

# Overwhelmed, Part 3: Stressed Out

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This morning we conclude our series of messages entitled Overwhelmed. If you missed either of the first two messages, I encourage you to watch or read them online or order a CD or DVD at the Media Center. Our lives are filled with so much activity we feel overwhelmed, stressed out, overcommitted, always in a hurry. As a result the most important things in our lives are neglected and begin to fall apart—our health, our families, our relationships with friends and God. We are addicted to busyness. It has become a source of our worth—how important we are is measured by how busy we are. It is a spiritual issue. We are powerless to break the cycle of busyness. We need God's forgiveness and strength to make different choices. I'm preaching this series of messages to myself. I invite you to join with me in looking for ways to make better choices in 2012 by the grace of God. The last two weeks we've talked about some practical ways to do that. This morning I want us to look at the underlying spiritual principle that enables us to live with peace in a high anxiety world. This is a principle that flows throughout the entire Bible. David describes it in this Psalm.

1 Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack. 2 My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride. 3 When I am afraid, I will trust in you. 4 In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

Psalm 56:1-4

How do we find peace and balance in a high anxiety world—a world filled with stress and fear? Fear is one of the things that drives us to be busy. Now fear in itself is a good thing. God gave us the emotion of fear to protect us from legitimate threats. If you encounter an intruder in your house, fear is a good thing! Fear will cause you to flee or fight. Some fears are not legitimate, and we waste a lot of energy stressing over those. They can be imaginary fears. Children sometimes imagine monsters under their beds and they are afraid. I remember living across the street from our Methodist Church in Dallas. We went to church every Sunday night and often I wanted to get home and watch TV while my parents talked with folks after church. I would go home by myself. I remember jumping from the sidewalk to the top of the steps on the porch because there were dark shadows in the corners of the steps, and I just knew there would be a snake coiled up there. Living in the city, there were very few snakes, but I was

sure a big rattler lived there. Imaginary fears. On an adult level when we worry about things that might happen; those are imaginary fears. They are not imminent threats. We are just afraid that they might happen. The media amplifies our fears. Stories of terrorist attacks, tornadoes and floods, the stock market crashing—all of those increase our fears of what might happen. We live in fear of imaginary things.

We also live with common fears of failure, rejection, economic collapse, our children's future. Nearly 1 in 8 persons suffer from anxiety attacks on a regular basis. Fear is overwhelming.

Stress is not necessarily bad. Stress is defined as “demands upon our physical, emotional and spiritual strength.” We face those demands every day. There is no such thing as a stress-free life! If you have zero stress, you are not doing anything! Stress is a normal part of life. Up to a certain point, stress increases our productivity. We ramp up our energy to meet the demands. But after a certain point, stress becomes counterproductive. It interferes with our ability to do our best. The stress level that persons can tolerate is different for each of us. The things that cause stress are different. What I'm doing today would create enormous stress for some of you—speaking in front of a large crowd. It is normal stress for me. Stress causes me to ramp up my energy to prepare a message for Sunday. I want to prepare a message that will help connect you with God. I don't want you walk out of here feeling like you wasted your time. I want you to walk out of here feeling that you connected with God and were reminded whose you are and who you are. I block out Wednesdays to do my sermon preparation. Everybody on staff knows: “Don't disturb Bill on sermon preparation day.” If the message isn't coming together, I can get stressed out. Once I'm here on Sunday morning, I don't feel overstressed—I feel gratified.

Our stress levels can be compared to playing a cello. If the bow does not put enough pressure on the strings, then the sound is flat and dull. Too much pressure on the strings and it squeals and snaps a string. Just the right amount of pressure produces a beautiful sound. We need just the right amount of stress in our lives. However, most of us have taken on too much stress, and we are

about to snap. How many times have you overcommitted yourself for a day? You may book two lunches or double book yourself for appointments. You make multiple promises to people about what you will do on a certain day, and there are not enough hours in the day to keep all those promises. You are about to snap.

How does the Bible teach us to handle stress and fear? The Biblical key to handling stress is to practice God's pattern for life. This is the purpose of the Sabbath. God designed us to experience a pattern of work and rest. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the Sabbath is a day for rest and worship. It is a gift to replenish our bodies, souls and minds. God gives us the gift of worship to remember who we are and whose we are. In our frantic pace of activity we forget those things.

God also wants to give us the gift of putting everything on "pause" and "mute" for a little while each day. To replenish we need to get away from the distractions so we can spend a few minutes in quietness listening to God and enjoying him. A great way to reduce our daily stress is to make some room for God each day. Other suggestions are found on the handout in your bulletin.

