

Beyond Self-Help Books

I have run out words to describe how concerned and afraid I am in these days we're living. I turn on both the news and social media with hesitation, fearful of what fresh hell might have emerged from that steady stream of information and opinion and clickbait.

I am extremely blessed; yet, I know it can all be gone in a heartbeat. And every day, I wonder if the next shoe will drop—if I'll be plunged again into heart-ache. That's what happens when you've known pain or grief or anger or loss. And, in one way or another, we all have known these things—and if not...well...we will, because that's a part of being human.

For most people, those things happen; but they don't dominate; but, some people seem unfairly, consistently, burdened by them.

They are different manifestations of what we call "stress," and can do more than just ruin a good day. Stress contributes to chronic and severe medical conditions, like autoimmune disease, irritable bowel syndrome, heart attack, stroke, depression, hypertension, and even cancer. Stress is real and harmful: to health, performance, and relationships. And it is deeply involved with our spirituality. We can't afford to discount it or dismiss it or ignore it.

In my clinical training, stress was covered briefly; but, I was not prepared for the intensity with which it has become epidemic in this generation. I have watched people struggle—people for whom I care deeply—people for whom I have pastoral responsibility—and I have felt helpless to respond.

Oh, anybody can Google stress and find "ten easy steps to dealing with stress;" and those steps generally are effective. But, if they're so "easy," why do we continue to see the incidence and intensity of stress increasing?

Not long ago our adult Sunday School class was discussing stress, and a couple of comments opened a new direction of thinking and understanding for me, and so, I've been reexamining what I already knew, and looking in some new directions.

One of the first things we're advised to do is to LEARN THE SIGNS and SYMPTOMS. Many of us already know these. Symptoms can include headache, upset stomach, digestive problems, fatigue, chest pain, change in appetite, and muscle pain. Stress is not what our creator had in mind when humanity was created. It has multiple manifestations: physical/mental/emotional/spiritual. It also can be destructive to relationships, and intimacy—irrational reactions to the slightest provocation—or, the opposite: withdrawing...

Learning to identify the signs and symptoms of stress is essential for avoiding long-term damage to health and relationships.

Another important piece of advice is to take personal inventory. Recognize that it's not always about what's happening "to" us from some other source: work, school, social demands... Quite often, stress is self-inflicted—the result of poor choices and life-style decisions: trying to live a champagne lifestyle on a beer budget; enduring a hated, dead-end job for the sake of being "successful".

And the greatest tragedy—and we talked about this in the Sunday School class—is an emerging pattern of inflicting stress on our children! In the last few days I've heard pressure on a 4th grader: "You've got to ace this test, or you'll never get into college!" *A fourth grader!*

Or, how about the nine-year-old Little League Baseball player whose parents are paying for a batting coach?

Whatever happened to, "Do your best"? If your college football team doesn't win a National Championship, fire the coach! "We're #1!" or we're nothing.

We want our kids to succeed; but is being #1 the only standard of success? So, we stress over that—and our kids inherit it.

And the greatest source of stress may well be—I don't know—it may well be a spiritual one: the realization of the distance between who God created us to be and who we actually are—the realization of unfulfilled potential—falling short. On the spiritual level, it is the difference between being successful and being faithful.

So, one of the first steps in dealing with stress is to do a self-inventory. What am I doing that I could stop doing—or do a different way? What am I not doing that I need to start doing. And, where will I find the discipline to do what I need to do?

Of course, diet, exercise and rest figure very prominently in both the cause and the relief of stress. But, again, you can find that on any website Google might open for you; or you can go to the self-help section of B.A.M. or Barnes & Noble.

We'll look at all the above in this series of sermons; but we can't really talk about it all at once, or in one sermon. Still, I want *to begin* on a note of hope. The point I'd like to make this morning is that we are not without resources. And we are not without choices.

ROMANS 8:31-39 *What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes* for us. ³⁵*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will*

be able to separate us from the love of God in | Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are not without resources; and, perhaps our greatest resource is the promise that such things are not to be faced alone. The very One who created us has promised that not a single minute of our lives is to be lived without the Love that gave us life in the first place holding us close, pulling us near, surrounding us with mercy.

Our first resource is that promised presence; and *nothing can separate us....*

Look, I don't know how it happens. And I know—believe me I know—that there are days when it all falls apart; when it seems nothing good will ever happen again and where we are is where we'll always be. There are days when not much seems to matter at all.

So y'all excuse me if I get all church-y here; but, I simply know no other way to get through those days except to begin with the insistence that

- 1) we are loved and
- 2) we are not alone and
- 3) there is hope.
- 4) *And nothing can separate us.*

This doesn't get us off the hook in (1) accepting responsibility for our own lives; it doesn't get us off the hook in (2) speaking up when we need do; it doesn't get us off the hook in (2) helping those who need help; it doesn't get us off the hook in (4) living lives that help justice flourish and peace, maybe, to become a possibility. It doesn't get us off the hook.

And it doesn't by-pass the down-on-our-knees-dirt-under-our-fingernails work of becoming who God has created us to become.

But it does fuel us for the journey. It does help us move forward when things are awful. At least...it does for me.

Because what I believe, out of my own experience, is that to each of us God has said, "I'll keep you." *And nothing will ever be able to separate us from that.*

And given all the days when I have felt so unworthy of such keeping, so far away from such love... well, I'll take it. *Because nothing can separate us... I am convinced.*

And more than anything I want for you, I want you to be convinced, too. It's not the final answer. It's not the resolution for all our stress. It's a place to begin.¹

¹ This closing page is, in part adapted from a blog on Julie Richardson's blogsite, *Someone Stole My Coffee*. The blog was entitled, "If I Were To Get a Tattoo...", November 5, 2017.