

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 25, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PSALM 23:2

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside the still waters.”

STRESS - ITS CAUSE AND CURE

There are at least three changes that have taken place in our daily lives in the 20th century that most people take for granted and seldom think about at all.

(1) Life has been speeded up immeasurably. Did you ever realize that George Washington, living 200 years ago, could not travel any faster than Moses could 3,500 years ago? For thousands of years a galloping horse was the fastest means of locomotion known to man. Yet today we hurtle through the air at three times the speed of sound. And what with car telephones and computers, and many other inventions, life races along like a motion picture being played at high speed.

(2) With this speeding up of life, changes take place much more rapidly, and recent medical discoveries have shown that change of any sort can be devastating to the human body. A hundred years ago it was not uncommon for people to be born, to grow up, and to die in the same home, and to work in the same job all of their life. Today, one-third of Americans move every year. People change jobs frequently, and, alas, they even change spouses with alarming rapidity!

(3) There has also been a great increase in the volume of life. People wake up to alarm clock radios. They turn off the radio only to listen to television news as they eat breakfast. They get in their car to go to work, turn on the engine, turn on the radio, or put in a cassette. When they arrive at their office, music is coming through the sound system. The same thing happens when they come home at night. There is constant noise. And, of course, industrial noises surround us on every side.

The effects of stress on the human body, mind and soul have only in recent decades begun to be assessed. These effects are extremely disturbing. Today more than one million people die each year from stress-induced illnesses such as heart attacks and strokes, not to mention all of those who get cancer and a multitude of other diseases brought on by stress. Two-thirds of all visits to family doctors are now caused by stress-related illnesses, at a cost of 75 billion dollars a year. Do you know that the three top-selling drugs in America today are: (a) Inderal for hypertension; (b) Tagamet for ulcers; and (c) Valium, a tranquilizer to try to overcome the effects of stress?

But what is this thing called stress? Some people have said that it is simply the wear and tear of the body. But it is far more than that. During the Civil War, they began to observe

something called “stress.” It was called “soldier’s heart.” When people are faced with some sort of an emergency or a danger, certain chemical changes take place in their body. The hypothalamus releases a certain drug and adrenalin is released into the bloodstream. This stress reaction is called the “fight or flight” syndrome and is very essential under certain conditions, especially if you’re being chased by a wild bull across an open field! But the problem is that when that response is triggered too many times, a perceptible chemical change takes place in the body which, in turn, upsets the whole body-chemistry and brings about enormous physical, mental and spiritual consequences.

During the Civil War the “soldier’s heart” was actually palpitations of the heart. These men had this mechanism triggered so frequently in battle that it was having adverse effects upon their hearts. In World War I it was called “shell shock.” They thought at the time that it had something to do with the loud noises of exploding shells. By World War II they had changed the name to “battle fatigue.”

We talk today about teachers in high schools, and salesmen who must produce or else lose their job, as suffering from “battle fatigue,” from the same type of syndrome brought about by repetitions of this triggering of adrenalin in the body. But we find that today the kinds of things that once were experienced only during warfare are now becoming commonplace in the lives of millions of people.

They can now determine the amount of stress that we have. For example, the death of a spouse is the worst; a divorce is second. The loss of a job, serious personal illness, or the illness or bad conduct of a family member, all produce certain levels of stress. These have all been quantified now, and it can be determined that if in an 18-month period you have a certain figure of stress-related changes that have taken place in your life, then your chances of having a serious illness in the next two years go up alarmingly. If the figure is over 300 points, you are a disaster waiting to happen, because you have a 70% chance in the next two years of having a heart attack, getting cancer, having psychiatric problems, or developing an ulcer, to name only a few. In fact, the number of different kinds of ailments that can be caused by stress is indeed startling.

Are you suffering from any of the effects of stress? Make your own checklist. Here are some of the things that can be induced by stress: excessive sweating, nervousness, irritability and anger, insomnia, high blood pressure, depression, headaches, desire to avoid people, stomach disorders, fatigue, heart racing or palpitation, hyperactivity, loss of concentration, inability to relax, hopelessness — and on and on it goes. Did I miss any of you?!

One thing that has been learned about stress is that it is cumulative. You may go through a very stressful experience, and three months later think you are over it. But you are not. It is cumulative. You store it up, month after month, year after year, until, if it is not dealt with, you reach the point in your stress threshold beyond which you cannot tolerate it any more, and at that point something happens -you break down; and we talk about a “nervous breakdown.”

