

Part 2 - From Stressed to Blessed

People spend lots of effort and money on relieving stress - recreational stress relief, medical stress relief, all kinds of things. Stress is simply a reaction to real or perceived threats. When your body feels threatened emotionally, physically, spiritually, relationally or mentally, a stress response takes place. Adrenalin is produced, blood pressure goes up, the pulse quickens, and many other physiological effects occur.

There's nothing wrong with that under the right circumstances. If you're standing in the road and a truck comes at you and your stress response gives you an extra burst of energy to get out of the road... That's a good thing.

The problem today is we have chronic stress where your body never shuts down. Hundreds of studies have shown that chronic stress is devastating to your physical health and damaging to your brain. Chronic stress can kill you.

Last week we looked at habits for spiritual health. This week it's habits for physical health. There lots we could cover but we only have so much time. So we're focusing on what the Bible says are the antidotes to common stresses. But first, let's identify the most common sources of stress; the six things that cause stress most often in today's lifestyle.

1. Worry - There are lots new things to worry about: No one worried about identity theft or terrorists twenty years ago. There's a lot of new worries we experience in an increasingly complex technological world.

2. Hurry - This comes from the increasing pace in life. We're going faster and faster in a microwave, nanotech world where we want things immediately. Speed creates stress.

3. Crowding - As the world gets more crowded people get more stressed. In 1800 there was only one city in the world with a million people. It was London. Today there are over five hundred cities with over a million and thousands with half a million. There are even mega cities like Mumbai, India with thirty two million, Tokyo with thirty six million and Mexico City with thirty five million. Enormous cities. Block after block after block without any open land. It's all been paved.

Even outside the cities, urban sprawl makes life stressful. I moved into the community where I live 21 years ago. We had a brand new strip mall with a supermarket and everyone was excited. Besides that, there was one convenience store and one restaurant. We had seven farms in the township.

Today we have three times the population we had then. We have Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Peeples, multiple fast food restaurants, Chiles and other restaurants. We have an Urgent Care and an almost finished CVS. There's now one farm left.

All this causes traffic. One study showed that just in the seventy five largest U.S. cities, people wasted over four billion hours in traffic jams. Just imagine the productivity lost in that. It wastes over six billion gallons of gas. All that's stressful.

The fourth modern stressor is **4. Choice** - We have more choices than ever. You'd think having choices would be liberating, but it's paralyzing because it creates indecision. In the store there used to be five to seven kinds of toothpaste. Now there's more than eighty. Do I really need that many choices? There used to be three or four types of cough medicine. Now there's fifty. How do I know which one is for my particular cough? Choices can be paralyzing.

People used to be able to get their coffee black, with cream, with sugar or with cream and sugar - four ways. When you think of all the different ways you can get your coffee at the coffee shop... It can be overwhelming.

5. Loss of Privacy - The government and all kinds of corporations are keeping their eyes on you. They want to know where you are, who you are, what you said and what you bought. Every time you buy they keep a record. Facial recognition software keeps track of people's pictures on line and is now beginning to be used in stores and restaurants.

6. Pluralism - We live in a world where people around you often have very different beliefs, convictions, lifestyles and backgrounds. Technology has shrunk the globe and we live in a mix of cultural values. So we experience conflict. And of course the media feeds on conflict, emphasizing differences which increases the stress.

So let's look today at Psalm 23, because the antidotes to all of this are there. It's just six verses long but we find the cures for these stressors in those six verses: *"The Lord is my shepherd so I have all I need. He makes me lay down in lush green meadows. And he leads me beside calm, quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in the right paths for his name's sake. And even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no*

evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. And you anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

That is the most beloved Psalm in the Bible. It's given comfort to people for thousands of years. When you really dig into it, it tells you how to lower your stress and find peace. Proverbs 14:30 says "*A peaceful heart leads to a healthy body.*" It's not always what you eat but what eats you that makes you unhealthy. So we've got to figure out how to lower the stress and raise the peace.

The first cause of stress was worry. You worry because you wonder if you will have what you need when you need it. So the first antidote to stress is...

1. I Look to God to Meet My Needs. That's first. This calms you because you're trusting in God. Stop looking to people or things to meet your needs and stress goes down dramatically. There's no security in things you can lose.

