



ELIM CLAPHAM CHURCH

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## LIFE QUESTIONS - STRESS

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Everyone experiences stress at some time or other in life that can lead to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual burnout and / or exhaustion. Yet no one has ever been born with stress! Stress is often the result of learned behaviour, or can be the body's way of letting you know that you are taking on too much responsibility - whether it be work, home, family, financial, church and social situations. Manageable amounts of stress can be a healthy motivating factor in you life, it's when it becomes unmanageable is where it becomes unhealthy and even dangerous, where you begin to feel out of control.

Just recently I overheard a little girl of approx 7 yrs of age playing with her friends say to one of them, "Don't bother me now I'm too stressed to cope with things!" I initially smiled when I heard this, but after some thought was saddened, because here was something that a child of her age should not be aware of. Obviously, she had picked this up after overhearing it from an adult.

What exactly is stress?

Stress takes place when your thinking gets out of control and you begin to believe that you cannot cope and become overwhelmed by the things that are filling your heart and mind. Anxiety is another word for stress. Your thinking seems to take over and your focus is continually upon some experience that has or may happen that will affect you, those around you or cause others to see you in a derogatory way. As a result, your thoughts are continually upon this thing or perceived thing that affects your attitudes, behaviour and or conduct.

Stress or anxiety is nothing new, as people of all ages and from all walks of life have experienced it from time and memorial. Examples of stress is found in the Old Testament where individuals reacted to situations in an unreasonable way - Elijah running away from the wicked queen Jezebel is a classic example.

In the West every year an increasing number are having to have time off from work etc. for stress, which a few years ago was known as anxiety. A certain amount of stress can be a good thing as it helps to build character in you as well as preparing you for future challenges. In the natural metal that has been stressed is that much stronger than unstressed metals. However too much stress is not good and can rob you of sleep, affect your health, relationships with others as well as your employment etc. to name but a few.

Over 2,000 years ago, Paul wrote, "Do not be anxious [or stressful - author's words] about anything ..." (Phil 4:6), here Paul recognises the destructiveness of stress or anxiety. A person facing too much stress / anxiety can find themselves continually thinking about the matter and can't seem to escape from their thoughts or fears no

matter how hard they try, resulting in them becoming overly fearful, irritable because of the pressure of the situation whereby they feel unable to cope with the situation.

On a spiritual note, stress can be an indicator that your relationship with God is not what it should be, because for whatever reason you may not be trusting Him, His word and His presence as you ought. There may be occasions when you may be experiencing stress through no fault of your own and you have no control over the outcomes. The Early Church went through times of great persecution and church history records the times where many believers faced severe persecution by rejoicing in greatness and goodness of God.

Life is filled with all manner of trials, difficulties and challenges - with many of them being beyond our control and no matter what they just keep on coming! How we respond to them is so important. Let's look at the above verse again to see if there is anything we can do to help us in such a position. "Do not be anxious about anything..." (Phil 4:6 NIV). Paul is pointing out to his readers that stress is more often than not a choice we make. If this were not so, he would be expecting us to do something that we could not do therefore he would be setting us up to fail.

Of course there are times when people suffer stress as the result of some negative experience they have faced or gone through, commonly referred to PTSD. You can be assured that such an experience does not come from the Lord. Matthew 11 makes this abundantly clear when Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are tired and have heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Accept my teachings and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest for your lives. The burden that I ask you to accept is easy; the load I give you to carry is light" (28-30 NCV). Notice the burdens that come from the Lord are easy and light. Why? Because they are always accompanied by His grace. This explains why so many of the Lord's children who have had to face difficult and challenging situations cope in an amazing way, when outsiders look on not being able to understand how they are able to cope and manage the situation.

This passage also shows that you need to approach His teachings with a healthy attitude. When your attitude is not right, His instructions and wisdom can appear an impossible burden. This in itself will prove to be extremely stressful!

God never created you to function with negative thoughts continually going over and over in your mind - this is what stress is! Stress can cause mental problems, and mental problems can cause stress! In simple terms stress is the inability to control one's thinking. Proverbs 23:7 says, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. ..." The key to overcoming stress is to take steps to change your thinking and focus. The Apostle Paul wrote, "... Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about" (Philippians 4:8 TLB). Initially this may be difficult but it can be done with practice and persistence. Change the material you look at or focus upon whether it be books, films or music. Try doing something you've wanted to do and haven't got round to

doing it. People have taken up a whole range of activities to help ranging from exercise to painting or drawing. Reading something light, singing, or just mixing with people you would normally do - can all help. It is also recognised that when a person is fit and healthy they are able to cope with more stress than they would otherwise. Starting some hobby or other can also be helpful in taking back control.

A key way of overcoming stress or anxiety is to learn to think differently! The sad thing about stress is the failure to trust! Your life is in God's hand. The writer to the Hebrews not only paints a picture as to something that causes stress and goes on to talk about a real stress buster when he says, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?' Hebrews 13:5-6 NIVUK). Here the Holy Spirit points out that your pursuit of material things causes stress, however, it is only by fixing your minds on the reality of God's presence is a sure antidote to stress, particularly as you remind yourself that no one is able to cause you any harm unless in some way God allows it to take place for whatever reason!

There are those who believe that if you are suffering stress as a result of bad choices or decisions it's your own fault and you have to learn to live with it. However God is a God of grace and mercy and even though you may have to live with the consequences, He is able to use your failures and mistakes to bring glory to His name in one way or other, once again provided you change your thinking and adopt an attitude recognising that lessons will be learnt as a result!

Another important stress buster is learning to say 'No'! Once again, when you do make sure that it's done with the the right attitude and tone of voice. Many take on too much, because they think that by taking on more activities, roles and responsibilities they would be liked more and if they didn't then people would think less of them. Don't forget, heart attacks, breakdowns and burn outs are more often the result of bad choices you have made! These are never God glorifying!

Isaiah states, "Don't you know? Haven't you been listening? Yahweh is the one and only everlasting God, the Creator of all you can see and imagine! He never gets weary or worn out. His intelligence is unlimited; he is never puzzled over what to do! He empowers the feeble and infuses the powerless with increasing strength. Even young people faint and get exhausted; athletic ones may stumble and fall. But those who wait for Yahweh's grace will experience divine strength. They will rise up on soaring wings and fly like eagles, run their race without growing weary, and walk through life without giving up." (40:28-31 TPT). The prophet talks about waiting or stilling your heart and mind before God. In other words listen to some worship music and invite the Holy Spirit to being to speak into your heart, mind and situation. You will be surprised at what He may say to you - giving you hope and an inner strength that is more than enough to face up to any stress matters you may find yourself in.

Another practical step you can take in order to overcome stress is by talking things through with someone in an open and honest way. It is important for you to first of all recognise that your own thoughts, attitudes and behaviour may need to change, before you talk things through with a third party. You will need to have confidence that the person you choose to talk things over with, will be a good listener and not judge or offer advice at a time when you don't need it! From personal experience I have come to realise that it is necessary to spend quality time with the Lord unburdening your heart before Him before you take time to talk things through with someone else.

Using prayer as a stress buster is most effective when praise and thanksgiving, upon the Lord and His goodness and mercy are incorporated. If you're not careful your prayer can become more about moaning, grumbling and complaining to the Lord about your own position and how bad it appears. This is not only selfish but it is wrong and reveals your heart condition, you cannot expect the Lord to intervene in the way you would like for this in itself feeds your own selfish nature - which is never God glorifying!

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