

Coping With Stress

By Philip Venables

INTRODUCTION

First of all I want to make it clear that I do not approach this issue as the one who has got this matter all “sorted out”. I am NOT the expert seeking to pass on all my learned wisdom. In fact, as I come to this issue, I feel very much a failure and am led to ponder how many times I have failed to “cope with stress”. God, however, has His wisdom and enabling which are the means to help us to cope with stress. What I would like us to be engaging with by the time we reach the end of our study, is not just how we can cope with stress, but how we can we can grow through stress.

Let us establish straight away that stress is a major issue. It was reported in 2005 that, “*Stress at work is causing depression and anxiety in one in five Britons and costing the country £100 billion a year in lost output (1).*” We, perhaps, all know what it is to have a sleepless night or tightened stomach or loss of appetite on account of feeling the pressures of life. It can be far worse as well, with even the collapse of the mental system being experienced by some.

But let us clarify first of all what is stress? A definition is that, “*it is a demand upon physical or mental energy.*” It can also be defined as, “*the suffering which comes as a result of the physical or mental demands placed upon us.*” We see immediately from these definitions that understanding what stress is can be confusing. Essentially, from these two definitions we have stress leading to stress. So when we refer to stress we can either be speaking of the demands of life or our failure to deal with the demands of life. Given the potential for confusion I am then going to seek to avoid the word stress in this study. Instead I am going to refer to the pressures of life and how we respond to them.

Pressures in life are universal. Throughout scripture we see the various pressures that came upon people. Interestingly, they started in the garden of Eden when, “**The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it**” (Gen. 2:15). That meant an element of pressure. Adam just could not lie in bed all day. We note immediately that the pressures of life are not essentially sinful because this pressure came upon Adam in the sinless situation prior to the fall. Rather, it is our response which can be sinful.

Moving on through scripture we then go to Genesis 3 and the attack of Satan against Eve; again a pressure event. We can go on throughout scripture and see so many experiences of the pressures of life which come upon all peoples. Our great Saviour was not exempt; He felt them as well. Think of just two events:

- The temptations in the wilderness when relentless pressure was upon him. We read how, “**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil**” (Luke 4:1-2). And after this there were the three specific temptations. What pressure this was!
- In Gethsemane when our Saviour faced up to all the demands of the cross upon him. In Matthew 26:42 we read, “**He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’**” What pressure!

We are starting to see then in this whole stress business there are two main issues:

- there are the pressures of life
- there is our response to these pressures.

As we get this into our minds I want us to appreciate something of how these interface. Put starkly the stronger we are then the better equipped we are, to handle the pressures of life. To illustrate if I brought my fist down upon a sheet of paper it would easily give way. A plank of wood would be effected by my fist, but would most likely not give way, whilst a bar of iron would be totally unmoved by my fist. Similarly, the degree to which we are affected by the pressures of life depends upon how strong we are in ourselves.

However, continuing my illustration the impact on the paper, plank of wood and piece of metal depends also on the strength of the fist. The stronger the fist then the bigger will be the pressure exerted. And so it is with the pressures of life. The greater the pressures are then the harder they are to bear. This sets us up for how we seek to move forward in looking at this issue of stress. Firstly we will look at the pressures themselves. And then we will look at the ability we have to cope with these pressures.

1. THE PRESSURES

How vast is the range of the pressures of life: bad health, bad neighbours, job problems, having no job, financial problems, big decisions, difficult relationships, a difficult boss, crossing the road. The list is really endless.

One of the ways we can help ourselves to cope with the pressures of life is to reduce the pressures. As an interesting example of this let us read of when Jethro, Moses father-in-law, came to visit him:

"The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

"Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions."

"Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them His decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people - men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain - and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them serve as judges for the people at all times, but let them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied" (Ex. 18:13-23).

We notice here that Jethro observed that unless the situation changed Moses would wear himself out. However, he proffered that if Moses followed his advice, and thereby reduced the pressure on himself, he would be able to take the strain.

Many of us, like Moses, are unnecessarily overloading ourselves. It has been well said that we should know the size of our plate and fill it. In pondering this we need to know that each of us will have a different size of plate. Just because someone can cope with many demands upon them very easily does not mean that we all can! And we should be aware that the size of our plate will vary according to what juncture of life we are at. In all this we need to know ourselves. We need to be able to prioritize what are the important things in life. It may be that we have to say "no" to a job promotion. We may need to refuse to take on a further responsibility in church. We make these decisions because we know how much we can cope with.

