

LIVING UNDER STRESS

1 Peter 2:18-25

Stress is a fact of life. It seems that life is a lot of “routine” punctuated by occasional crises. When we are forced out of our routine, it makes us uncomfortable and that discomfort produces pressure or stress that tends to direct or drive us back to a routine. How we deal with stress and what we do to eliminate the stress tends to define or characterize our personality. We use such terms as stable, easy-going, laid back, hyper, agitated, measured, calm, angry, rude, hostile, and other descriptors that we notice about various persons as they attempt to eliminate or relieve stress. We have all known people who will go “ballistic” when the slightest change or interruption is encountered and we learn the lesson of “don’t do anything to upset him or her” because you will be hurt or injured by the reaction. What that person is doing is conditioning others to not do anything that would cause stress or a change in his or her routine.

How should we respond to stress? One good way is to simply realize that God is still in control and that He has our best interest on His agenda. When the Israelites complained and murmured against Moses and Aaron, Moses told the people “Who are we, that you should murmur against us – it is God who is calling the shots and is in control – you are murmuring against Him.” Since he recognized the “big picture,” Moses took the complaints and the problems to the Lord because he realized that his own resources were limited but that God is all powerful and He could provide whatever was needed. This is faith and trust in action.

For most of us, one of the main things that cause stress in our lives is making decisions. It can be overwhelming at times. The stress that comes with making decisions can even impact our physical health in addition to the emotional damage it can do. Why do you think that it is so difficult to make decisions? My initial thought was that “uncertainty” or fear of the unknown is a major cause for the stress that comes with decision making. We hear the term “unintended consequences” used to express concerns about the uncertainty of the outcome of decisions that are made. When we make decisions, we try to consider such things as how the outcome will affect our success in life and how the actions and results fit into our priorities. We may go through some sort of process to come up with a logical choice and even if there was not a lot of uncertainty, we could still have stress associated with making the decision.

As the time approached for the culmination of the earthly ministry of Jesus, He experienced major stresses that exceeded what most of us will ever have to go through. We can learn from what Jesus did during this time. In the account given to us in the latter part of the fourteenth chapter of Mark we see that prayer was an important part of the process, knowing God’s will was critical to making the right decision, being committed to doing God’s will and then actually doing what was decided were significant factors in all that He did.

It is not so much a question of whether we will have crises or not, because we will. The question that we need to address is how should we handle the crises that come our way. Perhaps we can learn from the advice Peter penned to the saints in the first century about how to handle difficult situations in life. There are some basic and foundational principles that we need to keep in mind such as always showing respect for others, following the example of Christ, and accepting God’s provision for us.

Showing Respect – 2:18-20

¹⁸ Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. ¹⁹ For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it

with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer *for it* you patiently endure it, this *finds* favor with God. 1 Peter 2:18-20 (NASB95)

The issue under consideration in this passage is NOT whether slavery is morally reprehensible or justifiable. Peter is addressing how Christians are to function in situations that involve various kinds of authority relationships. The thinking of the Jews was that because they were the seed of Abraham, they ought not to be the servants of anyone; and particularly those who were believers in Christ thought they ought not to serve unbelieving masters, nor even believing ones, because they were equally “brothers in Christ.” So Peter, in this passage, outlines the expectation of servants with regard to their masters. Paul addressed this same issue in several passages: 1 Cor 7:20,21; Eph 6:5; Col 3:22; 1Tim 6:1; and 2 Tim 2:9.

The manner in which servants are to be subject to their masters is with reverence to the “master” as a human being and giving consideration to the existing relationship. Examples of how this was to manifest itself are: strict regard to their masters’ commands, faithfulness in any trust given to them, diligence in the discharge of their duty, and being careful to not be offensive to their master.

The part that becomes difficult to carry out is that such actions as just described are to be not only to the good and gentle (those who are reasonable in their expectations); but also to those who are ill natured and “crooked” as is implied in the Greek word (skolios) translated as “froward” or “harsh” or “overbearing” or “cross” in various translations. Being able to respond as Peter has taught is possible only if we are focused on a bigger picture of what is happening and not on the immediate situation.

We see the proper attitude or focus in verses 19 and 20. The first thing we see is that we must maintain a consciousness of God: (a) He is in control; (b) He loves us supremely and wants what is best for us; and (c) He is resident in us and is going through the ordeal with us. In times of self-examination, we need to look for evidences in our lives that show we believe this.

The second thing to learn is that in order to conduct life as Peter described, we must maintain a clear conscience by doing what is right and avoiding doing what is wrong. If we are not positioned on the “moral high ground” in such situations, then we will have a lot of problems in avoiding adopting the “way of the world” and becoming a “survivor” rather and living life as a “sacrificer.” If we are not on the moral high ground then we may lie about what we did in order to escape punishment. Christ was the ultimate example of living sacrificially rather than in “survivor” mode.

