

Surviving The Storms Of Stress

CONTENTS

Our Enslaving Expectations	2
The Value Of Stress	9
God-Produced Stress . . .	11
Father-Filtered Stress . . .	17
Surviving The Storms Of Stress	19
Coping Isn't Enough . . .	27
Peace Is Ultimately A Person	29

Ron Hutchcraft is a popular author, speaker, seminar leader, and radio host. I've known him to be an enthusiastic and tireless servant of the Lord—well, almost tireless. A few years ago, Ron wrote a book relating how the stress of his busy schedule and endless family responsibilities almost did him in. He learned some valuable lessons about dealing with modern stress, and he has shared these lessons in his book *Living Peacefully In A Stressful World*, available from Discovery House Publishers.

This booklet is the “wrap-up chapter” of Ron’s book. I think you’ll find his insights not only creative and practical but also drawn from the eternal well of heaven’s wisdom.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

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OUR ENSLAVING EXPECTATIONS

Commercials play to our restlessness, and they even help to create it. If they succeed, we feel a need for their product by the time their pitch is over. We want better breath, smoother hands, a nicer smell, or a bigger burger.

One classic potato chip commercial shows a boy boarding a bus with a big bag of their crunchies. As the boy keeps reaching for another chip, he claims, “Bet you can’t eat just one.” Hearing the irresistible crunch, the bus driver grabs “just one.” Of course, he keeps munching, until finally his hat is full of those habit-forming chips. By the end of the ad, everyone on the bus is chomping and singing, “No one can eat just one.” That’s amazing, when you

consider that you can’t even get two people to speak to each other on the buses I ride!

But the advertisers are experts on human motivation. They want to create in us the appetite for more. Even without those commercials, we are driven by that appetite.

Advertisers are experts on human motivation. They want to create in us the appetite for more.

“More” is usually perceived as the answer to our restlessness, the “if-only-I-had’s” of life. We convince ourselves that there’s nothing wrong with us that wouldn’t be cured by more time, more house,

more money, more friends, more job, more clothes, more excitement, more comforts.

Then we get the “two aspirin” form of a big raise, a dream home, a partner, a lighter schedule, or a standing ovation—only to find that the “headache” of restlessness soon returns.

The unsettling truth is that more is never enough! Discontentment destroys any possibility of personal peace. It condemns us to the pressure cooker of guaranteed restlessness.

Conventional wisdom tells us, “A man’s reach should always exceed his grasp.” A commitment to excellence, to service, to personal purity should keep us reaching. We are, by nature, pursuers. That’s why God calls us to pursue peace! But much modern stress results from the wrong pursuits—misplaced discontentment.

We are enslaved by expectations that cannot be satisfied. They are intrinsically frustrating. These “drivers” come in three forms, and they keep us on edge because they keep us reaching for more.

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I. POSSESSION EXPECTATIONS

Plato commented insightfully on our possession expectations:

Poverty consists not in the decrease of one’s possession but in the increase of one’s greed.

There is always another “thing” you don’t have! And the increase of things only creates an appetite for more. There was a time we looked forward to owning one TV, but then we needed two. Once we were thrilled with an apartment of our own, but the thrill was soon replaced with a hankering for a little house of our own. Eventually the little house was too little. It would take a big house to do the trick. And a swimming pool would be nice too.

Our “poverty” really is, in Plato’s words, “the increase of one’s greed.” Dinner out at McDonald’s was a once-special treat—now it’s routine. Tonight it will take a fancy restaurant to provide the same special treat. It seems only yesterday that an air conditioner was the luxury of the rich—today I’ve got to have one. Yesterday’s

luxury has become today’s necessity.

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Life’s goodies are truly good when God provides them in His way and in His time. They are enslaving when we demand them—when we expect them. Possession expectations will keep pushing us past the fragile limits of peace.