We need to be aware, as well, that we so often clutter our lives with unnecessary things which only add to the pressures of life. It might be good for us all to do an inventory of the things in our lives, whether they be possessions or activities, to see what really needs to be there. How much pressure would be relieved from our lives if we just got rid of some of the things that need not be there?

Finally, in this section it is worth considering the issue of peer pressure or as we used to call it "keeping-up-with-the-Joneses". We place pressure upon ourselves because we feel that we have to have the latest plasma TV or Smartphone or whatever fashion item. Let us remember that our fulfilment in life is not found in what we have, but in Christ.

We would relieve ourselves of much pressure if we just cut some things out of our lives.

2. OUR RESPONSE TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE.

We are going to consider our response to the pressure of life under three headings: before, during and after. This is an artificial distinction because there is in a sense that there is no division in our experience of the pressures of life. There are pressures we are going through now and on account of enduring these pressures we are seeking to build ourselves up for future struggles. However, I have adopted this approach because it can give us a framework to consider our response.

a. Before

It is said of the good man in Psalm 112 that:

**“Surely the righteous will never be shaken;
they will be remembered forever.**

**“They will have no fear of bad news;
their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD.”** (Psalm 112:6-7).

To cull out the basic detail here; the righteous man is not anticipating being shaken by the bad circumstances in life because his faith is strong in the Lord. This drives into the situation of us all as we face the perils of life. It is ultimately the strength of the LORD which will give us the ability, not only to survive the pressures of life, but even to prosper through them.

If you think of a boxer who has a fight ahead. He knows it will be tough so he is in training so as to face the day of the fight. That is like us. We should be permanently in training so as to be prepared for the day of conflict.

Accordingly, we need to hear the words of Jude 20-21:

“But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.”

We need to be building ourselves up in our most holy faith. We need to be keeping ourselves in the love of God. It is through this that we can build up more resources for fruitful endurance in the circumstances of life. But how is this achieved?

- The Word of God

We need to be continually studying the word of God. Peter says to the dispersed Christians, **“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation”** (1 Pet. 2:2). Our study of the Word should not be spasmodic. We should continually be delighting in the law of the LORD. This should be done through personal study. But very importantly we should be studying with others. Think about studying with another person, or in a small group.

But most critically we should be learning in church. We should be hearing God's Word preached. The statement stands that, **“faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word about Christ”** (Rom. 10:17). We need to hear the Word and study the Word together in church. Make sure you are there. It is a key means to your growth. It is interesting, as well, to consider what 1 Corinthians 14 is about. You might say it is about speaking in tongues or prophecy or whatever. Actually it is about edification. Read the chapter and see. And edification means being built up. One key aspect of church life is being built up. It is through hearing the Word and sharing the Word that we are built up.

- Prayer

Jude 20 has already been telling us about how we need to be praying in the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 6:10-18 tells us of how we need to be preparing for the day of spiritual difficulty which is ahead. For such a day we need to put on the whole armour of God. But we should note at the end of that passage it says that we should, **“pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people”** (Eph. 6:18). Everyday let us give ourselves to prayer. Let us pray together. Let us make the prayer meeting in church important.

- Fellowship

We read in 1 Samuel 23:15-16 that, **“While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.”** We need to be helping one another to find strength in God. We need Jonathans around us. Be careful who you draw close to. Remember the great truth that, **“as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another”** (Prov. 27:17). How wonderful it is to have close friends who can help build us up in our faith.

Think as well about having fellowship with others through listening to their testimonies. Read good

Christian biographies. Read of those who have endured so much for the LORD and known the preserving hand of God. Please read wisely though; not all, so called, Christian biography is helpful. Nevertheless, Much strengthening of our faith can take place through reading good inspiring biographies. From such books we can hear the descendants of the heroes of faith of Hebrews 11 cheering us on. Remember Hebrews 12:1 says, **“since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”**

As we come to Hebrews 12:1 we come to see the outcome which the Word of God, prayer and fellowship should have in our lives. These things are not ends in themselves: they are means to make sure we lay aside that which hinders us and reject sin in our lives. We have them so that we should, **“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and forever! Amen”** (2 Pet. 3:18). It is so important that we do not set spiritual strength as our goal. Rather when we set knowing Jesus Christ as our goal then we become strong in our God. Then we are equipped to endure and prosper in the tough stuff of life.

