



WHEN YOU ARE TIED UP IN KNOTS
Isaiah 30:15-16; John 14:27; Matthew 9:35-36

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A woman went to see her doctor one day, and as she sat down, she said, “Doctor, I am all run down.” After spending some time examining her, he said, “No, madam, you are not all run down. You are just all wound up!” There are a lot of us who go through life just like that woman—all wound up!! Many of us live as though we were driving a car with the accelerator stuck which causes us to race forward out of control. We are like a shooting star streaking across the sky. Our age is characterized by the “hurry up” command. We always seem to have to get some place else faster than we got to where we are presently.

The Shadow of Stress

The patron saint of our age seems to be “St. Vitus.” We are characterized by perpetual motion. We wear the badges of our tense, nervous rushing age—ulcers, heart attacks, and digestive problems. Though medical science has conquered many of the former diseases like diphtheria, typhoid and polio which used to take the lives of people, a new disease has raised its head in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Walter McQuade and Ann Aikman in a book entitled *Stress* write that “the basic cause of much twentieth (and twenty-first) century disease is a shadow which has slowly darkened our lives, like the smog that has darkened our cities. This shadow is stress.”¹ Their study and others indicate that behind many of our physical problems lie tension and stress. Dr. Michael Parkinson, head of the American College of Preventive Medicine, also notes the financial cost of stress when he observes: “There is a hidden epidemic of stress in this country, and we’re going to go broke if we don’t figure out how to manage it.”²

Stress Affects Our Body

Stress comes from the Latin root, *strictus*, meaning “to be drawn tight.” Many of our common expressions state this truth. We say, “My stomach is tied up in knots.” Or “Don’t get your bowels in an uproar.” Or “I feel like I am being pulled apart.” Or “This job is breaking my back.” Or “She gives me a headache.” Or “He gets on my nerves.” These everyday sayings state a deeper truth about our style of living and its impact on our bodies than we have ever realized. McQuade and Aikman seek

to demonstrate in their book the affect stress has upon our cardiovascular, digestive, skeletal-muscular, and immune systems.³ Extensive studies have been made to show the impact various events have upon us. The worst stress most persons experience is the death of a spouse. Divorce is listed next. Stress occurs in our life on many levels. You may have experienced stress through difficulties in your job, the loss of your job, changing jobs, moving to a new community, adjustment in your marriage, buying a house, the birth of a child, children leaving home, or other events.⁴ As we go through life, we will continuously face different kinds of stress.

If you have ever walked any distance, you know what an aggravation it can be to have a small gravel in your shoe. Sooner or later you realize, “I will have to stop and remove that gravel.” You know that if you do not, it will cause a blister or a worse irritation to your foot. Many of us go through life with the heavy load of tensions and pressures upon us without seeking to lighten or remove that burden. Look at how we often react to stress.

Many Are Often Unwilling to Confront Stress

Some people, I have observed, rather than confront their tensions, flee from them. Isaiah (Is. 30: 15-16) writes about those who mount horses and gallop off to escape their problems in Israel. Like the ancient Israelites, many try to escape their problems by running from them.

The cartoon “Nancy” which used to be in our papers addresses this issue. Nancy is depicted dressed in a cheerleader’s outfit. As the team of small boys rush past her to the field, she yells: “Go, team, go. Go, team, go.” Then the opposing team comes on the field, and a HUGE kid rushes past her. She looks up at him as he goes by, turns to her team and screams: “Run, team, run!”

Unfortunately, this is the answer many have taken in trying to deal with tension. They want to run away from all the stress and strain. Some people run into drugs, thinking that this is the way to escape. Others run into alcohol, believing that this is the way to avoid them. Still others take the ultimate escape of suicide. These persons want to avoid tensions and pressures at all costs.

Others expect somebody else to take care of all their problems and freedom from all their tension. All of their lives, these persons have had a mother or father, parents or children, brother or sister, a teacher or a friend—somebody else—who has helped smooth the way so they would not have to confront problems.

Pretend Stress Is Not Real

Others try to pretend that their problems and accompanying tensions are not real. They just ignore them. They assume that all their stress is merely in their head.

This viewpoint is illustrated in the story about a young boy who was rushing down the street one day and a neighbor stopped him and asked: "Where are you going, Johnny?" "I am going to get the doctor," he replied. "My grandfather is very sick." "Well, you go back and tell your grandfather that he is not sick," she asserted. "He just thinks he's sick." A few days later this same woman saw the young boy again and asked: "How is your grandfather doing?" "Oh, he is doing real well," the boy responded. "He thinks he is dead and we are going to bury him on Sunday."

