

*"This book will show you the path to replacing stress with serenity.  
You need to read this!"*

— **RICK WARREN**, pastor, founder of Saddleback Church, and bestselling author

# The Stressless Life

Experiencing the Unshakable  
Presence of God's Indescribable Peace

**VANCE PITMAN**  
WITH SAM O'NEAL

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# Introduction

It was one of the strangest days of my life. I suppose it was one of the most frightening too, although I don't remember much of the scary stuff, given that I was basically unconscious. What I do remember was pretty routine: lots of work, lots of fires that needed to be put out, lots of meetings, and lots of pressure to get it all done as quickly as possible.

In other words, it was a pretty normal day—which, I guess, was a big part of the problem.

I'd been in the office for about ten hours when I decided to head home and spend some time with my family, but then planned to get back to work once everyone went to bed. I started to realize something was wrong at dinner. I didn't feel right. Didn't feel like myself. It seemed like I was moving in slow motion, both mentally and physically. I lost all motivation and energy, and I couldn't even bring myself to lift up my arm to bring food to my mouth. I had a hard time following the conversation between my wife and my kids.

I tried to push through it as usual, but by the end of the meal I was convinced something wasn't right. I dragged myself up to our bedroom and lay down. I fell asleep instantly.

I didn't wake up for eight days.

When my family finally got me out of the house and dragged me to my doctor, I was diagnosed with the physical version of a mental breakdown. Basically, my body just quit. It shut down. Ran out of juice with no extra batteries in the drawer. Looking back on that period of my life, I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner.

We—myself; my wife, Kristie; and our launch team and ministry partners—founded Hope Church in Las Vegas, Nevada, back in 2001. From the very beginning, when eighteen people gathered in my living room, God's activity was overwhelmingly present. So were the challenges of ministry.

We outgrew our living room in four months. We reached the thousand-member threshold in four years, with hundreds of people coming to Christ each year during that period. Best of all, we'd planted a church in Sin City that itself would establish more churches in the West with a passion to engage the nations with the gospel—and that mission was progressing better than we'd dreamed. We had a network of churches joining together in God's global mission and growing rapidly.

All that was good news!

The bad news was that the demands and challenges of an intense ministry season had knocked me out of balance. I had taken on more than I was supposed to in my efforts to live out the calling Christ had placed on my life.

In short, my life was being squeezed by stress in almost every way imaginable, and I was failing the test. Hard.

Growing up as a pastor's kid in Alabama, I heard all the jokes about preachers being a little lazy. "It must be nice to work just one day a week," and on and on. So when I accepted God's call to the ministry, I wanted to show everyone that pastors work as hard as anyone else. Actually, I wanted to work harder than everyone else.

Of course, church planting is hard work, no matter where you do it. And church planting in a relatively unchurched area is harder still. But I was confident in my call, so I put my shoulder against the load and kept pressing forward. For about ten years I worked sixty or seventy hours a week, every week. That was my routine. My own expectation. I also did everything in my power to be a godly husband to my wife and a great dad to our four children. Again, all these priorities were correct, but the rhythm was wrong. I was functionally unaware of God's prescription for dealing with stress in a way that leads to peace.

From the outside looking in, everything was golden. But behind the curtain, we had just about every major problem a church could have. And I felt like all the solutions had to come through me.

Like many churches in the West, our biggest struggle was finding a place to meet. It's almost impossible for churches to get building loans in Las Vegas, so we held services in just about every location imaginable—from houses to schools to corporate conference centers to warehouses. The church met in nine different locations over the first ten years, but we were declined by over fifty lease properties during that same period. I even remember hopping in the car with some of our pastors one day and driving around the city looking for a place to hold our services *that coming week!*



Of course, God provided. But each time He moved to expand our fellowship, we'd outgrow our meeting space and be in danger of being homeless once again.

Most church plants struggle with finances, and we were no exception. We went for more than two years with literally no money in the bank—whatever we received through the offering each weekend went to paying whichever bills were most urgent. That's because Las Vegas was in a huge economic depression at the time, which also meant 30 percent of our congregation left the city because they couldn't find a job. We had moral failures and turmoil related to a couple of our staff members, including a pastor. We had to navigate the growing pains of an expanding, multigenerational congregation comprised of dozens of cultures, languages, and religious expectations. And on and on it went.

I didn't realize what was happening at the time, but in 2012, everything came to a head. That was the year we were scheduled to finish a multiyear building project so we could actually gather for worship and carry out ministry on our own campus. Unfortunately, that was also the year our bond company was sued and closed its doors, which meant we were short about 3.5 million dollars with three months to go before the building was finished—and no lending institution to help us pay the bills. I had to deal with sixty contractors threatening to walk off the job and sue the church. Daily.