Our lives should be continual lives of growth and development. Peter expresses this when he says:

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a Godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:3-8).

Our lives should be lives of progress as we escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. Lives where we should be effective and productive in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. And thereby we are strengthened for the battles of life.

These spiritual resources are absolutely crucial for facing the rigours of life. However, in considering the growth of our resources, I want to mention two further important issues:

- Taking care of ourselves.

We do not exist in this world as simply spiritual beings. We are spiritual and physical. Paul desires of the Thessalonians, **“May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Thess. 5:23b). We have bodies, we have emotions; we are not just spiritual beings. In Mark 6:31 we read, **“Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’”** We need to have our R&R; we need to have our rest and relaxation. We need as well to remember the principle of the Sabbath: six days work and one day rest. That is a creation principle. We need to heed it. Also the taking of holidays is very important. In all these things you are strengthening yourselves; you are adding to your resources so as to deal with the hardships of life.

Some say *“I don't know why I bothered with that holiday it seems so long ago now, I am immersed in the issues of life again”*. But through holidays we are investing in our welfare; we are strengthening ourselves.

In all these things we need to know ourselves. We need to take exercise. Get out and go for a good walk. Get the endorphins secreting in your system and be lifted up. Be careful about your diet. Drink sufficient water. Have a means of unwinding; play the piano, watch TV.

- Depression

I use the word depression as a summary for mental afflictions that can come upon us. When suffering from depression we have a reduction in the resources which we need to cope with the vagaries of life. It can be slight, it can be severe; but it is real. The essence of depressive illness is the experience of an inability to cope. “I can't cope” is the lament which articulates the feeling of someone in depression. Whether it be through chemical imbalance or mental malfunction we stop being able to deal with what we were once able to handle. It is as if through the affliction of depression the bank account which provides the resources to deal with the issues of life is suddenly depleted by a significant withdrawal of

the cash capability.

Elijah gives us an example of this. What spiritual strength he had to have to face the prophets of Baal! (see 1 Kings 18). But when we come into 1 Kings 19:1-5 we read, **“Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”**”

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.”

Elijah, I suggest, was suffering from a sort of depression; he could not cope. We can be like that as well and need to be aware of this. It is no excuse for failing to build ourselves up in God. However, we need to know where we are at, and be aware of how much we can cope with. Depression makes us vulnerable to being overwhelmed by the challenges of life. We, therefore, need to know how to move through it so that we can be well-resourced again to deal with life's pressures. In that sense medication or counselling may be necessary.

b. During

We have learnt that we need to make sure that we are continually strengthening ourselves in God. This is needed so that when the difficult, pressurised times in life come we are able to face them with determined confidence because we are trusting in the LORD. When, however, we come into experiencing the harsh realities of life we will not automatically survive them no matter how well resourced we are. We have to make sure that we have the right strategy in place so that we can bear up under intense pressure. And of course, we need to be aware that we are not playing with a trivial issue here. Pressure can be very severe: the death of a loved one, serious illness, the loss of work, the waywardness of a child, a difficult marriage. How are we going to get through?

- Immediate preparation.

There are times when we can see tough experiences ahead. Ezra was leading about six thousand people back from Babylon to Jerusalem. We read of this in Ezra 8. The journey would take four months (see Ez. 7:9). Many uncertainties lay ahead; many potential difficulties. What about food? What about security? So what did he do? **“There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions”** (Ezra 8:21). And then we read in Ezra 8:23 that, **“we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.”**

When we see difficulties in life approaching the natural reaction is panic. But for those of us who know the LORD we should embrace the promise, **“in all your ways acknowledge him, and He will make your paths straight”** (Prov. 3:6).

However, so many things enter our lives unexpectedly. Proverbs 27:1 says, **“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”** In the light of this we must make sure that we commit all our days and all our times to the LORD. We do not know, for example, whether or not a journey may lead to all kinds of difficult circumstances. Therefore, let us make sure we pray before we start out. Your day at school, college, in the shops, in the office or wherever, may have all kinds of difficulties that you are completely unaware of. So make sure you give it all to the LORD.

- The Word of God.

Here the issue is how we are using the Word of God in order to provide us with the necessary assistance to move through the hard circumstances of life.

When the Lord Jesus went through His sufferings in the desert at the hand of Satan he had one weapon which he used, that is the Word of God. The threefold attack by Satan was met with the threefold rebuttal in the words **“it is written.”** We should similarly be using the Word of God to preserve us and prosper us in the trials of life.

a. Let us speak to ourselves with the Word of God.

