

The Bible as a Resource for Stress Management
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Dr. Benson, Dr. Roush, and distinguished members of the Eleventh International Congress on Stress, it's a great honor for me to be here and address such a group of professionals who have dedicated their lives to helping people increase the longevity and quality of life by better managing the stress of life.

A number of recent researchers, including Dr. Benson, have acknowledged the value of spiritual and religious factors in relieving distress and promoting health.ⁱ I submit that one reason for this correlation is the content of the religious texts that undergird the world's major religions. The Bible is one such text, revered in different ways by Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Faith in God and physical health are so closely associated in the Bible as to at times be indistinguishable. The New Testament's primary term for spiritual salvation (Gk. ΦΤ.Τ, *sozo*) is often used to denote physical healing.ⁱⁱ Sometimes the term, ΦΤ.Τ, is used with both meanings within the same paragraph (e.g., Acts 4:9-12). Commenting on the miracle whereby a crippled man was enabled to walk, Peter said to those who accused him of wrongdoing by performing that miracle, "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was *healed* (Gk. ΦΤ.Τ, *sozo*), then know this,...it is by the name of Jesus Christ...whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed." (Acts 4:9) Just a couple of verses later Peter says of Jesus, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be *saved* (Gk. ΦΤ.Τ, *sozo*)." (Acts 4:12) When the word ΦΤ.Τ occurs in the NT, translators have to determine how to translate it based on the context in which it occurs. Within the very same passage one group of translators sometimes will translate it as "heal," denoting physical healing, while another group will translate it as "save," denoting spiritual healing.ⁱⁱⁱ The Bible writers understood physical healing and spiritual faith to be inseparably interrelated. At the same time, the Bible does not depreciate traditional medical care, but sees medical care and spiritual faith as complementary.^{iv}

On a backpack trip in the High Uinta wilderness area of Utah eighteen years ago I discovered how powerful faith could be to alleviate severe distress. After we made base camp at a deserted lake, my two oldest sons, Michael and Andrew, ages 10 & 7, pitched their tent some 30 yards into the forest from me and my youngest son Marcus, age 5. In the middle of the night I awakened to a blood curdling scream. I immediately recognized Andrew's voice.

Zippering open our tent and shining my flashlight in their direction, I could see through the trees that their tent was jiggling. I raced toward it, scanning my light to spot any predators. Once I reached it and looked in, I knew exactly what had happened. Andrew had awakened in pitch dark and become frightened. Then he sat up, hit his head on tent, and assumed that he was about to be eaten alive by some horrible monster.

Still screaming, his face contorted into a portrait of abject terror, Andrew's adrenaline and cortisol levels must have been sky high. Then I realized that by continuing to shine my flashlight into his face, I was only compounding his terrors. So I immediately turned the light back onto my own face.

I wish it were possible to describe adequately what transpired in the next 30 seconds. Once Andrew saw my face, he simply said two words, "Oh, Daddy." And right before my eyes,

the horror etched on his face dissolved into complete peace. He lay down and was sound asleep again within seconds.

I went back to my tent and lay awake for some time pondering how a brief glance at my face could bring such instant tranquility to my terrorized son. I concluded that the relationship and trust we had been building for seven years had been focused like a laser beam on his distress and had completely resolved it. I also realized that this is exactly what religious faith is all about—developing trust in God over time that functions as a tower of refuge in times of distress.

I've seen a similar effect many times with hospital patients and with families in crisis. I've often seen anxiety nudged into serenity by the reading of a single appropriate passage from the Bible, accompanied by a brief prayer. While good nutrition, time management, exercise, relaxation, loving relationships, and a positive mental attitude are all important resources for managing stress, my own experience indicates that when it comes to handling the major traumas of life^v no resource for managing stress has greater potential to help someone than does faith in God. And for several millennia now, the Bible has been engendering such faith in millions of people.

Attempts have been made to explain the positive correlation between health and spiritual faith solely on the basis of the placebo effect. It's interesting in this respect that after reviewing over 200 research studies on the relationship between physical health and spiritual faith (measured by attendance at religious services), Dr. Dale Matthews with the National Center for Healthcare Research reports that the positive correlation between the two outnumbers negative correlations by 10-1,^{vi} a ratio that would seem to exceed what would be expected from a placebo effect alone.