Once the building was finally finished, we were on campus for only four and a half months when Las Vegas experienced a hundred-year flood. In a matter of hours, our entire campus—everything we'd poured ourselves into creating and preparing for the past few years—was under water. The

flood happened so quickly that our staff were literally carried out of the building on the shoulders of fire and rescue personnel. Thankfully, nobody was seriously hurt, but the catastrophe caused over a million dollars in damages to our brand-new facility.

And wouldn't you know it; nobody has flood insurance in a desert.

So, yeah, that period of my life was a little crazy. We had a church with over 2,500 people gathering weekly, but I was still leading the same way as when we had eighteen people in my family's living room. I was in every meeting. Nobody knew the budget better than I did (or so I thought). Nobody could handle the preaching like I could (or so I believed). Whatever problems or situations needed answers, I felt I was the only one who could resolve them.

By the beginning of 2013, everything had caught up with me—the problems, the pressure, the tension, the anxiety. In other words, the stress.

I collapsed. For almost two hundred hours, I did nothing but sleep. I lost eighteen pounds because I couldn't even wake up long enough to eat. I couldn't talk with my wife, let alone my staff or congregation. My body simply refused to function.

## **We're All Stressed**

Many people close to me will be surprised when they read about this incident from my past. I don't talk about it much. I don't even like thinking about it.

So why am I including it in this book? Because I want you to understand one important thing about me: I know what

it's like to be stressed. I know how it feels to be crushed by life's pressures and apprehensions.

I also understand I'm not the only one.

According to the American Institute of Stress, 77 percent of Americans regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress.<sup>1</sup> That means stress is much more than simply feeling a heavy load or experiencing a busy schedule. It impacts your body in real and tangible ways, with symptoms that include headaches, loss of energy, chest pain, nausea, dizziness, and more. The same study says 48 percent of people lie awake at night and have difficulty sleeping because of stress.<sup>2</sup>

Let's stop here a moment, because I know many times numbers whoosh right over our heads without really sticking. Happens to me all the time. So let me illustrate what these numbers actually mean.

If you're at a meeting with ten people, there's a pretty good chance that eight of those people are physically impacted by the level of stress in their lives. Their bodies are affected. When you walk down the street, eight out of every ten people you pass are not as healthy as they should be because of the way stress and anxiety are affecting their ability to function.

The next time you go somewhere where a lot of people are gathered together—whether that's a church service or a big crowd at the grocery store, it doesn't matter—remind yourself that half of those people didn't get enough sleep the night before because of stress. Half! The next time you're stuck in traffic on the interstate, remember that half the people driving those cars didn't get enough sleep last night because of something that's stressing them out. Yikes! One out of every two.

Of course, things aren't getting any easier in terms of the world and the amount of stress it throws our way. I wrote this book during the final months of 2020—a year that at times felt like nothing but stress! This probably won't surprise you, but 67 percent of people said they experienced significantly more stress in 2020 than in previous years because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

My point is this: we're all stressed. Doesn't matter if we're young or old, male or female, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, hard-driving corporate executive or first-year intern, Christian or atheist—stress is a reality for everyone. Stress is a burden for everyone.

If you're fortunate enough to not be feeling that burden right now, I am so happy for you. I really am. But you need to understand that this stress-free period won't last. Sooner or later, you'll start to feel the pull against your shoulders. The tension. The drag. Sooner or later, the weight will start to pile up. And the more you try to fight it—the more you tell yourself to “suck it up” or experiment with different strategies to manage or medicate away the stress—the heavier that weight will become, until you eventually feel crushed by it. Totally beaten down.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that the *presence* of stress doesn't need to dominate your life. Yes, we all experience apprehension and anxiety—we can't escape from stress. But we can respond to stressful situations in a way that allows us to *enjoy* life, not just *endure* it. In fact, we can live in a way that's

**We can respond  
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endure it.**

defined not by anxiety and apprehension but by the unshakable presence of God's indescribable peace.

I know that's possible because I've seen it happen in the lives of many people—including my own.

I'm not much of a tech wizard, so I was a little skeptical when my staff made me start using an iPhone several years ago. Everyone kept telling me about all the wonderful things it could do and all the ways it could save me time—but I wasn't sure. Nothing seemed to work for me as easily as everyone else described.

Then one of my daughters said, "Dad, if you have any trouble with the phone, just do a hard reset."