Amidst the onflow of the pressures of life we can very often find ourselves overwhelmed by what is going on. In such circumstances it is good to take ourselves in hand and lecture ourselves from the

Scriptures. Through this we can know what it is to be stabilised in the vagaries of life. An example of this is found in Psalm 43:5-6 where the psalmist speaks to his own soul, **“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”** It would do us good to follow such a line; but what would we say?

We can go through a passage like Psalm 34 and grab hold of the promises of God to know that He is taking us through this difficult part of our lives for His glory.

God is in control We need to memorise scriptures which emphasize that we trust in the God who is in control of all things. Examples would be:

- **“He who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will”** (Eph. 1:11b)
- **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** (Rom. 8:28).

In times of adversity we need to be using scripture to assure ourselves that God is in control. He really is in control!

Once, many years ago, travelling by aeroplane from Malaysia I asked if I could visit the cock-pit with my sons as a treat for them. My request was granted and we went up to see the pilots at their controls. When there I asked about how they cope with turbulence. Now, I do not like turbulence at all, the response of the cockpit occupants was intriguing though. They simply brushed turbulence off as being something completely inconsequential. So why should I fear turbulence when those who are in control view it with such disdain? And that gives a great picture of us in the turbulences of life. The one who is in control is completely untroubled by these things. So why should I fear?

God delivers Psalm 34 is a beautiful psalm to look at in the context of us dealing with some of the great pressures of life. In this psalm we can be assured that God delivers us. We read in Ps. 34:7-9,

**“The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,
and He delivers them.**

**Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.**

**Fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear Him lack nothing.”**

And again go to v19,

**“A righteous man may have many troubles,
but the LORD delivers him from them all;”**

We lay hold of these and we claim them for ourselves in times of trouble. Remember that word “all” in v19; Not some, BUT all! And so we should unhesitatingly trust our God.

God has His time One of the encouragements we can take from these scriptures is that God has a time for our sufferings. Remember of the church in Smyrna the LORD says, **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”** (Rev. 2:10). Whatever the ten days means it is a specific allotment of time which the LORD knows.

Our sufferings have an allotted time. Now most importantly we need to know that they are NOT forever. We will soon be home. **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”** (John 16:33b) are the words of our blessed Saviour. The world cannot overcome us. Our Saviour is in glory and we will soon be with Him!

Combating worry One of the things that naturally occurs in times of pressure is worry. We wonder about so many things. So again we need to turn to the Word and see the injunctions to us from our LORD in Matthew 6:25-34,

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or

spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

How we need to be strong in speaking to ourselves about these things. Remember that great statement that "your Father knows". The LORD says "*do not worry*"; it is a command. We should be concerned not to excuse our worry. I remember a professed believer being described as a worrier; that is not good. I even suggest it is sinful for a Christian to be a worrier because we are disobeying a direct command of our LORD who said: "*Do not worry.*"

In the In Touch magazine for February 2010 there is a most instructive piece on Outsourcing Worry by Linda Canup (2). The sub-title is "Giving God Our Cares",

"I was reading the other day about a man who wanted to outsource his life. After delegating work tasks and other personal responsibilities, he decided to subcontract his anxiety. So he hired a virtual assistant in India to worry for him.

It worked spectacularly. Any time he started fretting about the things he'd told his assistant to worry about, he stopped himself and thought, You don't need to concern yourself with this; [name] is worrying about it for you. This allowed him to focus on the tasks he needed to accomplish that day without the interference of nagging anxieties.

What a wonderful idea to apply to our spiritual relationship with God: We ought to be outsourcing our worries to Him! It's way better than a virtual assistant worrying for us, because we've given our anxieties to the One who can truly make them disappear. Our concerns are not simply put aside or made to be somebody else's burden. They are acknowledged and resolved by the Lord Himself.

You might be thinking, 'That's sweet—but a little too simple for my life.' I wouldn't blame you. It's hard to stop worrying about where you'll get the money to pay your mortgage or the possibility that your ailing parent might not get better. I'm not trivializing these things. In reality, though, whether your worries are big or small, only God can truly take care of them.

When I concentrate my efforts on giving God the big stuff during sustained prayer and "outsourcing" the little stuff to Him as it crops up ("Lord, I'm late for work and I've lost my credit card—I'll let You deal with that for now"), life becomes a little easier.

