

THE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS SERIES

STRESS

How to Cope at the End of Your Rope



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INTRODUCTION

Has unrelenting stress ever pushed you to the breaking point? If so, you are not alone. How well I remember a time in my own life when I thought: *I can't take any more stress—I can't handle one more thing!*

I felt deeply wounded and betrayed in a relationship. Words were spoken that weren't true, and the stress it caused in my own life was intense. Our ministry was in its infancy, and the daily to-do lists were beyond my ability to accomplish it all.

As a result, my body felt the impact. I'd go to bed very late, working past midnight (and I am a confirmed night owl), but I'd also wake up each morning at 4:00. I was instantly alert—my mind racing through the endless list of tasks necessary to meet the needs of others.

Understand, waking up before sunrise has never been my norm. (I always thought if the Lord wanted me to see the sun rise, He would have scheduled it later in the day!) Nevertheless, those early awakenings were truly beneficial, enabling me to get even more work done. Yet several months later, the Lord showed me that my rising abnormally early in the morning had nothing to do with increased productivity. Instead, my sleep disturbance had everything to do with stress—specifically, the painful pressure of a broken relationship.

As difficult as the physical burden was, the emotional toll was even weightier. Our young, hope-filled ministry, always such a joy before, began to feel like a two-ton boulder on my back. I didn't have the help I needed to answer all of the counseling letters. I didn't have the confidence to do all the research required for my teaching. I didn't have a way to release all the mounting pressure of ministering to others. This period in my life was a blessing and a burden at the same time.

And then there was the weight of wrong choices. My acute awareness of that fact created even more pressure. *"If only* I had made different decisions. *If only* I had thought a different way. *If only* I had been a different person. *If only ... If only ...* "

By God's grace, I began to meditate on one of the most precious verses in the Bible: *"The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged"* (Deuteronomy 31:8). This passage and several others,

coupled with the wise counsel of friends, helped me turn a spiritual corner. Slowly, as I began surrendering my burdens to the Lord, and my stress began to dissipate as quickly as it had arrived.

Since that time, I've learned not to miss the *signs* God has for each of us. When stress is signaling possible burnout, *slow down* and turn from danger. *Stop* and ask for directions—God's directions. *Yield* the driver's seat to Christ. Then *resume* your journey, totally trusting in the Lord.

I also learned that stress can have either a positive or negative impact in our lives. On the positive side, it can increase our ability to endure. On the negative side, it can cause us to break.

Realize, when a blacksmith applies heat in the process of hammering out a horseshoe, he not only shapes the metal but also increases its strength. Likewise, when God allows us to come into contact with the heated hammer of circumstances, it's never for the purpose of harming us. Instead, under His care, He will both shape and strengthen us. He knows the right amount of pressure to permit in your life. Even so, your response to that stress is critical. When you surrender yourself to the perfect hands of the Master Craftsman, He will reproduce the life of Christ in you.

For years, the following words were attached to my bathroom mirror, reminding me of this life-changing truth:

For years, the following words were attached to my bathroom mirror, reminding me of this life-changing truth:

There is nothing—
No circumstance, no trouble, no testing—
That can ever touch me until, first of all,
It has gone past God and past Christ,
Right through to me.
If it has come that far, it has come with great purpose,
Which I may not understand at the moment;
But as I refuse to become panicky,
As I lift my eyes up to Him
And accept it as coming from the throne of God
For some great purpose of blessing to my own heart,
No sorrow will ever disturb me,
No trial will ever disarm me,

No circumstance will cause me to fret,
For I shall rest in the joy of what my Lord is—
That is the rest of victory!*

You personally can “be at rest” amidst your trials if you focus not on your trials, but on your God. He is sovereign over your trials. He knows how to use the stress in your life to bless your life!

June Hunt
Founder, Hope for the Heart

*Adapted from Alan Redpath, *Victorious Christian Living* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1951), 166.

STRESS

How to Cope at the End of Your Rope

Are you *stressed out* and barreling down the road to *burnout*?

Stress can be a motivator or a mean taskmaster—unceasingly pressuring you, relentlessly threatening you. You might feel like you are carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Yet what an extraordinary relief when you realize the truth that your burden is carried by someone else.

Jesus invites you: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28). God’s will for your life is not continual stress, but rather confident rest. You can be confident that, in every circumstance, He is at work within you.

Let stress send you straight into the Savior’s arms. He can shoulder your most stressful experiences—especially those that send you spiraling downward to a screeching halt.

If you’re at a breaking point right now and feel that one more pressure added to your life will crush you, then lighten your load by letting God bear your burdens. Remember, stress can be a tough taskmaster, but stress can also be a motivator.

Consider the 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, a man who was under tremendous pressure. Stress pulled Lincoln down to the depths of despair time and time again.

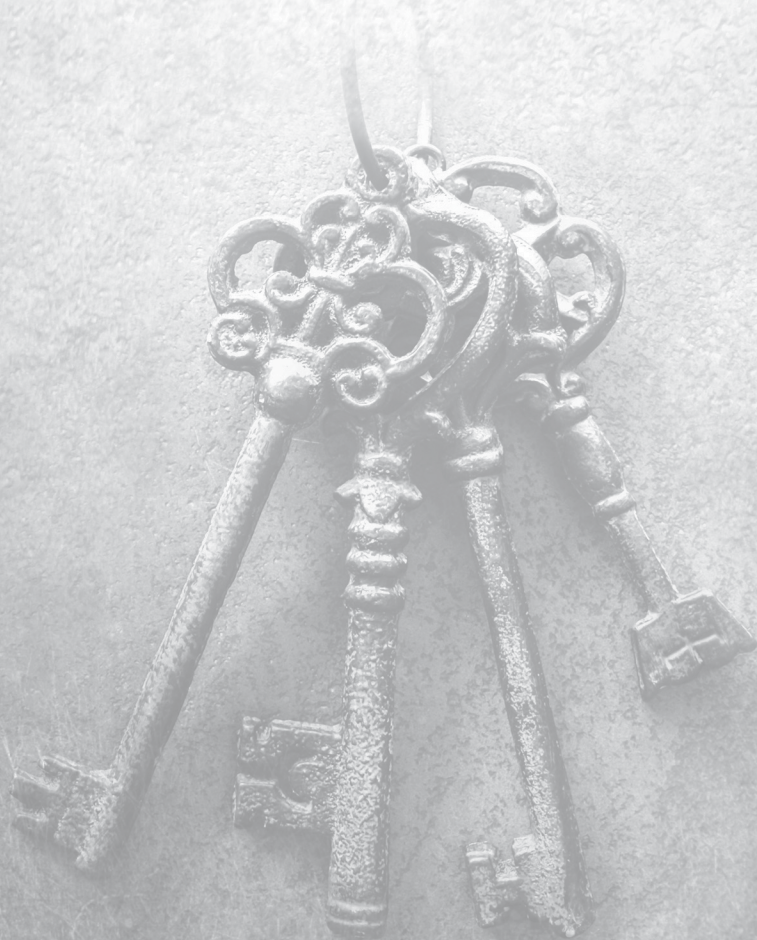
Yet each time, he rose up. Among the most beloved and respected of all American presidents, his stellar accomplishments proved that great stress can result in great success.

*"I was pushed back and about to fall,
but the LORD helped me.
The LORD is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation."
(PSALM 118:13–14)*

It matters not how great the pressure is, only where the pressure lies. As long as the pressure does not come between me and my Savior, but presses me to Him, then the greater the pressure, the greater my dependence upon Him.¹

Hudson Taylor

DEFINITIONS



*“If you want to find
peace in times of stress,
come to the Lord
and find the rest
you’re looking for
in Him.”*



Abraham Lincoln grew up with stress as a constant companion, emotionally troubling him and eventually enveloping him.

His impoverished and tragic childhood was marked by the deaths of his mother, aunt, uncle, and beloved sister, as well as the neglect of an emotionally absent father. This proved to be the stressful opening chapter to a life that would be punctuated by pain and anguish.

As an adult, *melancholy* became a common word to describe Lincoln's demeanor. He lived in a state of sadness that drew both the attention and the sympathy of those around him.

But in August 1835, another word became associated with Lincoln—*unstable*—as a painfully stressful event led to a complete emotional breakdown.² His experience could be likened to that of the psalmist.

*"I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow."
(PSALM 6:6–7)*

What Are the Many Sides of Stress?

Anna Mayes Rutledge was a lovely young woman with big blue eyes and silky blonde hair. Anna was the apple of Abraham Lincoln's eye and the picture of health—until an epidemic swept across rural Illinois. Doctors described her debilitating illness as "bilious fever."

Lincoln had tended to the sick, built coffins, and assisted with burials. Now a health crisis became intensely personal and deeply distressing, prompting him to make repeated visits to Anna's bedside.

For months, stress had been coming at Lincoln from seemingly all sides. Prior to the epidemic, his nerves had become frazzled from obsessive, day-and-night study of his law books.

He had even put his own health at risk through personal neglect leading to his emaciated appearance. One neighbor commented: “His best friends were afraid that he would craze himself—make himself derange[d].”³

And sadly, their fears *ultimately came true*. Lincoln failed to heed the call of Scripture to . . .

“Be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.”

(1 PETER 4:7)

Stress is . . .

External pressure causing physical, mental, or emotional strain

— “The stress from that heavy truck caused the old wooden bridge to collapse.”

“People cry out under a load of oppression; they plead for relief from the arm of the powerful” (JOB 35:9).

Self-induced internal pressure causing physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual strain

— “The stress of striving for perfectionism leaves me mentally and emotionally exhausted.”

“By one sacrifice he [God] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (HEBREWS 10:14).

Internal resistance responding to outside pressure

— “The stress in my lower back was caused by lifting heavy boxes.”

“My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body” (PSALM 38:7).

Negative pressure resulting in distress, danger, or destruction

— “The stress from many harsh winters destroyed the fruit trees in my back yard.”

“When calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you” (PROVERBS 1:27).

Positive pressure producing motivation and movement

- “The stress of needing to support my family caused me to seek a better job.”

“The appetite of laborers works for them; their hunger drives them on”

(PROVERBS 16:26).

What Is Unhealthy Stress?

Lincoln’s life was battered and bruised by unhealthy stress, and the untimely death of Anna Mayes Rutledge dealt the final blow to his fragile and frail emotional and mental states.

On the cold and wet day of Anna’s funeral, Lincoln was distressed about rain falling on her grave. Cold, gloomy weather was detrimental to Lincoln’s emotional health throughout his life, often serving as the culminating factor to push him over the edge. He once wrote that bad weather had proved “to be very severe on defective nerves.”⁴

Following Anna’s death, Lincoln was seen wandering in nearby woods—gun in hand—admittedly contemplating suicide. Friends literally locked him up inside their home to prevent him from killing himself.

Around this time, yet another word was starting to be murmured about Lincoln—*crazy*. During this time, the Lord of peace described in 2 Thessalonians seemed to elude him.

*“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you
peace at all times and in every way.”*

(2 THESSALONIANS 3:16)

Unhealthy stress . . .

Refers more to the duration of stress over a considerable period of time

Includes external or internal pressure that God does not intend for us to experience

Causes detrimental effects to the body, as well as to the soul and spirit

Stretches us beyond the threshold of our physical, mental, and emotional limits that God established within us to protect from overload

Plunges us past a saturation point where nothing can be added without something else being eliminated

King Solomon, known for his wisdom, wrote . . .

*“I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors
—and they have no comforter.”
(ECCLESIASTES 4:1)*

What Does Scripture Say about Stress?

As a young boy, Abraham Lincoln was grounded in Scripture. His mother, Nancy, sat him on her lap and read from the family Bible.

The Ten Commandments were a focal passage, evidenced by Nancy’s final words to her 9-year-old son: “Abe, I’m going to leave you now and I shall not return. I want you to be kind to your father and live as I have taught you. Love your heavenly Father and keep His commandments.”⁵ Lincoln’s mother died in her mid-thirties from an infectious disease known as “milk sick,” stemming from a poisonous root eaten by cattle.