2. PEOPLE EXPECTATIONS

We live in a state of chronic frustration because the significant others in our lives don't measure up. Or can't measure up.

Author James Dobson points out that while the baby is on the way, we profess only to want a child who is normal. But from birth on, we want a super-kid! We want for him either the life we didn't have or a replay of the life we did have. Somehow, his grades, his friends, his style is never good enough. We focus on what he needs to improve, seldom on what he has achieved.

So our children are quickly caught up with us in the whirlpool of more.

Marriages become battlefields because our partners continually disappoint us. Weaknesses are magnified; strengths are forgotten—just the reverse

of the courtship process. We are expecting more of Prince Charming or Cinderella, and they may be getting tired of never being enough.

These people expectations can make a person incurably restless with his work. No working conditions, no boss is what you really want. And the

We live in a state of chronic frustration because the significant others in our lives don't measure up.

dissatisfaction syndrome can reach right into the church too. There is ultimately something wrong

with every pastor, every leader. We end up expecting of people around us a perfection that belongs only to God.

If you are not satisfied with those around you, you are probably even less satisfied with yourself. We compare ourselves to standards of parenting,

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partnering, or producing that are unattainable, and can never relax because we are never good enough.

Marsha grabbed me after church one day to pour out

her broken heart over her prodigal son. She had tried so hard and done everything she could, and he was walking on the wild side of life. As we talked, it became evident that Marsha had an unreasonably high standard for her son, one he could never quite hit. I suggested to her that a child who is never good enough may one day stop trying to be. He may choose a rebellious course that will remove any possibility of impossible expectations. Her son had opted out of the demands, only to create a whole new arena of pressure.

Marsha began to cry as she revealed the reason she had pushed her son so hard. She had grown up in the brokenness left by an alcoholic father. Her youthful agony made her resolve to be a perfect mother and to have a

perfect home. She had walked that tightrope for years, and her son's struggles always threatened her goals. If he wasn't good enough, then she wasn't good enough. She was always reaching for more from him, and from herself. Neither of them could find peace.

If our hopes for peace are placed in the hands of imperfect people, they are bound to evaporate.

3. PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

Performance drives us to stressful schedules, sacrifices, and compromises. Our worth becomes identified with our work, and no spot on the mountain is enough. Even the top is unsatisfying, as Alexander the Great discovered when he wept because there were no more worlds to conquer.

Amy started high school with the futility of performance expectations. She seemed sad most of the time, so sad that she found herself on the brink of suicide. Although she outgrew those depths of depression, she did not grow much of a smile. The irony of her personal dissatisfaction was that she was a high achiever! She was elected vice president of her school chorus, but she was miserable because she was not president. She ranked second in her class academically, but she chose to look at the one student ahead of her rather than the 300 behind her. The storm in Amy seldom abated because winning was her only option.

Whatever our game is, we will lose consistently if we have to win. We aspire to be promoted to the next rung on the company ladder—only to need yet

the next promotion before the paint is dry on our new office door. No award, no achievement is ever enough. We punish our bodies, our families, our friends, our sanity to reach for another level of victory.

One day this unquenchable appetite for conquest can even violate the marriage covenant. There is the “need” to demonstrate that you are still attractive. The innocent flirtations are tantalizing. You, your spouse, your kids—and even your conquest—end up sacrificed on the ugly altar of adultery.

It is stress-driven slavery to always have something to prove. Discontentment runs like a treadmill under our feet. We are always running, pushing for more possessions, more from people, more conquest. There is no rest on a treadmill. Discontentment

is the mortal enemy of peace—a deep root of stress and restlessness.

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Instead, consider the apostle Paul’s equation for contentment:

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that (1 Tim. 6:6-8).

THE VALUE OF STRESS

Our two boys love history. But they hate tours. In fact, they have managed to make the word *tour* into two very long syllables. “Daddy,” they moan pitifully, “are we going on a tooooooo-ur?” When I assured them one summer morning we were going to see a working early-American town, not just costumed ladies telling about old buildings, they consented. Cautiously.

