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STRESS

Simon Vibert

This article is a synopsis of the 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. The purpose of this article is to assist church leaders by considering ways in which stress is manifested and managed.

1. Personal Challenges

a. Pneumonia

Most of us end up publishing books in the hope that we will find answers for ourselves, and thereby offer assistance for others.

My own experience of stress is probably not too different to the experience of others. Whilst there are important lessons to be learnt from personal experience, it is fair to say that these lessons need to keep being relearned throughout life and do not just issue from personal crises. Perhaps most importantly, we need to be reminded that the best help comes from a life that is realigned to the purposes for humanity found in the Gospel.

It was in 1997 that I first gave the topic of stress some serious thought. I was busy with the activities of pastoral ministry in Trinity Church, Buxton, involved in wider Church leadership, completing part time postgraduate study and seeking to be a good husband and father to our growing family. At the end of a long winter, I went down with a nasty bout of pneumonia which hospitalised me for a week and put me out of action for several months. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that the Lord was keen for me to learn a couple of key lessons!

The first was that God will jealously fight for the exclusive right to rule our hearts (Exod 20:4-6). The idols which were competing for my attention were largely located around finding my identity wrapped up in ministry and leadership in the Church. It is very easy to believe that my worth as a human being is to be found in my apparent success in work, but when productivity and power are snatched away through circumstances beyond my control, finding a theological answer to questions of human identity becomes very important.

The second poignant lesson was that I am not able to control completely my own destiny. A period of ill health has a remarkable ability

to shake one's sense of independence. Control is the thing that we want in life, but sometimes life's circumstances make it abundantly clear that there are so many things which we cannot control.

This latter point is particularly relevant as I arrive at a definition of stress, and understanding about 'control' will bring theological clarity to the topic of stress management.

b. Christian Stresses

My experiences of stress are not unique, of course. In fact, it would seem that most people in the western world are struggling with the issue of stress. Is stress a peculiarly twenty-first-century problem? The answer is both 'yes' and 'no.'

There are plenty of new pressures associated with modern life in the west in the twenty-first century. For example, despite the number of labour-saving devices and gadgets we own, expectations from *work* (to be always available through smart phones/email); expectations on our *social life* (to 'have it all,' 'live life to the full,' always be busy); the challenges of *urban living* (commuting, noise, pollution, longing for the country/seaside); pressures on *family life* (social mobility means we rarely live in the community in which we were brought up, and often are far from extended family and friends); and the contemporary challenges to *Church* (Sunday is just like any other day, Christians feel like a distinct minority in a secular culture) are but a few. The pace and rate of change can make it feel like stress is greater now than it ever was before.

Having acknowledged the modern problems of stress, it is also important to recognise that stress has always been an issue for fallen humanity. For example, look at David's experiences in Psalm 25:

- 'I trust in you (Lord); do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me' (v. 2). David knew what it was like to feel under pressure; to feel the hostility of those around him.
- 'My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only he will release my feet from the snare' (v. 15). He felt trapped, out of control.
- 'Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted' (v. 16). David knew loneliness; he felt unloved by those around him.
- 'Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish' (v. 17). His heart was troubled; he experienced anxiety, with affliction and distress (v. 18).

David may articulate his troubles using different words, and he certainly does not talk of ‘stress,’ but stressed people today speak of anxiety, worry, loneliness, frustrated ambition, or feeling unloved, pressurised, unmotivated, and so on, as all being consequences of stress. These too were the psalmist’s experience. We may also learn from David the help that is to be found in looking to the Lord.

Do Christians experience less stress? The surveys outlined below seem to indicate not. In part that is because we have greater expectations of ourselves. Jesus himself sets the bar high: ‘Be perfect for your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt 5:48) and yet we all resonate with Paul’s cry ‘Oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death’ (Rom 7:24, NKJV).

We have higher expectations of one another (‘love one another deeply from the heart,’ writes Peter, 1 Pet 1:22), but we also believe in the reality of forgiveness and relief from condemnation and guilt (see Rom 8:1; 1 Jn 1:8f.).

Christians, it seems, are no less stressed. However, this article is written out of a conviction that the Bible and the Holy Spirit provide rich resources to manage stress.

