

## **“How to Stress Less”**

### **Philippians 4:4-9**

*Sermon Series: New Year New You Part 2 Live Fearless Week 1. Free from Anxiety*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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Today we start the second part of our New Year, New You series. Our goal is to become a Temple of the Holy Spirit – a place God would want to live. On the first Sunday of the year I outlined three pillars to the temple of your life: Physical, Emotional, and Relational. If one of these pillars is weak, the temple tends to collapse. It's likely all three need a bit of shoring up. If you strengthen all three pillars, with God's help, you will definitely be a New You in this New Year and beyond.

In the first part we worked on the Physical Pillar which also is broken down into three parts. My wife Lisa talked about Exercise. Martha focused on Nutrition and Linda encouraged us to get proper Rest. This series is literally changing my life. I discovered if I go to my gym Planet Fitness and rest in a massage chair on Pizza Monday I can get all three done at once! Truth is, I am exercising more, watching what I eat and trying to get to bed earlier. It's making me new. Yet that's just the beginning.

For the next three weeks we'll look at the Emotional Pillar. If the first part is about Living Fit, the second is Living Fearless. Many feelings cause fear and make us emotionally troubled. We'll focus on three: Anxiety or Stress, Depression and Anger. To get started, let's do an emotional inventory. What is your response to these questions?

- Can you start the day without caffeine?
- Are you always cheerful, ignoring aches and pains?
- Can you resist complaining about your troubles?
- Are you understanding when loved ones are too busy to give you any time?
- Can you overlook it when someone takes their frustrations out on you though you did nothing wrong?
- Can you take criticism and blame without resentment?
- Can you conquer tension without medical help?
- Can you relax without liquor?
- Can you sleep without the aid of drugs?

- Can you honestly say deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, or politics?

If you scored 100% on this then you are almost as good as your dog.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know if your dog feels stress but I'm certain one cause of stress is feeling you are in the dog house. What is "stress"? A Hungarian doctor named Han Selye coined the term in 1936. Engineers originally used "stress" to describe how metal, such as a steel girder on a bridge, can be compressed or stretch and still return to its original shape. Selye later admitted he should have used the word "strain" which describes something that doesn't bounce back because it's a better description of how people feel. Yet whether you call it stress or strain the feeling's the same.

What is Stress? The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) says,

Stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand. Every type of demand or stressor—such as exercise, work, school, major life changes, or traumatic events—can be stressful.

It goes on to point out three facts about Stress.

1. Stress affects everyone from time to time - Some cope with stress more effectively or recover from stressful events more quickly than others. There are different types of stress—all of which carry physical and mental health risks. A stressor may be short or long term.
2. Not all stress is bad - Stress can motivate people to prepare for a test, a job interview a competition. Stress can even be life-saving in some situations.
3. Long-term stress can harm your health - Health problems can occur if the stress response goes on for too long or becomes chronic. Some experience digestive symptoms, headaches, sleeplessness, sadness, anger or irritability. People under chronic stress are prone to more frequent and severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold. Over time, continued strain on your body from routine stress may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses, as well as mental disorders like depression or anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

There is a famous inventory of 43 stressful events developed by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. The list includes: Death of a Spouse, Divorce, Retirement, Marriage, Mortgage. Each event is assigned a score. There's even a stress score for "Becoming a member of a church." When you count all your stressful events in the last year and add

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from "Mikey's Funnies," a daily e-mail humor list (6-26-02)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml>

up your score it indicates your risk of illness. 1983 was the year Lisa and I graduated college, got married, moved twice, she started her new job, I entered seminary and, in December, we found out she was pregnant. When I added up the score it said, “By now you should be dead.” Truth is I did wind up in the hospital for a week. Stress is hazardous to your health.

Thankfully, there are ways to manage stress. If we want to be emotionally healthy – to lower our fear, anxiety and worry – let’s work on our stress. Our goal is not to be stress free since some stress is good. Rather, let’s lower harmful stress. Let’s stress less. Stress has two sides – one external, the other internal. Remember the steel girder bridge? The external force is the load placed on the bridge. The internal force is the strength of the bridge to bear that load. Stress and strain occur when the burden is more than the bridge can bear. So you can lessen the load, strengthen the bridge or do both. In a course on stress management, my college professor, Dr. James Mills said,

Stress consists not just of the task we face, but also of our worry and concern about that task. This approach means that guilt, anger, and anxiety are part of our stress.

One goal is to relieve the burdens on us. Resolving a problem, completing a task, getting it off our plate lightens the load. We can also work on our reaction to these burdens and tasks. The Lord can help us with both.

The concept of stress may not appear in the Bible yet there is a powerful picture of it in the life of the Apostle Paul.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28 NIV).

Wow! I hate to think how many points he racked up on the Stress Scale. The word “danger” appears eight times in those verses. After such deadly stress, you’d expect Paul to be angry and agitated, discouraged and defeated, frustrated and fearful. He writes a letter to the Philippians while in jail, in Rome, chained to a soldier. You would expect gloom and despair to pour from his pen.

Nothing is further from the truth. He writes,

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. (Philippians 4:4-5).

This sounds impossible. How can you possibly be happy all the time? Well that's not what Paul says. Happiness is a lack of bad stress. Joy is contentment and peace in stressful circumstances. The Greek word "rejoice" also means thrive and be healthy. It was used as a salutation. Our word "Hello" originally meant, "Be healthy." "Farewell" means "I hope you fare well or stay well." "Goodbye" or course means "God be with you." And that's exactly what Paul is saying here. It's not a command to be happy all the time. Paul wants them to be well in the Lord. Be content in the Lord. Be gentle in the Lord. Be at peace in the Lord. Be joyful in the Lord. God is with you. The Lord is near.