Sometimes we have to acknowledge that our tension comes from real problems, pains, illness, and suffering. They are very real, and we have to face them. All of the pretense in the world will not make them go away or change their severity. If we are going to relieve the stress caused by them, we will first have to confront them.

Stress and Illness

Medical studies have led to an increased awareness of the central role stress has in all illness. Hans Selye has noted these studies in his major book, *The Stress of Life*. Others like Patricia Wuertzer, Lucinda May, Harold Bloomfield, Michael Cain, Dennis Jaffe and Robert Kory state clearly the major impact stress has on our lives in the following lines:

When people begin to suffer from accumulated stress, they become susceptible to disease, particularly to psychosomatic ailments. They also find themselves troubled by inexplicable anxiety, frustration, depression or a general feeling of dissatisfaction and aimlessness. When stress accumulates, a loss of mental clarity and emotional openness damages interpersonal relationships. Excessive stress also leads to the inability to make decisions, plan effectively and work efficiently. Because of the total interdependency of bodily, emotional and mental processes, stress affects every phase of one's life.⁵

Guidelines From the Gospel About Stress

Centuries ago, Jesus looked at people everywhere he went and realized that they were harassed. They were burdened down with difficulties and pressures of all kinds. Matthew records, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). Jesus Christ has come to be the Good Shepherd for all of us and to offer us guidance and strength in our daily living.

Tension is one of the most difficult problems we all have to face. Does the gospel of Christ have anything to say in this area? I think there are some guidelines we can discover in the Scriptures.⁵ Let me offer some suggestions.

Live One Day at a Time

First, we should learn to live life one step at a time. Jesus instructed his disciples, “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself” (Matt. 6:34). “Do not be overly concerned about tomorrow,” Jesus warns us. We have to learn to live in the present. Be a good steward of today. This is the gift that you have. None of us knows what tomorrow may be like or how long he or she may live. Utilize each day constructively and try to use it wisely.

A number of years ago a noted English physician, Sir William Osler, delivered a lecture at Yale University entitled, “A Way of Life.” In that lecture he shared these words with the students: “Now the way of life that I preach is a habit to be acquired gradually by long and steady repetition. It is the practice of living for the day only, and for the day’s work. Live in day-tight compartments.”⁶ Learn to live each day to its fullest. Treasure the gift of each new day because it is unrepeatable. “This is the day which the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). As Carlyle wrote, “Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what is clearly at hand.”

We cannot live primarily in anticipation or reflection. This is not to reject all planning and forethought. But it is to affirm the importance of focusing on the immediate present which you have and can do something to make a difference in how it is lived. The best opportunity you have to affect your life depends on what you do with the present moment you have. Would you ever wash a dish if you could see all of the dishes you would wash in a lifetime? You wash dishes one at a time—not a lifetime of them. Would you ever change a diaper, if you could see the years of diapers stretching before you? Who would ever become a tire repairman if he could see all the tires he would have to change and repair in his life? A football game is played and won or lost one play at a time. Learn to live each minute, each hour of each day.

Some of us fill our lives with so much worry about tomorrow that we cannot live effectively in the gift of today. When you are surrounded by tensions, problems, pain, and suffering, you face them by taking one step at a time. You may not be able to see your way to the end of your dilemma, but you can go step by step, hour by hour, and day by day. Each short step you take will enable you to go further the next time. This ancient poem from the Sanskrit, written centuries ago, challenges us to live in the present.

The Salutation of the Dawn

Listen to the Exhortation of the Dawn!
Look to this Day!

For it is Life, the very Life of Life.
In its brief course lie all the
Varieties and Realities of your Existence:
 The Bliss of Growth, The Glory of Action,
 The Splendour of Beauty;
For Yesterday is but a Dream,
And To-morrow is only a Vision,
 But To-day well lived makes
Every Yesterday a Dream of Happiness,
And every To-morrow a Vision of Hope
Look well, therefore, to this day!
Such is the Salutation of the Dawn.

Find Some Peaceful Disciplines

Second, learn to cultivate some peaceful disciplines. The Scriptures instruct us to “wait,” “rest,” “stop chasing here and there,” seek “a time to heal” and “a time to be silent,” and a time to “lay down in peace.” One of the reasons many of us are so harassed is that we are constantly surrounded by tension.