Just as the effectiveness of modern medicines is measured by their superior performance compared to placebos, so too the Bible invites its readers to test in their own experience the power and effectiveness of faith in God, that is, to experience for themselves whether or not such faith provides a greater sense of purpose, peace, wellness and hope than is present without it.

What is it then about the Bible that enables it to engender a spiritual faith that has such a profound positive effect?

I suggest that the answer may be found in this: the faith engendered by the Bible incorporates an encompassing worldview that provides a way of understanding and ascribing meaning to the stressors of life. While the larger elements of this world view, namely, the biblical explanation of the origin and continued existence of evil and distress, would be revealing topics for discussion, they are beyond the scope of this paper. Within these parameters, however, the Bible assures each individual of purpose and meaning within the benevolent, purposeful plan of an all-powerful creator God who loves them and desires a personal relationship with them. Even the distressful events in life can gain meaning and positive potential when understood within this context.

Following I suggest some components of the biblical worldview that engenders the development of a stress-buffering faith and lifestyle:

1. The first comprehensive written prescription for stress management appears near the beginning of the Bible in the form of the Ten Commandments which the Bible asserts were

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written and delivered to mankind by God Himself. (Exodus 20) They are presented as God's loving provisions to protect us from much potential distress—prohibiting harmful behaviors and advocating harmonious relationships. They also include a benevolently mandated weekly sabbath, a day of rest time provided each week for worship, for exploring the transcendent meaning of our lives, and for refocusing on the ultimate priorities in life. Such a day allotted for decompression each week seems more relevant than ever in our own generation which James Gleick describes by the title of his book, *Faster, The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, the book chosen by *Time Magazine* and *Esquire* as the 1999 Book of the Year.

Throughout the Bible the ten commandments were viewed as practical applications of the two higher and greater laws of love to God and love to others. (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:35-40) When the psalmist wrote, “Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble,”^{vii} he was asserting that by aligning our lives with God's commandments we can avoid much stress. (Psalm 119:165)

2. Breaking God's laws is referred to in the Bible as sin. (1 John 3:4) Sinful actions are condemned not simply because they violate a rule, but because they encroach on a boundary God lovingly set in His law to protect people from harm and distress. Whether the results be immediate or long term, sin always results in someone getting hurt. The root sin is failure to trust God, which in turn leads to sinful actions. (John 16:9) Sin is a fatal spiritual disease which results in physical diseases and ultimately death. (Romans 6:23) There is a ΦΤ.Τ—a cure, a healing, a saving—for the disease of sin. It is mediated through the confession and repentance of the sinner and the full forgiveness and cleansing provided God. (1 John 1:9)

The Psalmist wrote: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away...my strength was sapped [physical distress and illness].... Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” (Psalm 32:3-5)

The biblical passage used by Christian churches as a basis for their healing services with anointing oil includes confession of sins and forgiveness as components of the healing (ΦΤ.Τ) process. (James 5:14-16) And when Jesus healed a paralyzed man, He directly linked the forgiveness of the man's sins with his physical healing. (Matthew 9:1-7)

3. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that the goal of life is to get relief from stress or to manage stress per se. Indeed, it warns that no matter how righteously we live we will encounter distress in this world of sin. (Psalm 90:10) The apostle Peter wrote, “Don't be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12)

The Bible defines the ultimate purpose of life as faith in God, as love, obedience and faithfulness to God expressed through uncompromising moral integrity and love for others. And this is true even if such faithfulness should *result* in persecution, distress, or even martyrdom. In other words, while the Bible prescribes a way of life that protects us from much purposeless stress that has no transcendent purpose, it at the same time calls us to a life of purposeful stress.

The book of Hebrews commends a long list of believers who were simply, humbly and obediently trying to live out their lives in love to God and their fellow man, but were persecuted and in some cases murdered, because of their faith. (Hebrews 11:32-40) They could have relieved their immediate physical stress of persecution by compromising their relationship to God,

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but they would have experienced what for them would have been an unbearable spiritual stress had they done so. The Bible commends them for their integrity and promises that their ultimate reward will be great.