Following Jesus’ Example – 2:21-23

²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; 1 Peter 2:21-23 (NASB95)

The “this” to which we are called is not referring to our situation in life of being a slave or an employee or whatever. A clearer rendering would “To this cause you were called. . .” The “cause” is the purposes of the Kingdom of God. The “cause” is the salvation of souls and the redemption of mankind. Our responsibility is to bear a faithful witness to this salvation in our role as “walking billboards” for the Kingdom of God. We are to be examples of the effectiveness of God’s salvation to the world around us in the same manner as Christ was and is our example. As Peter has clearly stated we are to follow in His steps and do as He did.

There are many difficult jobs in this world. Some things are hard to do. We send missionaries to remote parts of the world to try to help people with medical needs, teaching them

how to grow food for themselves, and trying to enlighten them about God's love for them. That, in and of itself, is a difficult job. In most places, the work is made even more difficult by people that oppose Christianity. In some of the African areas, the witch doctors stir up the people to avoid the missionaries and not accept help from them. In our own country, people have a lot of stress and many find that drugs are a way to escape from the reality of life. There are people who have devoted their lives to helping people to be rehabilitated and that, too, is a very difficult job. Just the addiction itself is hard enough to deal with and this situation is complicated by those who oppose rehabilitation – those who make a profit selling drugs. These that oppose may be the local pushers on the street corner or it may be the beer company that glamorizes the use of its products.

When we are in the midst of dealing with such situations, we may have a tendency to “fight fire with fire” and adopt the way of the world in dealing with opposition. That is not what Christ taught us to do by His example. One of the things that Peter noted about Christ behavior was lack of deceit. We have heard the term “spin” applied to how people present the facts of a situation so that the story will favor whatever bias they may have. This is simply being deceitful. I read a quote several years ago from someone that simply stated that “any form of deceit is a lie.” Sometime people want to avoid the “whole truth and nothing but the truth” because of having to face the consequences of errors. This type of avoidance actually causes more stress in a person’s life on a long term basis than clearing the air and doing the right thing.

Another thing that we see in Christ’s behavior was that when people reviled or spoke ill of Him, He did not respond by speaking ill of them. Sometimes it is helpful in such a situation to simply say nothing. At other times, we might want to follow the admonition of pronouncing a blessing on the person when they are cursing you. In a similar vein, when He was treated improperly, He did not threaten those who were doing the harm to Him. His reactions have the effect of pouring water on a fire rather than adding fuel to the fire. This leads to less stress and restores peace rather than making things worse.

You and I have a tendency to think, “I can’t do that, it is beyond my capability, etc.” We are absolutely right! In our own strength we cannot do it. That is why Jesus went to the cross. That is why we need to go to the cross and die to self so that He can live in and through us. That is God’s provision for us.

Accepting God’s Provision – 2:24-25

²⁴ and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. 1 Peter 2:24-25 (NASB95)

The work of the cross puts to death the old nature that “cannot” function according to the example set by Jesus. The old nature is bound to sin and cannot (naturally) function in right living. The old nature is mortally wounded and it cannot recover from that wound. However, with the old nature having died, then the very life of Christ is functioning in and through us so that we can do all that God expects and we are able to follow Him as the Good Shepherd.

The world will examine and inspect our “actions” or good works; however, the Lord is the one Who cares for and inspects our souls. The world examines the outward appearance and results, but God is interested in the inward, the source and root cause of all we do.

How do we put these truths into practice while we are aliens and pilgrims in this physical world? We are fellow citizens with the saints and we also have citizenship in a physical nation. There are times when we face choices regarding our citizenship. Sometimes that citizenship can be helpful when we have laws that protect the practice of our faith. At other times, we may find

that the laws of the land are impediments to what God has called us to do. There are not clear cut rules that will apply in every situation. In the book *Community of the King*, H. A. Snyder comments: “But this will never be a neat clear-cut, triumphant road for the Church to follow. Obedience to the Gospel in a world when Satan is still active means living with tension. We should be alarmed when we are at home in the world or have total “peace of mind.” Christian life in a non-Christian world is tension, stress and at times even agony. The whole system of social techniques aims to adjust the individual to the world and eliminate tensions. Our Lord called and continues to call out a new society of persons unconditionally committed to exchanging the values of the surrounding society for the standards of Jesus’ kingdom.”

Summary

The tensions of life are a result of things in our life being pulled in different directions. If you were to pull on a rope that was not tied down or did not have someone on the other end pulling on it, then there would be no tension or stress. If that rope is our life, then we see that we have things that try to pull us in one direction or another. Which direction will we be pulled? Will it be to becoming a better person and making the world a more pleasant place in which to live or will it be to becoming a bitter person and creating harshness wherever we go? The outcome is a result of how we respond to the stresses we encounter.