The craftsmen made the place come alive. The blacksmith worked his magic with fire and iron. The miller showed us how a waterwheel and some wheat equals flour. And the potter made us forget any leftover impressions of a “toooooo-ur.” His skill was almost hypnotic. He sat at his wheel, rhythmically turning the shaft with his

feet. In a nearby corner were shapeless, seemingly worthless gray blobs of clay. One of those former blobs was now the focus of all his attention. With practiced fingers the potter was working that clay upward into a smooth and shapely vase.

The potter’s shack was cramped, too small for all the people crowded in to watch on that hot day. Eventually, the crowd left. But our kids wanted to stay. They had noticed two shelves of finished vases, one on either side of the potter. With childlike innocence one of my young sons reached out to touch.

“Careful!” the craftsman exclaimed. “Please don’t touch the pottery on that shelf. You’ll ruin it.” Then he surprised us when he said, “Why don’t you touch the ones on the other shelf?” Needless to say, we were curious

why some vases could be touched and not others.

Glancing at the “do-not-touch” shelf, he explained, “These haven’t been fired yet.” The potter told us then that there was more to making masterpieces than just making blobs into beautiful shapes. If he stopped at that point, they would quickly be marred and misshapen. Without the fire, the potter’s work is still beautiful, but too fragile.

The other vases could be touched because they had twice been baked in his kiln at temperatures of more than 2,000 degrees. “The fire makes the clay firm and strong,” our host concluded. “Fire makes the beauty last.” That was the trigger. My thoughts raced to Peter’s words:

*All kinds of trials . . .
have come so that your
faith—of greater worth
than gold, which perishes*

*even though refined by
fire—may be proved
genuine (1 Pet. 1:6-7)*

Both Peter and the potter were talking to me about a fire that increases the value of something precious. Having spent most of my adult years in an oven—a pressure cooker, to be exact—I knew about fire. Much of it could be traced to my overheated schedule and overcommitted lifestyle. That heat was my own fault.

***There is a heat
that burns, and
another heat
that beautifies.***

But there is another fire that comes not from me but from the Master Potter. There is, to be sure, a heat that burns, and another heat that beautifies.

GOD-PRODUCED STRESS

From the first day that I discovered the verse “Seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14), I hoped that my life would slow down. It hasn’t, but I have. By removing some roots of my restlessness, I have performed surgery on the stress that comes *from* me. By attacking stress-centers in my life, I am managing the stress that’s coming *at* me . . . and there is still plenty left! That’s because there is supposed to be. What keeps pushing on me is the heavenly stress that is *for* me—the heat that time proves, strengthens, and beautifies.

Personal peace is not the elimination of stress. If we live without pressure, we are as fragile as that potter’s unfired vase. God has been skillfully

reshaping me on His wheel, making a “blob” into something far more valuable. But that workmanship needs fire to make it firm and strong.

Peace-living resists self-induced stress but grows from God-produced stress.

In pursuing peace, I am trying to eliminate the stress that I cause and to control that which others cause. What’s left is the stress that God Himself either causes or allows. Peace-living resists self-induced stress but grows from God-produced stress.

If the pressure is taken off a piece of coal, there will be no diamond. Removing that irritating grain of sand

from an oyster's tummy means having no pearl. Protecting an apple tree from the pain of the pruning knife results in little fruit. Pressure, irritation, and pain can be tools to develop people too.

God may send a load. But He will never send an overload.

It's the wrong kind of pressure that can crush or weaken or kill. That is where my "gerbil-wheel" life had created an overload. Even with much of that unloaded now, my days still get crunched with plenty of demands, changes, and frustrations. While the weight is as much as ever, it just doesn't seem as heavy.

God may send a load. But He will never send an overload.

As my stress-weary heart has followed the word *peace* through the Bible, I uncovered this perspective on my pressures:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:7,11).