Establish Some Relaxing Practices

We need to develop some relaxing habits. My family has had cats for a long time. One lived with us for eighteen years. If you have a cat, you know something about how to relax. I have never seen anything that can relax like a cat. A cat sort of evaporates when it lies down. It has a tremendous ability to relax. Studies have indicated that pets not only help their owners relax, but the owner’s blood pressure is lowered, and the length of his or her life is actually increased. Cats or other pets may teach us how to relax more.

Calming Music

Another thing that might help is to surround yourself with peaceful music. The emphasis is on the adjective—“peaceful.” All music is not peaceful! Some music, instead of calming us, is a stimulus or an irritant. The right kind of music can create a soothing atmosphere for us. Sometimes, if we can take a walk in a peaceful setting like a woods or a park, we can relax some. We need to work at cultivating those things which can help us relax more.

Learn to Relax

Some people seem to have learned how to relax. Several years ago, I received a letter from a friend of mine named John Killinger. When I got the letter, Killinger

was teaching at Vanderbilt Divinity School. He had a busy schedule speaking and writing. His wife Anne told me once that she had never seen her husband mad but five times. She told me about one time that John was mad. I didn't even think that was a "mad." I wanted to tell her about some real anger sometimes. I thought about John's self-control when I received his letter that day. He wrote: "I had a few moments before I was to deliver the sermon for the opening convocation at Vanderbilt University, so I thought I would write you a few lines."

How many of us would have the ability to relax like that and write a note to someone a few moments before we had to deliver a major speech at a university? I am going to be very honest with you. I couldn't do that. I am not that relaxed! But Killinger is the kind of person who is well prepared and very much at ease with himself. However, we can learn to cultivate disciplines that will help us relax more.

Don't Take Yourself So Seriously

We can learn to relax more when we do not take ourselves so seriously. Too often we think the whole world revolves around us, our schedules, and our goals. We begin to question how anybody can interrupt us and take up our important time. Our own self-importance becomes the only paramount concern to us.

Dick Shepherd, a noted English clergyman, was to deliver a sermon series once and became ill with a bad cold the night before he was to begin. As he tossed about in his bed, he had a dream. In his dream he saw God pacing back and forth exclaiming: "Oh, what will I do? Oh, what will I do? Dick Shepherd has a cold and can't preach."

Think of the absurdity of that notion! Do we really believe that God's whole plan is doomed because one individual is sick? We often take ourselves too seriously and need to see how absolutely humorous and ridiculous we sometimes are. Seeing ourselves in the right perspective can help us relax.

Cultivate Some Diversions

Learn also to create some diversions in your life. When the tension becomes severe at work, school or home, vary your lifestyle some. If you always work through lunch, then you might lessen some of your stress by taking a lunch break sometime. If you don't take a day off, start taking a day off and see the difference it will make. Alternate your schedule, if possible. When you can, get out of the city for a day or a weekend. Take some kind of break in your regular schedule.

I know a contractor who used to enjoy preparing meals on the weekends. He didn't have time during the week, but on the weekends he came up with some delightful delicacies. Cooking was a tremendous diversion for him. I know a school

teacher who does woodworking at night. He receives personal satisfaction in being able to make things with his hands for somebody else. I know an attorney who loves to coach boys in little league. It is something totally different from what he does the rest of the time, and he loves to work with young boys. I know a nurse who paints nature scenes to relax.

Find some kind of diversion in your life. It will help lessen your stress load. I have found that when I go too long without any time away from my work, as much as I love my job, I find that the pressures and responsibilities of being a pastor seem to weigh heavy on my shoulders. I know I need some time away. If I can just get away sometime for a few hours it helps. A walk in the woods or park, browsing in a bookstore, or doing some physical work always helps me lighten the tension load. A day away can make a difference in my perspective. We all need some kind of diversion. It helps to plan some of them.

Prayer and Meditation

At the top of your list of peaceful disciplines put prayer. Nobody can overestimate the power of prayer in creating a peaceful climate in our souls. Practice that discipline faithfully. Begin each day with prayer, or find those quiet moments during the day or night when you can attune your heart to God. Isaiah (30: 15) reminds us that by returning -- trusting -- in God we find rest. Confidence in God stills and quiets our soul. Prayer returns our soul again and again into the presence of God to experience his quiet peace.

