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STRESS

PART 2

Wycliffe Wednesday Feature

*Simon Vibert discusses the practical
and ministry implications of stress
and how to manage it!*



STRESS PART 2

by

SIMON VIBERT

The Revd Dr Simon Vibert is Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall

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This article is a synopsis of research which went into the publication of Stress. The Path to Peace. (IVP, 2014). The book makes practical and ministry applications of the foundational understanding of stress and its management today.

This is Part 2 of the feature.



Theological Help

We have already touched on the expectation of God's exacting standards and the reality of our fallen humanity. This is relevant as we seek a right understanding of the issue of "control".

Confidence in God's attributes

For the Christian, understanding who we are in the light of who God is, is all important. John Calvin, in his masterful work *The Institutes of Religion*¹, begins chapter one with the twin themes of "The Knowledge of God and of ourselves".

Knowing God is important, but also knowing ourselves in the light of who God is, is equally important. Herein lies some profound theological help for living as Christians in the modern world.

a. Control - God is sovereign

In Romans 8:28 we read: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Each part of this verse is significant:

We know

Paul is confident, and wants all believers to similarly be confident, that God is to be trusted. This is knowledge that can be counted on and gives assurance for the future. Our confidence that God is at work is not the same thing as saying that we will always know the good which God is working towards, nor that he owes us any explanation. Rather, it is a settled confidence in God's character.

¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion* (Ed. J. T. McNeill), Westminster John Knox Press; 1559 translation edition (June 1960)

In all things

There are no circumstances of life (prosperity or poverty; health or sickness; success or failure) which are unknown to him, nor any area of life where he is not able to be God. Rather than spend my time wishing my circumstances were different I would be better realising that God is at work in all of them.

God works

This is not some wishful thinking: "it will be all right in the end, whatever will be, will be, *qué será será*." God is at work in all circumstances in life: the ones I might choose and the ones I might not.

For good

"Good" here is "good" as defined by God. In other words, I might not always be able to understand how God is working for good, but He is able to achieve good as God defines it, in whatever circumstances I might find myself in.

For those who love him

This is not a promise made to everyone, but only to those who are children of God, those who love God as their Father. It is only to Christians that God assures that life's difficulties will work out for God's good purposes.

Who have been called according to his purpose

God's purposes, primarily, are that he will do all things for his glory and honour. In other words, it is those he has foreknown and predestined (v29) that He will justify and glorify. He will complete the good work in believers that he has started.

How does this help with the daily struggle with stress? Precisely because in that daily struggle, God is at work to bring me to conformity to His image. He is bigger than my daily struggle and my job is to keep my eyes on Him and His ultimate purposes.

Romans 8 v 28

**b. Power and authority
(*exousia*) - God is omnipotent**

This point is related to the first. Jesus said "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go...." All authority is God's. There is no authority other than God's authority, which in turn he delegates to the Son (Matt 28:18f cf. Matt 7:28f., 9:6; 21:23-27.) Similarly, Jesus delegates authority to Kings and Leaders (Romans 13:1f.) Teachers (2 Tim 4:1), Parents (Eph 6:1), etc.

I am a person under the authority of God, accountable to him, but also confident that he has all power and authority. The quicker I realise that God is on the throne (I am not) and that everything I have I have "on trust" from God, the better it will be!

c. Your Father knows - God is omniscience

Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about clothes, food, or life itself (Matt 6:25ff.). The cares of today are quite sufficient, and "your father knows" your needs (v.32). Rather "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (v.33). God knows everything, even the hairs on our head, or the sparrow that falls to the ground (Matt 10:39f.). "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Ps 139:4).

When we feel "out of control with stress", when worries crowd in on us, when life seems overwhelming, when it seems like no one could possibly understand our difficulties or circumstances, we do well to remember: "Your Father knows".



the Bible and
Holy Spirit provide
rich resources
to manage stress

There is much more that could be written in this area. Indeed, the whole of the Christians life is to be lived in the “here and now” but with our eye on God’s ultimate purposes. Thus we should live in such a way that we remember God’s goal to conform us to the likeness of Christ (*Rom 9:29*).

I will conclude this article with some practical delineation of where this theology should impinge on daily life. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but illustrative of how the theology impacts stress management.