There it is! Stress that contributes to our peace! Hardship here is defined as training. But if we are not looking for the trainer's lesson in the problem, we get only the pain and miss the peace. When a peace-pursuer understands he is in training rather than in trouble, he can relax even under fire. Knowing that

peace will come from this pain doesn't make the pain any more enjoyable, but you can handle it calmly.

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Frankly, I almost lost my personal peace before it was even a month old. My “showdown with stress” had come at the end of the summer. I came away from my turning point with a fresh sense of hope, sensing I had finally regained control. I had made specific commitments to my Lord, my wife, my children, and

my work—commitments based on the biblical description of a peaceful life. That's when everything started to unravel.

I expected fall to be a circus as usual, getting three children acclimated in three different schools, managing the high-energy startup of another school year in youth ministry, a heavy schedule of speaking and meetings.

I entered the fall fray joyful, expectant, and confident. I had learned to practice peace. I did not expect the avalanche on top of the circus. It started late in September at a local high school football game. I was grabbed by a friend who blurted out, “I think your son has a broken arm.” It took only a look at Doug to confirm the bad news.

I will never forget the scene that followed in the emergency room. Because both bones were broken

and twisted, the doctor had to probe and push and pull for a long time. Doug was brave, but his pain was almost unbearable. Strangely, in a way only a parent could understand, so was mine. When we finally got home, Karen and I agreed that we felt totally depleted—as if we each had broken an arm.

The emotional struggle lasted a lot longer than the physical pain. A broken arm may not rate very high on a chart of human suffering, but it is a heavy burden for an athletic 12-year-old boy. All of his fall sports dreams were shattered by his broken arm. His natural self-consciousness about beginning junior high was complicated by 4 months in a cast. Doug's favorite seasons—Halloween through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's—evaporated as his

friends ran hard and he laid low. When the doctor later announced that the bones were healing crooked, we realized this battle could actually last for years, not months. There were tremors in my new peace.

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That broken arm turned out to be only the opening shot in a barrage of new tensions. The night Karen and I returned from Haiti, she was seized with a severe gastrointestinal attack. Unable to move,

Karen had to be rushed to the hospital by ambulance before our bags were even unpacked. Her pain was so severe that our family doctor stayed most of the night with us. It was the second time in 2 weeks that I had stood in this same emergency room, watching someone I love suffer.

This was to be followed by Karen's dangerous attack of phlebitis, forcing her to bed when we were running full speed together to finish a major project. By the time the hepatitis put her in bed for 6 months, we either had to laugh or cry. We did some of each. Just for good measure, we threw in a week in the hospital for our daughter too. The tremors were beginning to register higher on the Richter scale.

With things at home up for grabs, it would have helped if things at work were stable. They weren't. It was at this same time

that we faced a severe cash crisis. It threatened to paralyze us. Our people were not complaining, but they were not being paid

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Hebrews 12:7,11

on time. Simultaneously, some unresolved personnel conflicts surfaced, threatening to pull us apart. The long meetings that ensued led to new

stresses of some major reorganization. The frosting came with our landlord's notice—he had sold our office building and we would have to move!

By now, I had a major “peacequake” reeling inside me. Just when I was trying to simplify my life, it got more complicated. I found myself on my knees asking, “God, if You want me to pursue personal peace, why is all this happening? You aren’t even giving me a chance!”

Actually, a chance for peace is exactly what God was giving me. These upheavals were forcing me to rearrange misplaced priorities, some I would never have seen any other way. Unhealthy dependencies were being broken, as “asking Ron” was becoming more difficult. I was unintentionally less available because of

the fires I was fighting. And I was driven closer to my Lord than ever before. Since He is the ultimate source of peace, I began to taste that “peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

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God allowed me to be caught in an avalanche of friendly stress. He was helping me, driving me, to reorganize my life around saner expectations. And the tests had not taken my peace—they had confirmed it. God was speaking through this whirlwind to say, “This peace of Mine is stronger than you thought!”