Examine Your Purpose for Living

Thirdly, re-evaluate your purpose for living. Some people feel trapped in their jobs. They honestly are not fulfilled by what they are doing in their work. When I was in school, I have had jobs that I would hate to spend my whole life doing. I received money from them to help pay my way through school, but they gave me no sense of personal satisfaction. But I could do them because I knew they were a necessary step toward reaching a higher goal. I was doing that job to prepare myself for what I believed to be a much more meaningful work. At some point in your life you will ask yourself if this is the job you really want to do for the rest of your life. Sometimes you may want to change jobs. If you are working on an assembly line, the monotony of the job sometimes becomes heavy. But, if you are able to see your task as part of a larger whole, then its purpose is more easily seen. Your responsibility contributes to making an automobile or refrigerator which somebody else can use and enjoy. By seeing the larger vision or overall purpose for your job, your smaller task takes on greater importance. Your success or failure in your part of the whole makes a real difference in what the final product or service is like. You are important

in your contribution to your particular part and to the whole.

Sometimes when my work in the ministry is difficult, the days are dark and the load is heavy, the one thing that gives me a sense of inner strength is the vision of why I am in the ministry in the first place. Jesus told his disciples that we are called not to be successful or popular, but to be faithful to God in sharing the good news of the gospel of Christ with others. Although Jesus experienced rejection, he was able to continue—even to dying on a cross—because he had a sense of the purpose and direction of his Father in his life. With that higher goal in mind, he pressed forward in his quest to bring in the Kingdom of God. Individuals like Jeremiah and Paul were able to endure rejection because they had a higher sense of purpose in their lives.

As long as you have a vision or goal of why you are there in the first place, whatever your task is, you can continue to work faithfully in it. “If you spend your life doing something that really matters to you, and doing it well,” McQuade and Aikman note, “you can withstand a great deal.”⁷ Wayne Oates has observed that “a person who would seem to be burdened with enormous stress, yet who has a specific purpose in life, such as starting a business ‘from scratch’, can tolerate huge quantities of stress because his efforts are goal-oriented.”⁸ Recapture and redefine your purpose. What is your goal in life? How does your job, how does your family, how does your whole life fit into the total purpose of what you are trying to be and do? A clear purpose can strengthen you to endure much of the tension you may have to meet.

Get a Support Group

Fourthly, surround yourself with some friends or a support group. Jesus surrounded himself with an inner circle of friends. He not only instructed his disciples, but he drew strength and support from them. When Jesus came to the difficult personal struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, he returned from his agonizing prayers to find that his disciples were asleep. “Could you not watch for me one hour?” he asked. “Could you not support me in my time of need?”

We all need someone to whom we can talk when our spirits are low and our bodies are all tied up in knots. Find that person. Select him or her carefully. You will not want to share your inner feelings with everybody. This person may be your wife or husband, parents or children, a close friend or a professional counselor. In some churches there are support groups for widows and divorced persons. Sometimes you can find support groups for families who have someone who is having problems with alcohol or drugs. Find a friend or support group that you can lean upon in your time of need, who will give you strength and courage. You don’t have to face your burdens and struggles alone.

We Are Never Free of All Tension

In the fifth place, remember that the peace which Jesus gives us does not remove all tension from our lives. Our lives will never be totally free of tension. The Greek word for peace does not mean the absence of trouble. Peace is what makes for our highest good. Jesus lived his whole ministry in the midst of difficulty, rejections, and hostility. Nevertheless, he had an inner peace that could not be taken away from him.

The removal of all tension from our lives would not be good. Some tension is good. Tension can be creative. Too much stress can be destructive, but some stress is beneficial. The human body is the only piece of equipment that gets stronger by use. The more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. Other equipment eventually wears out with use, but the human body gets stronger with exercise. God has created us in such a way that we actually grow stronger as we respond to stress. And we are able to meet another stressful experience better because of the lessons we learned from the previous stressful situation. What we learn from one experience enables us to face others better. An athlete becomes better and stronger not by avoiding the strain of exercise, but by the constant discipline and practice of his or her sport. The more an athlete practices and participates in the tension of the game, the better he or she becomes as an athlete. Tension is a part of life and, as we learn to respond to it effectively, we will grow and develop better as whole persons. The peace that Jesus Christ offers us is not a life with the absence of tension, but peace in the midst of tension.

When my family lived in Louisiana, we experienced several hurricanes. I shall never forget the lesson I learned from one of those hurricanes. The hurricane came on our city with its rains and wind and beat upon our house as though the whole structure would collapse. In fact, some of the houses in our neighborhood, we found out later, had their roofs blown off, or part of their walls ripped apart. Right in the midst of the fierce storm, there suddenly came a great calm. The sun even came out. I walked outside for a few moments, and realized that this was the calm I had heard about so often in the midst of the hurricane. I went back inside and in a few moments, the other side of the hurricane came with all its fury. But I have never forgotten the lesson about the calm at the center of a hurricane. It became a parable about life for me.