How do you stress less? First **Release with Prayer**. Paul writes,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)

The word "anxious" means to have a divided or distracted mind. It's a person pulled in two different directions. It's someone who does not know what to do about a problem. Paul is not telling us to never feel anxious. He was anxious about his friends (Philippians 2:28), his churches (2 Corinthians 11:28) and his life (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). What Paul offers is a way to release anxiety: prayer. Every time an anxious thought fills you mind, every time worry clutches your soul, lift it up to God in prayer. Place it in God's strong and power hands. Ask God's help to deal with the burden. And then – this may seem strange – give thanks. Give thanks for His presence and His power. Give thanks for the blessings in your life. Give thanks for the good God is bringing out the problem. Why is thanksgiving so essential? It reorients your thinking. I've heard that alcoholics in recovery are often told to write out a gratitude list. Why? Because they say, "Stinking thinking leads to drinking." Negative thoughts lead to problems. A mind filled with gratitude leads to peace.

Let me add that this is not a once and done prayer. Paul says, "in every situation." That means every time you are in the ring, going ten rounds with anxiety, don't wrestle, release it to God in prayer. Lift it up. This will seem awkward and ineffective at first but keep doing it. Prayer is a muscle which gets stronger the more you lift things up to God. I have a friend at the gym named Nick. He is able to lift these massive weights while I strain to lift these puny weights. Yet he told me, "You can do it. Just keep working at it." Then he added, "You can do all things through Him who gives you strength." I think I've heard that somewhere before. Release with Prayer.

Next, **Receive His Peace**. In the next verse Paul writes,

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

Notice, if you give your problems and burdens to God, in return He gives you His peace. This is God's peace – the peace God feels inside. He wants to fill you with His peace. It

is a calm you cannot explain. It's serenity that doesn't quite make sense. It's the gift of the Holy Spirit. On the night before His crucifixion Jesus said,

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)

This peace not only fills the space your problems once took, it actually protects and guards you. Scholars point out the irony that Paul uses a war-like term to describe God's peace. The word "guard" usually describes a garrison of Roman soldiers who stand watch and protect a city. God's peace protects and defends your heart and mind.

When it comes to stress and emotional issues, the battlefield is not out there. It's in the mind and the heart. A lot of lies try to work their way into our minds and hearts. Some of these come from Satan, the father of lies. Some come from the media, our enemies, our coworkers and schoolmates, even our family. When we let them in and listen to them they control our thoughts, disturb our emotions and add to our stress. Some of these lies are: You're not good enough, smart enough, tall enough, thin enough, pretty enough, old enough, young enough. The most fundamental lie is, "You are not enough." God wants to protect your heart and mind from these lies. Scripture says,

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (I John 3:1)

You are a beloved child of God the Father. When that truth fills you, it protects your mind and heart and gives you peace. Many going through a troubling work situation, an uncertain illness, a family conflict, a journey of grief have said to me, "I can't explain it, but I'm getting through this with God's peace." So do you want to listen to the father of lies or the Father who loves you?

Third, **Review His Truth.** Next Paul tells,

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)

The word "think about" also means to reflect or meditate on these qualities. Long before mindfulness became popular, Scripture has been telling us to meditate and fill our minds with God's truth, justice and purity. Where do you find God's truth? In His Word. If you are not reading, reviewing, meditating on His Word you will not experience the peace He wants to give. This helps you avoid the lies I just mentioned.

You also need to watch out for the laws – the unspoken laws that cause stress. My professor in the stress class says our minds are controlled by unspoken laws such as:

- I must never make a mistake
- I must never fail

- I must never look foolish
- I must work very hard at all times
- I must never get angry

These are laws we have for ourselves. There are also unspoken laws we have for others:

- People should never disappoint me
- People should do what I ask
- People should be reasonable toward me
- People should always keep their promises to me

You may notice that unspoken laws I have for me contain “must” and unspoken laws I have for you contain “should.” These laws cause stress when I or they inevitably break them. The solution is catch yourself thinking these laws, challenge them and then fill your mind with truth about God, yourself and others.

Finally, **Rely on His People**. Paul ends by saying,

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:9)

Paul offers his life as an example of how to replace stress with peace. Who is a peaceful person in your life? You know who I’m talking about. It’s the one who is calm under pressure. The one who doesn’t lose their head when others do. The one who thinks clearly in a crisis. The one who knows the next step to take. The one who prays. Some of this is taught. Some is caught by observation. You can’t fake peace. But you can follow someone who is peaceful. Learn from them. Let them coach you. Ask them to listen to you. Ask them to pray for you. Often, when people are under stress they shout or go silent. Don’t shout. Reach out. Don’t hide. Get alongside a peaceful person.

I want to end this message by giving you a chance to practice what I just preached. I will lead you through a prayer you can use at home in your quiet time.

Describe in a few words what is causing you anxiety and stress:

### **1. Release With Prayer**

Petition – offer up a prayer placing the situation in God’s hands

Request – Ask God for what you need to handle it

Thanksgiving – Give thanks to God for all your blessings

- 2. Receive His Peace** - Ask God to fill you with His peace. Ask God to protect you from the lies that fill your heart and mind.
- 3. Review His Truth** – Ask God to identify the unspoken laws you have for yourself or others. Ask God to reveal His Truth about you and others.
- 4. Rely on His People** – Ask God to lead you to a peaceful person who will listen and guide you through this situation.

May the God of peace be with you. Amen.