FATHER-FILTERED STRESS

There's another stress that God doesn't send but allows. Job is a dramatic example of this. The Bible says that all his losses and suffering were Satan's idea, calculated to disillusion his faith in God. Yet even the devil cannot bring pressure and pain without God's permission!

A unique behind-the-scenes look at spiritual warfare emerges from Job's predicament. Satan could not touch Job until God okayed it. Satan approached God, asking to go beyond the "hedge around him and his household" (Job 1:10). The Lord gave a conditional yes when He answered, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger" (v.12).

Job's glue through his

personal holocaust was a faith that declared, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble? . . . The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (2:10; 1:21). His analysis was, at best, only partially right. Actually, the devil had "taken away" and sent the "trouble." But Job trusted in a Father who knows what is best for His children, and that He had to okay these trials somewhere along the way.

Job's troubles make ours look like pinpricks. Still, I have found myself asking during our recent avalanches, "Is God trying to build us, or is Satan trying to bury us?" Since that's virtually unanswerable, I have decided to ask a better question, "How can God use this?" If this pressure could not train me, the Coach would not allow it.

Our problems look much less terrifying when we realize they are Father-filtered. That filtering is guaranteed in promises such as “God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (1 Cor. 10:13).

God will allow us to be pushed to the building point, but not to the breaking point.

In other words, nothing can enter the life of God’s child without His signature. His approval is based on what we can bear. He will allow me to be pushed to the building point, but not to the breaking point. It’s a little like weightlifting. Too

much weight will crush us, but greater weight than we have lifted before is needed to make us stronger. Only the Lord knows the difference, and He filters every additional load.

Everywhere the apostle Paul traveled, he was relentlessly tormented by his unnamed thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7). He identified its source as “a messenger of Satan.” In spite of the devilish origin of his trouble, he looked for the lesson—a reason his Father would allow it. Paul concluded that his thorn was sent “to keep me from becoming conceited . . . that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Cor. 12:7,9).

That same pressured preacher also looked for the Lord in his trouble and sensed His comfort and assurance when He said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (v.9).

SURVIVING THE STORMS OF STRESS

Amid all the hoopla of the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, one tragic casualty was generally overlooked. Boomer didn't make it. In the extravagant opening ceremonies, a bald eagle named Boomer was scheduled to soar into the Coliseum to the strains of "America The Beautiful." Unfortunately, Boomer was unable to show up for his performance. Three days before the Olympics opened, Boomer died—of stress, they said. I guess even an eagle can tell when things are out of hand. People-pressure was just too much for the old bird. He knew how to survive the dangers of the wilderness but not the stresses of civilization.

We can sympathize with

poor Boomer. We all have those crushing moments when we feel as if we're dying of stress. Recent medical research tells us that many people are literally killed by stress. For the rest of us who feel the punishment of emotional dying, survival skills become crucial.

Establishing quiet centers and peaceful habits gives us precious resources for inner peace. When we attack the roots of stress in us and the chronic stress centers around us, we make room for the friendly stress that will always be there. But even with that plan for peace in place, there is one important item of unfinished business. How do we handle the rest of the mess—the circumstances beyond our control?

There are important answers in the account of the most violent storm experienced in the New

Testament. Acts 27 describes the savage northeaster wind that threatened the ship transporting Paul to trial in Rome. They lost all control of their circumstances—yet they survived. And locked inside this storm-tossed story are the four skills we need to survive the unavoidable storms of stress.

1 GET RID OF THE CARGO YOU DON'T NEED.

Luke, the author of Acts, explains the first survival skill in this way:

We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. . . . with their own hands (Acts 27:18-19).

If someone had suggested to the captain of the ship upon departure that the cargo, the ship's tackle, and maybe even his

favorite chair were going overboard, he probably would have burned their ears with his reply. Yet when the storm hit, they decided they could do without some items they once were sure they needed.