It's amazing how things seem to miraculously work themselves out: lost stuff reappears; I make it to work with time to spare; another parent at the soccer match has a spare jersey for my kid; there's money left over at the end of the month. When this happens, I don't outsource the praise!"

This provides us with much food-for-thought as we seek to deal with the troubles of life. Let us remember to outsource our worries to the LORD.

God knows us One of the great Bible words is endurance. It speaks of keeping going under the arduous circumstances of life. And when we think that the experience is simply overwhelming and we do not know how we can get through, then we remember God is in control. The Word says, "**No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.**" (1 Cor. 10:13). We must lay hold of these promises and speak them into our troubled souls.

In so many ways we can use the Word of God in times of pressure. We go to the many examples of how believers in the past have gone through troubles and God has been with them. Read the story of Joseph through the lens of Genesis 50:20, "**You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives**". Read of David and Daniel and of course above all, read of Jesus our LORD. Read and be encouraged to endure through the afflictions of life.

b. Use the Word against the devil.

Not only can we use the word to lecture ourselves, but we can also use it to resist the devil. Scripture says that we should, "**Resist the devil, and he will flee from you**" (James 4:7b). No doubt this is an

area where we need to be very careful. There is a lot of nonsense around in this realm. However, there are times, I don't say this is always the case, but there are times when we can be aware of Satan seeking to eliminate us in the walk of faith. In these circumstances we need to **"take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God"** (Eph. 6:17). We use the scriptures and we wield the Word of God.

Tell the devil of our security in Christ. No-one can pluck us out of His hand. Tell Him of our forgiveness in Christ; the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. In this way we resist him.

- Prayer

One of the other times when the LORD encountered pressure was in the garden of Gethsemane. We read of this in Matt. 26:37b that, **"he began to be sorrowful and troubled"**. The pressure was intense and He turned it all over to His Father. So we read of His three times of prayer where He asked, **"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will"** (Matt. 26:39). Similarly, we should be submitting to the will of our God in all the circumstances of life. Remember He knows all about everyone of them.

This was not lethargic speaking though by our Lord. Rather it was passionate pleading. We read of it in Hebrews 5:7 that, **"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and He was heard because of his reverent submission."**

How this should be a model for our pleadings during prayer. There are times for loud cries. Read the Psalms and see how many times there was a crying out to God. Read Psalm 18:6 as an example, **"In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple He heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears."**

Let us come to our God with fervent passionate prayer. And let us give all to Him. Let us consider the injunction 1 Peter 5:7 to, **"Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you."** Prayer is the means by which we can give everything over to God. Note here that cast is in the aorist tense. This means it is a once for all thing. It is NOT present continuous. It is once-for-all. That means as our cares come upon us in the pressures of life we cast them upon Him and leave them there. It is interesting that the passage continues that we should be, **"self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"** (1 Pet. 5:8). How many believers are taken captive by the devil through not releasing their care upon God.

And finally regarding this prayer issue let us hear from Hebrews 4:14-16 that: **"since we have a great High Priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."** Let us be continually turning to Jesus. He knows the trials of life. He can help.

- Praise

Singing praise songs to our God can be such a transforming experience in difficult times. Remember Paul and Timothy who were incarcerated in the prison at Phillippi with their feet in stocks in Acts 16. Of them we read that at, **"about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them"** (Acts 16:25). We can begin to see a different perspective on life when we start to engage in praise to our God. Go to "You Tube" or to your cd's. Get out some of your favourite praise songs and be lifted. Going back to Psalm 34 we read that in his difficulty David begins with praise:

**"I will extol the LORD at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
My soul will boast in the LORD;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the LORD with me;
let us exalt his name together."**
(Psalm 34:1-3)

The problem is that we have got a Christianity which is based on me. In such a situation we only praise God when we are in a happy state. Rather when our faith is about God and His Son Jesus then we can praise Him for who He is regardless of our circumstances and feelings.

- Others

Going back to the experience of our LORD in Gethsemane we can consider how He longed to have fellowship with Peter, James and John in His extremity. We read He returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. **"Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" He asked Peter**" (Matt. 26:40b). How painful it was for Him to not have their fellowship at that time of extremity.

We need each other. We need to support one another. In Galatians 6:2 Paul says to the Galatians, **"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ."** Very sadly we are so easily let down by our fellow believers like our Saviour was. May it not be so.

