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PUTTING MY TIMES IN GOD'S HAND

Psalm 31:14-15a

By

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1993 New Year's Message

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One of the realities of our modern, fast-paced world is stress. We constantly hear of people being stressed out or going through burnout. The Holmes-Rahe stress test assigns points for various traumatic situations in life. The death of a spouse rates 100. The Christmas season rates 12 points. If you took a vacation at Christmas, throw in 13 more points!

I read about a woman who was the classic "Type A," always under self-imposed stress. Her friend, who was determined to get her to relax, invited her to dinner and, while she was busy fixing dinner, urged the harried woman to watch a video on stress management. Fifteen minutes later she came into the kitchen, handed her friend the tape, and said, "It was good, but I don't need it."

"But it's a 70-minute video," the well-meaning friend replied. "You couldn't have watched the whole thing." "Yes, I did," the stressed out one replied. "I put it on fast-forward." (*Reader's Digest* [7/90], p. 68.)

We may wonder if the Bible, written thousands of years before many of the stress-inducing factors of our modern world, could have much to say about how to deal with stress. But David went through stress like few of us have ever experienced. He wrote about it in Psalm 31. Most of us have never been under the stress of having someone determined to kill us. But David had a whole team conspiring together on the project (31:4, 13)! They had slandered him and had managed to turn friends and neighbors against him (31:11). Furthermore, David could see a connection between his current troubles and his own sin (31:10; NIV, "affliction" = iniquity or guilt), so he had to wrestle with guilt on top of everything else. But we do know that it was written when David was in the pressure-cooker! He tells us how to deal with stress.

Whatever stresses you face now or in the coming year, David faced equal or greater ones. This psalm isn't coming to you out of the ivory tower of a king, but from the crucible of a man who has

been there. In 31:14-15a, David gives us the key to handling stress in our lives: "But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord, I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hand." To personalize it,

My response to stress should be personal trust
in the sovereign, personal God.

You will note that 31:15 refers to ...

1. "My times"—The reality of stress.

Both David's times and ours are marked by instability. The word "times" refers to the uncontrollable changes of life. John Calvin commented: "He does not use the plural number ["times"], in my opinion, without reason; but rather to mark the variety of casualties by which the life of man is usually harassed" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Associated Publishers & Authors], 2:351). The word causes us to reflect upon the instability and changeableness of life. We may think we control our times, but we don't. One day David was a powerful king; the next he was running for his life from his rebellious son.

We never know what stresses a new year will bring. A few pressure-points are predictable, but most are not. The predictable changes relate to the facts of aging and changes in the life-cycle. For example, some of you will be graduating from high school or college and starting a career. Others will be entering upon married life for the first time this year. Others will be having their first child. For others, their first child will be entering school. Still others will be the parents of a teenager for the first time this year. Some of you may be waving good-bye as the last one leaves the nest. Others may be facing retirement. All of those changes are predictable, but they will cause stress and will require some adjustments.

Other changes we face will be quite unpredictable and unannounced. They will barge into our lives like an intruder in the night. It may be your own or a family member's sudden loss of health. It could be the death of a family member or even your own death. Perhaps an aging parent will require large chunks of your time and energy.

Some may lose their jobs, and with it, a large part of their identity. That change in life can put tremendous stress not only on

the individual, but also on the family. Did you know that 85% of men who are unemployed for nine months or more divorce? Some of you may find yourself going through the pain of a divorce that you never asked for or planned upon. Some may be hit with severe financial set-backs which force an unplanned move to another locale. But whether predictable or unpredictable, the new year holds changes that will produce stress. I want to make three observations about stress from this psalm before we move on:

A. The time to prepare for stress is before it hits.

It's obvious from Psalm 31 that David knew God in a very personal, practical and thorough way before he got into the crisis that prompted the psalm. Note the many attributes of God David recites throughout the psalm: God is a refuge and shelter (1, 19, 20). He is righteous (1) and will judge righteously (23). He is a rock of strength (2, 3). He hears and answers prayer (2, 22). He is a stronghold and fortress (2, 3), David's source of strength (4). He is the God of truth (5) and of lovingkindness (7, 16, 21). He is all-knowing (7) and gracious (9) in that He forgives and doesn't cast off the rejected (implied in 9-13). He has unlimited storehouses of goodness for those who fear Him (19), even if they are going through the worst of trials.

David didn't learn all that about God out of the blue in the middle of this calamity, although he no doubt deepened his knowledge of God through the distress. David had begun to know God through His Word (Ps. 19) as a boy tending his father's sheep. Even then God knew David as a man after His own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). So when the crisis hit, David had resources in God to lean on.

Proverbs 1:20-33 also makes this point: The time to get wisdom is before the calamity strikes. Otherwise, if we wait to call out for wisdom when we're in the crunch, wisdom will laugh at us. If you're not in a crisis, it's time to sink down roots in the Lord that will enable you to weather the inevitable storms that will come. Spend time alone with God and His Word, feeding your soul. Let His Word confront your life with sin that needs to be dealt with. You'll be ready for the crunch.