If we are going to handle our own personal northeasters, we will have to get rid of the cargo we don't need.

If we are going to handle our own personal northeasters, we will have to get rid of the cargo we don't need. Of course, it sometimes takes a storm to make us even consider letting go.

Some of our “extra

cargo” may be bad things we have accumulated like barnacles: a compromising relationship, deepening debt, a growing obsession with money, an entangling sinful habit, a critical attitude—things we hang on to until a storm exposes how they are sinking us.

There is good cargo too that may have to be jettisoned. We tend to accumulate involvements that, taken separately, are each neutral—even helpful. But taken together, they are just too much.

A storm is our chance to change. When the rough weather subsides, we can return to the same overloaded or wrongly loaded lifestyle. That in turn could set the stage for an even bigger storm. If you want to survive your personal “hurricane,” evaluate extra cargo and get rid of it before it sinks you—one way or another.

2 GET BUSY WITH THE THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER.

Luke tells us that “Hurricane Paul” lasted 2 weeks! Then an angel appeared to Paul in the middle of the night. Paul’s visitor introduced a second survival skill for a storm. The apostle announced this message to the crew:

Not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, . . . “God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you” (Acts 27:22-24).

In essence, the angel had simply reminded Paul, “The ship doesn’t matter. Only the people do.” To survive a storm, you get busy with the things that really matter—and those “things” are usually people!

With all the pressures to achieve and accomplish, the people we love can slowly get pushed to the corners of our lives.

With all the pressures to achieve and accomplish, the people we love can slowly get pushed to the corners of our lives.

Neglect is not intentional—weeds grow in our garden, not because we plant them but because we forget them. Many a man leaves a wife or a child in his dust as he speeds

toward his career goals. Many a woman slowly vanishes from the most important moments of her loved ones as she loses herself in a job, a social circle, a religious responsibility. Co-workers or employees can become functions instead of people with needs.

Without realizing it, we let those close to us become simply dispensers of information, transportation, hugs, money, or services. It usually takes a storm to restore our values.

In the pursuit of peace, the “ship”—the project, the schedule, the deadline, the organization, the budget—may be lost on the rocks. That is costly, but it’s okay. It is our people we cannot afford to lose. If the storm blows you back to them, you have all you really need. You can always find another ship.

3 GET DESPERATE WITH GOD.

Our faith tends to be cool, calm, and collected—until a crisis clobbers us. Then we go from our feet to our knees, and God becomes more than someone who “helps” us: He is our only hope.

Luke apparently spoke for himself, and Paul too, when he said, “We finally gave up all hope of being saved” (Acts 27:20). That is probably why the visiting angel greeted Paul by announcing, “Do not be afraid, Paul” (v.24).

I’m glad for that glimpse of the apostle’s humanity. He is on such a pedestal in my mind that I would expect to find him standing bravely in the bow of the boat, like George Washington crossing the Delaware. Instead, Paul seems to be as terrified as everyone else—and

as desperate. In his desperation he was met by “the God whose I am and whom I serve” (v.23).

Paul models for us a third survival skill in a storm—getting desperate with God. When the bottom drops out, it is easy to get desperate. The sailors on Paul’s ship sensed that they were headed for the rocks. So . . .

In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea . . . Then Paul said, . . . “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away (vv.30-32).

Often our panic makes us reach for a lifeboat instead of the Lord. My lifeboats have usually just made bigger messes. I have hired the wrong people, spent unwisely, cut programs too soon, pushed

people I love too hard.
A storm can make us panic
or make us pray.

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It is when our points of reference disappear like the sailors' stars that we learn what prayer really means. Stripped of any possibility of self-rescue, we throw ourselves on the Lord. Our praying is not controlled, predictable, third person; we finally open our religious hand and let God fill it with something supernatural.