A book written by Randy and Nanci Alcor describes the experience of a young lady by the name of Sharon. She was a secretary in a church office and everybody liked her. Her family liked her; her friends liked her; the people she worked with liked her. She was a splendid

Christian woman. One day she was sitting at her desk in the church office, talking on the phone to a salesman about a piece of equipment she had been asked to get for the lowest possible price. She asked the salesman if his company could bring their price down a little. And he snapped back at her, “What do you want us to do, give it to you?” Now that was a rude thing for him to say, but to the average person on the other end of the line, it would be no big deal. But she started sobbing uncontrollably. She couldn’t complete the conversation. She couldn’t move from her desk. She couldn’t drive home; her husband had to come to pick her up. And for three months she was incapacitated. Why? Because of the accumulation of stress. She had lost a family member; they had moved from one house to a bigger one; a number of things had happened in their personal lives, and the stress had built up. Finally, there came the straw that broke the camel’s back, so to speak.

Another thing that has been discovered about stress is that there are two kinds of people when it comes to facing stress, and you have probably heard or read about them. They are personality Types A and B. It has been noticed that these types react very differently when it comes to dealing with stress.

Personality Type A is achievement-oriented. A sense of urgency drives him on. He has high expectations of himself and others who are associated with him. He is impatient, aggressive and competitive. He is frustrated if he doesn’t meet his goals. He has guilt feelings about resting or taking a vacation. Are you a “Type A”?

If you are a Type A let me say that you are probably a mover and a shaker, one of this world’s go—getters. You’re the type that goes out and gets the job done. You can’t stand to see anyone giving less than 100% to the job at hand. You can’t stand driving behind somebody who drives too slowly. You can’t stand waiting in a line. You’re on the go, and you’re climbing the ladder. Well, let me tell you this: you have seven times greater risk of having a heart attack than Type B! In fact, studies have shown that from 72% to 85% of all people who have heart attacks are Type A people. You also have a high risk of contracting a vast array of other diseases such as I mentioned earlier.

Type B is just about the opposite of Type A. Type B is more people-oriented than goal-oriented. If you are Type B, you’re the kind that takes time to smell the flowers. You are more interested in the process of life than in the product of life. The ominous fact is that though Type A is the kind that goes out and gets the job done, he often doesn’t live long enough to enjoy the results of his labors. Somebody once said that a gold-lined casket is not really the goal of life. And to get kicked to death by the golden calf is no fun either.

Type B, the tortoise, is probably going to come dawdling by one of these days and see the hare belly-up with a heart attack. And the tortoise is going to go on and may very well accomplish more in the long run, for the simple reason that he will probably outlive the hare by 20 to 30 years and will most certainly enjoy life more.

Well, what can be done about this devastating problem that is taking so many lives, and robbing so many more of all that makes life worthwhile? I would like to speak about three different areas: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual.

1. First of all, as far as the bodily aspect of stress is concerned, it has been discovered that regular physical exercise is absolutely essential for dissipating the accumulating stress that builds up in your body. Therefore, if you are not exercising, you are simply inviting all sorts of additional problems. One writer has said, “It’s as if we carry in our bodies little locked up boxes of potential diseases (probably genetically determined), and stress is the key that unlocks them.” They now know that cancer is very definitely related to stress. So, you ought to exercise regularly, knowing that by so doing, you are syphoning off stress that is building up and tying your body in knots, and creating the release of all sorts of chemicals in your body, and thus producing a host of devastating reactions.

Do you know that the walls of arteries are destroyed as a direct result of stress? What does your body do? It lays down plaque inside your arteries, and this plaque is the body’s attempt to overcome the fact that stress is destroying the artery walls. Plaque is a kind of “patch” on the inside of arteries. But the problem is that as this plaque builds up, it causes hardening and constriction of the arteries which, in turn, produces high blood pressure; and often a piece of this plaque will break off the artery wall and cause a heart attack, a stroke, and often, death.

So, I would urge you to get some regular exercise, even if it is only taking a brisk half-hour walk three times a week, and at the same time watching your diet and controlling your weight.

2. In the mental or psychological area, a person can indeed change from Type A to Type B by simply a mental effort to do so. He can come to the conclusion that being a Type A is not the smartest thing in the world, that the race is not necessarily to the swift, that the good life is not dependent upon how far we go, and that results are not really the most important thing. I remember a young man in his early 40s, an extremely successful businessman, telling me once that his heart attack had actually been a blessing in disguise, because it made him slow down and view life in an entirely different way. He said, “Thank God, before it was too late, I have gotten my priorities sorted out.”

