

STRESS

By R. J. Rushdoony

Prior to perhaps 1950, the word *stress* was primarily an engineering term, and older dictionaries gave detailed, technical, and scientific definitions of its meaning. Since then, the meaning of stress more commonly refers to the tensions felt by persons, both emotionally and intellectually.

A major industry has arisen to alleviate human stress: psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, psychologists, tranquilizers and various other drugs, counsellors, drug companies, self-help books, magazine articles, ministries both in and out of the church to cultivate peace of mind, and more. In all too many churches, modernist and evangelical, the goal seems to be the alleviation of stress, not salvation. Moreover, the peace promised by such agencies differs from that promised by Jesus Christ in John 14:27. His peace is "not of this world," and it is given to us in the midst of tribulation (*Jn. 17:33*).

How should a Christian think about stress? Is it Christian to want a stress-free life? Is something wrong with stress? Obviously, grief and concern marked many a Biblical saint, often to startling degrees. Did they seek a stress-free life, or was something else their concern?

We cannot think realistically about stress unless we recognize that, in a sinful, fallen world, it is inescapable. Because men are sinful, and because this fallen world is full of evils, we will experience stress commonly and routinely. The easiest escape from stress is death, a route some take. With others, it leads to an escape from responsibilities. I recall some 45 years ago, a woman who, at the slightest frustration, went into an emotional tailspin, carried on, blamed everyone in sight for her "condition," and then went to bed. Her husband was not much better.

Sin creates stress, because it damages human relationships, hurts people, and introduces hatred and evil where love should prevail. To long for a stress-free life in a sinful world is itself sinful because we are avoiding the real problem, sin in others—and in ourselves. About 35 years ago, I knew an intelligent and talented person who remained in a darkened room, prayed much and spoke of having two or three visions, but never took up normal duties because the stress was too oppressive. This person's "suffering" made others suffer.

Today stress is little tolerated. With more than a few, it leads to temper tantrums if their quest for a kind of nirvana is interrupted. They see their sensitivity to stress as a higher spirituality, and themselves on a higher spiritual plane.

If we look at the Biblical saints whose lives were full of suffering, Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Paul, and others, we see no flight from stress but rather an insistent faithfulness to their calling. They were never victims of stress but always "more than conquerors" in Christ (*Rom. 8:37*).

When in 1828 Noah Webster published his first dictionary, he briefly defined *stress* in its psychological sense but spoke of it as little used. Freud and Jung, however much they contributed to the modern usage, did not speak of *stress* but of various neuroses and like conditions. The idea of *stress* as itself the problem is rather new.

As we have seen, *stress* as commonly experienced is a sinful, retreatist response to a sinful world. It is true that people have at times been subjected to vicious treatments, to tortures, and to sadistic evils. Such persons are not usually the victims of stress, however great their sufferings. They have experienced *evils*.

We should be fearful therefore of succumbing to the feeling of stress. Ours is a God-created world, and all experiences are God-ordained. Paul tells us, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (*1 Cor. 10:13*).

A high percentage of stress is personally created, by brooding over a problem, by resentment against certain persons, by seeing ourselves as deserving better at the hands of God and man, by brooding over the fact that our husband, wife, or children are a disappointment, by resenting our lot in life, and so on and on.

Someone wisely compared stress to me recently as comparable to a fever. A fever tells us that something is wrong with us, and it serves as a warning. Stress can also in most cases tell us that we are taking ourselves too seriously, and God not seriously enough.

Stress is a sickness of our times. I recall as a child and in my youth meeting and knowing many who had survived massacres, wars, famines, slave-labor camps, and the like, and the memory of them sometimes still shames me when I think of their great peace—and my impatience. My brother Haig met in Bulgaria in this decade a pastor's widow who spent 16 years in prison, under horrible conditions, for teaching women the Bible. Haig describes this woman, in her late 80s, as radiant and peaceful: she has never felt sorry for herself, only grateful that the Lord has used her. Stress was not a part of her experience; faith and victory were and are.

We in the Western world live in luxury and peace compared to the rest of the world, but we are most full of complaints perhaps, and certainly more subject to stress than others. This is an aspect of our departure from Christ. We can have no part of Him if we want a stress-free life. In fact, He *promises* us tribulation when He says, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world" (*Jn. 16:33*).

It is time that we *religiously* accept stress as a fact of life and a test of our faith. By avoiding stress, we avoid necessary moral stands, and we certainly are then unwilling to express righteous indignation, which is most stressful. The fear of stress leads to moral compromise and to a departure from the courage and conviction which are essential to sound morality. The flight from stress can be a flight from morality.

When the great depression began in 1929, it was interesting to see what happened. Crime decreased and church attendance increased. What would now be called a stressful era became a time of re-assessment for many, and youth then took adversity better than youth since 1960 has taken prosperity. Instead of being a recipe for disaster, stress was for many a prescription for growth and maturity. Nowadays, too many avoid maturity by avoiding stress.