2. Cultural Challenges

Upon leaving Buxton I went to be Vicar of St Luke’s Church in Wimbledon Park. The congregation and parish were largely made up of those who make the 45-minute commute into central London for work. The small, expensive, terraced houses of SW19 made a great starter home in this part of London, and the area previously boasted the highest birth rate per head of the population. Stress was a frequent topic of conversation within in the congregation and the wider parish.

a. Surveys

‘Stress in the City’ Survey

In 2001 I, along with members of the congregation, surveyed as many of the 1,500 homes in our small parish as possible. The goal of the survey was to talk about parishioners’ experience of stress and to offer them the opportunity to explore the Christian faith as a possible solution. We compared these answers with those received from members of the Church.

The questions we asked were:

1. 'How often do you experience stress?'

Parish—5% never; 31% occasionally; 6% monthly; 26% weekly; 32% daily
 Congregation—1% never; 33% occasionally; 4% monthly; 16% weekly;
 46% daily

Apparently, attending Church does not inherently appear to reduce an individual's experience of stress. We will return to this point shortly.

2. 'Do you think that the Christian faith offers help with stress?'

Parish—11% no; 19% not sure; 70% yes
 Congregation—3% no; 9% not sure; 88% yes

Whilst acknowledging the very subjective nature of this, and all of the questions, the answer to this question might imply that Christians, whilst experiencing similar stress levels to everyone else, nevertheless, have accessed some relief as a result of their Christian faith.

3. 'Do you think that the Christian faith offers real hope for life beyond the grave?'

Parish—16% no; 30% not sure; 54% yes
 Congregation—1% no; 18% not sure; 81% yes

This response is intriguing both in terms of the 18% of Church members who are not sure that the Christian faith offers real hope for life beyond the grave, and the 54% of non-Church attenders who think that it does! It would appear that there are plenty of people who do not darken a Church's door yet really hope, wish, or believe that the Christian faith was indeed true!

The door-to-door survey concluded by inviting people to explore the Christian faith further—and 50 people attended a follow-up Alpha course as a result. We also offered them an evangelistic booklet which I have written entitled *Longing for Paradise?*¹

In 2013 I conducted another survey which asked similar questions via online survey tools, with a specific Christian audience in mind. This survey sought to elicit the tell-tale signs of being stressed and find out what Christians call upon to help them at such times.

¹ An online version of this booklet is available at <http://www.simonvibert.com>. More than 10,000 of these booklets are in circulation.

1. 'What is the number one tell-tale sign that you are stressed?'

Roughly in order of greatest to least the following answers were provided by participants:

- irritability, grumpiness,
- anxiety
- sleep trouble
- withdrawal, distraction and escape
- headaches, stomach aches, muscle tension, skin complaints and fuzzy thinking.

These responses point to the combined impact of stress on mental, physical and emotional well-being.

2. 'Does the Christian faith help with your stress? Why/why not?'

94% of respondents claimed that their faith helped them in times of stress. Key helps for Christians are the reminders that God is in control; that he is a loving heavenly Father who cares for his children; that he gives clear directions for life in His word, the Bible; and that the Holy Spirit gives peace and purpose to life (see Phil 4:6f.).

3. 'What are the main ways in which you deal with stress?'

Numerous responses were given here, but they may be summarised into:

- Spiritual Disciplines—prayer, bible reading, praise, Christian friendship, Sabbath observance
- Enjoyment of Creation—exercise, countryside
- Prioritising and Organising - talking with colleagues/spouse/friends, managing workload, avoiding and escapism, procrastination and overindulgence.

b. Definitions

Two particular studies have been helpful to me in working out a definition of stress.

i. Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, 'The social readjustment rating scale'

Psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe surveyed more than 5000 patients over a two year period in order to discover whether or not stress contributes to illness.² They identified 43 life events (or 'Life Change

² Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe, 'The Social Readjustment Rating Scale,' *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, vol. 11, no. 2 (August 1967), pp. 213-

Units') and asked contributors to score them according to the stress. The higher the score, the higher the stress.

The self-test is assumed to give an indication of the likelihood of illness or accident. They argued that if the Life Change Units score was below 150 there was a 35% chance of illness or accident within two years. If the LCU score was between 150–300: there was a 51% chance and for an LCU score of over 300 there was an 80% chance of illness or accident.

