His remedy to renew a burned-out servant named Elijah. The first thing God prescribes is:

A. Rest - God gave Elijah rest for his body.

⁵ He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." ⁶ Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey

is too great for you." ⁸ So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

- I Kings 19:5-8

The body will short-circuit if it does not receive rest and nourishment. A balance of work, rest and leisure is the best medicine for a burned-out system. People usually "rest" until they are well enough to repeat the same mistakes that led to burnout originally. What is needed is an attitude that understands that rest and leisure are as important as work in developing a balanced and pleasing life before God.

B. Release - God allowed Elijah to pour out his heart, his frustrations, fear, and anger.

⁹ Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

- I Kings 19:9-10

The problem with burnout is that it's like a low burning fire inside that never gets extinguished. It keeps burning and building and destroying us from the inside. Pray, cry, share with others, empty your heart out before God so the emotional energy created by the stress can be released.

C. Refocusing - Elijah was seeing only the problem, but in the cave at Horeb he sought again the vision of God that had

originally sent him to prophecy (he heard again the voice of the Lord).

¹¹ So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

- I Kings 19:11-14

Sometimes it isn't a change of place or people that we need; it's a resetting of our sights on God, His word, His Son Jesus Christ and His church that is truly needed.

D. Recommitment - One task was over, it had been a challenge and a burden. After a time of rest, prayer and renewal, Elijah is given a new ministry, a different service to perform for the Lord.

¹⁵ The Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶ and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and

Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place.

- I Kings 19:15-16

The best way to beat burnout is to be active in different ways with different people, pursuing different goals.

If our focus is on God and His purpose, He will be able to direct us into some service that will give us fresh hope and a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm. He will also supply us with help to do the work at hand; Elisha was to continue Elijah's work.

SUMMARY

Elijah was human, like all of us, who nearly burned out because of the pressures of his service to the Lord, but God renewed him with:

- Rest for his body
- Release for his soul
- Refocusing for his spirit
- Recommitment for his heart
- Reinforcement for his ministry (Elisha)

God not only cares for us, He knows exactly what we need for what ails us in every generation. Are you overanxious, stressed or burned out? Do you recognize yourself in Elijah? Are his symptoms also your symptoms? Have you given up on man's solutions to fix the problems and worldly ways to be renewed?

- Denial
- Escapism

- Materialism
- Medication
- Hedonism
- all the ..isms!

I encourage you to try God's prescription for burnout:

1. Find the proper balance between work and rest, even if it means less money.
2. Express your feelings to God in prayer. Do it often and sincerely.
3. Re-establish your priorities putting Christ and His kingdom first in your life again. This will properly order all of your other priorities.
4. Begin seeking for new ways to serve the Lord through His church.

My prayer for all those who struggle with anxiety is that you will find the comfort and security in the Lord that you need to live a joyful, productive life in Christ Jesus. Try it and see the results.

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