Later, Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush, built upon the young boy’s spiritual foundation by faithfully taking him and his sister to Pigeon Creek Hard Shell Baptist Church every Sunday. Lincoln *heard* the Word of God, Lincoln *read* the Word of God, but there is no evidence until later in life that he turned to Scripture to find solace from his stress.

Lincoln's early experience is similar to that of King Asa of Judah.

*"Though his disease was severe,
even in his illness he did not
seek help from the LORD,
but only from the physicians."
(2 CHRONICLES 16:12)*

Distress "implies an external and usually temporary cause of great physical or mental strain and stress."⁶

"There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil"
(ROMANS 2:9).

Distress can be the result of severe, self-induced, internal stress.

"See, LORD, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious" (LAMENTATIONS 1:20).

Distress is a state of anguish, vexation, or affliction.

"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (ACTS 17:16).

Distress is a word used more than 100 times in the Bible (NIV) to describe negative stress.

- It most often pictures the negative result that pressure and pain can have on the heart.

Example: The apostle Paul wrote to those whom he deeply loved in the young Corinthian church—those who had severely rebelled against him, but later sincerely repented.

"I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you"
(2 CORINTHIANS 2:4).

Distress is often a translation from the Hebrew word *tsarah*, which means "straits, distress."⁷

- The word means "distress, anguish, or affliction" in a spiritual or psychological sense.

Example: Due to the jealous rage of Joseph's 10 older brothers, his life was in severe jeopardy. And despite his distressful pleas, the brothers sold him as a slave and he was carted off to Egypt.

Years later, the brothers found themselves in the depths of distress. Because of the severe famine in Israel, the brothers traveled to Egypt to buy grain. But when they found themselves in a stressful predicament, they reflected on what they had done to Joseph many years before and wondered if their cruel treatment of Joseph was the cause of their distress.

*"We saw how distressed he [Joseph] was
when he pleaded with us for his life,
but we would not listen; that is why
this distress has come on us."*

(GENESIS 42:21)

What Was Jesus' Response to Spiritual Stress?

For much of his life Abraham Lincoln shouldered his stressful burdens without God's help, retreating and withdrawing into his own dark, isolated world of gloom.

Despite familiarity with Scripture, he didn't initially follow Jesus' model of releasing stress and anxiety to God through prayer and trusting that a sovereign plan was unfolding for his life. In fact, there was a significant season when Lincoln rejected the core tenets of the faith altogether, and people labeled him an infidel.⁸

But the spiritual seeds sown in childhood would one day sprout and bear fruit following Lincoln's second emotional breakdown. God's faithfulness would indeed remain forever true.

"If we are faithless, he remains faithful."

(2 TIMOTHY 2:13)

Living among the disciples, Jesus demonstrated to them how life is lived in the strength of an intimate relationship with God. Throughout the most difficult hours of His life, Jesus modeled the perfect response to stress. He also wants to be your source of calm in stressful situations.

Crisis of the Cross

*“He took Peter, James and John along with him,
and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.
‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the
point of death,’ he said to them.”*

(MARK 14:33–34)

Jesus’ Mental Process

Question: “In Gethsemane, how did Jesus mentally process the situation He was facing?”

Answer: Although Jesus knew He was about to be arrested and would face death, He acknowledged His Father’s sovereignty and put His trust in God’s ultimate control over the situation.

“‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you.’”

(MARK 14:36)

Jesus Expresses Anxiety in Prayer

Question: “How did Jesus outwardly express His emotions?”

Answer: Although Jesus was frequently open with His emotions (John 11:35), He responded to His pending crucifixion by releasing His anxiety to His Father in prayer. He admitted His desire to avoid the torturous death facing Him by asking His Father to remove the cross from His life. Yet, His heart remained submissive to His Father’s will.

*"He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them,
knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing,
take this cup from me: yet not my will,
but yours be done.'"*

(LUKE 22:41–42)

Jesus Suffers Physical Torment

Question: "Did Jesus have a physical reaction to the trauma He experienced?"

Answer: Suffering physical torment as a result of His agony, Jesus perspired profusely.

"And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (LUKE 22:44).

Jesus' choosing to submit His will to His Father's will brings significantly deeper meaning to His "crisis of the cross." His willingness to die to His own desire reveals the true nature of God's love—He always has our best interests in mind.

Every crisis carries this challenging choice: You can choose to persevere and be changed (because of love for God and for others), or you can choose to seek a way of escape.

*"This is how we know what love is:
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.
And we ought to lay down our lives
for our brothers and sisters."*

(1 JOHN 3:16)

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Both previous and present stress stockpiled until it virtually swallowed the vitality and energy of Abraham Lincoln, who once proclaimed: “I am now the most miserable man living.”⁹

Suicidal thoughts were so prevalent in Lincoln’s mind that he feared even carrying a pocketknife. Lincoln met the present-day U.S. Surgeon General’s definition of mental illness—“alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior” that are associated with “distress and/or impaired functioning.”

And yet in the strangest of ironies, Lincoln also met the U.S. Surgeon General’s definition of mental health—“the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity.”¹⁰

When Lincoln later encountered the greatest challenge of his life, he fully embodied the latter definition and demonstrated great perseverance.

*“We also glory in our sufferings,
because we know that suffering
produces perseverance;
perseverance, character;
and character, hope.”
(ROMANS 5:3–4)*

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) develops when someone fails to heal from a single traumatic event or a series of disturbing experiences. PTSD is generally revealed by characteristic symptoms following an extremely traumatic event (for example, childhood sexual or physical abuse, violent physical or sexual assault, war, terrorism, natural disaster, or car accident) that threatens loss of life or serious injury to a person or a loved one.¹¹

- **Responding:** The response to the traumatic event involves intense fear, anxiety, helplessness, or horror, along with intrusive thoughts and persistent reoccurrence of the traumatic event through dreams or vivid memories.¹²
- **Avoiding:** Typically, a person will avoid anything associated with the trauma and will experience numbing of general responsiveness to life.¹³

Comfort can be found in God's Word.

*"But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless."
(PSALM 10:14)*

What Is God's Heart on Stress?

Stress can take us down one of two paths. For many, stress leads to *unrest*. Frustrations at work, responsibilities at home, deadlines at school, unfinished to-do lists, heartbreaking headlines, and troubled relationships all pile up to an overwhelming sense of weariness, exhaustion, pressure, and unrest. And the enemy wants to use the *unrest* to *arrest* you—to hold you captive to the pressures and stresses of life.

But God's plan—His path for stress—leads not to painful unrest but rather peaceful *rest*. The enemy wants to overwhelm you with unrest, but the Lord wants you to overcome with His rest. Stress is inevitable, but hope is available. If you want to find peace in times of stress, come to the Lord and find the rest you're looking for in Him.

*“Let me teach you, because
I am humble and gentle at heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.”
(MATTHEW 11:29 NLT)*

God is with you in times of stress.

“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).

God sees and knows your stress.

“But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand” (PSALM 10:14).

God wants to give you peace when your heart is troubled, stressed, and afraid.

“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).

God wants to carry your burden and give you rest.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (MATTHEW 11:28).

God wants to guide you when you’re too stressed to make decisions.

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you” (PSALM 32:8).

God wants to strengthen you when you’re weak and weary.

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (ISAIAH 40:29).

God wants to deliver you from your stress.

“They cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress” (PSALM 107:6).

God wants to comfort you in times of stress.

“I, yes I, am the one who comforts you” (ISAIAH 51:12).

God wants to use your stress to increase your dependence on Him.

“We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself . . . But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 CORINTHIANS 1:8–9).

God wants you to talk to Him about your stress and set you free.

“In my distress I prayed to the LORD, and the LORD answered me and set me free” (PSALM 118:5 NLT).

God wants you to trust Him and be a refuge for you in times of stress.

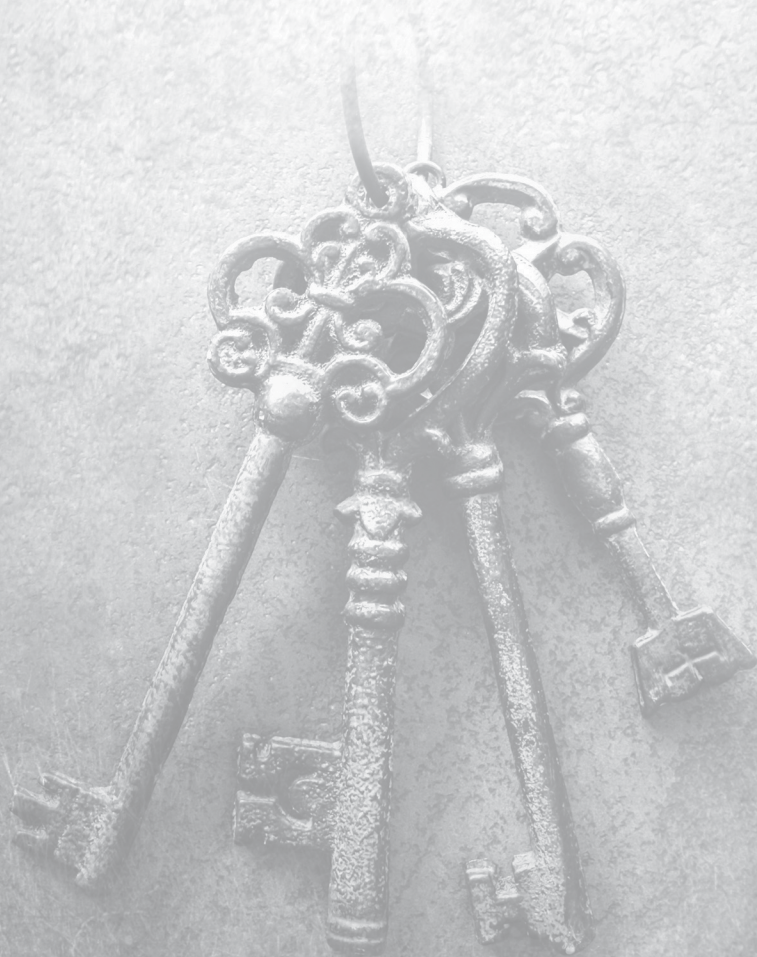
“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (PSALM 62:8).

God wants you to worship Him and acknowledge His constant presence even in times of stress.

“I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone” (GENESIS 35:3).



CHARACTERISTICS



*“As we live
day-in-day-out,
we will all have
varying amounts
of stress.”*



Abraham Lincoln's voracious study of his law books paid off with a prominent law practice and undergirded him for a lengthy political career. For 30 years, he dotted the political landscape. Lincoln's political career began in 1834 when he was elected to the Illinois State Legislature. It had been a robust time to run for office. The state's economy was booming, its population had tripled in 10 years, and an \$11 million internal improvements package had just passed to build roads, canals, and railroads.

An overall sense of optimism permeated throughout the state, but the economic boom eventually became a bust, and multiple stressors both personally and professionally led to Lincoln's second emotional collapse. Scripture addresses the source of stress during both good times and bad.

*“Consider what God has done:
Who can straighten what he has made crooked?
When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider this:
God has made the one as well as the other.”
(ECCLESIASTES 7:13–14)*

What Are the Four Stages of Stress?

Abraham Lincoln referred to it as “that fatal first of Jany. 41.”¹⁴

The date to which Lincoln referred is January 1, 1841, and even today a great deal of mystery surrounds precisely what event or events drove him to a breakdown. It's clear there were multiple stressors in his life, but historians can only speculate what actually pushed him over the edge.

The once-bustling Illinois economy had come to a disastrous standstill by the end of 1840. The internal improvements package to which Lincoln had so closely aligned himself was a failure, state debt exceeded \$13.6 million, and bank-issued currency had lost all value.

Lincoln’s reputation was sinking along with the economy, and that was a bitter pill to swallow for a man who so highly valued character and a strong public presence.¹⁵

Like Lincoln, the apostle Paul faced multiple stressors. But, *unlike* young Lincoln, Paul entrusted himself to God and triumphed over stress.