As the Bible presents it, the worst thing that could happen in this life is not that we might be subjected to too much stress, but rather that we would live a life without purpose, without a commitment to something greater than ourselves, a cause that is worth dying for and therefore worth living for.^{viii}

4. A fourth component of the Bible's encompassing worldview that relates to stress management is the assurance that God can bring good out of what happens in our lives if we will love Him and trust Him to do so.

The apostle Paul wrote: "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

In his book, *Why Bad Things Happen to God's People*, Ricard Rice illustrates this assurance. He describes a sculptor crafting a work of art from a huge block of rare marble. A good way into his sculpture he discovers a major flaw in the marble. He studies it carefully, revises his design accordingly, and finally completes his work of art. And ever after to those who view it, the final product looks as if that flaw was part of the original design. It's not the design he could have crafted from a flawless block of marble. It's different. But it's a masterpiece nonetheless.

One fourth of the Bible's first book, Genesis, tells the gripping story of a man named Joseph. As a teen age boy he was sold by his brothers to Egyptian slave traders. His life suddenly went from one of wealth and ease in his Palestinian homeland to one of servitude. Working as a slave, he determined to do his best and trusted God to bring something good out of his distressing circumstances. Recognized for his hard work and integrity, he was placed over his masters vast estate. But when he refused to compromise his integrity regarding a moral issue, he was falsely accused and sentence to life in prison.

However, he didn't change his values. Again he determined to do his best and to trust God to bring something good out of his circumstances. And again, he was recognized for his integrity and put in charge of his fellow prisoners. His story is a classic story of stress management at its best.

Eventually Joseph is recognized by the Pharaoh and elevated to second in command in Egypt, commissioned to orchestrate efforts to stockpile food in preparation for a time of famine he had predicted. The high point in the story comes when his brothers who sold him into slavery come to Egypt to buy food because the predicted famine had affected Palestinian homeland. When the brothers meet Joseph they bow before him and plead for mercy, expecting him to seek revenge for their vicious act against him. But instead Joseph assures them that he has forgiven them long ago. In a moving passage of Scripture, Joseph says to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done to save many lives." (Genesis 50:19,20)

The story of Joseph illustrates God's commitment to bring good out of all circumstances for those who trust Him to do so.

In 1979 I went through a traumatic divorce. Four painful months into that process, I had drive 500 miles from SLC, Utah to Reno, Nevada to attend a professional meeting for ministers. I
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dreaded having to face my peers. Half way across the Nevada desert I pulled off the interstate highway and drove under a bridge, discouraged, bordering on clinical depression. I didn't want to go back home. I didn't want to go to my meeting. I wanted to die right there.

Suddenly I experienced a deep spiritual moment. My life flashed before me as a series of concentric circles—I was in the middle of the smallest circle, my wife in the next one, then my children, my work, my extended family, and my friends. In an instant I saw all of those circles wiped clean except for the one in the middle, and I didn't like the “me” that I saw there. I felt completely alone, like an embryo in the womb, and the womb began contracting, tighter and tighter. I felt my bones being crushed. Then surprisingly I sensed a “presence” in that womb with me. The thought flashed through my mind, “That’s impossible, there’s no room in here.” Then I realized that it was the presence of God Himself, and He was assuring me that He would be with me through whatever might happen, and that if I had Him, I had all I needed.. The words of the Bible came back to me, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5) I was assured that God could add back any of those circles in time as He chose. But for now, all I needed to do was to accept His love for me and His promise to be with me. He assured me that He was able to do something with this major flaw that had developed in my life. Once I had that assurance, I was able to drive on to my meeting and face my peers.

Through the extended process of recovering from that divorce I discovered some powerful tools that helped me manage my stress. I eventually developed a stress management seminar that is being used by clergy and health professionals within my denomination for community education. God took a major flaw in my life and crafted it into something unexpected that appears to be helping many people gain a new perspective on the trials they’re encountering in their lives.