At certain points in your life with Him, God will strip you of all other resources, leaving you only Himself. Then you will discover, in the words of a wise old saint, "You never know Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you've got."

And then there is peace, no matter how long the storm lasts. In the words of King David, you can proclaim:

*When anxiety was
great within me, Your
consolation brought joy
to my soul (Ps. 94:19).*

4 GET BACK TO A HEALTHY ROUTINE.

When the boat is headed for the rocks, lunch can wait. Yet as Paul's ship was about to go aground, he urged the crew to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food

Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive” (Acts 27:33-34).

Paul advocated here a fourth survival skill in a storm—getting back to a healthy routine. When a strong disturbance batters our ship, our daily routines are usually the first things thrown overboard. In reality, the heavier the pressure, the more important it is to guard our sources of strength.

When we start to miss sleep, meals, and breaks, we start sinking. Quiet centers tend to be neglected when we start cutting corners. More than ever, we have to fight for that quality time with our Lord, our lovers, and little ones. Those healthy routines are what keep us strong on both sunny and stormy days.

Blown Where You Belong. There’s a line from an old hymn that

beautifully interprets the storms we face:

Clouds arise and
tempests blow
by order from Thy throne.

When God orders up a tempest in my life, it is because a change is needed. Usually, the storm is not the real issue—not from God’s viewpoint. It is an imbalance that has developed in my priorities, a dislocation so subtle that I can’t even see it until turbulence gets my attention.

It is in storms that I literally get blown back in balance. I am learning not to throw that wonderful new peace overboard when my ship spins out of control. It is, instead, time to get rid of the cargo I do not need, get busy with the things that really matter, get desperate with God, and get back to a healthy routine. God has provided that positive strategy for

weathering the storms of friendly stress.

The account of Hurricane Paul ends with a thrilling postscript. Luke records that the tempest finally blew them aground

Our plans may be interrupted by storms, but God's plans never are. In fact, the storm is part of His plan.

on the island of Malta. One look at a map reveals what was really happening in the midst of that raging crisis at sea. Malta sits right off the southern coast of Italy, the ship's original destination!

The whole time they thought they were out of control, they were right on course!

Centuries before, the ancient Jewish prophet Nahum said it all in a simple sentence: "His way is in the whirlwind and the storm" (Nah. 1:3).

Our plans may be interrupted by storms, but God's plans never are. In fact, the storm is part of His plan. If we don't abandon ship, the winds of God will blow us right where we belong—no matter how far off course we feel.

COPING ISN'T ENOUGH

Nancy's "glass of stress" is full and overflowing. Wedged between the demands of single-parenting, a rebellious son, and managing an office, she has just about had it. When she heard that I was writing about peace and stress, she said, "Oh, I'm reading something right now about how to cope with stress. I hope I find out in time!"

Most of us pressure-cooker people would, like Nancy, consider it success just to cope with our stress. But after years of coping, I have decided that coping is not enough.

According to the dictionary, "to cope" is "to struggle or contend on fairly even terms." That sounds like treading water but never getting to shore!

Since my stress-saturated life did not drown me, I guess I was coping. But just keeping our heads above water leaves us vulnerable to any big wave that comes along.

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When I made a commitment to go after peace, I wanted to learn to conquer stress, not just cope with it. Stress was too often dredging up my dark side, subverting our family life, shuffling sane priorities. I hungered for a peace that would break its grip.

I found it in a promise in the Bible that has been tested by two millennia of believers. The apostle Paul had the credentials to pen the words; turbulence and upheaval had been a way of life for him. Just before the promise, he listed every major disturbance in the human experience: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death (Rom. 8:35-36).

Then, with this catalog of life's storms in mind he proclaimed:

In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:37).

If we can be “more than conquerors” in the stresses of life, why should we settle for coping?