*“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted,
but not abandoned; struck down,
but not destroyed.”
(2 CORINTHIANS 4:8–9)*

As we live day-in-day-out, we will all have varying amounts of stress. Contrary to what many think, a moderate amount of stress can be very helpful.

For a student, the moderate stress of an exam typically provides the motivation to study. Likewise, with no homework to turn in and no regular tests to take, many students would be unmotivated to study. If, however, there is too much stress, the possibility of burnout is ever-present.

Stress functions in unique ways at different levels. Some types of stress are detrimental, while other forms of stress can actually be beneficial. Consider these varying stages of stress.

- Stage 1—No Light**..... **Insufficient Stress**
No motivation to move responsibly
- Stage 2—Green Light**..... **Positive Stress**
Motivation to move responsibly
- Stage 3—Yellow Light** **Negative Stress**
Motivational warning signs to slow down movement

Stage 4—Red Light Burnout

Movement suddenly stops
and repair is necessary

*“Those who disregard discipline
despise themselves,
but the one who heeds correction
gains understanding.”
(PROVERBS 15:32)*

What Characterizes the Four Stages of Stress?

“Lincoln,” one observer noted, “went crazy as a loon.”¹⁶

Razors had to be removed from his room. Knives and other sharp objects had to be taken away from him. Lincoln was reeling, fears of a further tarnished reputation consumed him, but it was affairs of the heart—not affairs of the state—that sent his emotions into overdrive.

Lincoln was engaged to a young woman named Mary Todd, but his heart belonged to another—a graceful, curly-haired blonde named Matilda Edwards. Mary recognized Lincoln’s affections for Matilda and eventually released him from the engagement, but not without exacting a significant amount of guilt upon the lovelorn Lincoln.

And many believe it was the breakup of Mary Todd that was the catalyst for “that fatal first of Jany. 41” for Lincoln’s conscience was deeply stressed over the fact that his heart would wander while under a matrimonial agreement.

Lincoln could relate to the psalmist. . . .

*“My guilt has overwhelmed me like
a burden too heavy to bear.”
(PSALM 38:4)*

Four Stages of Stress

Stage 1: No Light

With insufficient stress to encourage an individual to act responsibly, you will find that the person . . .

- Avoids responsibility
- Has poor relationships
- Is not productive
- Has no energy
- Experiences depression
- Feels no purpose
- Lacks perspective on life
- Has a short temper

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me” (PSALM 42:5–6).

Stage 2: Green Light

Positive stress pushes you to proper maintenance. When there is sufficient positive stress, you will find that a person . . .

- Faces responsibility
- Is productive
- Is peaceful
- Is energetic
- Is enthusiastic
- Has responsible relationships
- Has fulfillment of purpose
- Has a positive perspective

“Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means” (2 CORINTHIANS 8:11).

Stage 3: Yellow Light

That “check engine” light is sending a signal that something serious is occurring. The warning signs of stress are like the amber lights on a traffic signal—they caution you to be alert, to slow down, and to be prepared for upcoming change. The physical warning signs of stress can include . . .

- Tension headaches, stomachaches
- Muscle aches, backaches
- Heavy sighing, rapid breathing
- High blood pressure
- Hyperalertness, anxiousness
- Weight gain or loss
- Loss of sleep, or excessive sleep
- Lack of concentration, constant worrying
- Indecisiveness, poor judgment
- Irritability, agitation

“Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning” (ECCLESIASTES 4:13).

Stage 4: Red Light

Burnout is certainly not God’s will for you. Perhaps you have not processed the stresses of life in a godly way. Instead of living at Stage 2, a person becomes . . .

- Overwhelmed by responsibility
- Withdrawn from relationships (including sexual apathy)
- Minimally productive
- Depressed (lack of enthusiasm), moody
- Purposeless, lacking perspective
- Easily fatigued, nervous
- Erratic with disrupted eating and sleeping patterns

“The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me” (JOB 30:27).

What Is a Checklist for Burnout?

Lincoln was a man committed to honor and integrity. His turbulent emotions concerning the breakup with Mary Todd can be traced in part to the gravity of a matrimonial contract in 19th century America. Legally binding, a rejected party had the right to seek damages. Lincoln himself had successfully served as the attorney in a “breach of promise” suit.

Looking to the source and getting below the surface, the weightiness of a marriage pledge in the mid-1800s may also have contributed to “that fatal first of Jany. 41.” Following the breakup, Lincoln continued on in a cathartic state of self-analysis, losing confidence in his ability to maintain resolve since he hadn’t followed through and married Mary Todd.

Lincoln wrote to his longtime friend Joshua Speed: “I must regain my confidence in my own ability to keep my resolves when they are made. In that ability you know, I once prided myself as the only, or at least the chief, gem of my character; that gem I lost—how, and when, you too well know. I have not yet regained it; and until I do, I cannot trust myself in any matter of much importance.”¹⁷ On November 4, 1842, Abraham Lincoln ended up marrying Mary Todd, and as one observer noted “[he] looked and acted as if he was going to the Slaughter.”¹⁸

Character came at a high cost to Lincoln, similar to a sacrificial call of Scripture.

*“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves
and take up their cross daily and follow me.”*

(LUKE 9:23)

Checklist for Burnout

Emotional Symptoms:

- ☐ I am plagued with guilt over not being as responsible or committed as I should be.
- ☐ I feel apathetic, anxious, and depressed.
- ☐ I feel I don't do things as well as I could and should.
- ☐ I have a great deal of self-doubt.
- ☐ I have a sense of helplessness and decreased self-esteem.
- ☐ I have a sense of hopelessness.
- ☐ I have decreased self-esteem.
- ☐ I have difficulty concentrating.
- ☐ I have feelings of confusion and disorientation.
- ☐ I have feelings of disenchantment, disillusionment, or failure.
- ☐ I have increased irritability.
- ☐ I have less time and energy for relationships.
- ☐ I have uncharacteristic anger, cynicism, and negativism.

Physical Symptoms:

- ☐ I am susceptible to many colds and viruses.
- ☐ I eat and snack excessively.
- ☐ I feel tired and lifeless most of the time.
- ☐ I generally feel nervous, unsettled, and have difficulty relaxing.
- ☐ I grind my teeth at night and have trouble sleeping.
- ☐ I have a rapid pulse or high blood pressure.
- ☐ I have allergies, asthma, or shortness of breath.
- ☐ I have frequent, severe headaches.
- ☐ I have indigestion, diarrhea, or constipation often.

- ☐ I have lost or gained a lot of weight.
- ☐ I have tightness in my neck and shoulders or lower back pain.
- ☐ I often have cold hands and sweating palms.

Spiritual symptoms:

- ☐ I am apathetic toward Scripture.
- ☐ I am feeling more and more desperate to improve my situation.
- ☐ I am losing confidence in God to help me.
- ☐ I am too stressed to attend church.
- ☐ I fail to recognize my own limits much of the time.
- ☐ I fail to seek the counsel and support of others.
- ☐ I feel I am in a spiritual vacuum.
- ☐ I feel I am on my own.
- ☐ I feel I have lost perspective on life.
- ☐ I feel God has given up on me.
- ☐ I feel like giving up on myself.
- ☐ I rarely pray or have quiet time anymore.

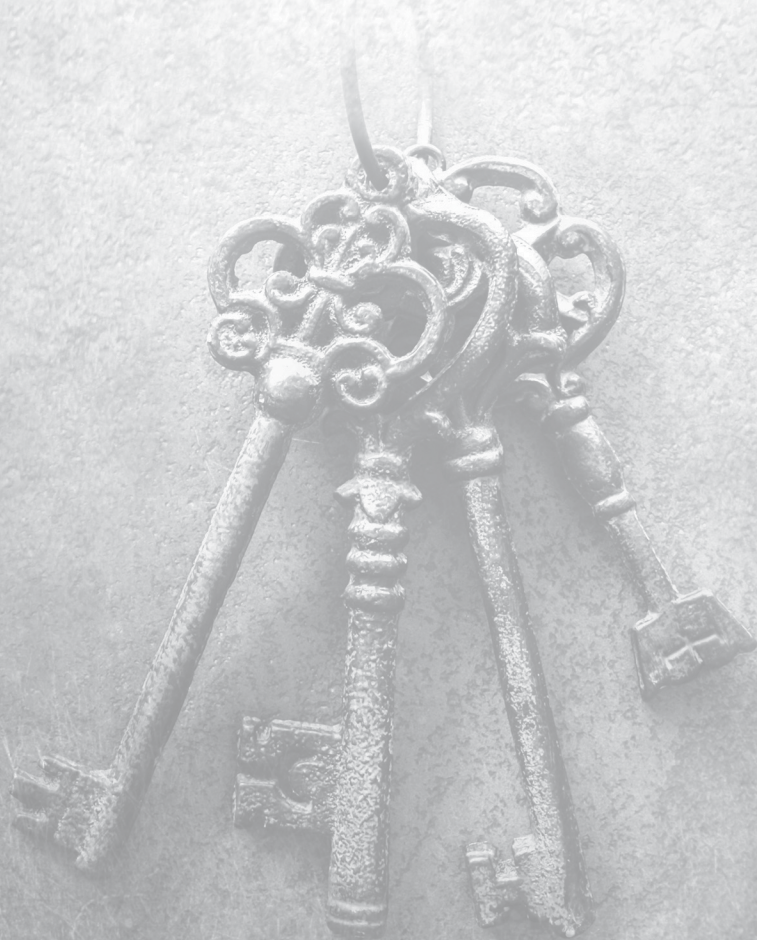
No one will likely experience all these symptoms, but if you checked four or more, evaluate how you are responding to the pressures in your life. You may also need to check with a health-care professional.

Are you releasing your heavy load to the Lord and allowing His peace to permeate your heart? The Bible says,

"A heart at peace gives life to the body."
(PROVERBS 14:30)



CAUSES



*“Identifying the truth
behind our reactions
to events in life is the
starting place for
turning destructive
distress into
constructive action.”*



While there is widespread speculation that Abraham Lincoln's initial breakup with Mary Todd prompted the "fatal first," there was no shortage of other stressful events in Lincoln's life that could have contributed to his emotional breakdown.

January 1, 1841, was the date that Joshua Speed ended his business ties in Springfield, Illinois, and Lincoln faced the prospect that his loyal, longtime companion might move away. And Speed may have been accompanied by someone else precious to Lincoln.

On the final evening of the leap year of 1840, there was a tradition for men to propose marriage. It appears that Matilda Edwards captured the heart of another besides Lincoln—Joshua Speed. Did Lincoln learn of a proposal that fateful "fatal first"?¹⁹ Even in the midst of such stress, God was there. Lincoln would later turn to Him, but not in January 1841.

*"When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;
he brought me into a spacious place."
(PSALM 118:5)*

What Are the Classic Causes of Stress?

The seven classic causes of stress brought emotional upheaval to Lincoln's life.

January 1, 1841, posed yet another looming deadline for Lincoln. It was the final date for the state of Illinois to pay back \$175,000 in debt interest. The legislature had met in special session and determined that if the state couldn't pay, it would enter into receivership. The "fatal first" for Lincoln may have been tied also to financial fears.

The debt crisis had already weakened him politically. Would it now render him powerless? Like Job, whose reputation plummeted following attacks by Satan, Lincoln no doubt longed for the days when his name was revered and respected.

“When I went to the gate of the city and took my seat in the public square, the young men saw me and stepped aside and the old men rose to their feet; the chief men refrained from speaking and covered their mouths with their hands.”

(JOB 29:7–9)

Seven Classic Causes of Stress

1. Conflict²⁰

Reasons you can experience conflict:

- Opposing values of family and friends
- Unresolved anger in relationships
- Unrealistic expectations of others
- Lack of open communication in relationships

The apostle Paul was met with extreme opposition from others.

“Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. 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”

(2 CORINTHIANS 11:23–24).

2. Crisis

Reasons you can experience crisis:

- Death of a friend or family member
- Separation or divorce
- Severe illness or sudden disability
- Unexpected trauma of any kind

The apostle Paul was shipwrecked and often in extreme danger.

“Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move” (2 CORINTHIANS 11:25).

3. Change

Reasons you can go through change:

- Shift in cultural or spiritual values
- Change in financial or marital status
- Transition in environment or employment
- Disturbance in sleeping and health habits

The apostle Paul was constantly on the move, often going without sleep.

“I have been constantly on the move . . . 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” (2 CORINTHIANS 11:26–27).

4. Condemnation

Reasons you can experience condemnation:

- Rejection by significant others
- Lack of support from coworkers
- Betrayal of a friend
- False accusations by family members

The apostle Paul was rejected and betrayed by the Gentiles and by his own people.

“I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers” (2 CORINTHIANS 11:26).

5. Concerns

Reasons you can carry concern:

- Unsaved or rebellious loved ones
- Unpredictable or uncertain future
- Recent or frequent fear of failure
- Perfectionism or excessive attention to detail

The apostle Paul carried the daily pressure of concern for the churches.

“Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 CORINTHIANS 11:28).

6. Competition

Reasons you can experience competition:

- Self-acceptance based on superior performance
- Comparisons between family, friends, or coworkers
- Envy or jealousy among neighbors or business associates
- Significance or security based on outperforming others

The apostle Paul chose to boast only in his weaknesses.

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 CORINTHIANS 11:30).

7. Conscience

Reasons you can challenge conscience:

- Self, others, or things seem more important than God
- Self-effort is perceived as the best way of meeting needs
- Personal needs eclipse the needs of others
- Acknowledgment of sin is considered an admission of weakness

The apostle Paul was secure in his integrity before the Lord.

“The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying” (2 CORINTHIANS 11:31).

What Pressures Increase Stress?

Uncertain circumstances increased stress in Lincoln's life, but there was one constant that could be counted on to drag him down to the emotional dregs—the dreaded winter. That one season of the year continually blew a chill across the tormented man's soul. And the winter of 1840–1841 had been *unusually* bitterly cold.

A friend of Lincoln's said it was colder in Illinois than anyone could remember, and a newcomer to the state made the following observation: "I am sure I have seen colder weather in Connecticut. But I have never seen a place where cold is to be dreaded so much."²¹

Lincoln was accustomed to that "dread," and it powerfully impacted his emotions each and every year. If only that troubled man would have warmed his spirit and soul with this assurance:

"The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine on us."

(PSALM 118:27)

Your Mental Response

Mental stress is caused by the way you think about or interpret events.²²

- If you dwell on losing your job, you will feel stress.
- If you dwell on God's faithfulness to provide, He will replace your stress with His peace.

Do you have a positive or a negative outlook? If you dwell on negative thoughts, you can turn almost anything, even good circumstances, into stress. This is why God wants you to meditate on what is pure and good. The Bible says about the Lord:

"You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" (ISAIAH 26:3).

Your Emotional Response

Emotional stress is caused by the way you process your thoughts.²³

- If you think bitter thoughts, you will feel bitter emotions.
- If you think forgiving thoughts, you will feel forgiveness in your heart.

Although feelings need to be recognized and acknowledged, they are basically a product of your thinking, and they can be controlled. Emotional immaturity makes you a prisoner to your feelings and keeps you chained to undue stress. 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 not your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (JOHN 14:27).

Your Physical Response

Physical stress is caused by the way your body automatically responds to external pressure.²⁴

- If you mentally dwell on your difficulties, you can develop physical fatigue.
- If you trust God for His timing, He provides you peace.

If pressure is not dealt with in a healthy way, you become susceptible to a variety of physical problems. Prolonged stress can result in harmful physical reactions, such as elevated blood pressure, stomachaches, headaches, and even chest pain.²⁵ The Bible reveals that many of the consequences of stress can be avoided as you keep His Word in your heart.

“Do not let them [God’s words of wisdom] out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one’s whole body” (PROVERBS 4:21–22).

Your Spiritual Response

Spiritual stress is caused by the way you view God, His involvement in your life, and His sovereignty over your life.

- If you believe God is indifferent to you and powerless to work in your life and circumstances, you will have a crisis of faith.
- If you believe Him to be a loving Father, helper, friend, and healer with infinite power to work on your behalf, you will enter into His rest and receive His peace. The Bible says,

“The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace”
(PSALM 29:11).

What Stressors Can Cause Stress and Distress?

Stress is an individualistic, subjective experience because what one person finds stressful another person may find invigorating. Situations and pressures that cause stress are often referred to as *stressors*, and while life-changing events cause major stress, the hassles that occur on a daily basis impact people the most.

Although David did not experience all of the stressors we have today, he certainly had his share of troubles that would create intense distress for anyone, anytime, and anywhere.

*“Be merciful to me, my God,
for my enemies are in hot pursuit;
all day long they press their attack.
My adversaries pursue me all day long;
in their pride many are attacking me . . .
All day long they twist my words;
all their schemes are for my ruin.
They conspire, they lurk, they watch
my steps, hoping to take my life.”*

(PSALM 56:1–2, 5–6)

Typical Stressors

Life transitions

- Learning to crawl, walk, talk
- Being toilet trained, sharing with others, making friends
- Having unmet needs, wants, desires
- Dealing with siblings, attending school, dating
- Going to college, getting a job, getting married
- Moving, buying a house, having children
- Receiving a promotion, changing jobs, losing a job
- Experiencing an empty nest, infidelity, divorce, widowhood
- Taking care of elderly parents, illness, disability
- Retiring, poor health, grieving the death of significant others

Daily hassles

- Dealing with deadlines, demands, difficult people
- Encountering traffic, road rage, office politics
- Exhausting work, social schedule, church commitments
- Meeting needs of family, friends, employers
- Making phone calls, writing e-mails
- Planning schedules, preparing meals, staying healthy
- Running errands, paying bills, resolving family problems
- Taking care of cars, doing house repairs, maintaining a yard
- Buying clothes, stocking up on supplies, helping children with homework
- Misplacing keys, losing wallet, losing sleep

Internal factors

- Fearing the uncertainties of life
- Engaging in negative self-talk
- Nurturing a pessimistic outlook
- Exhibiting a critical spirit
- Lacking faith in a loving, all-powerful God

- Entertaining unrealistic expectations
- Maintaining unforgiveness
- Resenting responsibilities
- Possessing phobias or addictions
- Harboring anger

Individual differences

- Avoiding vs. enjoying crowds
- Fearing vs. craving attention
- Collapsing vs. thriving under pressure
- Eluding vs. embracing confrontation
- Ignoring vs. providing caretaking
- Monopolizing vs. minimizing conversations
- Dodging vs. pursuing physical activity
- Causing vs. solving problems
- Deferring vs. making decisions
- Pleasing others vs. pleasing self

In reality, there are innumerable possible stressors in life because any event that is considered as threatening, difficult to manage, or producing excessive pressure can result in stress. Individual beliefs, attitudes, interpretations, perceptions, and experiences influence what becomes stressful to a particular individual.

Therefore, it is critical that the first signs of stress or distress be met with a reality check. Identifying the truth behind our reactions to events in life is the starting place for turning destructive distress into constructive action. The psalmist clearly shows how important truth is to God.

*“Behold, You desire truth
in the inward parts,
and in the hidden part
You will make me to know wisdom.”
(PSALM 51:6 NKJV)*

What Is the Root Cause of Stress?

You must rally or die.

Joshua Speed, the ever-concerned friend, had witnessed Lincoln respond negatively to severe stress in his life time and time again, so he challenged him following his second breakdown to respond differently rather than desperately. This became a pivotal chapter in Lincoln's life, an awakening that stirred Lincoln to aspire to greatness.

Lincoln told Speed that he was not afraid to die, but he had an “irrepressible desire” to make a great contribution to the people of his generation, to “so impress himself upon them as to link his name with something that would redound to the interest of his fellow man.”²⁶

Lincoln was beginning to move from a wrong belief about stress to a right belief about stress, and one day he would turn to God to help him carry the crushing burden of an entire nation. His desire to serve others is a consistent call of Scripture.

*“Serve one another humbly in love.
For the entire law is fulfilled
in keeping this one command:
‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
(GALATIANS 5:13–14)*

What do you need to know and believe that will enable you to have success over stress?

3 Inner Needs

We all have three inner needs: the needs for love, significance, and security.²⁷

Love—to know that someone is unconditionally committed to our best interest

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (JOHN 15:12).

Significance—to know that our lives have meaning and purpose

“I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me”
(PSALM 57:2 ESV).

Security—to feel accepted and a sense of belonging

“Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge” (PROVERBS 14:26).

The Ultimate Need-Meeter

What do our inner needs reveal about us and our relationship with God?

God did not create any person or position or any amount of power or possessions to meet our deepest needs. People fail us and self-effort also fails to meet our deepest needs. If a person or thing could meet all our needs, we wouldn’t need God! Our inner needs draw us into a deeper dependence on Christ and remind us that only God can satisfy the longings of our hearts. The Lord brings people and circumstances into our lives as an extension of His care, but ultimately only He can satisfy all the needs of our hearts. The Bible says . . .

*“The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.”*
(ISAIAH 58:11)

All along, the Lord planned to meet our deepest needs for . . .

Love—*“I [the Lord] have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness”* (JEREMIAH 31:3).

Significance—*“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’”*
(JEREMIAH 29:11).

Security—*“The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged”* (DEUTERONOMY 31:8).

Our needs for love, significance, and security can be legitimately met in Christ Jesus! Philippians 4:19 makes it plain, *“My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”*

Wrong Belief: “My life is out of control. I feel helpless to cope with the stress in my life.”

Right Belief: “God has allowed this stress in my life to bless me and to reveal my weaknesses. I am grateful for the pressures that have pressed me closer to Him and caused me to allow Christ to be my strength.”

*“‘My [Jesus’] grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness.’
Therefore I [Paul] will boast all the more gladly about
my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.
That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses,
in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.
For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*
(2 CORINTHIANS 12:9–10)

What Is the Greatest Hope for Spiritual Stress?

Perhaps the best way to reduce stress is by eliminating the pressure. And the best way to eliminate pressure is to release it. When Jesus came and died on the cross, He made a way for the burden of sin to be forgiven, for captives to be released and receive eternal life. Release all your stress and pressure to the Lord by releasing your burden of sin to Him.

*“We have been released from the law
so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit,
and not in the old way of the written code.”*

(ROMANS 7:6)

4 Points of God's Plan

Whether you're trying to make sense of your past, trying to overcome something in the present, or trying to make changes for a better future, the Lord cares about you. He loves you. No matter what challenges you or your loved ones are facing, no matter the pain or difficult feelings you may be experiencing, no matter what you've done or what's been done to you, there is hope. And that hope is found in Jesus Christ.

God has a plan for your life, and it begins with a personal relationship with Jesus. The most important decision you can ever make is whether you will receive His invitation. If you have never made that decision, these four simple truths can help you start your journey together with Him.

*“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”*

(JEREMIAH 29:11)

1. God's Purpose for You: *Salvation*

- What was God's motivation in sending Jesus Christ to earth? To express His love for you by saving you! The Bible says, *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”* (JOHN 3:16–17).
- What was Jesus' purpose in coming to earth? To forgive your sins, to empower you to have victory over sin, and to enable you to live a fulfilled life! Jesus said, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (JOHN 10:10).

2. The Problem: *Sin*

- What exactly is sin? Sin is living independently of God's standard—knowing what is wrong and doing it anyway—also knowing what is right and choosing not to do it. The apostle Paul said, *"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway"* (ROMANS 7:18–19 NLT).
- What is the major consequence of sin? Spiritual death, eternal separation from God. The Bible says, *"Your iniquities [sins] have separated you from your God"* (ISAIAH 59:2). Scripture also says, *"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (ROMANS 6:23).

3. God's Provision for You: *The Savior*

- Can anything remove the penalty for sin? Yes! Jesus died on the cross to personally pay the penalty for your sins. The Bible says, *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (ROMANS 5:8).
- What is the solution to being separated from God? Belief in (entrusting your life to) Jesus Christ as the only way to God the Father. Jesus said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (JOHN 14:6). The Bible says, *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"* (ACTS 16:31).