"A what?" I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Just hold down this button and this button at the same time," she said, "and keep holding them until an apple pops up on your screen. That will fix most of your problems."

Turns out she was right—and not just about the phone.

A hard reset is pretty much what happened to me after I took my unplanned, unwanted, and unforeseen weeklong nap. Once I was finally able to function for more than a few minutes at a time, my wife and some of the leaders of our church sat me down for an intervention of sorts. They told me my role and responsibilities at the church and in our other ministries would be cut back drastically. I was allowed to preach on the weekends but do nothing else. No meetings. No strategy sessions. No counseling. No conflict resolution. They also told me this new reality would last a long time—not days, not weeks, but months.

To their credit, they didn't give me a choice in any of these decisions. They told me what was going to happen during this reset period, and they made it clear that those closest to

me would ruthlessly enforce my new way of life. I'm grateful to live and work with people who care about me enough to help me see how badly I was managing the stress in my life—and to help me choose a better path.

Just as importantly, I'm grateful that the months and years since that hard reset have allowed me to focus on the topic of stress and how it impacts our lives. I'm excited to share my journey with you and show you what I've learned as we move through the pages of this book.

### **What's the Alternative?**

A lot of people have a lot of opinions about which holidays are best. I think most would put Christmas at the top of the list.

Not me, though. For my money, there's no better celebration than Thanksgiving.

I love everything about Thanksgiving Day. First and foremost, my house gets crammed full of the people I love most in the world—my children, my grandchildren, and my closest friends. Then there's the food. Kristie gets going on the preparations early in the morning, which means the smells start to tease and tantalize my nostrils just about as soon as I get up. By the time we finally sit down around the table, I'm usually drooling as much as the family dog. And, to top it all off, we get to watch football all day.

Seriously, what could be better on this side of heaven than Thanksgiving Day?

There comes a moment at every Thanksgiving feast when I finally throw in the towel. I've eaten seconds and thirds of everything on the table—even the veggies Kristie insists on

serving to make the meal seem healthier. I've unbuckled my belt two plates ago, and now there is literally no more room in my stomach. I'm completely stuffed. Completely satisfied. So I push myself away from the table, lean my head back against the chair, wave my napkin like a white flag of surrender, and breathe out the most satisfied sigh you could imagine.

Do you know that feeling? Have you been there? Keep that image in mind while you read this passage from God's Word: "Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:8).

If you're familiar with Abraham's story, you know he has a unique place in history as the forefather of both the Jewish and Arab people groups. He had a deep and personal connection with God that spanned decades. As a husband, father, and grandfather, he was dedicated to his family. And he lived as part businessman, part farmer, part soldier, and part priest.

In short, he enjoyed an incredible life. And when it finally came time for him to move on, he did so as someone satisfied with life. In other words, Abraham pushed back from life's table completely stuffed with blessings and fully satisfied by the wonder of everything he'd experienced.

As residents of the modern world, most of us understand that the stress we live and deal with every day is not good. It's not normal. It's life-taking rather than life-giving, which is why we're so desperate to find ways to manage or alleviate or otherwise eliminate anxiety from our lives.

What we often have a harder time understanding is the alternative. If stress is bad, what's the right way to live? What's life supposed to look like?

For me, the answer to that question is Abraham. He is the example not only of what life *could* be but also what it *should* be. That's because we weren't created by God to drag ourselves through each day in a haggard haze of stress. No! We were created to be so stuffed full of purpose and peace and the riches of God's blessings that we can't take even one more bite.

Or, as Jesus described it, we were created for abundant life: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came so that they would have life, and have it *abundantly*" (John 10:10, emphasis added).

What I'm saying is this: you and I were created for a stressless life. Not *less stress*. That's important. You and I were never intended to manage or deal with something as harmful and corrosive as stress. (More on that in chapter 1.) Instead, we've been given everything necessary to enjoy a life that is free from stress. Devoid of stress. A stressless life.

That's the unshakable promise you've been offered. That's the life I want you to live. And I'll show you how to find it in these pages.

## Available Now

Too many of us believe Jesus's promise of abundant life was meant to be fulfilled in the distant future—either in heaven after we die or maybe here on earth after we pass some unseen milestone by earning enough money or developing enough patience or solving all the problems that weigh us down. (Hint: that unseen milestone doesn't exist and that future will never come.)

Thankfully, we don't have to wait to experience Jesus's promise of abundant life. We don't have to wait to figure out



how to remove stress from each day. That life is available to us in the here and now. Today. Right this moment.

