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DROPPING THE WEIGHT OF STRESS Michael B. Beaugh  
Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 11:28-30 February 14, 2010  
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This morning we are talking about dropping the weight of stress so we can run the race God has set before us (Hebrews 12:1). To set the stage, here is a film clip from *Marley and Me* that some of us may be able to identify with.

(Show film clip)

Last week, we talked about anger. In this family, we see a lot of anger that is being produced by the stress experienced by this young mom. Until they learn how to manage the stress, they won't be running the kind of race God has set before them. They are not going to have the marriage they hoped for. One of the terrible outcomes of stress if left unchecked is this kind of relational dysfunction. Have you ever wondered why your child suddenly starts acting out, defying authority, refusing to eat, doing poorly in school? It is likely stemming from stress.

But the effects of stress can be even more severe. If left unchecked, stress can lead to illness, total exhaustion, eating disorders, clinical depression, addictions, and much more. Since all of us know this stuff, I won't spend a lot of time on the impact of stress.

**Let's talk about the good news. That's why we are here this morning. The good news is that we do not have to be victims of stress.** Although stress is a normal physical response to anything that threatens us or throws us off balance, we do not have to let it control our lives and determine our destiny. We will never be stress free until we die, but we don't have to let stress kill us. In fact, stress is a good thing when it motivates us to take action, to try harder. The key is in learning how to manage stress so it doesn't kill us or someone else. As Christians, we want to manage stress so we can be more effective followers of Jesus Christ.

Is there something causing major stress in your life today? It may be so severe that you need to get professional help with it. I encourage you to do that. I can recommend someone to help you with it.

**But there is much in the Bible and in our faith that can help guide us in the management of our stress.**

Now, the Bible doesn't talk about stress in the way we do today. In fact, the first use of the word "stress" as a biological and psychological term did not occur until 1934. A doctor applied this word to the physical change that comes over us when we feel threatened and thrown off balance. He discovered that our bodies produce hormones that raise our blood pressure

and pulse rate. These hormones get pumped into our systems, and we react with tense muscles, digestive changes, sweats, and more. Today, we go around explaining our behavior by saying we are stressed out as if that justifies our behavior. But the danger of stress is this hormonal impact.

There are no key verses in the Bible with the word stress in them as we understand the term today. But we see evidence of it in stories like the one from Exodus 17. Let's see what we can learn from this story that can help us deal with our stress.

It is pretty clear that Moses is under a lot of stress. So are the people whom he is leading through the wilderness to the Promised Land. They have run out of water, and they are complaining against Moses. They are not just asking him to do something. They are questioning his competence and skill as a leader. It is how stress usually works, how it builds up. The lack of water is the stressor for the people. They are stressed out. The people become the stressor for Moses. They expect him to do something about their situation. "Give us water to drink," they demand. The stress builds.

Now, notice what Moses does. He openly acknowledges to the people that they are causing him great stress. He feels their pressure. But he tells them he is not responsible for their stress. **Here is the beginning point for dealing with stress.** Being able to talk about it, admit it, and identify the source of it. Silent suffering from stress is a killer. But so is taking on stress for things we are not responsible for. We have to talk about it to let it out. We have to talk about it to gain clarity about it.

We can do our children a favor by encouraging them to talk about what is stressing them out. Don't assume that you know. Don't blame them. If it turns out you are the source of their stress, don't be defensive. If nothing else, be a model for them. Show them how healthy individuals deal with stress by talking about it with them. And don't try to talk them out of it.

Moses didn't tell the people that they were silly, or that they were stressed out over nothing, or just acting like babies. He took them seriously. He took them so seriously that he told them their stress was causing them to do the unthinkable. According to Moses, they were really testing God. Their stress is a spiritual issue.

This doesn't mean that every time we experience stress we are testing God, but stress can cause us to question the faithfulness of God. It can turn us away from God. That is what is happening here in Exodus 17.

Everyone who has read the Bible knows that testing God is a big no. Testing God is a sign of unfaith, unless God invites the test. Testing God is a way of trying to get God to do our bidding, to get God to show up on our terms. You may be out of water and stressed to the breaking point, Moses is saying, but that is no reason to doubt God is in control. That is no reason to

doubt that God will provide for you. You may be stressed out over your job, or your grades, or your finances, but that is no reason to doubt that God has your back. Are you stressed out to the breaking point? Don't blame God. Don't turn from God. Take it to God. Just lay it at God's feet.

So that is what Moses does, and here is a second key to dealing with stress. In verse 4, Moses goes straight to God. "What shall I do? These people are ready to kill me." Do you hear a little stress in those words?

Perhaps you have said it this way. "I have so many responsibilities it is about to kill me." "I can't take the pressure from my boss any more. This job is about to kill me." "I am so busy with my children's activities that it is about to kill me."

If any of those are true of you, it is okay to tell the Lord about it. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest," Jesus said. Take it and lay it at the feet of God. Did you know that if you have a relationship with a higher power, you are more likely to deal better with stress? Why is that? Because people who believe and trust in God are more likely to live with optimism and hope. They understand that stress is but a momentary thing. Beyond it are the peace, purpose, and promise of God. Stress is not forever.

What is stressing you? God is bigger than whatever it is. And God has your back.

Finally, in order to deal with his stress, **Moses listens and does what God commands.** God tells Moses to take his staff and strike a rock and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.

I have often wondered why God didn't just cause water to come up out of the ground like a spring. Or why God didn't just send a big rain. Why this big show with Moses dramatically striking a rock?

I think partly it was because God was testing Moses. Are you willing to do what it takes to move beyond this stressful situation?

Stress is a call to action. If I am experiencing stress, I can be sure that God is calling me to do something about it. It is a warning sign with a next step agenda attached to it. If I am experiencing stress, God is trying to tell me something. Am I willing to listen and then do what God commands?

All of us know the keys to dealing with stress. But will we do them? The medical community says we can reduce the severity of stress and its harmful effects by eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, being part of a positive and affirming group, learning relaxation techniques. I saw a list like this in an article on the internet. The last item seemed curious. It said, "Get a good chiropractor." Guess who wrote the article?

Teresa saw a list like this in a newsletter from our insurance company. Guess what the last item said? Buy more insurance.

We know what to do, but will we do it? Will we strike the rock? If our stress arises from being overworked and overbooked, are we willing to strike the rock? Are we willing to make the changes needed?

To run the race, we must throw off every sin and weight that clings to us. It is what a disciple of Jesus Christ does. We run toward the prize. We are athletes. We are Olympians. So we work at getting rid of everything that holds us back and drags us down. Religious faith is not about rules to follow or about giving up fun. It is about the joy of winning a race. And so we run, fueled by the grace of God, carrying the baton of love to hand off to the next generation, cheered on by those who have gone before us and will come after us.