4. Your Part: *Surrender*

- Give Christ control of your life, entrusting yourself to Him. Jesus said, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"* (MATTHEW 16:24–26).
- Place your faith in (rely on) Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and reject your "good works" as a means of earning God's approval. The Bible says, *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast"* (EPHESIANS 2:8–9).

Has there been a time in your life when you know you've humbled your heart and received Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior—giving Him control of your life? You can tell God that you want to surrender your life to Christ in a simple, heartfelt prayer like this:

“God, I want a real relationship with you.
I admit that many times I’ve chosen to go my own way
instead of your way.
Please forgive me for my sins.
Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross
to pay the penalty for my sins.
Come into my life to be my Lord and my Savior.
Change me from the inside out and make me the person
you created me to be.
In your holy name I pray. Amen.”

What Can You Now Expect?

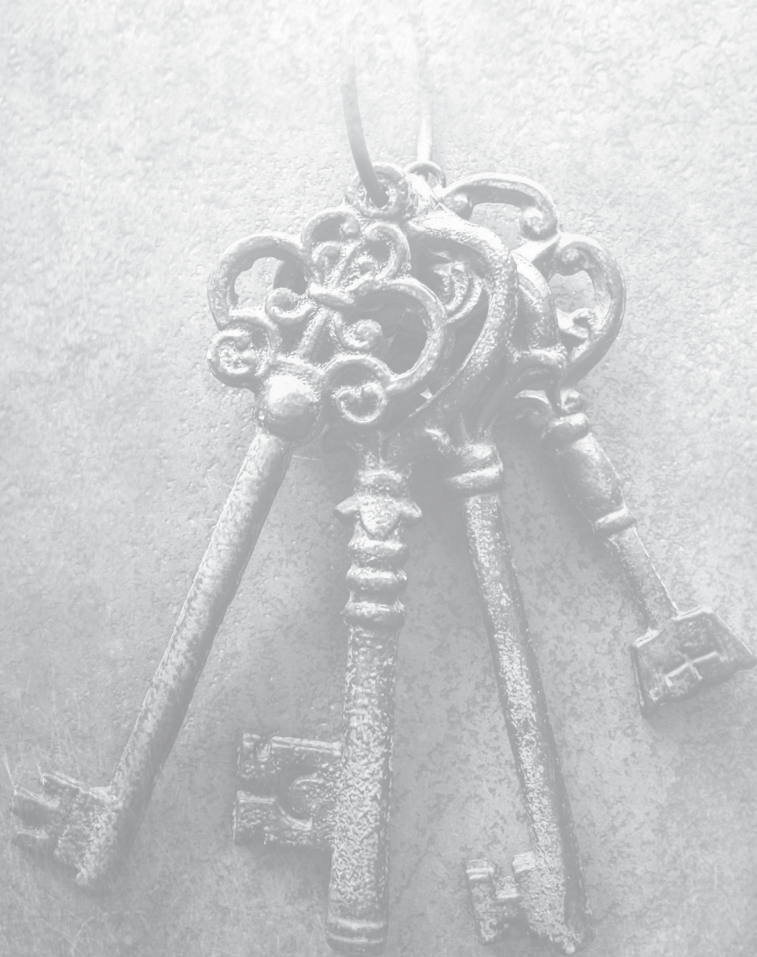
When you surrender your life to Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit who empowers you to live a life pleasing to God. The Bible says, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life . . .”* (2 Peter 1:3). Jesus assures those who believe with these words:

*“Truly I tell you, whoever hears my word
and believes him who sent me
has eternal life and will not be judged
but has crossed over from death to life.”*

(JOHN 5:24)



STEPS TO SOLUTION



*“Dependence on God
dissipates unhealthy stress
and provides a powerful
dynamic for blessing
the lives of others.”*



Although Abraham Lincoln would struggle with stress and desperate emotions his entire life, a sense of “greater purpose” set him on a course that would not only protect him from having another breakdown, but put him in the national spotlight.

One topic dominated the political conversation during the 1860 presidential race: *slavery*. That line in the sand clearly divided the north from the south. Lincoln was becoming increasingly recognized for his political skill and savvy, and his name recognition began to extend beyond the Illinois borders. There were three criteria the Republican candidate had to meet: he had to be a “man of the people,” a solid advocate of antislavery, and a politician without even a hint of radicalism.²⁸

To an increasing number in the Republican Party, Abraham Lincoln was that man, and it began to appear that the favor of God was resting upon the congressman from Illinois.

*“No one from the east or the west
or from the desert can exalt themselves.
It is God who judges:
He brings one down, he exalts another.”
(PSALM 75:6–7)*

Key Verses to Memorize

By the time Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the *United States* of America, *division* was already in the air.

Southerners considered the election of a stalwart antislavery candidate a signal—it was time to secede without a moment to waste. In short order, about 10,000 volunteer soldiers were recruited and equipped in South Carolina; the state of Georgia put \$1 million on the table to fund a war; and Louisiana approved \$500,000 for guns and confederate fighters.²⁹

The newly-elected President Abraham Lincoln would not only be stressed but “*weary and burdened*,” as Scripture describes, *from day one*. But he would have the Lord to lighten his heavy load and give rest to his troubled soul.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

³⁰ *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

(MATTHEW 11:28–30)

Key Passage to Read

Before long, eight more states joined the initial trio that seceded and a full-scale civil war painfully preoccupied the incoming president.

Abraham Lincoln found himself at his most desperate and distraught time seeking rest, guidance, and empowerment from God. Following a devastating Union army defeat at Fredericksburg, Virginia, Lincoln stressfully paced the floor of his office and moaned repeatedly in grief and anguish, “What has God put me in this place for?”³⁰

The dressmaker of Lincoln’s wife recounted an insightful turn of events concerning the dejected president’s source of strength and solace. Lincoln, appearing even more stressed and burdened than usual, collapsed on a sofa and reached for a Bible. Within 15 minutes, the dressmaker witnessed an incredible change in his countenance: Hope and new resolve were written all over his face.

Curious as to precisely what Lincoln was reading, she subtly peered over his shoulder and quickly discovered—the book of Job.³¹ Lincoln seemingly had found a kindred spirit in Job.

Another man well-acquainted with stress and suffering was Elijah. Even Elijah's name (meaning *Jehovah is God*) announces that he is a messenger approved and sent by God. Elijah had significant spiritual strength, yet his reserves were empty as he sat beneath a broom tree begging God to deliver him from his great distress after angering King Ahab and his wicked queen, Jezebel.

*"Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done
and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.
So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say,
'May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely,
if by this time tomorrow I do not
make your life like that of one of them.'"*

(1 KINGS 19:1-2)

Elijah on Empty

1 Kings Chapter 19

The Cause of Elijah's Burnout

Elijah lost confidence in the sovereign power of God. v. 3

"Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,"

Elijah had reached the end of his own resources. v. 4

"While he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, LORD,' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'"

Elijah was tired and exhausted. v. 5

"Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.'"

The Steps God Used to Restore Elijah

Elijah left his servant to be alone with God. vv. 3–4

“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’”

Elijah received rest and food provided by God. vv. 5–8

“Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank.”

Elijah moved forward with God’s provision. v. 8

“So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.”

God was not silent but asked Elijah to explain his need. v. 9

“There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”

Elijah was honest with God about his feelings. v. 10

“He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’”

God showed Elijah that He was still in control. vv. 11–12

“The LORD said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire.”

God spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper.vv. 12–13

“And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”

Elijah’s response revealed that he did not understand how God was working.v. 14

“He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death . . . I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’”

God revealed the next steps for Elijah to take.vv. 15–16

“The LORD said to him, ‘Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.’”

God revealed part of His future plans to Elijah.vv. 17–18

“Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Elijah obeyed God.v. 19

“So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.”

God gave Elijah the gift of a genuine friend and companion.vv. 20–21

“Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. ‘Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,’ he said, ‘and then I will come with you.’ ‘Go back,’ Elijah replied. ‘What have I done to you?’ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.”

God sometimes allows difficult situations in your life to increase your reliance on Him and to form a stronger relationship with Him. The events in which Elijah found himself were beyond his control and demanded a complete dependence on God. If your prayer life is to penetrate to the deeper layers of your faith, you may find yourself under the broom tree of a broken spirit.

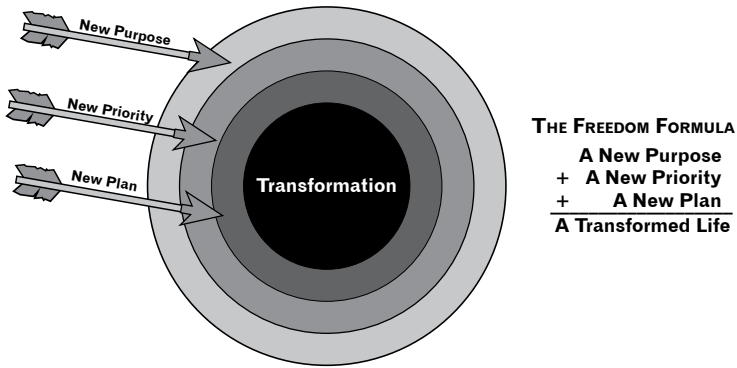
*"In my distress I called to the LORD;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears."
(PSALM 18:6)*

How to Have a Transformed Life

If we're not careful, stress can intrude in our relationships with others and God. Take a biblical approach to stress and allow God to be your source of calm in stressful situations.

*"The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace."
(NUMBERS 6:24-26)*

Reaching the Target: Transformation!



Target #1—A New Purpose

God's purpose for me is to be conformed to the character of Christ.

"Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (ROMANS 8:29).

— "I'll do whatever it takes to be conformed to the character of Christ."

Target #2—A New Priority

God's priority for me is to change my thinking.

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (ROMANS 12:2).

— "I'll do whatever it takes to line up my thinking with God's thinking."

Target #3—A New Plan

God's plan for me is to rely on Christ's strength, not my strength, to be all He created me to be.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (PHILIPPIANS 4:13 NKJV).

— "I'll do whatever it takes to fulfill His plan in His strength."

My Personalized Plan

Seasons of stress can become opportunities for evaluating my life and values. I will carefully consider how God is working in my life. Then, I will determine the best course of action to take as God transforms the stress in my life into a blessing from Him.

*“Give careful thought to the paths for your feet
and be steadfast in all your ways.”*

(PROVERBS 4:26)

I will . . .

Receive God’s rest and physical nourishment.

- I will get at least eight hours of restorative sleep each night.
- I will make an effort to start eating healthy meals and snacks.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul” (PSALM 23:2–3).

Move forward with God’s provision.

- I will learn to be content with what the Lord provides.
- I will trust the Lord to meet my needs.

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (PHILIPPIANS 4:12).

Wait on God’s response.

- I will not get ahead of God by making hasty decisions, but will wait on Him and walk with Him.
- I will pray for the Holy Spirit’s discernment.

“Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD” (PSALM 27:14).

Communicate honestly with God.

- I will truthfully tell God what I need.
- I will faithfully thank Him for all He has done.

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

Place my trust in God, giving Him control.

- I will surrender my will to God’s will.
- I will rely on the Lord’s strength.

“Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (ISAIAH 40:31).

Listen for God to speak to me.

- I will consciously slow down my hectic pace.
- I will “be still” and allow God to speak to my heart through His Word and through the Holy Spirit.

“Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him” (PSALM 37:7).

Be patient when I don’t understand God’s plan.

- I will trust God with every detail of my life.
- I will acknowledge that my Creator knows all my days.

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (ROMANS 12:12).

Rely on God’s instruction.

- I will read my Bible and allow God to teach me His ways.
- I will remember that God has my best interests at heart.

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you” (PSALM 32:8).

Obey God despite my past difficulty.

- I will begin again with God’s help.
- I will rest in God’s forgiveness.

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon” (ISAIAH 55:6–7).