Let me say it again: that life is available to *you* in the here and now! Today! Right this moment! You don't have to wait until some later date to experience the stressless life. You don't have to become a sage or a psychiatry professor. You don't have to take a class or pay a price.

Instead, you can immediately take hold of the indescribable, soul-satisfying, joy-producing, fruit-bearing life God has always intended you to live. Of course, to do that, you'll need to learn what stress is and how to remove it from your life. And not just stress in a general sense, but the specific stressors pressing down on your neck even now. I'm talking about

- stress in your schedule,
- stress in your budget,
- stress in your relationships,
- stress in your decision-making,
- stress during spiritual battle,
- and stress caused by circumstances outside your control.

My goal in this book is to help you work through each of these issues and more. This isn't some magic bullet to make all your problems go away. That's not possible! Instead, these pages are filled with practical instruction and spiritual inspiration for moving away from anxiety and jumping feetfirst into the kind of abundant, stress-free living that is only available through Christ.



# 1

## Anxious Living

### What Is Stress and Why Is It Bad?

He didn't know it was the last football game he'd ever play, but Journey Brown made the most of it.

The 2019 Cotton Bowl featured the Penn State Nittany Lions against the Memphis Tigers. Brown was the starting running back for Penn State, and he played an incredible game: sixteen rushes for a total of 202 yards and two touchdowns. He ran around people. He ran through defenders. He was all over the field and seemingly unstoppable, leading his team to victory with a score of 53–39.

Going into the 2020 season, the future could not have been brighter for Journey Brown. Professional scouts from the National Football League (NFL) were already drooling over his explosiveness and breakaway speed. Coaches were talking about him. Sports reporters were writing articles

about everything they expected him to achieve and all the awards they predicted he would win.

As a junior, Brown was poised not only for another successful season with Penn State but also to run all the way to the NFL in 2021, with a high position in the draft and a lucrative contract.

That's when everything changed.

In a tragic twist, a routine medical examination revealed that Brown suffered from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a condition that causes the muscle wall around the heart to become abnormally thick. As a result, the heart has to work much harder to pump blood—a dangerous reality for an elite athlete. In fact, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is the most common cause of sudden cardiac death in people under thirty-five.

Journey Brown retired from football on November 11, 2020. “The pain of not being able to play the game I love anymore hurts, and I can’t explain how I am feeling right now,” he wrote in a letter to his teammates and fans. “However, I can walk away from the game knowing I truly gave my all at every practice, on every down, and in the locker room every day.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the procedures used to diagnose hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is called a stress test. I've been through those myself. Doctors hook you up to a bunch of monitoring machines, then put you on a treadmill. They start you out slow but then increase the speed and inclination of the treadmill every three minutes. It doesn't take long to get most patients huffing and puffing!

Of course, that's the goal of a stress test. The whole process is designed to put extra pressure on your heart—to get

it pushing and pumping beyond its normal capacity. That pressure, that stress, reveals anything out of the ordinary.

What Journey Brown discovered in November 2020 is that life itself is a stress test. I'm sure he hopped on that treadmill at his doctor's office believing it was all just another routine diagnostic. Just another run for an athlete who loved running. But then the results came back, and the entire trajectory of his life changed in a single moment. Dreams were crushed. The future was suddenly unclear.

Thankfully, he responded well. James Franklin, the head coach of Penn State's football team, called Brown's diagnosis "heartbreaking." But he also noted that Brown immediately began serving as a voluntary assistant coach for the other running backs on the team, and he believes the young man's future remains bright. "He's handled it better than I think anybody I've ever been around," said Franklin. "I don't know if he wants to stay in football or whatever he decides to do, but he's going to be unbelievably successful."<sup>2</sup>

Have you learned that life is a stress test? I want to focus on that principle for a moment because it lies at the very heart of this book.

Everything you experience in life is a stress test—successes, failures, relationships, work, family, sickness, uncertainty, finances, good times and dreams, bad times and tragedies—all of it increases the pressure on you and within you until your areas of weakness become clear. Sometimes that pressure increases gradually throughout your childhood and school and marriage and career. Or, as Brown experienced, sometimes that pressure gets piled up all at once in a moment of crisis.

What's the goal of all that pressure, you wonder? What's the point?

To reveal the condition of your heart.

## What Is Stress, Anyway?

Before we go any further, let's make sure we're on the same page about this idea of stress (or anxiety or worry). Because the concept of stress generally (and those words individually) can mean different things to different people.