If you're already in a crisis and you don't know God as David did, seek Him like you never have before! He is gracious and may meet you there, if your heart is right. But the time to prepare for stress is before it hits.

B. Even if our stress is the consequence of sin, we can take refuge in God.

David recognized that, in part, his own sin was behind the crisis he was in (31:10). This leads me to think that the psalm was written in connection with Absalom's rebellion, which was a consequence of David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:10-11). God will forgive our sin if we confess and forsake it (Prov. 28:13), but He doesn't necessarily remove the consequences (Gal. 6:7-8). But David's experience shows that even if our calamity is the direct result of our sin, we can still run to God for refuge and comfort and know that He will receive us!

It's significant that David's enemies were still condemning him long after God had forgiven him. They were talking against him, making his name a reproach (31:1, "ashamed"; 11, "reproach"; 13, "slander"; 17, "put to shame"; 20, "strife of tongues"). No doubt they were calling him a hypocrite: He claimed to follow God, but he was guilty of murder and adultery. And, what's more, the charges were true! But David's enemies didn't know the sincerity of David's repentance or the magnitude of God's grace.

We must never condone sin, but we must be careful not to judge or reject repentant sinners. Thank God that He is gracious and through the blood of Jesus forgives all our sin, or which of us could be here today! Yes, in His righteousness He often makes us suffer the temporal consequences of our sin. But we need to experience and model the fact that even if our stress is the result of our sin, we can take refuge in our gracious God.

C. God will never allow us to go through more stress than we can bear if we trust in Him.

"God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted [or, 'tried'] beyond what you are able" (1 Cor. 10:13)! Though David's trial was terrifying, so that he despaired even of life itself (31:13), God gave him strength to endure. God isn't into easy solutions. He

doesn't usually remove the trial the instant we seek Him. But none who have waited on Him have found Him to fail. "He gives more grace when the burdens grow greater!"

It's only when we trust God in the midst of severe distress that we prove His faithfulness in our own experience. Often it's the waiting for God to deliver us that's the most difficult thing. Think of Joseph, languishing for the better part of his twenties in the Egyptian dungeon, his feet in irons, never seeing the daylight. Why? Because he obeyed the Lord by resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife! Why didn't God answer his prayers? We know the outcome, but for years, Joseph didn't know that one day he would be released from prison and promoted to second in the land. But because Joseph trusted in God, he could later say to his brothers, "You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

Stress will be a reality for every one of us in the coming year. But if we prepare for it in advance by sinking roots with God; if we take refuge in Him, even if the stress is a result of our sin; and, if we remember that God will never allow us to go through more stress than we can handle, we will grow stronger through it.

But there's a second, vital factor that we need to keep in mind about stress, as seen in 31:15:

2. "God's hand"—The reality of the sovereign, personal God.

David's "times" may have been unstable and changing; but David's God was stable and unchanging (31:2, 3, "rock," "fortress"). And David's times were in the hands of David's God. David was not subject to the whims of those who sought his life. His life was in God's hands, and he was invincible until God wanted him to die. One of the most comforting truths to remember in trials is that they are under the control of the sovereign, personal God.

- A. The God who holds our times in His hands is a sovereign God.

Daniel 2:21 uses this same Hebrew word for "times": "It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings" Our God is not sitting on the edge of heaven,

biting His nails as He sees the rebellion of the human race unfold. As David wrote about God's attitude toward rebellious world rulers, "He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps. 2:4).

God has a sovereign plan for all of history. He is working all things after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11) so that even the wrath of man will praise Him (Ps. 76:10). We can know that when tragedy strikes us, God was not asleep or on vacation. His sovereignty is a great comfort in a time of trial.

I read ("Tabletalk" [11/92], pp. 18-19) of a pastor and his wife who were called home from a summer vacation with the news that their four-year-old, who was staying with friends, had been flown to a pediatric intensive care unit. The diagnosis: acute lymphocytic leukemia. That same summer, their newborn underwent surgery to repair a cleft lip and the wife was laid low with a degenerated disc.

The pastor shared how his knowledge of God's loving sovereignty was a rock of refuge to him in this crisis. But he also told of how many people recommended to him Rabbi Harold Kushner's best-seller, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, whose thesis is that God is good, but not sovereign and all-powerful. Thus God can't help all the suffering that is happening in the world. The pastor wrote, "... incredibly, suffering people are supposed to find comfort in this. Am I really supposed to be relieved to know that there are forces in this world outside the control of God?" God's sovereignty is a tremendous comfort: Your times and mine are in His mighty hand!