Be ready for God's blessings.

- I will pray with expectation.
- I will cling to the promises of Scripture.

"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (JEREMIAH 33:3).

How to Conquer Classic Causes of Stress

After you experience excessive wear and tear and you learn what conditions contribute to your stress, what action can you take? How can you conquer the classic causes of stress? If the pressure in your life presses you closer to the Lord, then you can put your hope in the Living God.

*"This is a trustworthy saying
that deserves full acceptance.
That is why we labor and strive, because
we have put our hope in the living God,
who is the Savior of all people,
and especially of those who believe."
(1 TIMOTHY 4:9–10)*

Conquering Stress

1. Conflict

How you can conquer conflict:

- Accept the differences of others and focus on common goals.
- Resolve past anger and let go of present grudges.
- Avoid unrealistic expectations of others.
- Speak openly and honestly in relationships.

Paul encouraged the church in Rome . . .

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (ROMANS 15:5–7).

2. Crisis

How you can conquer crisis:

- Accept God’s sovereignty over life and death.
- Trust God’s leadership in all relationship difficulties.
- Depend on God’s sufficiency in physical trials.
- Rely on God’s comfort and peace when blindsided by trauma.

King David acknowledged the sovereignty of God in his own life . . .

“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (PSALM 139:16).

3. Change

How you can conquer change:

- View change as natural, constant, and ordained by God.
- Accept unwelcome changes as occasions to deepen your trust in God.
- Welcome change as an opportunity to learn and grow.
- Consider physical changes as challenges to build Christlike character.

Daniel praised God as a change agent . . .

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning” (DANIEL 2:20–21).

4. Condemnation

How you can conquer condemnation:

- Expect to be rejected just as Jesus was rejected, but realize there is no condemnation for those in Christ.
- Cultivate a spirit of cooperation and teamwork.
- Maintain faithfulness even in the face of unfaithfulness.
- Extend forgiveness and speak the truth.

Paul encouraged the early Christian church to walk in forgiveness . . .

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (COLOSSIANS 3:13).

5. Concerns

How you can conquer concerns:

- Entrust your loved ones to the Lord’s care and protection.
- Trust God with tomorrow and live life today.
- Put away perfectionism and focus on improvement while aiming for excellence.
- Learn from failures because they can be more valuable than successes.

Jesus addressed the concerns of life . . .

“Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ . . . But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (MATTHEW 6:31, 33–34).

6. Competition

How you can conquer competition:

- Base your personal acceptance on being accepted by Christ.
- Consider individual weaknesses as God’s opportunities.
- Relinquish your desire for control to God’s sovereignty.
- Derive joy from the success of others and give glory to God.

Paul experienced competition from others who preached the Gospel . . .

“Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill . . . But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (PHILIPPIANS 1:15, 18).

7. Conscience

How you can conquer conscience:

- Give God first place in every activity.
- Turn to God as the resource for meeting your every need.
- Respond to the needs of others.
- Confess sinful thoughts and acts to God, then change sinful ways.

Paul recognized the need of maintaining a clear conscience . . .

“I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man” (ACTS 24:16).

How to Stop Stress with Truth

President Abraham Lincoln was a pursuer of truth, and he rejected the \$4 billion³² slave industry no matter the stress his stance would produce.

He made his first attack against slavery on the floor of the Illinois legislature almost 25 years before becoming president. His famous Gettysburg Address three years into his presidency reinforced his unwavering commitment to perceive and treat people the same way God expects people to be perceived and treated—*as equals*.

Consider Lincoln’s words when the Gettysburg battlefield was being dedicated as a national cemetery: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . . we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”³³

The apostle Paul described the equality and unity that all people have in Christ:

*“In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,
27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.
28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,
nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
(GALATIANS 3:26–28)*

The Lies of Stress and God’s Truth

Lie #1: “The more I do for God, the more He will love me.”

Truth: God already loves you completely. Nothing you can do will increase His love for you.

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (ROMANS 5:8).

Lie #2: “I will lose God’s love if I fail.”

Truth: God’s love is always with you regardless of what you do.

“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (ROMANS 8:38–39).

Lie #3: “When I’m not pleasing God, I feel His condemnation.”

Truth: God’s heart for you is not condemnation. He desires freedom for you and condemns only the sin that has you in bondage.

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (ROMANS 8:1–2).

Lie #4: “I’m afraid that if I fail, God will punish me.”

Truth: God does not punish us. He disciplines us for our own good.

“They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness” (HEBREWS 12:10).

Lie #5: “Because God is always available when anyone needs Him, I should be too.”

Truth: Jesus was not always available. He often left the crowds and His disciples to be alone and pray.

“After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray” (MARK 6:46).

Lie #6: “To burn out for a cause is admirable.”

Truth: God never applauds burnout, only balance—a balance of work, rest, play, and service.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (ECCLESIASTES 3:1).

Lie #7: “I am not serving God if I’m not seeing tangible results.”

Truth: You are to serve God in the way He chooses, but you are not responsible for God’s timing or His harvest.

“Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 CORINTHIANS 3:7).

Lie #8: “If I don’t do everything that I’m asked to do at church, I’m letting God down.”

Truth: God is far more interested in an intimate love relationship with you than He is in what you do.

“Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (MATTHEW 22:37–39).

Lie #9: “Life is such a burden, I cannot possibly be happy.”

Truth: Life is a gift that God wants you to accept with a joyful spirit.

“When God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God” (ECCLESIASTES 5:19).

Lie #10: “I must appear to have it together and not allow my mistakes to show.”

Truth: A spirit of humility is more impressive than a spirit of pride.

“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (MATTHEW 23:12).

Lie #11: “Keeping God’s laws is the heart of the Christian message.”

Truth: Reflecting God’s grace is the heart of the Christian message.

“I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (ACTS 20:24).

Lie #12: “When I’m at death’s door, I’ll be sorry I didn’t accomplish more.”

Truth: When you’re at death’s door, your primary focus will be on your loved ones—so love them well now.

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law” (ROMANS 13:8).

How to Strangle Stress

President Abraham Lincoln understood that God had a purpose for his life, and focusing on fulfilling that purpose helped him deal with overwhelming stress.

Lincoln believed the culmination of his life's work was the Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, during the third year of civil war. Although limited in scope, only calling for the immediate release of slaves in rebel states, it fueled momentum for the Union Army and was a key historical document on the nation's journey to true equality. It also opened the door for black men to join the Union Army and Navy, resulting in more than 200,000 black soldiers and sailors ultimately fighting for the preservation of the nation and freedom for all slaves.³⁴

Lincoln later recalled when his faithful friend, Joshua Speed, rallied Lincoln and aroused an aspiration for civic greatness. Concerning the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln told Speed: "I believe in this measure my fondest hopes will be realized."³⁵

And they were.

But did the esteemed president recognize God had "created" him to do this great work and had even prepared the work for him to do?

*"We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

(EPHESIANS 2:10)

Tools for Repair

Purpose: Picture God's purpose for you.

Acknowledge that the fast lane is not God's way. Change your thinking to confront a brainwashed world that worships action, activity, and accomplishments. The more you become aware of your identity in Christ, the more you will begin to see the spiritual value of a simple, unpressured life.

"Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters . . . to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 THESSALONIANS 4:10–12).

Prayer: Pray specifically for God's provision.

Go to God with every detail of your life. Express your feelings and frustrations honestly. Then acknowledge His faithfulness with an attitude of expectant hope for His provision and thankfulness for His promise to meet all of your needs.

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

Protection: Prioritize protection of your time.

Guard your time wisely. Only the enemy speaks to your heart with condemnation and pressure to perform. God's people follow His example by protecting time to rest from overwork and activity.

"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his" (HEBREWS 4:9–10).

Peace: Pray for Christ to give you His peace.

Appropriate the power of Christ to reflect His peace in the way you respond to the pressures and trying circumstances of daily life. This can be a reality if you practice the awareness of His presence, rest completely in Him, and trust totally in His ability to guard your heart from anxiety.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (JOHN 16:33).

How to Benefit from Stress-Reducing Techniques

President Abraham Lincoln was able to reduce stress in his life not only by focusing on what he believed was his divine calling—reuniting a divided and devastated country—but also by earnestly and continuously praying.

From the executive mansion on May 9, 1864, Lincoln wrote the following letter to Union supporters: “Enough is known of army operations within the last five days to claim our special gratitude to God. While what remains undone demands our most serious prayers to and reliance upon Him (without whom all human effort is vain), I recommend that all patriots, at their homes, at their places of public worship, and wherever they may be, unite in common thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God.”³⁶

Lincoln’s rally to pray is similar to Esther’s call for a fast to ward off a national tragedy. She directs her cousin Mordecai to . . .

*“Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me.
Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.
I and my attendants will fast as you do.”*
(ESTHER 4:15–16)

Techniques for Stress Reduction

1. Stress-reducing prayers³⁷

- Harvard Medical School researchers used MRIs (magnetic resonance imaging) to identify and characterize the brain regions that are active during a simple form of quiet prayer or meditation.
- Significant signal increases were observed in the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and cingulate cortex of the brain.
- Quiet prayer and meditation activates neural structures involved in attention and control of the autonomic nervous system.
- The Psalms reflect many heartfelt prayers: Psalm 27:7–14; 31:1–5; 51:1–10; single-verse prayers include: Psalm 51:12; 56:3; 63:1.

“LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief” (PSALM 143:1).

2. Stress-reducing exercise

- The World Health Organization recognizes depression as the foremost cause of disability worldwide. Depression also leads to additional stress. It can worsen a person's circumstances and worsen the depression itself. Exercise is noted to be effective in preventing depression.³⁸
- Research is conclusive—exercise is one of the best ways to reduce stress.
- Exercise releases the “good” chemicals (i.e., dopamine and endorphins) and reduces the “bad” (e.g., cortisol).³⁹
- Make a commitment to exercise (walking, swimming, biking, etc.) a minimum of 20 minutes a day, three times a week. Mark your progress on a calendar.

“The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception” (PROVERBS 14:8).

3. Stress-reducing images

- Research supports the transforming power of our thoughts—a procedure that is biblical when properly practiced.
- A University of Miami study revealed that focused imagery helped to lower cortisol levels, rates of depression, and levels of mood disturbance and fatigue.⁴⁰
- Visualize green pastures, still waters, and the Lord as your Shepherd—the Lord walking with you during your dark times of deepest stress. Then, repeat very slowly five times: “The Lord is my shepherd.” Each time emphasize a different word.

“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters” (PSALM 23:1–2).

4. Stress-reducing writing

- Writing about traumatic experiences can improve psychological and physiological health.
- Journaling as a part of daily devotions or quiet time helps objectify and analyze stress and traumatic events.

- Take about 20 to 30 minutes a day to pour out your honest and open thoughts and feelings on paper or on the computer.
- Give no thought to grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
- Record your thoughts as they come, not for anyone else's eyes but for your own personal benefit.

“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (PSALM 62:8).

5. Stress-reducing thanksgiving

- An “attitude of gratitude” can benefit psychological and physiological health.
- Positive attitudes and expectations greatly increase the likelihood of successfully relieving stress and healing trauma wounds.
- Develop a mindset of gratefulness and hopefulness by regularly focusing on reasons to be grateful and hopeful.
- Make a list of past “blessings”—answered prayers and acts of kindness by others that lift your spirit, warm your heart, and create within you a sense of goodwill and peace.
- Identify someone each week for whom you are grateful and write a short thank you note or give them a call or text expressing your appreciation for them.

“Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 TIMOTHY 4:4).

6. Stress-reducing conversations

- Talking about traumatic experiences can be just as helpful as journaling in improving psychological and physiological health.
- Verbalizing out loud—to yourself or to another trusted person—the stress-producing events or situations in your life helps identify stressors, objectify and clarify causes, and release negative thoughts and feelings.
- Find someone you trust and consider wise and mature who will agree to be a sounding board for you.

- Meet on a regular basis (weekly or as often as needed) and share your stressors, listing each one and exploring the reasons they are stressors in your life.
- Describe your thoughts, feelings, and any traumatic events surrounding them in an open and honest way, not editing your thoughts or weighing your words.

