

I am a bit stressed about Christmas. My wife tells me she wants a watch for Christmas. But I know if I go out and purchase it, wrap it up, and put it under the tree, she will open it, smile at it, and then ask me where the receipt is. She will want to exchange it, and find another one. Oh, yes, I could have her go along with me, but then her gift won't be a surprise. Plus, I am stressed about my daughter and son-in-law coming for 3 days, and I have two sermons to write and memorize before and while they are here. Will I be able to spend some quality time with them? What about you? Are you a bit razzled with Christmas approaching? Maybe this prayer would be a good one. *"In these days before Christmas, spare us from the stress of deadlines and the frenzy of commercialism."* Every year about this time we need to hear that and pray that, because, we *can* get all caught up in – and “stressed out” by – the trappings of the season.

But I think it's fair to say that stress is not just seasonal. Stress – meaning a feeling of strain or pressure or being “under the gun” for one reason or another– is something that most of us deal with on a regular basis. Some of you have the stress of dealing with a spouse who has a multitude of health problems. Some of you have personal health issues that cause you stress on a daily basis. Some of you have the stress of living life as a single adult, when you had a companion by your side for many years. Some of you have the stress of grandchildren or children who are living lives in conflict with the Savior. A few of you who are still working full-time have stress in your workplace. You feel strain or pressure, an uneasiness.

You may remember how I shared with you a year and ½ ago in a Bible class that you need 5 things in your life to relieve stress. You need to be in the Word, you need to have some work that you do, you need to have family-Friend commitment time, you need to have a hobby, and you need to devote 30 minutes to exercise each day. If you have a healthy balance of these 5 your stress will be minimal. The problem is when one area gets overweighted to the exclusion of others.

Our text for today is addressed to First Century Christians living in the ancient Macedonian city of Thessalonica. These believers didn't have to be told what stress was, because they were living it. For no other reason than their allegiance to Jesus Christ as their Savior, they were beginning to feel the pangs of physical persecution. And their pastor, the Apostle Paul, was concerned.

So toward the end of his first letter to them, he writes to the Thessalonians with some very practical God-inspired counsel on how to deal with this stress in their lives. And since all of God's Word is timeless, we also are given solid, Scriptural instruction on how to deal with the stresses and strains and setbacks and difficult situations that come into *our* lives. We'll note that Paul doesn't make any mention about deep breathing exercises or play dough or special anti-gravity chairs. Instead, in rapid-clip fashion he offers and encourages us to practice a series of truths, which we might call “A Survival Guide for Stressful Times. He starts off with 5 stress reducers and then gives us one promise. Scriptural stress reducer #1: **(16) Be joyful always.** Question: Is this possible? The Thessalonians were undergoing increasing personal and physical persecution for their faith. And while God may spare us from that, we all deal with our own painful issues. Is it possible to “**be joyful always**” when relationships are crumbling or children are turning wayward or health is declining or we've just buried a loved one or our job is on the bubble and things are beginning to look pretty bleak?

The answer is yes. But in order to understand that, we must first understand the distinction between “happiness” and “joy.” Happiness is dependent upon our circumstances, while joy is an attitude. The Thessalonians weren’t really happy about being picked on and persecuted. They weren’t particularly happy about being poor. But they had reason for an attitude of joy. Why? Because believers know that Christ rules the heaven and earth, and so the sorrow which enters our lives is not a matter of blind fate. Anything which causes us sorrow is something our Savior permitted to come only to serve our good. Sorrows draw us closer to him. They purify our faith like gold is refined by fire. They provide opportunities for us to confess before others the hope that is in us. There is however, one thing sorrow cannot do. It can never, never separate us from God’s love. In addition, God’s Spirit helps us and prays for us in our weakness. And we know that God will keep his promises to watch over us and care for us in our sorrows. So Be joyful always! When we focus on what we are in Christ, what we have in Christ, and what we will be because of Christ, we can **“be joyful always”** – even in the midst of stressful and unhappy circumstances. Life events change, but **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever”** (Hebrews 13:8). And He is our joy and delight.