Here's how the dictionary defines *stress*:

- *Physiology*. A specific response by the body to a stimulus, as fear or pain, that disturbs or interferes with the normal physiological equilibrium of an organism.
- Physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension.<sup>3</sup>

Those definitions are technically accurate. They are semantically correct. But they don't really convey what it's like to experience stress in real life. Yes, stress is a physiological response within our bodies, but it's also much more than that. Yes, stress can be described as "strain" or "tension," but it's hard to articulate in any meaningful way what that actually feels like.

Below is a more true-to-life definition I came up with.

***Stress:*** *Fearful concern experienced when life's demands seem greater than my ability to meet them.*

That definition fits better with my experiences with stress. I don't encounter stress every time I experience a challenge—

probably because I like challenges! I like digging in and doing the difficult work. But when I start to feel overwhelmed, when I start to feel like what's being demanded of me is more than my personal resources can cover, that's when I become stressed.

This is the definition of stress we'll use throughout this book, so it's worth looking a little deeper to unpack it. Specifically, I want to show you the difference between "stressors" and "stress," as well as the differences between "genuine concern" and "fearful concern."

**Stress is  
fearful concern  
experienced when  
life's demands  
seem greater than  
my ability to meet  
them.**

### ***Stressors vs. Stress***

Stressors are those circumstances that create the levels of pressure, tension, and strain that lead to stress. They can be expected or unexpected. They can be big or small. They can be recurring incidents or a onetime event. Stressors are usually negative moments—things we didn't want to happen. But positive circumstances can also serve as stressors when they change our lives in big ways or when we're unprepared to receive them.

Most stressors we experience are relatively minor. Getting stuck in a traffic jam. Catching a cold. Receiving a bill or an invoice that is way more than we'd planned to spend. Falling into an argument with our spouse over something silly or unimportant. These are the kinds of inconveniences and annoyances each of us confronts on a daily basis.

Of course, minor doesn't mean easy. When our lives are filled with pressure and strain, even the smallest stressor can become the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Other stressors are so big they immediately take center stage in our lives. The loss of a job. Cancer. Divorce. The death of a parent or child. Stressors can also include larger events that may not impact us directly—wars, pandemics, political elections, economic depression, and so on. All these factors (and many more) can push us toward fearful concern.

In the introduction, I said that all people experience stress, and that's true. Yet it's important to understand that stress doesn't cause itself. Instead, what brings about stress are the various stressors we encounter in our lives. We could say it this way: *stressors* are what we face, while *stress* is what we feel. Stressors put demands on us that threaten to overwhelm our resources and can cause us to feel fear and worry and anxiety.

To say it another way, stressors are the primary sources of stress.

But we don't have to respond that way. It's possible to handle stressors in a way that produces peace. In fact, it's possible to enjoy a stressless life. Truly, it is! That's what this book is all about.

Before we move forward, I think it's necessary to point out that all people encounter all kinds of stressors every single day of their lives—including Christians. There's a lot of confusion about that reality, both in our culture and in the church. Many Jesus followers feel shame or guilt or doubt when they encounter trials and tough times. They feel like they must be doing something wrong or that God is punishing them.

The truth is, followers of Jesus are not immune to difficult circumstances. In fact, it's clear from Scripture that we should *expect* stressors in our lives.

The apostle Paul writes this to the church: “But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come” (2 Tim. 3:1). The Amplified Bible defines the phrase *difficult times* as “times [of great stress and trouble] . . . [that will be hard to bear].” Have you experienced those times? I have.

The apostle Peter adds this: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12). Don’t be surprised when you encounter a stressor! It’s not something strange. It’s not a confirmation that you’re going down the wrong path. In fact, stressors and difficult circumstances are often signs that you’re headed in the right direction spiritually; you’re just encountering resistance from your enemy.

In short, what distinguishes us as followers of Jesus isn’t the absence of stressors in our lives—it’s not the absence of pressure or strain, or even danger or doubt. Instead, what distinguishes us is the unshakable presence of God’s indescribable peace in the midst of these realities.

So here are the big questions you need to wrestle with for a minute: When you encounter difficult circumstances, do you experience stress or peace? When the pressures of life start to squeeze you, what comes out? Anxiety and worry and fear? Or is it, to use Paul’s terminology from Philippians 4:7, “the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension”? Indescribable peace.

### ***Genuine Concern vs. Fearful Concern***

My wife and I have four children, which means we’re fluent in all the kids’ movies. In fact, our family went through many different waves of kids’ movies—and now, with grandchildren,



we're smack in the middle of a whole new generation of kids' content.