- Church

The Hebrew Christians were suffering much. In fact the book of Hebrews can helpfully be read through viewing it as how Christians can keep believing under pressure. In Hebrews 10 we read, **"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching"** (Heb. 10:24-25).

Meeting together is so important. And when we come to church let us bring all into church. Sometimes people say about coming into church that we leave the day-to-day affairs behind. No, let us bring it all in and see God work in all the problems and pressures of life as we bring them to God in church.

So through the Word of God, prayer, praise and fellowship we can be helped to keep going during days of affliction. The most important thing is that we keep the LORD with us through a continued trust in Him. Let us have faith in God. And let us heed to, **"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"** (Phil. 4:6-7). May it be so for the glory of God.

c. After

- "Success"

When the time comes that the pressure is off. We can look back and learn much from our God.

We did things. This takes us back to the garden of Eden and the command to Adam to look after the garden. If he had not had this pressure put on him Adam would not have had the impetus to get on and work for God. So the pressures of life give us means of fulfilment. The need to pay the mortgage drives us to work and thereby we can know fulfilment in doing good work to honour our God.

So the pressures of life lead us to be fulfilled in achieving things.

We have transformed characters. Metals are heated in order to remove impurities; this is called refining. And it is said that the refiner knows that the metal is pure when he can see his reflection in the molten metal. What a precious thought this is. Malachi 3:3 says of the LORD that, **"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness."** The hard circumstances of life are the refining process.

There is a further thought here though, and that is that the metal itself will be destroyed if the fire is too hot. The LORD knows the amount of heat we can bear! He is not set upon destroying you.

And think about the words of James 1:2-4, **"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."** Through the tough stuff of life God is working some great happenings. Our faith is strengthened; we are built up.

Further, the psalmist in Psalm 119:67 remarks that, **"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word."** Affliction brings us back on to the right track. So easily our lives become flabby. Affliction sharpens them up.

We can trust God. In the easy times of life we so easily look to ourselves and trust in circumstances. When we have all the props of life knocked away in the turmoil of life we are left simply to trust in our God. And we learn that He is faithful. The truth of Deuteronomy 33:27, **"The eternal God**

is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” becomes more real to us. This, in a sense, was Job’s experience. Everything was taken away and he came through holding on to God alone.

We can have confidence for future struggles. When we have worked through many issues in the crucible of the hard circumstances of life and we have survived. When we have known the LORD preserving us. We can therefore be encouraged to look ahead and know God’s help in the future. In this sense the trials of life are God’s training ground for our development in usefulness. Think of the story of David,

“But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you" (1 Sam 17:34-37).

The experience of conquering the lion and the bear gave David confidence that He would help him in the conflict with Goliath. And so for ourselves we can look back on things we have come through; pressure times which we have survived. We can then say yes I can trust Him for the future; I can trust Him through upcoming struggles.

“Failure”

We have all failed in dealing with the pressures of life. But our God is gracious. Let us cast our minds to Peter’s experience in Matthew 14:29-31 when he saw the LORD walking on the water. **“‘Come’, He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith’, He said, ‘why did you doubt?’”**. We, like Peter, so easily look at the circumstances and collapse. But our God is the God of a new start. We are his disciples we are learners. With God failure is not final.

In this context there is greatly encouraging scripture hidden away in Ezra 10. The context here is of a people who have wandered from God by marrying wives from outside the nation of Israel. As we come in Ezra 10 we find the people have come to repentance through Ezra’s powerful ministry. Shecaniah then speaks up to take the lead in the repentance. He acknowledges the sin of the people and then says, **“But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel”** (Ezra 10:3b). There is always hope for God’s people because God always receives us, restores us and renews us when we turn to Him.

CONCLUSION

I have sought to deal with how we as believers in Christ can cope with stress. It is sobering to wonder about the situation of the non-Christian in seeking to deal with the pressures of life. Obviously, they do not have the devil against them. But their situation is dire for they do not have the God of all glory to call upon and rely upon as a loving father. If you are a non-Christian you need Christ Jesus as your enabler. You need to come to God through Him.

But finally for us as Christians let us finish with a promise from God’s Word.

**“When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.**

**For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;”**. (Isaiah 43:2-3)

May the LORD help us to cope with stress, but much more to grow through stress.

- (1) From "The Times", May 16, 2005, "Britain counts £100bn cost of stress in the workplace" by Ben Hoyle.
- (2) "InTouch" magazine, "Outsourcing Worry; Giving God our Cares" by Linda Canup, February 2010,p.25.

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