Sometimes people link their security to their job and they lose that job. They link it to a relationship. Then people die or there's a relationship breakdown. They put their security in money. There are lots of ways to lose your money.

As your pastor and friend, I recommend to you that you never link your security to anything that can be taken away from you. You can lose your job, your health, your reputation, your spouse, your friend, your home... but Christ will always be with you. You can walk away from him, but he'll never walk away from you. So find your security in that.

Psalm 23:1 says "*The Lord is my shepherd so I have all I need.*" I shall not want. God's my shepherd. I stop expecting people to meet needs only God can meet. Romans 8:31-32 says, "*If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?*" The logic is obvious. If God loved you enough to send Jesus to die on the cross, God certainly loves you enough to care for you. So stop looking to other people to meet your needs because they're going to let you down. No person could possibly meet all your emotional, mental or spiritual needs. So look to God.

The first step to stress reduction is to refocus on God. Stop focusing on other people or things and focus on God. Make this an affirmation in your life. Every time you start to get stressed, stop and say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need."

2. I Obey God's Instructions About Rest. So much stress comes from being in a hurry; feeling like you've got too much to do; like you never can get caught up.

God could have created humans to not need sleep. Some animals hardly sleep and a few don't seem to sleep at all. Why create you with a need to spend one third of life asleep. Why is so much of your life "wasted"? Because God wants you to rest. And God modeled it. After God created the universe it says "*God rested.*" Why? God wasn't tired. God doesn't get tired. God was modeling the importance of rest to your life. God says every seventh day you rest. The Bible has many instructions on rest, recreation and relaxation. It's so important it's in the "big ten" - the Ten Commandments. Right up there with don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't lie. That's how important a Sabbath is in your life. Jesus said "*The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.*" God created this idea of a day of rest, recreation, worship, and restoration for you, for your benefit. It's so you don't burn out.

Yet today in our society people aren't doing that. Even on their day off they're working. Even if they go to a church service some go right back to work to get done the stuff they didn't get done during the work week. That's not a Sabbath.

Psalm 23:2 says this "*He makes me lie down.*" It says God makes me lie down. Does God ever have to make you lay down? Because you weren't smart enough to rest. Sheep aren't smart enough to rest so the shepherd has to make them lay down. If you're not smart enough to get the rest you need and take a day off for rest, God has wired your body so that it will *make* you take time off. If you just keep going, you'll get sick because God wired you to obey his commandments.

Your best requires rest. You're not wasting time when you're relaxing or resting. That's why God gave us a Sabbath. Exodus 34:21 says, "*You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but on the seventh day you must stop working, even during the seasons of plowing and harvest.*"

Even in your busiest season it's not an excuse. Even accountants at tax time, retailers at Christmas, farmers at harvest, you still need a day off. What am I supposed to do on my Sabbath? There are three things to do:

I Rest My Body. Physically rest. It's the Biblical basis for a Sunday afternoon nap. Just not while I'm speaking.

I Refocus My Spirit. That's worship - what we're doing now. In corporate worship we refresh our spirit.

I Recharge My Emotions. Recreation recharges your emotions. Different things recharge different people. You need to do something that restores you and reenergizes.

My Sabbath is not Sunday. Sunday is a work day for me. The media team know what I do on Sundays after our worship time - I finish getting everything ready for next Sunday. If all goes well I email it to them that evening or Monday morning. My Sabbath is Saturday. On Saturday I rest, refocus and recharge. I try to do no work on Saturday. It's my Sabbath.

You say, But I feel guilty when I relax. Jesus didn't. Jesus often took time off to relax. He'd go out and do an entire period of intensive ministry then he'd say, Guys we need to go away for a while. We're going off to the mountains. We're going off to the desert.

I heard about a guy who said to his pastor, "Pastor I tried to get a hold of you all day on Monday." The pastor said, "I'm sorry. That's my day off." The man said, "The devil never takes a day off." And the pastor said, "Yeah and if I didn't I'd be just like the devil..." Some people - that's why they're so cranky - not enough sleep; not enough rest. You're a little devil because you're not taking a Sabbath.

3. I Refresh My Soul with the Right Environment. The visual element of life and beauty in particular is important in stress management. Ugliness stresses you out. Beauty inspires; encourages; motivates; stirs positive emotions and God created a world of beauty; a planet with vibrant colors. Have you ever heard someone say, "I feel so close to God in nature." Of course you do! God created it.