“I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief” (1 SAMUEL 1:15–16).

7. Stress-reducing forgiveness

- Releasing resentment and bitterness through extending forgiveness is helpful for psychological and physiological health.
- Letting go of hard feelings and bad attitudes toward others is a great stress reliever and frees the person in bondage to unforgiveness.
- Make a list of those who have hurt or offended you during your lifetime and write beside their names their offenses and the ways you were negatively impacted by them.
- Record your feelings surrounding each event and the pain and stress you have carried as a result.
- Share your list with the Lord and then go back over it again, this time releasing each person, the offense, and all your pain to Him, trusting Him to deal with the people, their offenses, and your pain as He sees fit.

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (COLOSSIANS 3:13).

8. Stress-reducing touch

- Touch significantly reduces stress and improves psychological and physiological health.
- Therapeutic or compassionate, caring touch or massage expedites emotional healing, slows the heart rate, and enhances the autoimmune process.

- Make a conscious effort to touch the people in your life either by giving them a pat on the back, a hug, or a gentle squeeze on the arm or hand.
- Find a good massage therapist and regularly get a massage when stress is bearing down on you.
- Play games with family and friends that involve playful and gentle touch. “Roughhouse” with your children—rolling on the ground together, crawling over each other, or hoisting them onto your shoulders.

“Greet one another with a holy kiss” (2 CORINTHIANS 13:12).

9. Stress-reducing humor

- Humor can benefit psychological and physiological health.
- Using clowns and other laughter-producing methods (especially in children’s hospitals) increases the success of medical treatment.
- Laughter is “good for the soul” and can turn a bad mood into a pleasant one, a tense situation into a relaxed one, and a dark cloud into a silver-lined one.
- Plan fun-filled times on a regular basis with family, friends, and coworkers in an effort to relieve stress or avoid stress buildup.
- Play fun games with loved ones, watch funny movies or sitcoms, read a funny story, share humorous events from your life whenever stress is knocking at your door or the door of someone you care about.

“He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy” (JOB 8:21).

10. Stress-reducing Scripture

- **Read these single verses often:**

“May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer” (PSALM 19:14).

“The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” (PSALM 27:1).

"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (PSALM 34:18).

"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (PSALM 42:5).

"My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (PSALM 51:17).

"The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him" (PSALM 28:7).

— **Reflect on these longer passages:**

"Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong . . ." (PSALM 37:1–11).

"I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry . . ." (PSALM 40:1–8).

"Hear me, LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy . . ." (PSALM 86:1–11).

11. Stress-reducing meditation

- Meditation is considered the exact opposite of the body's fight-or-flight response under stress.

- Simple meditation can involve sitting in the morning with closed eyes for 10 or 20 minutes. Establish a breathing rhythm, repeating one word (such as *trust* or *forgive*) or a short verse, over and over.

"I trust in you . . ." (PSALM 25:2).

"The LORD is my strength . . ." (PSALM 28:7).

"You are my hiding place . . ." (PSALM 32:7).

- Repeat in a second session sometime during the day.

12. Stress-reducing music

- Music used today as therapy has historical, biblical precedence. For example, when King Saul was deeply troubled, David played the lyre, or the harp, for him. Saul was soothed and refreshed by the beautiful melodies flowing from the strings. The Bible says, *“Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him”* (1 Samuel 16:23).
- Listen to your favorite worship music.
- Sing inspirational praise music.
- Put Scripture to music.

“Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp” (PSALM 147:7).

13. Stress-reducing eating

- Eat at least two to three regular meals a day or five small ones. Don’t skip or forget meals.
- Avoid fast food, sweets, alcohol, and caffeine. Too much caffeine can have a negative impact on your body when you’re under stress. Caffeine impacts the hormones in your body, causing an increase in hormones, such as adrenaline, cortisol, and dopamine.

“God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food’” (GENESIS 1:29).

14. Stress-reducing pets⁴¹

- If you don’t have a furry friend, consider getting one.
- Owning a dog increases the likelihood of getting out for exercise, a known stress buster.
- Animals offer companionship. They can be a wonderful antidote for loneliness and depression.
- Pet ownership can help control spikes in blood pressure brought on by stress and tension.

“The righteous care for the needs of their animals” (PROVERBS 12:10).

How to Recover from PTSD

Although Abraham Lincoln was never diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), his was a trauma-filled life that desperately needed divine intervention.

In the throes of depression following his engagement breakup with Mary Todd, Lincoln traveled to Kentucky to visit his best friend, Joshua Speed, and his sister, Mary. Joshua's mother, Lucy Speed, gave Lincoln an Oxford Bible, and he expressed his appreciation in a letter to Mary: "I intend to read it regularly when I return home. I doubt not that it is really, as she says, the best cure for the 'Blues' could one but take it according to the truth."⁴²

Twenty years later, that gratitude would again be expressed through an inscription on a photo given to Lucy. It read: "For Mrs. Lucy G. Speed, from whose pious hand I accepted the present of an Oxford Bible twenty years ago."⁴³

Biblical truth brought Lincoln relief and wisdom despite the previous traumas of his past and the present traumas of his presidency. He was able to echo the words of the psalmist.

*"I remember, LORD, your ancient laws,
and I find comfort in them."
(PSALM 119:52)*

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder develops when someone fails to heal from a single traumatic event or a series of disturbing experiences. The path out of PTSD involves intentionally stopping—mentally turning and emotionally heading back through the trauma—not to experience it again, but to process it and move on in a new direction.

PTSD takes people on a detour from life as they knew it, sending them careening off a mountainside into a rocky valley only to discover the only way up is back the way they came. The task can seem insurmountable and the pain unbearable, but the reward is reliable—

God promises new life. Although fear can paralyze, stress can cripple, and anxiety can enslave, those who face their pain can find comfort in their suffering through the process of healing.

*“My comfort in my suffering is this:
Your promise preserves my life.”
(PSALM 119:50)*

Post-trauma sufferers haven’t had the luxury of time to grieve losses or wrap their heads around what has happened to them because they are still “dodging bullets”—real or imaginary. Like soldiers fighting on a battlefield when their buddies fall at their feet: They can’t stop, arrange proper burials, plan memorial services, and attend grief counseling. They are still fighting for their own lives.

Ultimately, they push the trauma to the back of their minds and move on with the necessity of surviving. Maybe someday they will be able to properly honor their fallen friends. However, few do because the demands of life take precedence.

So their deeply buried pain remains walled-off. Eventually, it begins to push its way out of the hidden recesses of their minds and forces its way back into their consciousness, their dreams, their emotions. Then the time for a long-awaited, long overdue process of healing can begin.

Healing from PTSD

Acknowledge the reality of your trauma.

- Admit to yourself, God, and at least one other person that you are hurting and in need of healing.
- Identify the symptoms you are experiencing, their frequency, and their impact on your life.

“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (PSALM 62:8).

Recognize the source of your trauma.

- Acknowledge your pain, identify its source, and share your experience with a trusted, mature friend. “This is what caused my pain: _____.”
- Explore subsequent experiences that have been spin-offs or repercussions of your original trauma. “As a result, this trauma also happened to me: _____.”

“Wisdom is a shelter . . . Wisdom preserves those who have it”
(ECCLESIASTES 7:12).

Seek counseling for severe symptoms.

- Process flashbacks, dreams, nightmares, and other troubling experiences with a trained professional.
- Inform a medical doctor if depression becomes severe or chronic.

“The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty” (PROVERBS 22:3).

Realize present situations can “trigger” buried memories and more emotions.

- Learn what to expect during the healing process.
- Sights, sounds, smells, touch, people, places, media, and movies can all cause the mind to suddenly remember or the body to recall past pain.

“Those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction” (JOB 36:15).

Commit to journaling as you travel your road to recovery.

- Writing, recording, sculpting, and drawing are all tools for recalling, uncovering, processing, organizing, objectifying, and gaining insight.
- Reading your journal on a regular basis moves the healing process along. Your journal becomes “your story” on paper.

“Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness” (ISAIAH 30:8).

Examine troublesome or self-injurious thinking or behavioral patterns.

- Honestly evaluate your relationships and work history with someone who knows you well.
- Pinpoint ways you could be sabotaging yourself professionally or personally, and explore the reasons with a professional who understands PTSD.

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (ISAIAH 53:6).

Investigate the emotional and psychological walls you have erected and the tools you have used.

- Evaluate your family, friends, and workplace to consider the illegitimate ways you have tried to meet your God-given needs for love, significance, and security.⁴⁴
- Explore the defense mechanisms you have established over the years to keep your relationships superficial or at least detached from your past traumas (e.g., isolation, anger, critical spirit, etc.).

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (HEBREWS 4:13).

Finally, face the pain of the trauma you have experienced.

- Walking through your pain is the most difficult but most necessary of the steps everyone must take on the road to healing and freedom.
- Pain held captive in silence is pain never freed. Remember that *pain expressed is pain released*.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (JOHN 8:32).

Those who make the journey back up the mountain no longer fear looking back down. They have entered the shelter of emotional healing. They have left past traumas where they belong—in the past. Now they are free to walk forward without fear.

*“Build up, build up, prepare the road!
Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.”
(ISAIAH 57:14)*

How to Stop Stress Before It Overtakes You

“Excuse me now,” President Abraham Lincoln told an approaching Congressman. “I am going to the theatre. Come and see me in the morning.”⁴⁵

Lincoln and his wife, Mary, were devotees of the theater and found it provided a practical way for the war-torn president to stop stress—at least temporarily. On the evening of April 14, 1865, a Good Friday, the Lincolns were in a celebratory mood because the Civil War was officially over and the Confederate Army had surrendered at Appomattox. The pair was attending a production of *Our American Cousin*, but there was a prominent actor present, yet not on stage that evening, who tragically would steal the spotlight.

John Wilkes Booth, enraged that Lincoln declared in a speech that he was planning on giving blacks citizenship and voting rights, eerily vowed: “Now, by God, I’ll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make.”⁴⁶

And it was. But God’s Word gives this assurance regarding the timing of even that fateful evening . . .

*“All the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.”*

(PSALM 139:16)

Slow Down Your Stress

As you seek to slow down your stressful pace, the following suggestions may prove helpful:

Exercise—safely do whatever aerobic activity you enjoy most.

Take a few deep breaths—let out a good long sigh.

Sing a song at the top of your lungs.

Practice muscle relaxation techniques.

Dim the lights and soak in a hot bubble bath while listening to relaxing music.

Become better organized—clutter can increase stress.

Make your work environment more comfortable.

Go for a casual walk in a scenic location.

Play a game or paint a picture.

Invite friends for a fun-filled evening.

Have a good cry once in a while.

See a favorite movie or watch a special show.

Turn off the television and read an inspiring book.

Smile at people and laugh often.

Develop your faith by choosing to believe God is at work in every situation.

The Bible says . . .

*“Come and see what God has done,
his awesome deeds for mankind!”*

(PSALM 66:5)

How to Manage Your Mind

Tucked inside the thirteenth chapter of the book of Acts is an obscure passage packed with profound wisdom. Acts 13:36 reads, “Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep.”

The reference is to King David of Israel, but the implication is both encompassing and enormous. Scripture is telling us that God intentionally places people in the generation that they are in, and when their purpose is finished, *they die*. You and I have been intentionally placed in the generation that we are in, and when our purpose is finished, we will die. And not a day sooner or later than what God has predetermined.

At the close of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln no longer was described as stressed and depressed, dark and moody. Two inconceivable words began to be associated with his demeanor—*serene* and *joyful*. Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, commented that Lincoln seemed “conscious that the great purpose of his life had been achieved . . . He seemed the very personification of supreme satisfaction.”⁴⁷

So when John Wilkes Booth shot the 16th president of the United States of America and killed him, God wasn’t taken by surprise. Abraham Lincoln had served God’s purpose for his generation.

According to the book of Jeremiah, God’s purposes are established even prior to conception. Consider God’s words to the prophet.

