

FROM STRESSED TO BLESSED

We were away a week ago for summer vacation up in the Muskoka's. A friend let us use their cottage for a week of fishing, boating and just relaxing. This is the view that I had to put up with for a week, not bad right? We had a great time and got a lot of rest.

We are continuing in our series this week Transformed. So far, we have talked about mental, emotional and spiritual transformation. Today is Father's Day and I want to talk about physical transformation. Specifically, I want to talk today about stress. I know that men are not the only ones who deal with ongoing stress, but I think specifically men often face chronic stress because of the needs placed upon them by being a father and provider for the family. Let's read again this very familiar Psalm:

Psalm 23:1-6 A psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Stress is very hard on you physically. Before we get into this Psalm in a lot of detail, I want to first identify 7 of the most common stressors that we face:

Worry

The reason why worry is number one is because there's a lot more things to worry about than there used to be. Nobody worried about identity theft twenty years ago. Nobody worried about losing their cell phone twenty years ago. There's a lot of things we worry about today that your parents didn't have to worry about because they are new worries in an increasingly complex world.

Hurry

Hurry comes from the increasing pace in our life. Would you agree that it seems like the world is going faster and faster? We live in a microwave nanosecond world where everybody wants it now and they want it yesterday and they want it immediately. And everything is going faster and faster. That creates stress. Speed creates stress. Obviously when you are running through a place it is a lot more stressful than simply walking slowly through a place.

Crowds

As the world gets more crowded people are getting more stressed out. The reason why is we have a thing called urbanization. That is people are moving to the cities. Life used to be rural but now it is definitely urban. Eighty four percent of Canadians live in urban areas. Eighty four percent! In 1800 there was only one city in the world that had one million people in it. Today there are over five hundred cities on earth that have over a million. There are over a thousand that have a half a million. Tokyo has over 36 million. Delhi over 35 million and Shanghai over 31 million.

Having moved here from Brampton I know from experience that traffic causes stress. I read one study that said in the seventy-five largest cities in America that last year, Americans wasted over four billion hours waiting in traffic jams. That amounts to wasting over six billion gallons of gasoline – while you are stuck in traffic.

Choices

We have more choices today than ever before. You may think the more choices you have in life the better. Actually, choice can become paralyzing because it creates indecision. You used to walk into a grocery store and there would be a couple kinds of toothpaste. Now there is sixty kinds of toothpaste. E.g. coming home from Kuwait. Every brand has different ingredients that offer different benefits. So how do you know which one is best? The more choices you have can be paralyzing.

Loss of Privacy

Any loss is stressful but more and more today we face a loss of privacy. Not just the government but all kinds of corporations are keeping their eyes on you. They want to know where you are and who you are and what you said and what you bought. Every time you buy something it is recorded. We face this from when we play with hot wheels to when we are in wheel chairs.

Pluralism

We live in a world where increasingly the people around you often have very different beliefs, convictions, lifestyles, cultures and things like that. A hundred years ago North America was pretty much a homogenous place. There were commonly held values people shared, but that is just not true anymore. Technology has shrunk the globe. We are no longer a melting pot but we are more like a stew. People who live all around you and work all around you often have very different beliefs than you, often have very different cultural values and things like that.

What does that mean? It means there's going to be conflict. Conflict comes from being around people who are vastly different, and of course the media feeds on conflict. It is creating this culture of incivility where people are just rude to each other.

Fear of the Future

What if this or that happens? What if I cannot afford to retire? What if I can never afford a house? What if the economy continues to decline or I get sick and cannot work?

Within Psalm 23 we see a model for stress management.

Pro 14:30 A heart at peace gives life to the body ...

That is so true. When you are at peace, you just feel better. So how do you find peace? How do you reduce stress in your life? Within Psalm 23 we see 7 ways to manage stress that reflect the 7 stressors that I just mentioned.

1. Look to God to Meet Your Needs – stop worrying

Stop looking to other people or other things to meet your needs. Stop putting your security into things that you can lose. Look to God to meet all of your needs.

Psalm 23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

I shall not want because God is my shepherd. He is going to lead me and take me to the places where I need to go and to the things I need to have. That is what shepherds do.

Rom 8:31-32 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

The logic here is obvious. If God loved you enough to send Jesus Christ to die on the cross for you, do you not think he loves you enough to take care of every other need in your life? Of course, he does. So, stop looking to other people to meet your needs because they are going to eventually let you down. There is no one who could possibly meet all your emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual needs.

2. Obey God's Instructions about Rest – stop hurrying

So much of our stress come from the fact that we are always in a hurry and we never take the time to rest that God told us to take. God created us to require rest. Why did God create us with the need for sleep? We will all spend about a third of our years on this planet asleep. Why?

It is because rest is important. God modeled rest for us in creation. He included it in the 10 commandments – right up there with not murdering or committing adultery. That is how important it is.

Psalm 23: 2 He makes me lie down ...

If you like underlining things in your bible, underline the words 'makes me'. Have you ever had God make you do something? Rest is one of those things. If you do not get enough, eventually you will be forced to rest when your body stops working. Smart sheep follow the direction of the shepherd. Make sure that you have a Sabbath – for resting, refocusing and recharging.