The research had two phases. The first was with psychiatric patients and a control group to work out the Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Using a simple paper and pencil method, 394 participants rated the significance of life changing events and how long it took for them to recover from each of the listed events. The psychiatrists then compared the answers from the control group with those of the patients and evaluated how the weighting was assigned to each of the 43 categories and used these ratings for the larger survey.

The second phase was with a sampling of 5,000 people in which participants were asked to record their experience of the 43 events they had experienced in the last two years.

Although there is still significant subjectivity in the method of scoring stress, Holmes and Rahe argue that a large sampling of people gives a strong indication of how much stress is likely to be induced by various life events. They demonstrate a pretty convincing link between high stress and illness. By inference, reducing the environmental variables is likely to reduce the timing of the onset of illness.

Holmes and Rahe Life Change Scale Stress Test

Research questions: What events have happened to you in the past 12 months?

Life Event	Event Value
Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation	65
Jail term	63
Death of close family member	63
Personal injury/illness	53

Life Event	Event Value
Marriage	50
Fired from work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in family member's health	44
Pregnancy	40
Sex difficulties	39
Addition to family	39
Business readjustment	39
Change in financial status	38
Death of a close friend	37
Change in number of marital arguments	35
Mortgage/Loan greater than \$10,000	31
Foreclosure of mortgage/loan	30
Change in work responsibilities	29
Son/daughter leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding achievement	28
Spouse begins work	26
Start or finish school	26
Change in living conditions	25
Revision of personal habits	24
Trouble with boss	23
Change in work hours, conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in school	20
Change in recreational habits	19
Change in religious activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Mortgage/Loan less than \$10,000	18
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family gatherings	15

Life Event	Event Value
Change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Celebrated Christmas/ Hanukkah	12
Minor violation of law	11
Your score=	

It appears fairly universally agreed that the score from the Holmes and Rahe stress test (the Social Readjustment Scale) sets the standard for assessing the amount of stress and the likelihood of it causing long term impact in a patient's life.

A more thorough examination of the physical and emotional effects of stress may be found in Robert M. Sapolsky's recently revised *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*.³ The author makes the point that we tend not to lie awake at night worrying about whether we have leprosy or malaria. Rather, the diseases we fear most are those such as heart disease and cancer, which are the result of a slow build-up. When stressed, our body turns on the same physiological responses as an animal's—the so-called 'fight or flight' principle. However, in the modern age, we do not resolve conflict in the way our ancient forebears (or Zebras being chased by Lions) did, namely, by fighting or fleeing. Over time, our responses to stress can make us vulnerable to the slow build-up of diseases (like heart disease or cancer). Prolonged stress causes or intensifies physical and mental afflictions, including depression, ulcers, colitis, heart disease, and so on. Sadoski demonstrates that understanding the physiology will help humans react better to the 'fight or flight' reaction.

Before we arrive at a working definition of stress it is worth noting that stress may apparently be good for/useful to us demonstrated in what is known as the Yerkes-Dodson Bell Curve.

ii. Yerkes-Dodson Bell Curve

The Yerkes-Dodson Law was first described in 1908 by psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson. They discovered that mild electrical shocks could be used to motivate rats to complete a maze, but when the electrical shocks became too strong, the rats would dart around in random directions to escape. The experiment suggested that increasing

³ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2004).

stress and arousal levels could help focus motivation and attention on the task at hand, but only up to a certain point.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law is a useful tool for understanding how the stress cycle works, and how and why stress might in fact be good for us too. The researchers noted a definitive increase in performance after ‘arousal’ but they also noted that it peters out quickly. Research has found that different tasks require different levels of arousal for optimal performance. For example, difficult or intellectually demanding tasks may require a lower level of arousal (to facilitate concentration), whereas tasks demanding stamina or persistence may be performed better with higher levels of arousal (to increase motivation). Similarly doing the washing up, driving the car, running a 100 metre sprint, knitting...each of these require different levels of intensity and different rates of recovery.

Due to task differences, the shape of the curve can be highly variable.⁴ For simple or well-learned tasks, the relationship can be considered linear with improvements in performance as arousal increases. For complex, unfamiliar, or difficult tasks, the relationship between arousal and performance becomes inverse, with declines in performance as arousal increases.