B. The God who holds our time in his hands is personal God.

"You are my God" (31:14). The flavor of the whole psalm is personal and intimate. Although God is sovereign, He is also personal and can be known intimately. A lot of people think that the sovereignty of God means that He is cold and distant. They have a deterministic view of life. They're like the guy who strongly believed in predestination, who fell down the stairs. He got up, dusted himself off and said, "I'm glad that's over with."

But note 31:7: "You have seen my affliction; You have known the troubles of my soul." God is not severe and distant, off in

some corner of the universe saying, "I ordained it; now grit your teeth and endure it." God is sovereign, but He's also personal and caring. If you've trusted in Christ, you can call Him "my God," because He knows you and you know Him. Even during trials, you can know that "He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

You may be thinking at this point, "Well, then, if God is sovereign and if my times are in His hands, then there's nothing left for me to do. Whatever will be, will be." Not so. There is a third element. "My times" points to the reality and instability of stress. "God's hand" points to the reality and stability of the sovereign, personal God. "But as for me, I trust in You" points to:

3. My response—The reality of personal trust.

Personal trust in the sovereign, personal God gives us inner stability in the midst of outer instability. Trust is the vital link that connects God's sovereign love with my distress. When I trust God in the midst of a stressful situation, He doesn't usually remove the source of the stress immediately, but He gives His stability in the midst of the crisis. That's where David was at when he wrote this psalm--still in the crisis, but experiencing God's stability in the midst of it because he was trusting in God.

There is a sense, of course, in which your times are in God's hand whether you trust in Him or not. But that's not the sense in which David's times were in God's hand. David's times were in God's hand because David deliberately determined to put them there! It wasn't an automatic response. The word "I" (31:14) is strongly adversative and emphatic. David is saying, "No matter what my enemies may do to me, no matter whether former friends abandon me, for my part, I am going to trust the Lord." It was a personal, conscious, deliberate choice. Trust always is.

Note 31:2-3: "Be to me a rock of strength ... for You are my rock" That sounds like doubletalk, doesn't it? But it isn't. Notice the two words, "*to me*." There is the key! There is personal trust. "What You are in Your very nature, O God, a rock and a stronghold, be that to me in my current crisis!" David is taking the revealed character of God and bringing it down into his own experience in a personal, conscious, deliberate manner. That is personal trust.

Maybe you're thinking, "I've tried that, but I just keep taking my problems back on myself and getting anxious all over again!" Welcome to fallen, self-reliant humanity! Guess what? David did the same thing! Derek Kidner (*Psalms* [IVP], 1:130) observes that this psalm is unusual in that it makes the journey from anguish to assurance twice over: In 31:6-8 David reaches a point of calm trust, but then he plunges back into anxiety in 31:9-13 before reaffirming his trust in 31:14-24. The psalms are so true to life!

Personal trust is like that—you wrestle with your anxieties and finally cast them on the Lord and experience His peace. Then you take the whole thing back on yourself and struggle again with your fears. But then you focus on God and who He is and deliberately affirm your trust in Him all over again. But the point is, trust is not passive resignation to fate. Trust is actively, personally laying hold of the character of God as revealed in His Word and applying it to your particular crisis. When you know this God—the God of David—as your God, then you experience His stability in the midst of unstable circumstances. You can handle whatever stress comes upon you because you have placed your times into the hand of this sovereign, personal God.

Conclusion

It's interesting that Jonah echoed a phrase from this psalm when he cried out to the Lord from the belly of the great fish (Jon. 2:8; Ps. 31:6a). Jeremiah, whose message was rejected and whose life was often threatened, often borrowed another phrase from the psalm as his motto (Jer. 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29; Lam. 2:22; Ps. 31:13). As an old man, the author of Psalm 71 (perhaps David himself), took refuge in God by praying the words of Psalm 31:1-3. But most significantly, the Lord Jesus had meditated on this psalm so often that His final words from the cross were a quote from Psalm 31:5: "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). He endured the supreme stress of bearing our sins by entrusting Himself to the sovereign, personal God! So must we!

Some of you parents have had the experience of taking your young toddler into a swimming pool. The water is over his head, even in the shallow end, but you're holding him up. But as you go out into the deeper water, the child panics and he clings to you all the more tightly. You're still touching the bottom and holding him

up, but the deeper water scares him more than the shallow water did, even though the shallow water was deep enough to drown him.

This year, some of you are going to feel like you're in over your head. The stress will seem overwhelming and you'll feel like you're out of control. Guess what? We're never in control, even when we proudly think that we are! God wants us to see that we're always in over our heads! We're dependent on Him for the next breath we take and for our daily food. Our response to stress, whether it comes from the big crisis or from the daily routine, should be consciously, deliberately to put our trust in the sovereign, personal God who is never in over His head. We need to put our times in His hand.

Discussion Questions

1. Is God's sovereignty a source of comfort or consternation to you? Why?
2. How can a person who lacks faith increase in faith?
3. Agree/disagree: Burnout is evidence of a lack of trust in God?
4. Is it true that God will never give us more stress than we can bear? What are the implications of this?

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