The apostle Paul wrote: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts those in any troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3,4) From his experience as a prisoner at Auschwitz, the Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl concluded: “Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning.”^{ix}

5. While the Bible assures us that there will be stress in this life, it also offers peace in the midst of stress, peace that transcends the most profound distress. The prophet Isaiah expresses this insight in a Scripture passage that perhaps more than any other text exemplifies the Bible as a resource for stress management: “Thou wilt keep in perfect peace him whose mind is stayed upon thee, because he trusts in thee.” (Isaiah 26:3 KJV)

Two months ago I first met Dennis, a third-year medical student at a nearby medical university. He was experiencing a personal crisis. The girl he had been living with for the past two years had moved out to live with another man. While he acknowledged that he deserved what he got because of how he treated her, Dennis was still devastated by her decision and deeply grieving her loss. He was in his hospital rotations and got a 6-week leave of absence to pull himself back together. That’s when I met him. He spent the first hour and a half telling the story and talking about his feelings. Then we talked about his resources, including the spiritual ones. He had grown up in a religious family, but stopped attending church as soon as his parents allowed. He did not own a Bible and was biblically illiterate. I gave him a Bible, read some

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appropriate passages with him, and asked him to start reading the New Testament.

Ten days later Dennis came to see me again. He was still experiencing considerable distress, but he had also read the first 21 chapters of the gospel of Matthew. I have a poster on the wall of my office that says, "Hello, this is God. I will be handling all of your problems today. I will not need your help. So relax and have a great day." Underneath it I have an ad sheet for my stress seminar. Dennis pointed to the poster, "That's my problem. I've never handled stress well. But I've gotten more help in these 21 chapters of Matthew than in anything I've ever done before. Not relaxation, not exercise, nothing has helped me like this has. I know now that I'm a child of God, that God loves me and has forgiven me and will take care of me. I have a peace that I've never known before." Dennis still has a long way to go. But he's gaining some valuable spiritual resources to help him get there.

The apostle Paul was severely persecuted for his faith—he was flogged five times, caned three times, stoned several times and left for dead, and often went without food or shelter. (2 Corinthians 11:23-27) And yet he could write: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 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. I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength." Philippians 4:11,12

That is the contentedness and peace that give one the freedom and capacity to stay composed and on mission in the midst of distress. And I have seen it at work.

6. While each of the previous elements discussed could be applied to an individual believer, the Bible never envisions a believer in God as an isolated entity, but rather as an integral part of a community of faith from which they would draw strength in times of distress and to which they would contribute to help others in distress. In the Old Testament this powerful social support system was expressed in terms of a national identity, namely, the nation of Israel, which was as much a spiritual community as it was national, for any foreigner who would adhere to the spiritual laws inherent in Israel's covenant relation to God were to be considered spiritual members of the family of Israel. Isaiah 56:1-7 In this context the prophet Isaiah quotes God as saying, "my house [the temple] will be called a house of prayer for all nations." Isaiah 56:7

In the New Testament this corporate identity is embodied in the church, which was formed around a common faith in, and allegiance to, Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God and His mission of salvation for the world. The New Testament compares this faith community to a human body. And just as when any member or organ of the human body is threatened or injured, the entire body system mobilizes to protect against the threat and to heal the injury, the process we refer to today as "the stress response," so too, wrote the apostle Paul, when one member of the church suffers, the whole church suffers with them, mobilizing to come to their aid by prayer and a ministry of support. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

The book of Acts describes the earliest days of the church in these terms: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." Acts 2:44,45 The strong social support system formed in the early church was undoubtedly one of the characteristics that enabled it to make the extensive impact it did upon the western world. And while the radical sacrifices believers made for one another in those early days is seldom mirrored to the same extent in our modern faith

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communities, it is hard to overestimate the value that the social support within faith communities can play as a stress management resource for the members of those communities.^x