Our scripture reading from David in Psalm 56 points us to the key. "Do not be afraid." This is a theme that recurs in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The gospels record that Jesus talked about the greatest commandments (To love God and to love our neighbor) only eight times. He said to his followers, "Do not be afraid," twenty five times. Jesus knew how often we become overwhelmed with fear.

It is easy to say to someone, "Do not be afraid." The key is to answer the question, "Why shouldn't I be afraid." The Bible answers that question:

10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10

We need not be afraid of anything, because the mightiest power in the universe, God himself, promises to always be with us. Jesus said to his followers, "I am with you always, even to the close of the age." David wrote: "Even though I

walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” (Psalm 23) This promise is made over and over and over again throughout the entire Bible. God is with us. God lives in us. We have nothing to fear.

God did not promise that because he is with us we will not suffer or have bad things happen. He promises to be with us and see us through those experiences so that they do not crush us. In Isaiah 43:2 we see the promise that God will walk with us through the fire and through the floods of life. He does not promise to let us escape the fire or the floods, but he promises to walk with us through those experiences. In the end, he promises to redeem all the suffering and the hurt in our lives. God never promises that nothing bad will ever happen to you or your children or your parents. Somehow we think if we worship God, and read our Bibles and pray then God will keep any bad things from happening. We are bitter and resentful when bad things happen. But God never made that promise. Even his own Son was not exempt from extreme suffering—mockery, a brutal flogging, and the excruciating pain of crucifixion.

We have so many fears. What if I get cancer? What if my children have a serious illness or accident? What I’m learning to do is trust my children into God’s hands. I pray for his protection but also pray that whatever happens, he will be with them and will hold them tight. Just because God is with my children does not mean he will help them find the perfect mate within 24 hours, or land a job quickly. It means he will walk with them through the process. He will give them strength for whatever happens.

In Psalm 55:22 David says: “22 Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.” It is interesting to look at the context in which David wrote those words. It was not a time when everything was going smoothly. Listen to what he wrote earlier in the Psalm about what was going on in his life:

4 My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. 5 Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.

Psalm 55:4-5

Jerusalem is under siege by an enemy. The city is in turmoil. Danger is everywhere. Yet David casts all his cares on God, because whatever happens, God is with him.

Our scripture reading this morning from Psalm 56 describes David fleeing from King Saul who was seeking to kill him. He fled to enemy territory among the Philistines. He pretended to be insane so that they would not kill him. And yet he proclaims:

3 When I am afraid, I will trust in you. 4 In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

Psalm 56:3-4

9 By this I will know that God is for me. 10 In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise-- 11 in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

Psalm 56:9-13

Because God is with me, I will not be afraid. There are many practical things we can do when overwhelmed with stress and fear. But none of them will work unless we live by this truth: God is with us no matter what. I will trust him.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced overwhelming stress. He knew what a crucifixion and flogging were like. He did not want to experience the pain. He threw himself down on the ground and pleaded with his Father to let the cup pass from him—to exempt him from the incredible suffering. Couldn't there be another way to save the world from sin and death? Jesus was not exempted from the plot of evil men. At the end of his prayer, he put his trust in God, "Nevertheless thy will be done." On the cross he would feel abandoned by God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the most extreme moment of his suffering, Jesus was asking God: "Where are you? Why don't you do something?" Yet in the end he said, "Father, into your hand I commit my spirit." He came to a place of complete trust.

We often hear this verse from Paul quoted: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, present

your requests to God.” (Philippians 4:6) We often miss why Paul says we should not be anxious. The last words in the previous verse are the key: “The Lord is near.” Because God is with us, we do not have to be anxious about anything. (Phil 4:5)

I could go on and on quoting scriptures, because this theme is consistent throughout the Bible. The point is clear: because God is with us, we have nothing to fear.

When we feel the fears rising we affirm this truth. “God, thank you that you are with me. I trust you. I’m scared. I don’t know what is going to happen. But I trust you. I place my life in your hands. I place my spouse in your hands. I place my children in your hands.”

Sometimes it is helpful to write down our fears in a journal. What is it I’m afraid of? It helps to name it and so that it does not just rumble around in our heads. We name the fears. Then we write: “God, I give you these fears. Thank your for walking with me through whatever is ahead, I know I don’t walk alone.”

The great hymn, “How Firm a Foundation” records some of the promises of God’s Word to us when we are overwhelmed with the stress and fears of life. Listen to these words as if God is speaking directly to you.

"Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,  
for I am thy God and will still give thee aid;  
I'll strengthen and help thee, and cause thee to stand  
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

"When through deep waters I call thee to go,  
the rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;  
for I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,  
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

"When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,  
my grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design

thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

When we remember that God is with us his perfect love casts out all fear.

Healing Prayer