God has not told us that we are going to live in a world free of tension, anxiety, stress, or difficulties. The peace which he offers to us is a peace in the midst of the storms and difficulties that confront us. It is a peace that will enable us to live with quietness and confidence, because we have an inner strength that no one or anything can remove.

The Peace of Jesus

Lastly, remember that the peace which Jesus gives us is all sufficient to face the tensions of life. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). The world offers us a peace which is primarily escape. Run from your problems. Go to the seashore. Go to the lake. Go to the country. Go to the mountains. But, when you come back, all of your problems are still here. Jesus said, "My peace I give to you." His peace comes to us as a gift. His peace is inseparable from his presence. We can't have his peace apart from his presence. When Jesus Christ is in our life, we are strengthened by the power of his presence to face the difficulties of life.

It is evident by the way he lived that Jesus had inner peace in his own life. This inner peace was not determined by outward circumstances. This peace was grounded in his union with the Father. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee." The inner peace of Christ was evident throughout his life. Through his teachings and miracles, in the Upper Room, praying in Gethsemane, his arrest in the garden, at his trial before Pilate and the high priests, and even on the cross his serenity was clearly seen. In the Upper Room as he commissioned his disciples, and as he sends us forth to minister in his name, he continues to bequeath his peace to us.

He offers to us peace which arises out of our union with him. "My peace I give to you...Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." We may confront difficulties of all kinds. Tension, pressure, and stress are a part of life. We will not avoid them. But Jesus Christ can make a difference in how we handle them. The inner peace he gives us is not controlled by the circumstances. "My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, give I to you."

Have you read about how an eagle survives when it is caught in a storm? The storm may beat upon the eagle as though it would force the bird to the ground. When the winds and storm currents begin to blow upon that great bird, the eagle simply sets its great wings in a certain way. Rather than the storm forcing the bird to crash to the ground, the angle of the wings causes the storm pressure to lift the bird up, and it is able to rise above the storm. The set of the wings makes the difference.

Jesus Christ does not tell us that we will never have any tensions, pressures, or difficulties. But he promises us this: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." "I am the Good Shepherd." His presence gives us peace. "My peace I give to you." And that is sufficient to sustain us and lift us above the storms.

O Divine Redeemer, sometimes we do feel crushed to the ground by the tensions of life. Lift us up by Your inner peace. Sustain us through Christ who gives us this peace, we pray. Amen. ■

¹ Walter McQuade and Ann Aikman, *Stress*, (New York: B. P. Dutton, 1975), 4.

² Patricia B. Gray, “Hidden Costs of Stress,” *Money*, (December 2007), 44.

³ *Ibid.*, See especially chapters 1-4. See also Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life*. Revised Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976).

⁴ Wayne Oates, *Managing Your Stress*. (Indianapolis: Bierce Associates, Inc., 1983), 28- 32.

⁵ Harold H. Bloomfield and others, *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1975), 29.

⁶ William Osler, *A Way of Life* (Baltimore: The Remington Putnam Book Co., 1932), 17.

⁷ McQuade and Aikman, *Stress*, 6.

⁸ Oates, *Managing Your Stress*, 23.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O loving God, Shepherd of our souls, sometimes Your spirit seems so far from us. Why this hide-and-seeK game with us? We are told that Your spirit is ever near. Some of us have experienced disappointment in that we have not sensed that spirit. Some feel that their marriage is falling apart and they want to know where your presence is. Another has children who have given way to drugs, and Your spirit seems remote. Another’s job is uncertain and he longs for the certainty of Your presence. For another, her days are lonely since her husband’s death and she longs for the assurance of Your companionship. Here is another who didn’t pass her exams, God, and she feels she will fail. She is frightened.

There are so many needs—so many desires—so many dreams, hopes, goals and longings. Give us the assurance of Your presence in this hour. Help us to look for You and find You in the life we live and the work we do.

We confess that—if we take our car and ride to the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, You are there. If we fly to the distant side of the United States, You are there. If we ride to the uppermost reaches of the state of Maine or Canada, You are there; and even then shall Your hand lead us and Your right hand hold us. If in the dead of night we feel deserted and depressed, the darkness cannot hide You, for the night shines as day to You. Be the night light of our souls. Through Christ we pray. Amen.