The Bell Curve helps to explain why we feel ‘flat’ after a good holiday, or totally exhausted and unmotivated on the Monday after an exciting but tiring Sunday of Church worship. The findings of Yerkes and Dodson also help us appreciate why the rhythm of work, worship, and rest is built into human flourishing by a good creator God (more on this shortly).

iii. A working definition

The Health and Safety Executive’s formal definition of work-related stress is: ‘The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work.’⁵ Stress is not an illness—it is a state. However, if stress becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop.

A more useful definition, and perhaps also the simplest, came from social scientist Richard Lazarus in 1966: ‘Stress occurs when an individual perceives that the demands of an external situation are beyond his or her

⁴ David M. Diamond, Adam M. Campbell, Collin R. Park, Joshua Halonen and Phillip R. Zoladz, ‘The Temporal Dynamics Model of Emotional Memory Processing: A Synthesis on the Neurobiological Basis of Stress-Induced Amnesia, Flashbulb and Traumatic Memories, and the Yerkes-Dodson Law,’ *Neural Plasticity*, vol. 60803 (2007).

⁵ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/> Accessed 11/2015.

perceived ability to cope with them.⁶ Or, to put it in even simpler terms: ‘Stress is what we experience when we feel out of control.’

The issue of ‘control’ is important to consider from a theological point of view. When I was recovering from pneumonia I wrestled with the anxiety and frustration of being ‘out of control.’ I had to learn to be dependent upon others and live with the fact that I was unable to work for a period of several months. As I reflected on my physical weakness, I was also aware of the great encouragement that came by appreciating that God is sovereign, ultimately in control, ruling over me and the whole of the universe. This, I believe, is at the heart of how a Christian response to stress needs to have a robust theological understanding of ‘control.’

3. 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*, begins chapter one with the twin themes of ‘The Knowledge of God and of Ourselves.’⁷ Knowing God is important, but also knowing ourselves in the light for 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 similarly to 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

⁶ R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* (New York: Springer, 1984).

⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

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.

- *'In all things'*—there are no circumstances of life (prosperity or poverty; health or sickness; success or failure) which are unknown to God, nor is there 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.⁸
- *'God works'*—this is not some wishful thinking: 'it will be all right in the end, whatever will be, will be, *qué será será.*' Rather, 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.
- *'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 Christians whom 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 (v. 29) that He will justify and glorify. He will complete the good work in believers that he has started.

So, how does this help with the daily struggle with stress? Precisely because in that daily struggle, God is at work to bring me into 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.

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 (Rom 13:1f.), Teachers (2 Tim 4:1), Parents (Eph 6:1), etc.

⁸ Of course this does not deny that God can and does intervene to change the circumstances of life. But the Bible appears equally clear in that God will work to his honour in the circumstances we find ourselves, for example, Gen 50:20.

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 (and I am not) and that everything I have I have 'on trust' from God, the better it will be, and the less I will stress about things that are out of my control!

c. Your Father Knows—God is omniscient

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 number of 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, or it appears that no one could possibly understand our difficulties or circumstances, we would do well to remember: 'Your Father knows.' There is much more that could be written in this area. Indeed, the whole of the Christian 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 8:29).

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.

4. Practical Help

We will look at the following 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.’⁹ 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.

Secondly, refocus: focus away from the anxieties of tomorrow and onto the trustworthiness of God. Hence Peter counsels: turn your anxieties into prayer (1 Pet 5:7f.).

Thirdly, also from Corrie Ten Boom, ‘Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.’¹⁰ In the above 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 measure or directed in the right way.

Here are three practicalities related to anger:

⁹ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (first published Old Tappan, N.J.: World Wide. 1971).

¹⁰ Boom, *The Hiding Place*.

- 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’s remedy is to bring anger before God to get things in their proper perspective, and seek his forgiveness.
- Secondly, and 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 such as a crying baby, a work deadline, etc. The build up of adrenaline still needs to be dissipated, e.g. through cardiovascular 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 is 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.’ 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).¹¹

d. Rest (The Fourth Commandment)

The Fourth 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 six days and on the seventh

¹¹ Cf. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life. What on earth am I here for?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

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 active followers of the Lord.
 - 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 rose from the dead. Whichever day it is, wrestling with a way to keep a day of rest in a global, 24/7 age is complex!
- Rest and Work both need to be defined appropriately according to the type of work undertaken (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 seek to work, rest and worship in a manner which glorifies 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. 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 instead.

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), and *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' (Rom 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 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!

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