Psalms 23:2-3 says, "*He makes me lie down in lush green meadows and leads me beside calm quiet waters. He restores my soul.*" We can all visualize that scene. When you just think about lush green meadows and a calm quiet lake, you tend to relax a bit. If you think about the traffic on Route 23 you get stressed. But if you think about meadows and calm waters, stress drains away. Nature refreshes because beauty inspires. Find environments that refresh you. You need to see beautiful scenes and hear beautiful sounds to keep stress down. Add beauty to your life. Here are some suggestions:

Get Outside Every Day. If you're not getting outside every day your stress level is going up. Even if it's just your back yard, even if it's just a walk around the block, even if it's just take your lunch outside. We have some nice parks in town and plenty of beautiful countryside around here. You need to get in touch with God's creation. You need to surround yourself with beauty.

Start the Day with God Not the Media. Before you read any text message, check your email, turn on the radio, turn on the TV for some morning show, you need to get in touch with God. The first ten minutes set the mood for the day. Do you want to start it with the worst news of the day? No. You don't need to know all the bad news first thing. Turn on some praise music. Get in touch with God. Let the first ten minutes of your day be with the Lord. That will dramatically reduce your stress and improve your mood.

Intentionally Improve Your Environment. Put up pieces of art; play music that inspires you. Do an inspiring craft or have a hobby that increases your exposure to beauty. Looking at beauty lowers your stress level. Listening to beauty lowers your stress level. Take up an instrument or some kind of art. You are most like your Creator when you're being creative. God gave us music and God gave us art for one reason. To express emotion. You don't need it for physical survival but you do need it to really live. To be who God made you to be. So fill your life with art and music.

Philippians 4:8 says, "*Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.*" Because of sin there's a lot of ugliness in the world. There are a lot of unpleasant things in the world. Whatever you give your attention to is going to either raise or lower your stress.

4. I Go to God for Guidance. This is vital because a common source of stress is indecision and, in today's world, we usually have too many choices. I recommend making God your source for guidance. Not the opinions of your friends or some pundit on television, but going to God. Because God always tells you the truth. James 1:5-6 says, "*If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone.*" God alone is the source of wisdom and God gives it generously and graciously. God is waiting to give you wisdom. You just have to ask.

So I go to God. I pray and I ask. Then I read the Bible. Then I wait and be quiet and I listen and I sense. At the right time, maybe not immediately, but at the right time, God will do something in my mind and heart. That's inspiration!

Write this down - God will guide me at the right time. God **will** guide you at the right time. God's timing is perfect. God is going to give you the right decision and the right guidance if you'll trust him but God will do it at the right time.

Psalms 23:3 says this *"He guides me in the right paths for his name's sake."* God will guide me at the right time in the right way. I believe in God to do that. If you have that belief, and if you're willing to wait and listen and clear out the obstacles that you may be keeping between you and God, God is going to do it.

5. I Trust God Is with Me in the Dark Valley. I trust God when I'm in the valley. We all go through dark valleys in life. You'll go through many. One common source of stress is loss. Loss of a job, income, health, your reputation, a loved one... We all go through many losses in life and when we do there are generally two reactions. Fear and grief. Grief is beneficial. Fear is damaging and detrimental. Grief is the way we get through the transitions of life. The Bible says God grieves so it's a godly emotion. In fact if you don't grieve you get stuck. Grief allows you to take time, work through things, and then, at the right time, move on and grow emotionally.

On the other hand fear is a bad thing. Not once in the Bible does it say, grieve not, sorrow not, weep not, cry not. What it does say is fear not. And it says that 365 times. Grief doesn't paralyze; fear does.

Psalms 23:4 says, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, [I don't fear. Why?] for you are with me; Your rod and your staff comfort me."* Remember he's using the shepherd metaphor. Shepherds carried a rod and a staff. To ward off wolves and to guide the sheep. It's saying I'm not going to stress out about this because God is my protector and guide; God is helping me. And I'm going to trust God in the dark valleys.

Some of you may be going through a valley right now and shadows are scary. But here are two things about shadows:

Shadows can't hurt you. If a truck runs over you it hurts, but if a truck's shadow runs over you it doesn't hurt you.