The difference between coping and conquering seems to be those two little words—“through Him.” Without them, this is just

another inspiring way to say, “Think positively.” Real personal peace is not the result of positive thinking.

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PEACE IS ULTIMATELY A PERSON

The ancient Jewish prophets called Him “the Prince of Peace.”

When Jesus came, the Christmas angels promised He would be a Savior whose saving would bring peace.

When He left, He promised:

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you (Jn. 14:27).

His servant Paul summed it up when he reminded us:

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near (Eph. 2:17).

Earlier, in six simple words, he spoke the prescription for peace:

For He Himself is our peace (v.14).

I was one of those Paul described as “those who were near.” Years ago, I had

recognized that the war in my heart was really a battle with God. I realized that I could not have Christ’s peace until He was my Prince. Opening the hands that had so tightly gripped the steering wheel of my life, I let Jesus drive.

Since we were made to live for the God who made us, everything else is out of place until we find Him. And He can only be found at the cross, where His Son paid the bill for our war against God. Whether we have rejected God, or simply neglected Him, the result is the same—a life He made and paid for, lived without Him. Upon our invitation, He enters our lives—bringing His peace.

Since my personal visit to Jesus’ cross, I have known the Person who is peace. Through the most turbulent stress seasons, I have been unsinkable, as Paul said, “through Him

who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). His pressure on the inside has always been greater than the pressure on the outside.

But for so long, I have been something much less than “more than a conqueror.” My complicated lifestyle had allowed too many other hands on that steering wheel. I wasn’t crashing, but I was swerving. Then the prison cell door swung open, and my Rescuer said, “Seek peace and pursue it.”

I have been pursuing it ever since. The peace I hungered for has been there since Christ came in. But I was like a man with an inexhaustible bank account who wasn’t writing many checks on it. The poverty, the pressure of my life, was waiting for peace to come instead of going after it.

Inner peace is the natural condition of the heart in which Christ lives.

I just need to quit blocking and sabotaging the supply lines.

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In a sense, my search for peace ends where it began. Years ago I came to Christ for peace. Years later, I am learning to enjoy it by discovering Him more deeply than ever before. The pursuit of peace is ultimately the pursuit of a Person.

The gales of stress have blown me to the Prince of Peace. And just as Paul was carried to God’s destination

by that northeaster, He may be using the storms of your life to drive you to Him.

If the load you are carrying seems too heavy for you, it is because you were never meant to carry it alone. Coping may well be a touch-and-go struggle, but conquering is totally out of your reach. Stress is eroding even your ability to cope.

That moment of extremity is His opportunity. Strangely enough, you may be closer to peace than you have ever been, and the stress of your life has carried you there. We stand tired of fighting—and Jesus quietly whispers, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28).

Strong and proud, we don't feel the need, even though it is just as urgent then. But battered and wounded by years of battle, we know we need help—the

rest. That's when our hand reaches for His. Peace is a Person—and peace rooted in Him can triumphantly stand any test.

Corrie ten Boom testified to that from the greatest hell that man could create—the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. She and her dear sister Betsie paid the price for hiding Jews in the attic of their home in Holland. Through torture, humiliation, and pain, they turned to the Christ who lived in them—and tested His peace. Their witness was backed by the credentials of a suffering that few of us have ever known.

Betsie died in that concentration camp; Corrie was released as a result of a clerical error. In Betsie's dying hours, she spoke a message that Corrie would carry around the world for nearly 40 years. Betsie said,

“Tell them that there is no pit so deep but that God’s love is deeper still.”

Corrie and her sister had tasted what it means to be “more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” The peace that Christ brings is that strong.

If my stress makes me hungry for His peace, then it has driven me home. The storm has blown us into the Harbor that we have looked for all our lives.



Note to the reader:

This booklet is based on a portion of the book *Living Peacefully In A Stressful World* by Ron Hutchcraft. Ron is a popular author, speaker, and seminar leader, and hosts the daily national radio program *A Word With You*.

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