

“Where is God... when I’m having trouble coping”

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Text: 2 Corinthians 12: 5 - 10

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Stress. The bane of modern living. Whether it is in cramming for the final exam, watching your investments bounce around with the stock market, the soldier wondering if she will come back from patrol today, and on and on and on. Stress is something we know about. Stress is like the trash of life. We generate it all the time. But if we don’t dispose of it properly it will pile up and overtake our lives.

We’ve all heard of various strategies for dealing with stress: get exercise, get enough sleep, create distractions for yourself in life, schedule moments of fun and escape (and *not* keep your schedule). But more vitally, dealing with stress is dealing with the mind game around stress. This has been understood for a long time. Marcus Aurelius was a stoic philosopher in the 2nd Century AD and also the Emperor of Rome. During his rule he fought three wars simultaneously on three fronts, while also running an empire. And you think your life is stressful! In the midst of one military campaign he wrote this, *“If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.”* Modern psychology would say much the same. But there’s more. Dallas Willard was one of the preeminent authorities on Christian spirituality of our generation. He wrote that good spirituality should help foster mental wellbeing. So let’s look at what psychology today knows about managing stress. Then we will examine spiritual practices that help do what psychologists encourage us to do.

First, we are called to be a caring community. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). Bear one another’s burdens. When we are finding it hard to cope with stress it is as if we are walking around with the weight of the world on our shoulders. One of the simplest ways to experience relief is to have people you can talk with about this. 20 years ago a large study asked, “How many people can you turn to to talk with about the stresses of your life?” The average answer 20 years ago was between two and three people. The same study was conducted again recently, and the average answer now is between one and two people, and the proportion of people who say “I have no one at all to talk to” has gone up. This is truly sad, because one of the greatest supports comes from just speaking of your experience to another. If that person listens and understands with empathy, the one who is feeling stress will feel less of a burden simply because they know someone else knows and cares. The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi from a prison cell. It was a letter filled with gratitude because “you hold me in your heart” (1:7). He thanked them for holding him in their prayers. He was also greatly touched that the Philippian Church would care so much that they would send one of their own, Epaphroditus, from Greece to Rome a tangible gift of support for him. The Philippians couldn’t take Paul out of the stressful situation of being in prison. But in their empathetic concern and care they were relieving Paul of some of

the emotional burden of imprisonment. Reach out to people with whom you can talk about your burden. The support of others provides relief.

And...reach out to God. Psychological studies consistently show that people who engage in spiritual practices, which helps them connect regularly with God, have a greater capacity to cope with stress. And as it should! For if we believe that the God of the universe is really there, and that God is loving and gracious, comforting and nurturing, protective and available to us, then we have the greatest source of help in the universe. God in love wants to help bear our burdens too. Now there are two ways God might respond to our prayers about our burden in life. God might remove it or help us deal with it. We read from Second Corinthians about Paul's famous struggle with the "thorn in his flesh". We don't know what this issue was. But we do know that Paul was sufficiently stressed out about it that he repeatedly asked God to remove this stressor. But it didn't go away. Any of us can find ourselves in a chronically stressful situation that seems beyond our control, and our feeling of helplessness can lead too easily to feeling chronic stress. Ultimately Paul found a different direction for his thought patterns. He reframed how he thought about the "thorn in his flesh" and he wrote the reframe came in the small quiet voice of God, "My grace is sufficient for you", for my power can be made manifest in you when you recognize your weakness. So Paul changed how he thought about his stressor. He wrote, I am content in the face of insults and hardships, persecutions and calamities (all experiences which can create stress), because when I recognize my weakness I can tap into the strength of God. This is the perspective behind the famous Serenity Prayer, written by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, which we will say later. But the point here is this: a regular spiritual practice creates openings between us and God where we can experience God's support for our lives.