*The Lion King* is one movie I remember, although that's mainly because of the music. Some of those songs are so catchy and repetitive that it felt almost impossible to shake them loose from my brain. We'd have kids singing them all over the house for weeks, and I'm man enough to admit that I joined in from time to time.

There is a song called "Hakuna Matata" that is especially memorable. It's sung by a young lion, a boar, and a meerkat walking through the jungle. I thought that was a strange combination, but the words have stuck with me. The song is about having no worries. It's about not letting anything bother you. It's about a problem-free philosophy you can carry around for the rest of your days.

Let me make this clear: "Hakuna Matata" is a great theme for a song, but it's a terrible philosophy for life.

That's because every person experiences what I call genuine concern. We all have things we care about—people, relationships, ideals, places, possessions, resources, memories, and more. We walk around with personal connections that carry weight and meaning, which means we have the potential to feel genuinely concerned when there's a problem associated with these people, ideals, or resources.

Such concern is natural. It's good. It's part of what it means to be human, and it's part of what it means to be created in the image of a loving God. The problem comes when our genuine concern drifts over a line and becomes fearful concern.

You're probably wondering, *What's the difference between genuine concern and fearful concern?* Good question. Fortunately, there's a simple answer.

- *Genuine concern* is expressed through a dependence on God. It causes us to ask, “What will He do?”
- *Fearful concern* is expressed through a dependence on self. It causes us to ask, “What am I going to do?”

The biblical term often connected to this idea of genuine concern is *burden*. When we encounter a stressor, or when a problem arises in connection with something or someone we care about, we feel the weight of that burden—often deeply. We feel genuinely concerned about the situation, and that’s okay. Concern is not the issue.

The right response when we feel genuinely concerned is to carry that burden to God and lay it at His feet. The psalmist writes, “Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you” (Ps. 55:22). Peter says, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time, having cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you” (1 Pet. 5:6–7).

On a practical level, that looks like this: *Lord, here is the situation. I don’t have what it takes to fix this, but I know You do, so I’m placing this burden in Your hands.* And the result is peace.

On the flip side, fearful concern is when we refuse to let go of those burdens and instead keep piling them higher and higher on our shoulders. When we face a situation out of our hands or beyond our control *but try to handle it anyway*, we will inevitably feel stress. Anxiety. Worry.

And when our days are filled with fearful concerns of all shapes and sizes, we become so weighed down with questions, pressure, and stress that we begin to *endure* life rather than *enjoy* it.

Have you been there? Are you there now? If so, keep reading, because there is an answer. You can experience God's peace in every situation, and you can experience it right now. Today.

## **Why Should We Avoid Stress?**

Have you ever wondered what the most venomous snake in the world is? The answer is the inland taipan, which lives in Australia. Taipans are big snakes—adults grow to between six and ten feet long—but they pack an even bigger punch within their fangs. Just one drop of venom is potent enough to kill one hundred adult men in as little as forty-five minutes.<sup>4</sup>

I've never lived in Australia, but imagine for a moment that you do. You have a nice house Down Under and a lovely property close to the ocean. The sun shines every day, you can smell the salt air from the sea, you love your local church, and you can still run to a local supermarket if you need groceries or other supplies.

The only problem is the taipans. They live all over your yard, which means anytime you leave the house, you're under threat from the world's most venomous creature. Talk about a stressor!

Imagine calling the Australian equivalent of an exterminator or animal control, but they just tell you that taipans are considered an endangered species—they can't be removed. Your only option is to deal with the situation as best as you can. "Just try to manage your interactions with the snakes," they say. "Don't go out any more than you need to, and do your best to keep a positive attitude whenever a snake is close by."

Wouldn't that be terrible advice? How insane would it be to live with such a dangerous threat or try to get by through limiting your exposure to such deadly creatures?

Yet that's exactly what we're taught to do with stress—manage it, live with it, carry as much anxiety and worry as we're able to bear, and then (and only then) look for help. In fact, a Google search on how to manage stress produces more than 1.2 billion results. No wonder so many people are failing the stress test of life. No wonder we lack peace. We've been told to manage something that is poisonous, and it's killing us one day at a time.

The real solution to the problem of stress in our lives is not to manage it but to eliminate it. Passing the stress test of life means ridding yourself of that stress; it means living a stressless life. In fact, let's conclude this chapter by exploring five reasons why you should be ruthless in removing stress from your life.

### ***God Said So***

There's no point in beating around the bush; the main reason we should avoid the presence of stress in our lives is because God told us to.

Jesus said, "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on" (Matt. 6:25). Later, the apostle Paul repeated that idea more succinctly when he wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything" (Phil. 4:6).