ⁱ E.g., Herbert Benson, *The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: A Fireside Book published by Simon & Schuster, 1997); Dale Matthews, M.D., *The Faith Factor: Proof of the Healing Power of Prayer* (New York, Viking, 1998); and note Robert Sapolsky, Ph.D., *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (New York, W.H. Freeman and Company, 1998), p. 317: "The primary assertion about the protective effects of belief strikes this atheist as perfectly logical, if you believe in the right kind of god or gods. If the god is one who intervenes in human affairs with rules that are mysterious, you at least get the stress-reducing advantages of attribution—it may not be clear what the deity is up to, but you at least know who is responsible for the locust swarm or the winning lottery ticket. If it is an intervening deity with discernible rules, it provides the comfort of both attribution and predictive information—carry out ritual X, or Y is going to happen. If it is a deity who does all the above, *and* will respond to your personal and specific entreaties (most religions do not include that belief), there is an added and wonderfully stress-reducing element of control introduced. And if on top of all that, the deity is viewed as benign, the stress-reducing advantages must be extraordinary. If you can view cancer and Alzheimer's disease, the holocaust and ethnic cleaning, if you can view the inevitable threshold where your own heart will cease to beat, all in the context of a loving plan, that must constitute the greatest source of support imaginable." Sapolsky's list of essential characteristic of a "god" and faith that would be capable of providing unsurpassed protection against the damaging effects of stress is indeed the God, and the nature of faith in God, described in the Bible.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps the best known text in the Bible to Christians is John 3:16,17: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish but have everlasting life. God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved [a form of the Greek word, ΦΤ.Τ]."

The Gospel of Matthew (9:21,22) tells the story of a woman who had consulted doctors unsuccessfully for 12 years for a serious physical illness she had. Matthew quotes this woman as saying, "If I (could) only touch his (Jesus) cloak, I will be healed." Matthew says she subsequently did touch Him and was healed, whereupon Jesus said to her, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you [in each case the term "healed" in that story was a form of the Greek word, ΦΤ.Τ]."

ⁱⁱⁱ Consider the biblical passage used by Christian churches as a basis for their healing services with anointing oil: James 5:14,15: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will *heal* [a form of the Greek word, ΦΤ.Τ] the sick." The New King James Version translates, "will *save* the sick."

^{iv} It's worthy of note that the most prolific writer of the New Testament was not the apostle Paul, as many might suppose, but rather St. Luke, a practicing medical doctor, who wrote both Luke and Acts. My own Seventh-day Adventist denomination, which was founded on the teachings of the Bible, operates two accredited medical schools on the North American continent and over 150 hospitals worldwide in which the attempt is

made to integrate modern medicine with prayer and spiritual faith.

^v Thomas H. Holmes and Richard R. Rahe, “The Social Readjustment Rating Scale,” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 213-218. This thoroughly researched and tested scale lists among life’s most traumatic experiences: the death of a spouse or close family member, marital separation and divorce, incarceration, loss of job, and personal injury or illness.

^{vi} Dale Matthews, M.D. *The Faith Factor: Scientific Evidence of the Link between Spirituality and Good Health* (Video produced by National Institute for Healthcare Research, 1995).

^{vii} All biblical references are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

^{viii} It is instructive in this connection to note that the Bible directly links physical health and healing to a life of unselfish service to others. The prophet Isaiah wrote, If you share your food with the hungry, provide the poor wanderer with shelter, and clothe the naked, then “your healing will quickly appear.” (Isaiah 58:6-8) This connection between service to others and physical health has also been underlined more recently. After reviewing numerous studies in this area of research, Allan Luks wrote in his book, *The Healing Power of Doing Good*: “The results of...health benefits to the helper (volunteer)...can be astonishing in their impact. Helping contributes to the maintenance of good health, and it can diminish the effect of diseases and disorders both serious and minor, psychological and physical” (p. 83).

^{ix} Victor E. Frankl. *Man’s Search For Meaning* (New York, Washington Square Press, Inc., 1963), p. 179.

^x Results of research conducted at the University of Texas Medical School by Thomas Oxman and colleagues, as reported by them in a 1995 Psychosomatic Medicine article entitled “Lack of social participation or religious strength and comfort as risk factors for death after cardiac surgery in the elderly” (*Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1995, 57:5-15), indicated that “Those who neither had regular group participation nor drew strength and comfort from their religion were more than seven times more likely to die six months after surgery.” As quoted in: Dean Ornish, M.D. *Love and Survival: The Scientific Basis For The Healing Power of Intimacy* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), pp. 50,51. Such research results engender appreciation and respect for the Bible’s admonition that believers be joined in a faith community. The social support provided by such communities can be a powerful resource for stress management. T. E. Oxman, D. H. Freeman, Jr., and E. D. Manheimer.