I heard about a guy who said to his pastor, "Pastor I tried to get a hold of you all day on Monday." The pastor said, "I'm sorry. That's my day off." The man said, "The devil never takes a day off." And the pastor said, "Yeah and if I didn't, I'd be just like the devil..."

3. Recharge Your Soul with Beauty – get away

Get away from the crowds by getting outside and enjoying God's creation. Beauty is a very important thing in stress management. Have you ever heard someone say something like, "I feel so close to God in nature?" There is a reason for that. Nature was created by God; it reflects His beauty. Man was made to live in a garden, not in a skyscraper. When God created man, he put him in the Garden of Eden. Notice where it is that God makes us lie down;

Psalm 23: 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he restores my soul.

I think we can all visualize this. Think about lush green meadows and a calm lake with no sound other than the wind in the trees. Picture yourself in traffic on the 401 going through Toronto, now picture yourself on a dock on a calm lake at sunset. Notice the difference?

Here are some practical suggestions. Get outside often. Make sure that you are intentional about spending time outside away from crowds.

Start your mornings with God and not the media. Turn off your device and focus your first moments of the day in prayer. The first few moments of your day will set the tone.

Intentionally surround yourself with beauty. Hang pieces of art that inspire you. In our house and in my office, I have sea shells, maybe you have plants or other natural elements that remind you of creation.

Php 4:8 (MSG) Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious -- the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.

One thing you can do is always have praise music on in the background.

4. Ask God for Guidance – reducing choices

If a common source of stress in your life is indecision, then learn to go to God for direction. Look to Him for guidance. Not the opinions of your friends or some person on the Television, but go to God for direction.

Psalm 23:3 ... He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

The best way to do this is by reading the Bible. You read it and meditate on it throughout the day. God has promised to guide us, if we will let Him. Our families need us to be walking with Jesus, to be guided by Him. It has been said;

“A good father does these basic things: provides for his family, protects his family, and gives spiritual and moral guidance.”

The sad truth is that fatherlessness is on the rise. In America, almost 75 percent of children living in fatherless households will experience poverty before the age of eleven, compared to only 20 percent of those raised by two parents. Children living in homes where fathers are absent are far more likely to be expelled from or drop out of school, develop emotional or behavioral problems, commit suicide, and fall victim to child abuse or neglect. The males are also far more likely to become violent criminals. As a matter of fact, men who grew up without dads currently represent 70 percent of the prison population serving long-term sentences.

5. Trust God Even in the Tough Times – dealing with loss

We will all have good days and bad days. As I mentioned with our increasing loss of privacy, one of the greatest stressors in life is loss. When we go through times of loss there are two usual reactions – fear and grief. In response to this God promises us:

Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

God is our shepherd. The tools of a shepherd are the rod (to protect us) and the staff (to guide us). With the creator of the universe guiding us and protecting us, what do we have to fear? The omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent God of creation is with us. Even when we are going through the valley of the shadow of death, we do not have to be afraid.

Maybe you are going through a shadow valley in your life right now. The shadow of sickness. The shadow of debt. The shadow of discouragement. Shadows can be scary. Remember as a kid seeing shadows on the wall of your bedroom when you were trying to go to sleep? The good thing about shadows is that they cannot hurt you.

Shadows are always bigger than their source. That means that they may look big, but in reality, they are nothing. Wherever there is a shadow, there is a light. You cannot have a shadow without first having a light. The key to facing shadows is to focus on the light, not the dark.

6. Let God Be My Defender – dealing with conflict

Pluralism increasingly leads to conflict, and conflict leads to stress. We face opposition, criticism and are even attacked for our beliefs. Jesus said that this should not surprise us. Because the world hated Him it will hate us as well. Our natural response when we are attacked is to fight back. To retaliate and get even. That makes us no better than the people who are against us.

Psalm 23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

David understood what it was to be attacked. Even though he knew that God had anointed him to be the future king of Israel, he spent years under constant danger. He hid in caves. His character was attacked and lies were told about him. Even after all he went through, he would not say a bad word about the king. He never attacked. His hope and his focus were not on the danger but on his defender.

Psalm 18:1-2 (He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said) I love you, O LORD, my strength. 2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

It takes a lot of faith to rest in the presence of your enemies. You have this wonderful picture of the shepherd and the sheep having a picnic while surrounded on all side by the wolves. It takes faith, not to retaliate but to trust in God as your defender.

7. Expect God to Finish What He Starts – faith in the future

What if I lose all my money or I lose my health or something terrible happens to my family?

Psalm 23:6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Often shepherds will have helpers with them, sheep dogs. While the shepherd leads from the front, the sheep dogs guide from behind. They pick up the strays and motivate them to stay in line and keep up with the shepherd. The name of those two sheep dogs is Goodness and Love.

No matter what happens to us in life we need to always remember these two facts, that God is good and that God love us. Say it together, "God is good and God love me". No matter what we may face. No matter how vast the shadow or deep the valley or numerous the enemies.

God is going to finish what He started. He is going to complete the work that He began in us. As believers we know that one day, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That is our future, and that is focus no matter what we may currently be facing.