And with this story we can begin to tap into the psychology of Christian spirituality. All of us have attitudes. Technically, an attitude is an evaluation that we've made, that something is right or wrong, good or bad, positive or negative. When we come up against tough stuff in life, we evaluate it. Stress is the product of negative evaluations... negative attitudes. When we are struggling with something that is creating a stress in life, negative attitudes can lead to feelings of being powerless and defeated, anxiety and anger...and over time to burnout. It can lead to a lot of negative self-talk, which sustains our feeling of stress. Have you ever had thoughts like: "I can't escape this... There is no end to this... I don't know how to manage... I'm all alone in facing this... Nobody care... I'm just getting run down and burnt out...". This kind of talk actually talks us into feeling stress. Over time it can foster a negative outlook that becomes a straightjacket that will not let us go, creating chronic stress, the feeling of being overwhelmed and the worry that we can't cope. Negative attitudes and a negative outlook can also drag us away from all the things that are helps and supports in our stress (proper exercise and diet, talking with others). Modern psychology knows that the fix for this is our conscious, proactive efforts to rebalance our positive and negative thoughts, that we regain more of a positive outlook on life. And when we do, the experience of stress declines.

One of the most remarkable psychological "discoveries" of our generation comes from the work of Dr. Barbara Fredrickson. She has actually proven mathematically that the wisdom of the ages

and of ancient spiritual attitudes and habits have been right all along. And that is: we need to foster positive attitudes in making our evaluations of our experiences of life. As best we can, see the glass as half full rather than half empty. When our attitudes shift more towards the positive (on average) our sense that we can cope improves, the experience of stress declines, which gives us more capacity to deal with the things that create our stress, which in turn reduces our stress still more. Barbara Fredrickson calls this an “upward positive spiral” that broadens and builds our capacity to deal with the stressors of life. Now it takes mental discipline to do this. It takes an ability to step back and look at how our thought patterns are going. Some people can do this on their own, others need counsellors to help them do it. But if we can appreciate and monitor our habits for negative thinking, we can begin to turn them around into more positive thoughts.

Something you might not appreciate about Christian spirituality is that it promotes a positive outlook on life and positive habits of thinking. Last week we looked at having a hopeful outlook on life. In the Letter to the Romans Paul introduces a large section of teaching with an assertion that growth in discipleship rests in part on “the renewal of our minds” (how we think about things). One of Jesus’ most famous teachings was to avoid negative thinking. He asked his followers rhetorically, “Can you add as little as one hour to the length of your life by worrying about it?...So, don’t worry” (Matt. 6: 25-34). On the flip side Paul encourages us to keep our thoughts oriented positively. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, let your mind dwell upon these things” (4:8). What we let our minds dwell on can change our outlook in life. But psychology also tells us that new habits of doing can change our habits of thinking. So we should take equally seriously the fruit of the Spirit in our lives as living these ways can shape our thinking positively. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. There are other Christian habits of thinking and acting which also work in the same way. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26). A core part of Christ’s Gospel is his encouragement that we forgive each other for hurts and be reconciled. In other words, don’t let the frustrations of your lives continue, which can lead to stress.

Dallas Willard wrote that a good spirituality should foster mental wellbeing. Growing into the mindset I’ve been describing is not easy, since the frame of mind we have is held by habit. And as we know: habits are hard to break. The Christian habits of thinking I’ve described here are good for us to do as an act of discipleship and as a spiritual practice. But one consequence is that it does foster greater wellbeing. And isn’t that as it should be? As the father of modern psychology William James put it, “The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”

We’ve looked a lot at Paul’s teachings today. I did because Paul was human, and he experienced a significant number of things that would create stress. Even as he wrote to the Philippians from a prison cell, he could write this about stressors, “I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry, and having plenty and being in need. I can do all things

through him who strengthens me. I have learned to be content" (4:11-14). In looking at the trials of his life, and God in his life, he learned contentment, acceptance, reliance, a positive outlook. He said, I have learned to be content. We can learn it too. And that will help us cope, with whatever life puts before us. Thanks be to God that God is a God who helps, and has provided a faith that actually works in practical ways to help us live life. After all, did Jesus not say that he came so we could know life in abundance?