Practical Help

We will just look at four areas:

a. Worry (*Matt 6:25-34*)

We have already noted in the passage above that Jesus reminds the disciples that they are dependent upon God for their daily needs (hence the prayer in *Matt 6:11*). As the creator of the world, God continues to be intimately involved with His creation (even birds and grass). Moreover, God gives us sufficient resources for each day (rather like the Manna in the wilderness, *Exod 16*). So, do not worry. God knows and God cares, and he is more than able to supply your needs (*Matt 6:31-34*). Remember who the king is and make sure you live by these rules of the kingdom.

Corrie Ten Boom once said, “worry is carrying tomorrow’s load with today’s strength”. Jesus reminds us: “each day has enough cares of its own” (*6:34*), therefore, three principles will help the Christian to be relieved of worry:

- **First, live for today, but plan for tomorrow.**
This principle applies to almost every walk of life. Tomorrow needs preparation and planning, but it should not prevent us

from focussing on today.

- **Refocus.**
Refocus off of the anxieties of tomorrow and onto the trustworthiness of God. Hence Peter counsels: turn your anxieties into prayer (*1 Pet 5:7f*).
- **Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.**
In this passage Jesus encourages his disciples to have confidence in God’s fatherly desire to meet the needs of his children.

b. Anger (*Eph 4:26*)

Anger is a huge problem in our modern world. Pumped up with adrenaline and testosterone, aggressiveness spills over into street fighting and public disorder. But anger also lies behind much online slander, family strife and arguments.

Of course, not all anger is wrong. Quoting the LXX of Psalm 4:4, Paul writes “In your anger do not sin”, then goes on to say: “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” (*Eph 4:26f*).

The clear implication is that anger is very likely to lead to sin, but that is not automatically necessary. God is described as being angry (wrathful), E.g. Romans 1:18ff. In the second commandment, God is described as being a jealous God who punishes sins to the third and fourth generation.

God’s anger is best described as “red” not “green”. In other words, it is jealousy for the honour of his name and indignation when he is defamed that sparks his wrath. It is not that he is jealous of another’s position or threatened by anyone or anything else.

Because human anger is so unlike divine anger, the Bible mostly warns about the misuse of anger. It too easily leads to sin, and in human beings is rarely measured or directed in the right way.

Here are three practicalities related to anger:

- **First, confess sinful anger to God and seek forgiveness from him and others.** As has been observed, sin can be suppressed, expressed or confessed. People “explode” in anger when they suppress or repress it. It is rather like swallowing dynamite. The Bible remedy is to bring anger before God to get things in their proper perspective.
- **Secondly, relatedly, the counsel of the old hymn is wise: “take it to the Lord in prayer”.** It is amazing how all the angry and aggressive people in the world disappear when I rise from prayer! This involves cleansing the well-spring of my heart (cf. *Matt 12:34*).
- **Thirdly, displacing anger it by using up adrenaline is also important.** In the modern age the “fight or flight” reflex is not just triggered by real danger, e.g. an out of control car careering towards a toddler, but also by perceived threat – a crying baby, a work deadline etc. The build of adrenaline still needs to be dissipated – through cardio vascular exercise or other methods of burning up the adrenaline.

c. Ambition (*Phil 1:21*)

Worldly ambition is driven by the desire for human achievement and recognition, and a cause of much stress. The desire to achieve more wealth, status and possessions can be all-consuming and insatiable. Stress results when we can't match our expectations to reality and remain dissatisfied in that state.

However, there is such a thing as godly ambition, as exemplified in *Phil. 1:21*: Here Paul espouses a reason for living “for me to live is Christ”; and a reason for dying “To die is gain”. (*Phil. 1:21*).

If Paul continues to live, it will mean fruitful

labour for the sake of God's people. If he dies, then he will go home to be with the Lord (*Phil 1:22-26*). Paul has a reason for living, knowing Christ and making Him known, and this will drive him as an apostle and evangelist. But ultimately he longs to be home with Christ. This ambition gives a Christian a “purpose driven life”, and puts all other ambitions in perspective (cf. *Phil. 3:14; 1 Cor. 9:24b*)².

take it to the Lord in prayer

c. Rest (4th Commandment)

The 4th Commandment mandates a day of rest. It is interesting to compare the two sets of the Decalogue. In Exodus, the motivation for rest is the pattern of creation: God laboured for 6 days and on the 7th he rested (see *Exod. 20:8-11*). In Deuteronomy, the day of rest is patterned on God's redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt (see *Deut. 5:12-15*).