Scriptural stress reducer #2: **(17) Pray continually.** Again, this must be properly understood. Paul is not suggesting non-stop engagement in prayer to the exclusion of everything else – such as work or carrying out our other God-given responsibilities. What he is suggesting is to always be in a spirit of prayer. He is encouraging us to cultivate such a relationship with God and ease of prayer that we can pray at any or all times. Our Lord is available to you twenty-four seven, and he invites you to share your thoughts, your hopes and dreams, your fears, even your jokes and foolishness with him, just as a child might with a loving and caring parent. You don’t have to stop and fold your hands and close your eyes to communicate with him.

A number of years ago King David and his men returned home after a weary three day journey. They found that while they were away, an enemy tribe had made a raid on their homes and had burned them to the ground. On top of that, their wives and children had been taken captive by the enemy. It wasn’t long before morale hit bottom. What did David do? He shifted the pressure from his own shoulders to the Lord’s. He knew that the stress was too big a load for him to carry alone. Someone once said, “I consider myself the warehouseman, not a warehouse. I only handle each burden long enough to unload it in the warehouse. God is the warehouse. I am the warehouseman.” Yes, take it to the Lord in prayer, and life becomes manageable and less stressful.

Scriptural stress reducer #3: **(18) Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.** So you lost your pension. Your health has not been good for sometime. Your marriage is a disaster. Your kids are on a wayward path. It is easy to get on the pity pot, and do the woe is me routine. But stop, God says you still have reason to give thanks. You still have a ton of blessings given to you. Think and write down the blessings you do have. Remember Romans 8:28: **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** Instead of asking “Why is this happening to me, God?” why not ask, “What are you teaching me through this, God?” Periods of stressfulness should not be seen as the absence of God in our lives, but a necessary part of our spiritual development. God uses **“all circumstances”** to fashion us and keep us as His own **“in Christ Jesus,”**

and for that we must thank Him. And you know you thank Him too by your actions. As the Bible says, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.

Scriptural stress reducer #4: **(19-20) Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt.** God the Holy Spirit creates the fire of faith within us through the Means of Grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to see our utter sinfulness, our complete need for a Savior, and the work of that Savior for us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the one who lit the wick within us. And like the Emmaus disciples remarked, our hearts *“burn within us”* when we contemplate Christ. Paul tells us to build on the faith we have been given and to never treat **“prophecies”** – a general term meaning the Word of God – with contempt or disregard. How might we do this? A couple of ways come to mind... When in our personal lives we treat the Word of God as a museum piece – something to be admired but not to be touched – we cut ourselves off from its power and influence. In Romans (10:17) Paul writes *“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.”* It is impossible to overestimate the importance of staying close to the Word. To disregard the Word is to treat it with contempt. A second way is to not live according to it. The ancient church father Chrysostum said *“an impure life extinguishes the gift of grace.”* In other words, if there is sin in our life – either unconfessed sin or sin which we’ve become very comfortable with or tolerant of, we treat God’s Word with contempt.

With these words Paul encourages us to recognize the Word of God for what it is – fuel for our fire. And when the fire of faith burns brightly within us, stress shrinks away because of the heat. Final stress reducer: **(21-22) Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.** The Greek word for test has to do with proving the genuineness of a coin. In the same way, we are to **“test everything.”** How? By sifting it through the sieve of God’s Word. That which passes through we are to use. That which doesn’t, we are to **“avoid.”**

The Thessalonian Christians lived at a time when any number of pagan ideas and religious philosophies challenged their faith. So do we. This is the age of religious pluralism. Every religion is seen as good as the other. Today there is no truth, only personal preferences. How do we avoid confusion? Paul encourages believers then and now to develop a Christian mind trained by the Word so we can test, determine, and then **“hold on to”** the truth. Jesus said when we know the truth, we are set free.

After giving us this practical survival guide for stressful times, Paul then concludes with a blessing. The blessing asks two things. Lord, bless every effort of these people to grow in holy living. And Second, God, keep these people from going backwards in their faith life so that they will be blameless when Jesus returns for Judgment Day. That prayer is the same prayer that I have for all of you’re here today. **(23-24) May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.**

There is no reason to get stressed out people. And if you do, use the Scriptural Stress reducers God has provided. And remember this: *“Enjoy these next weeks and remember that whatever doesn’t get done doesn’t really matter. The important stuff has already been done.” Amen.*