In those verses, the words translated "worried" and "anxious" are both from the same root term in the Greek language. That's a term that means to care, to worry, to be

troubled, or to be pulled in different directions. It's the idea of having something on your mind continuously that consumes you and weighs on you—you can't escape it.

Have you ever seen a dog “worrying” a bone? After they dig it up from whatever hiding place they used in the yard, they get it between their forepaws and then start chewing away. They gnaw on it and slobber all over it and just wear it down from one end to the other.

That's the picture described by this Greek word translated “worried” or “anxious.” Stress is a fearful concern that keeps gnawing away at you. And God is clear in His Word that we should remove it from our lives.

Notice that both Jesus and Paul spoke in commands—“Do not be worried” and “Do not be anxious”—which means they weren't giving us options or suggestions. Which means removing stress from our lives is a requirement.

Once again, these commands aren't telling us to remove *every* stressor from our lives. That's impossible. Neither Jesus nor Paul is commanding us not to care about anything or to avoid all burdens and concerns. Instead, they are teaching that life's cares and concerns must be understood and processed through a right perspective of our relationship with God.

I like the way Albert Barnes talks about this:

Philippians 4:6 does not mean that we are to exercise no care about worldly matters—no care to preserve our property or to provide for our families; but that there is to be confidence in God as to free the mind from anxiety, and such a sense of dependence on Him as to keep it calm.<sup>5</sup>

Here's another way to think about it: allowing ourselves to become stressed and worried—and especially to saturate ourselves in a lifestyle of stress and worry—means we're stepping outside the boundaries God has set up for our lives. And those boundaries are for our protection. God didn't command us to avoid stress because it's lots of fun and He wants to hog it all for Himself. No! God commanded us to avoid stress because He knows it's not good for us and He wants us to experience what's best.

**Stress is displeasing to God. So when we willingly choose to tolerate fearful concern and anxiety, we are disobeying Him.**

In short, stress is displeasing to God. So when we willingly choose to tolerate fearful concern and anxiety, we're disobeying Him.

### ***Stress Is Actively Harmful***

We also need to avoid stress because allowing it to become part of our lives is actively harmful. Stress endangers our health, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Physically, the statistics are staggering.

- 43 percent of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.
- 75 to 90 percent of all visits to the doctor's office are for stress-related ailments and complaints.
- Stress costs American industries more than \$300 billion every year through health-care expenses. (That's

more than the gross domestic product of over 160 nations!))<sup>6</sup>

- Stress is linked to the six leading causes of death in the modern world: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide.<sup>7</sup>

No wonder God said, “Don’t do that!” Stress is harmful to our bodies. It hurts us.

Emotionally, stress has a wide range of harmful side effects. According to the Mayo Clinic, stress often causes restlessness and a lack of motivation or focus. It pushes people toward irritability and anger, and it also causes us to withdraw into sadness and depression. Anxiety and worry are major causes of overeating, anorexia, drug or alcohol abuse, addiction to nicotine, social withdrawal, and more.<sup>8</sup>

Spiritually, as we’ve already seen, living with stress puts us outside the boundaries of God’s plan and purpose for our lives. Tolerating stress is an act of disobedience, which means it negatively impacts our relationship with God. It breaks our fellowship with Him and steals away the joy of the abundant life He’s promised us.

My mentor, Clyde Cranford, says it this way: “Anxiety is a cancer that eats away at our flesh and our faith.”<sup>9</sup>

God instructs us not to stress or worry or nurture anxiety because it is dangerous.

### ***Stress Is Inconsistent with God’s Character***

I’m a big fan of A. W. Tozer, a pastor and author from Chicago during the early decades of the twentieth century. One of my favorite Tozer quotes is so simple yet so profound that it blows my mind each time I read it.

Here it is: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>10</sup> If you’re like me, it takes a few seconds to process that principle because it’s so deep. But let me walk you through a few ideas to show you not only what Tozer was saying but also why the presence of stress in our lives is inconsistent with God’s character.

To start, how would you answer the following three questions?

- Is God loving?
- Is God wise?
- Is God powerful?

If you would answer yes to all three questions, you’re mostly correct. That’s because God is actually more than each of those attributes.

God is not only loving, but Scripture also says that “God *is* love” (1 John 4:8, emphasis added). God is not only wise, but all wisdom is contained in Him and flows from Him (see Col. 2:3). And God is not only powerful, but the Bible confirms in several places that He is all-powerful (see Isa. 40:26 and 2 Pet. 1:3, for example).