From this we may infer a number of important principles:

- **Work is good.** Even those who are not in paid employment need to work; it is part of God's created intention for human beings.
- **Rest is necessary.** The motivations for Sabbath rest are important.
 - First, the pattern of “six on and one off” is written into the rhythm of the created order. I assume that this is good for all people, irrespective of whether they are an active follower of the Lord.

² Cf. Rick Warren *The Purpose Driven Life. What on earth am I here for?* Zondervan, 2012



Take a
rest

- o Secondly, there is to be a weekly day set aside for the worship of God the Redeemer. Some would assume that the Deuteronomy account places an emphasis on God's redeemed people. Part of the debate through the centuries has been over whether that day is Day 6 of creation (Saturday) or the First Day of the week (Sunday), the day Christ rising from the dead. Wrestling with this in a global, 24/7 age is complex!
- **Rest and Work need both to be defined** appropriately according to the type of work (clergy, for example, would struggle to negotiate Sunday as their day off!).

Whatever pattern is adopted, there are many stresses associated with trying to keep this rhythm in a global community which never sleeps. However, I do not think that we should give up trying to keep a Sabbath pattern, and we should recognise that we should see to work, rest and worship in a manner which glorified God.

Matt 11:28-30 is particularly helpful in this regard. Jesus said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Jesus recognises that we are “weary” and “burdened”. He offers to carry our heavy load and encourages us to learn from him. Rather like the heavily laden donkey, Jesus offers to take the strain. But that is not the complete picture: will still carry a load as he places his burdens/priorities on us. He does not call us to idle escape, but rather that we carry his easy and light burden.

...joy to be found in laying our stresses and strains at Jesus' feet

There is joy to be found in laying our stresses and strains at Jesus' feet and in picking up his burden for the world and carrying that.

Conclusion

I encourage you think of the most stressful day you can remember.

- What caused it?
- In the light of the things which we have covered in this article, can you think of anything which might have made that day less stressful?
- How did you recover?
- How might this knowledge help you whenever the next really stressful day comes your way?

Remember our definition: “Stress is what we experience when we feel out of control”.

Following my illness, I wrestled with the question: “Should I be in control?” Many people are stressed precisely because they think that they should always be in control, but in reality no one ever can be totally in control. I needed to “let go” of some things, and not assume I can do or be everything I might like to. I also need actively to trust my sovereign Lord.

At one level, as we have seen, I do need to be in control of my life: Jesus encourages us **to plan** (He spoke in terms of “counting the cost” of following him, *Mark 8:34*), **to pray** (Our

Heavenly Father knows our needs, e.g. Matt 6:33-34) to rest. Jesus said “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest....” (Matt 11:28).

So, there is a sense in which I should take control of my life by planning, praying and resting. These things require action from me.

But it is also important to realise that I cannot be in control of everything. Indeed, Jesus said: “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matt 6:27).

The wonderful and relieving truth is that God is sovereign. He knows the end from the beginning. He is in control. And the sooner I get off the throne of my own heart and recognise the King of Kings, the easier it will be to put the cares and anxieties of this life in their proper perspective. This profound and wonderful truth is encapsulated in this verse: “...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). The promise to believers is that, whilst I cannot always be in control, in everything God is at work, to bring about good for those who love Him. For me, this is enormously stress-relieving!

We have spent considerable time recalling that God is in control, and I believe that we should be very relieved by this knowledge! But we have also recalled that when the Holy Spirit indwells us He will bring peace, joy and some order to our lives, after all, the fruit of the Spirit is “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22f.)

Under the rule and reign of God we will in fact be more productive and more ambitious. As Augustine discovered and as is reflected in this prayer:

*Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless
till they find their rest in you;
so lead us by your Spirit
that in this life we may live to your glory
and in the life to come enjoy you for ever;
through Jesus Christ our Lord
who is alive with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever.
Amen.*

This is a great prayer for stressed people to pray!