Shadows are often larger in appearance than their source. Your fear can be greater than the actual event.

But here's the good news. You can't have a shadow without a light. Wherever there's a shadow there's a light somewhere. So the key when you're going through the valley of the shadow is to look past the shadow and focus on the light. As long as I focus on the light the shadow can't scare me. And Jesus is the light of the world.

6. I Let God Be My Defender. Another common source of stress is conflict. Opposition. Criticism. Attacks. There are people in your life who simply don't like you. They may be people you work with. They may be in your circle of friends. They may be a neighbor. They may be a member of the church. Maybe they are people in your own family. They criticize you - maybe out of jealousy, maybe out of fear. They put you down. They never have a positive word. If you have any success they minimize it. They criticize you regularly.

When that happens the natural response is attack back, criticize back, retaliate, get even. But when you get even with somebody who's criticizing you it puts you on the same level. If you forgive them it puts you above them. But if you get even you're no better than they are.

You have people around you all the time who don't agree with you and may not like you. And our society seems to be losing its civility. The world is getting more rude. The things I hear people say; the things I see posted in social media... it's disheartening. When people do this, what they're revealing is the smallness of their heart. Little people belittle people. Great people make people feel great.

How do you handle rude people? How do you handle mean people? You don't. You let God handle them. You let God be your defender.

David in the Old Testament, as a young man was anointed by Samuel to be the next king of Israel. But it was done in secret so no one was aware of it. David knew. His family knew, but it wasn't public. For a large part of his life he spent his time running from the current king who wanted him dead - hiding in caves and being maligned and demeaned. Rumors were told about him. He was criticized constantly.

Yet he never would say a bad word against the king. He would never retaliate. God was preparing David to be the king after his own heart and it's David who says in Psalms 23:5 *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, and you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."*

God did give David a banquet in front of his enemies. He lifted him up as king even though they tried to work against him. David didn't become king because of his own efforts against his enemies, but by God's work. And David's head was anointed with oil which was the way of proclaiming who was going to be the next leader; the next king. His cup did overflow - he was blessed far beyond what he suffered. God was good to him in spite of his attackers, in spite of his critics.

In Psalm 18:1-2 David says this *"I love you, Lord; you are my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety."* Does David sound stressed out there? No. But he was still being attacked while writing this. He knows God's in control. God is his defender.

It takes a lot of faith to trust when you're under attack; to trust God and just not defend yourself when you're being maligned, misunderstood, misjudged; when rumors are spreading and people are saying things about you. When that happens everything in you wants to rise up to do something about it; to correct it; to give the other person the same treatment. It takes faith to trust God.

You are most like Christ when you remain silent under attack. Jesus was constantly attacked. And who was he attacked by? The religious people. The religious people did not like Jesus. Common, ordinary, everyday people – they loved Jesus. And the marginal people - the prostitutes, pimps, tax collectors, crooks, thieves, the poor, the lepers, all the outcast people, they all loved Jesus. It was the religious people who could not stand Jesus. They called him a glutton, a drunk, a son of the devil, the devil himself. They said he was a false leader, a false prophet. And on and on and on.

Jesus never retaliated; never hit back. You're most like Christ when you remain silent in criticism. I'll tell you a secret I've learned from experience: When you do this you end up with more anointing, authority, and influence. They think they'll hurt you by criticizing. But respond correctly and it actually helps you. Because when people criticize you unjustly, and they say mean things, Jesus says, *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."*

We can trust God even when we suffer. Peter has a good way to say this in 1 Peter 4:19: *"So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you."*

Then, one last thing: **7. I Expect God Will Finish What God Starts in Me.** Are you afraid of the future? Are you a *what if-er*? What if this happens? What if this went wrong? What if that went bad? What if? What if? What if? If you are it leads to enormous amount of stress in your life that's unnecessary, because here's what Psalm 23:6 says, *"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* I'm going to heaven anyway.

People tend to look at the future one of two ways: They say, "What if everything goes wrong? What if I don't have enough? What if I lose my job or someone walks out on me? Or they look at the future and say "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Those are your options. You can either see from God's viewpoint or you can see it from your fearful anxiety. You lower stress by expecting God to finish what God starts. And even if everything else goes wrong in my life I'm still going to heaven. I'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Let's pray.