Based on these truths, we can make the following three statements:

- Since God is love, He desires only the best for us.
- Since God has all wisdom, He knows what is best for us.
- Since God is all-powerful, He can bring about what is best for us.



Now, here's the kicker: if all that is true, what are we so stressed about?!

Tozer understood that a wrong view of God (or even a “lesser” view) will have repercussions in our lives. That's because the more we misunderstand God and His character, the more we will rely on ourselves and our own resources—which causes stress. It produces that fearful concern.

For that reason, stress and anxiety and worry are inconsistent with the character of God, who desires what is best, knows what is best, and is always able to bring about what is best.

### ***Stress Misrepresents God's Character to Others***

Not only is the presence of stress in our lives inconsistent with God's character, but it paints a flawed picture of God for the rest of the world to see. Because our lives aren't just about you and me.

It was Thanksgiving morning when my friend Matt Chandler brewed himself a cup of coffee, then sat on his couch to feed his six-month-old daughter. The last thing he remembers from that day is putting his little girl in her bouncy seat. In the next moment, Matt collapsed near the fireplace, suffering a seizure so intense that he bit through his own tongue.

The next days and weeks were a whirlwind of crazy. Matt was diagnosed with a tumor on the frontal lobe of his brain. Emergency surgery was scheduled and carried out. Afterward, doctors informed Matt and his wife, Lauren, that the tumor was malignant. Worse, they were unable to remove all of it. And worse still, the cancer had likely spread to other areas of his brain.

That was back in 2009. I remember hearing about Matt's story from mutual friends. It captured my attention for two reasons. First, like me, Matt was a young pastor of a fast-growing church. I understood the pressures he must have been facing, and I couldn't imagine what it would be like to endure that pressure in the midst of such an immediate personal tragedy.

The second reason Matt's story caught my attention was because of the incredible peace he possessed. Despite the bad news and the physical strain, Matt sought to comfort those who cared about him, including his young congregation. He posted messages emphasizing God's character and sovereignty. He was visibly calm and collected whenever he preached a sermon or gave an interview. And as the story caught fire, he used whatever spotlight came his way to point people to the truth of the gospel.

Here's an example of what I mean from an interview Matt gave a year after his diagnosis:

I believe the Scriptures teach that God is aware of every act at every level of the universe. From a star exploding to the rate at which our planet spins to a cell dividing, He knows. I don't believe in the end that God gave me cancer, but He certainly could have stopped it and didn't. So I have to believe—like Joseph, John the Baptist, and Paul had to believe when they were in prison—that God is working, and what the enemy means for evil, He will turn to good.<sup>11</sup>

Talk about unshakable peace! Matt Chandler passed the stress test. He showed a watching world what it truly means to believe that God loves us, God knows what is best, and God is able to bring about what is best.

Unfortunately, many followers of Jesus don't always react so well to the stress test of life—myself included. When we carry worry and anxiety, we present a distorted view of God to those who are watching our lives. And believe me, if you have made it known that you're a follower of Jesus, people are watching!

The reality is that stress in our lives misrepresents God's character to others. It raises questions about Him. *Is God really in control? Does He really care? Can we trust Him?*

Therefore, it needs to go. And in its place, we must both develop and display God's indescribable peace.

### ***Stress Changes Nothing***

The final reason we should get rid of the stress in our lives is because stress is pointless. It accomplishes nothing and changes nothing—at least, nothing good. As we've seen, stress can change plenty of things in terms of the negative impact it has on us, but it doesn't produce anything for our benefit.

That's what Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Luke. He was teaching His disciples when He said, "And which of you by worrying can add a day to his life's span? Therefore if you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about the other things?" (Luke 12:25–26). The NIV translates verse 25 this way: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

I'm guessing that doesn't surprise you. I know I've never had an epiphany or some kind of spontaneous blessing in my life because I was so stressed out. I've certainly never added anything good to my life because of worry or anxiety or doubt—it's been only subtraction. I'll bet the same is true for you.

Look one more time at our definition of stress: *Fearful concern experienced when life's demands seem greater than my ability to meet them.*

I know you've been there. I know you've felt the crushing and the squeezing that always come with fearful concern—with stress. Me too.

The good news is you don't have to carry it anymore. You don't have to be crushed anymore. You don't have to feel squeezed anymore. Yes, stressors will always be in your life—there will be people, problems, and circumstances that are difficult or troubling or way too much to handle.

But stressors don't have to lead to stress. You can pass the stress test of life, and as we'll see in the next chapter, it starts by understanding the incredible, indescribable, unshakable peace that has been offered to you by Jesus Christ.