Again, in considering the mental aspect of stress, let me quote Dr. Robert S. Eliot, who is Professor of Medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical School, and one of the nation’s leading cardiovascular experts. He has two basic rules for coping with stress. You should write them on a card, and put it on your office desk, or tape it to the refrigerator door. Listen to his use of medical language!

Rule 1 - Don’t sweat the small stuff; and

Rule 2 - Everything is small stuff!

That’s it! That’s how to cope with stress, and that could give you a whole new perspective on life.

We often lose sight of what is and isn’t “small stuff,” don’t we? You can hold a quarter up in front of your face, and it will blot out and completely cover the sun, and even appear larger

than the sun! We need to get a cosmic perspective on things.

3. As far as the spiritual aspect of stress is concerned, the Bible calls us to stillness.

Always remember the beautiful words of the 23rd Psalm, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters” (23:2). Over and over again, the Bible calls us to turn aside from the turmoil of life and quietly reflect upon the goodness and mercy of the Lord. In this hectic, frenzied, noisy world, we need to get away to a place where it is calm and quiet. It need not be far away; it can be in your home, or behind the wheel of the car as you drive, or in your office. We need a time and a place to be alone with the Lord.

Many people are offended when they read the story of Martha and Mary in the Gospels. I would venture to say that if a hundred secular Type A people read that passage they would say that Martha, who is scurrying around, busily tending to the guests and fixing a fine meal after the traumatic event of Lazarus’ death, was certainly the heroine of the story, and that “do-nothing” Mary, who is sitting at the feet of Jesus, quietly listening to Him, was nothing but a wimp and a faded pansy. But listen to what Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41,42). That is a lesson that Type A people need to learn. They need to hear God say, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). They need to know that sitting and listening to the Word of Christ may be more important than the feverish activity that everyone else may be applauding. They need to learn how to change their thinking about what is really important in life.

Studies have shown that a time of meditation or prayer does more than perhaps anything else to remove stress. So why not turn aside in the morning before the day’s work begins, and commit the day to the Lord. Ask Him to be glorified in all you do? This will fortify you, because, when a problem arises, you can say, “Lord, I have committed this to You already this morning; I am trusting You now to see me through.” Then, during the lunch hour we can spare a few minutes to be quiet before God, reading a few verses from a pocket New Testament, and again committing ourselves to Him. And in the evening, especially before retiring for the night, we can be still and experience the streams of His love and mercy and grace as they flow over and into our souls, and as we thank Him for the day.

“Be still and know that I am God.”

God said to Elijah, who had just been through a very stressful experience with King Ahab, “Hide yourself by the brook Cherith...” (1 Kings 17:3). That was God’s prescription for a very over—stressed prophet. “Hide yourself by the brook Cherith...” “He leadeth me beside the still waters.”

Someone said recently that he likes to take one—minute vacations — to sit back for just one minute and think about some beautiful part of the world he has visited or would like to visit! A Christian can take one—minute vacations! What about taking a minute to count your blessings? How many of them could you count in 60 seconds? Maybe it would take several one-minute vacations to reflect upon all that God in love has done for you - the positive blessings He has bestowed, the things which could easily have happened to harm you but didn’t. This kind of

endeavor could give you a much healthier outlook on life, and certainly syphon off a great deal of your stress.

Our Lord Jesus Christ didn't come to any quiet waters. One of the Psalms which speaks of our Lord has this awesome verse in it: "All Your waves and breakers have swept over Me" (42:7). He took all our sins upon Himself, and He offers us eternal life if we will put our trust in Him.

But we need to come to rest in Him; we need to give God time to heal us and to cure us, to build us up and strengthen us in Him. We need to find that "place of quiet rest near to the heart of God," so that we may have our souls restored.

Said one poet:

Slow me down, Lord.
Ease the pounding of my heart by the quieting of my mind.
Steady my harried pace with a vision of the eternal reach of time.
Give me amid the confusion of the day, the calmness of the everlasting hills.
Break the tensions of my nerves and muscles with the soothing music of the singing streams that live in my memory. Let me look upward to the towering oak and know that it grew great and strong because it grew slowly and well.

AMEN.

Prayer after Sermon:

Father, help us to find that place of quiet rest, and determine that with Your help we are going to overcome the effects of stress. Help us to know the peace that passes understanding. Help us to give You time to work out Your perfect will in our lives. Help us to grow wise and strong so that we may be powerful and effective instruments in Your hands.

We pray in Jesus' Name.

AMEN.