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”*

(JEREMIAH 1:5)

Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life

Realize, thoughts influence emotions and actions. Therefore, it is essential that you take charge of your thinking.

When the language (thinking) center of your brain is prioritized, the feeling (stress) portion of your brain is minimized.

— Your thoughts dominate and can even dictate your emotions.

When you feel sad, angry, or anxious, check your thoughts. You will find they correspond to your emotions. Change your thoughts and you will find your feelings aligning with your thoughts.

— Your thoughts are the engine that pulls your emotions like a caboose wherever it goes.

When your emotions run wild, empower the language center of your brain and you will diminish the power of your feelings. Activate your thoughts by focusing on the truth.

- Your thoughts will eventually bring your feelings into submission to your thinking.

*“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.
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 4:8–9)

How to Relieve Stress Overload

Toward the end of his life, Abraham Lincoln powerfully modeled how to relieve unhealthy stress and how to find a way to bless others in the midst of stressful circumstances.

It begins with a right relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ, and an understanding of His sovereignty in all circumstances. There is no better stress reliever than knowing that God is in control of every circumstance in our lives.

Lincoln found great relief from unhealthy stress by reading and studying God’s Word, the Bible, and by spending time with God in prayer. No doubt, assurances from God’s Word about His infinite love, grace, and hope helped strengthen Lincoln on the path toward greatness.

Even in the midst of stressful circumstances, unhealthy stress was greatly relieved in Lincoln’s life through the realization that his life had purpose. Simply put, Scripture conveys that there is no such thing as a *purposeless* life. That realization alone can be a great stress reducer. Lincoln furthermore understood that he could never fulfill his purpose in his own strength, but through God’s strength alone.

Dependence on God dissipates unhealthy stress and provides a powerful dynamic for blessing the lives of others. One of the most cherished passages in Scripture addressing stress is found in the book of Philippians.

*“Do not be anxious about anything,
but in every situation, by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

(PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7)

Road signs give you notice of impending change or danger. Do you fret when you have to stop? Do you resent having to yield the right-of-way? Do you get impatient when you must slow down or take a detour from the familiar? God’s warning signs often relay the same messages as the obstacles you encounter on the road.

*“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.”*

(JEREMIAH 6:16)

Finding Relief from Stress

Stop

Stop and look at the real reason you are experiencing stress.

- Do I try to meet my own needs instead of waiting on the Lord?
- Do I think God cannot get along without me?
- Do I seek self-worth by trying to prove my adequacy and effectiveness?
- Am I Spirit-led or people-pressured?

“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (GALATIANS 1:10).

Stop, confess, and turn away from any known sin in your life.

- Do I manipulate or control others?
- Do I feel envious or jealous of others?
- Do I express my feelings inappropriately?
- Do I overreact to criticism?

“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (PROVERBS 28:13).

Yield

Yield to God’s sovereign control over your circumstances.

- What is God doing in my circumstances?
- In what way does God want me to change?
- How does God want me to respond?
- Do I have impure motives?

“In the LORD’s hand the king’s heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him” (PROVERBS 21:1).

Yield to God your perceived rights and your expectations.

- I yield my right to control my circumstances.
- I yield my right to be accepted by others.
- I yield my right to be successful.
- I yield my right to be right.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (PROVERBS 3:5).

Resume Speed

Resume speed—living in the presence of God.

“Dear Lord,

- I choose to let Christ live His life through me.
- I choose to live in the present, not worrying about tomorrow.

- I choose to refocus my thoughts from my pressures to your purposes for allowing this pressure.
- I choose to make a commitment to talk less and listen more.
- I choose to have a thankful heart regardless of the pressure I feel.
- I will call on you, Lord, for wisdom and peace.”

“Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, LORD” (PSALM 89:15).

*“Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him.”
(PSALM 62:1)*

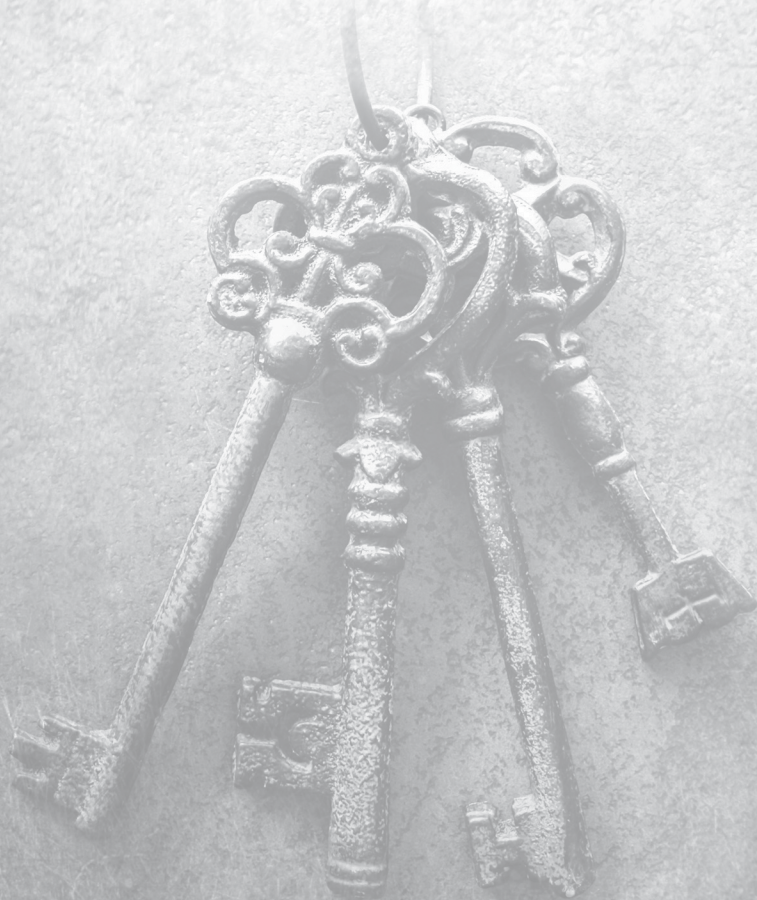
**On your journey through life,
don’t miss the SIGNS God has for you.**

**When stress is signaling possible burnout:
SLOW DOWN and turn from danger . . .
STOP and ask for directions—God’s . . .
YIELD the driver’s seat to Christ . . .
RESUME SPEED, trusting in the Lord.**

—June Hunt



SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE



*“First seek the counsel
of the LORD.”*

(1 KINGS 22:5)



God's Word offers the hope and promise of a changed life. The Lord will renew your mind—transforming the way you think, act, and live—as you saturate yourself in His Word. In the following questions, the bold-faced words serve as prompts to help you more easily memorize the verses related to this topic. May God's truth come alive to you, flourish in you, and flow through you.

Why should I strive to achieve **tranquility** in my life?

*"Better one handful with **tranquility**
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind."
(ECCLESIASTES 4:6)*

What does Jesus say we should do to **find rest** for our **souls**?

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you
and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble
in heart, and you will **find rest** for your **souls**.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(MATTHEW 11:28–30)*

Are you trying to attain your goals **by means
of the Spirit** or **by means of the flesh**?

*"Are you so foolish?
After beginning **by means of the Spirit**,
are you now trying to finish
by means of the flesh?"
(GALATIANS 3:3)*

I feel **hard pressed on every side**.
Is it inevitable that I will be **crushed**?

*“We are **hard pressed on every side**,
but not **crushed**; perplexed, but not in despair;
persecuted, but not abandoned;
struck down, but not destroyed.”*
(2 CORINTHIANS 4:8–9)

Why should I **cast all my anxiety on** Christ?

*“**Cast all** your **anxiety on** him
because he cares for you.”*
(1 PETER 5:7)

Why should I prioritize having **peace** in my **heart**?

*“A **heart at peace** gives life to the body.”*
(PROVERBS 14:30)

I was **in distress** and I **cried out to God for help**.
How can I know whether **he heard** me?

*“**In my distress** I called to the LORD;
I cried to my God for help. From his temple
he heard my voice; my cry came
before him, into his ears.”*
(PSALM 18:6)

Why should I **hope in the Lord**?

*“Those who **hope in the Lord**
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.”*
(ISAIAH 40:31)

How **do I not be anxious about anything**?

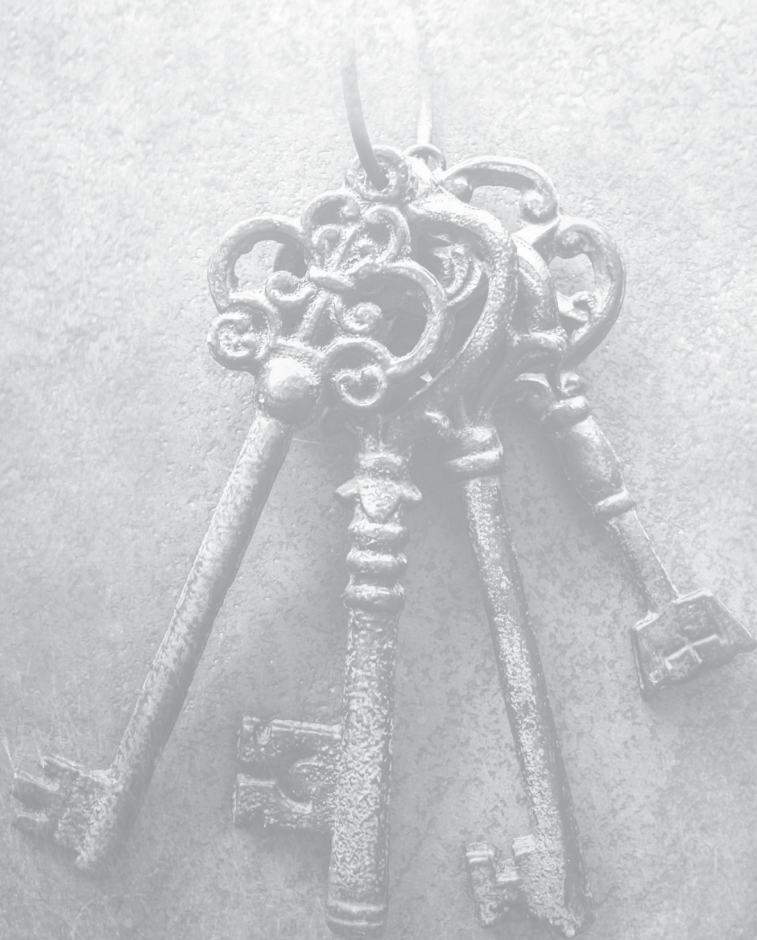
*“**Do not be anxious about anything**,
but in every situation, by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
And the peace of God, which transcends
all understanding, will guard your hearts
and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*
(PHILIPPIANS 4:6–7)

What **things** are best for me to **think about**—to dwell on?

*“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** ...
And the God of peace will be with you.”*
(PHILIPPIANS 4:8–9)



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Hope for the Heart

... presenting God's Truth for Today's Problems

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God's Word is our sure and steady anchor, the foundation of our ministry and all our resources. We are grateful to God for His 35+ years of guidance and enabling us to impact the world with His truth that sets people free.

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We present biblical hope and practical help through our print and digital resources (over two million books sold), radio broadcasts, and podcasts. Likewise, our counseling services and seminars, the International Christian Coaching Institute (ICCI), the Lifeline to Hope caregiver training program, credentialing and certifications, and a global outreach that touches over 60 countries in 36 languages and on 6 continents—are all designed to help people have a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

*“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”
(Jeremiah 29:11)*

June Hunt, M.A., is the Founder and Chief Servant Officer of Hope for the Heart, a worldwide counseling and caregiving ministry that offers biblical hope and practical help in more than 60 countries and 36 languages. The *Keys for Living Library* provides the foundation for the ministry's award-winning, live, call-in counseling radio program, *Hope in the Night*. Her passion to help others through biblical counsel is fueled by her joy in seeing a life changed through Christ. As an accomplished author, speaker, and musician, June provides God's truth for today's problems. See more at: www.junehunt.org

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