

Life's Big Stresses Call for One Big God

Leader Notes

by Katy Sensmeier

We Need our savior

This time in history is like no other! God seems to be grabbing the attention of the whole world. If He is trying to get our attention, what do you imagine He wants us to know? How do we live in our current situation without being totally and utterly stressed out? How can we live each day as His Word says we can, with peace, joy, love, and faith in the midst of so much stress? (John 15:10-12; Philippians 4:6-7) Of course, it's easier to feel this peace when everything in life is going well and as planned. But what about when the world seems to be falling apart, as described in Psalm 46 with chaotic events happening all around us? How do we "be still" and "not fear"? We need our Savior!

Our world has been hit with a global pandemic that has caused fear, sickness, death, and economic disaster, and yet, among believers everywhere, it has stirred us up to seek Him more diligently, search truth in His Word, remember His promises, turn to Him in intimate conversation, pray and care for each other, and actively put our trust in Him.

In these stressful times, the bottom line is, we NEED Jesus! In this season of trouble, our faith is in for a massive workout! It's when things get heavy that we get to witness the BIGness of our God and our faith muscles will grow stronger. Just like physically working out, we don't know how much we can lift until we add more weight. God's strength is infinite. We get His strength in our weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:10) God's Word is packed full of times when His people hit trouble and as they trust in Him, and He remains faithful always. As we move through this time, choosing faith over fear, we build those muscles fulfilling the plans and purpose that God prepared for us to walk in. (Romans 8:30) He created us knowing we would live in this exact time of crisis. We were meant to be here right now in this time and in this place.

He searches our hearts and knows everything about us. (Psalm 139:1) It is a RELATIONSHIP! It has always been about love and relationship. He loves us so much! He showed us this when He took the sin of the entire world upon Himself. Through His death and resurrection, we became alive in Him. We have died with Christ, so it is He who lives in us. (Galatians 2:20) Christ lives in us!

So often in our daily lives, we forget how mighty God is and that we ALWAYS need Him. We forget that He is forever REAL and PRESENT, that we have direct access to Him. In fact, sometimes we get so caught up and absorbed in what we want or need that we completely IGNORE Him. How does it feel when we are invisible to someone? When we really like someone, appreciate them, and love who they are, but they don't pay any attention to us? We lavish them with gifts, show them great love and affection, and even sacrifice for them and they still don't even give us the time of day. Some would say that it is no RELATIONSHIP at all. How often do we do the same to Jesus? How many times do we turn to Him, only when we need Him?

In crisis, we yell out, "Where are you, God?" We call on Him when we come to REALIZE that we REALLY do need Him! That He alone is our refuge and strength. (Psalm 46:1) He has already proved His love through His death and resurrection, and through His Spirit He has given us everything we need to move through this, or any other trial. He is with us. He is as close as our breath. His Holy Spirit in us, is greater than the Enemy in this world. (1 John 4:4)

We have to remember, the Coronavirus didn't catch God by surprise. He knew this was going to happen and He knows what is going to happen next. It's not our job to try to understand why this happened, but it is to trust God and move closer to Him. As we move closer to God, He will draw near to us. (James 4:8) Isaiah 59:1 provides confidence that, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear."

Many people are using this time to reestablish what is important...not just to them, but what is important to God. We have a tendency to wander from God by building up other little "g" gods in our busy lives. Some of these things might include TV shows, movies, social media, and endless gaming, and even meaningful activities, like school, sports, social clubs, food, friendships and family, can take all our time and focus, being

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valued before God. Jesus provided us a clear order that we are to love the Lord our God with ALL of our heart, with ALL of our strength, and with ALL of our minds, and, second, love our neighbor as ourselves. (Luke 10:27; Deuteronomy 6:4-7; Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31) 2 Corinthians 5:15 confirms, "and He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again." We can easily forget that we were made to serve Him, honor Him, and praise Him with our lives, first and foremost. We are to live for Him. Jesus reassures us in Matthew 6:33 when He is speaking about not worrying by saying, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." When we seek Him and trust Him first, we receive the benefit of His peace.

The title of this study applies more than ever: Life's Big Stresses Call for One Big God. Through this study, as we lean into our Savior, we will come to really know that there is no crisis or circumstance that is bigger than our God. We will learn to wait on Him, experience His love, to understand who we are in Christ Jesus, grow in the knowledge of His Word, and to walk in RELATIONSHIP with Him. This life can be stressful...why wouldn't we do it walking together with the God of this universe? In times of joy or when life is totally out of control, we need the love, peace, and joy of Jesus. We need our Savior.

Please be aware of the delicacy of the theology in this study. When "choices in thinking" are discussed, we are not indicating that your life will be better or that "bad" things will not happen if you think the way God describes in Scripture. The research on how we think only serves to demonstrate what happens neurologically and physiologically when our thinking follows God's Word. The "thinking" relevant to this study is not "prosperity theology" where we create our own world based on our thoughts. It is also not advocating the psychology of "the power of positive thinking," because it is not the "thinking" that has the power, but God's design and spirit as we walk in it. In this study, "choices in thinking" means choosing to learn, think, and do what God says is true and good, and the demonstration through research which shows what actually happens in our God-designed bodies when we align our thoughts with God's Word as illustrated in Philippians 4:8-9.

Leader's notes are in red throughout.

Study 1: The Only Real Superhero

INTRODUCTION

Starting off, we are going to do a little experiment. God has given us this precious ability to visualize future possible experiences and remember events from the past. For just a minute, close your eyes and imagine one of the most wonderful moments in your life or a moment in your life you are looking forward to in the future. Take your time with all the details of this moment in time, including sights and sounds, and any emotions you feel.

Wait silently for a few minutes to allow students to access their moment. Ask anyone to share how it feels to remember that special moment or look forward to a possible future one.

Living those moments are amazing, even just imagining those moments provide us such a sense of peace and contentment. Life can be beautiful, joyful, and sweet. And, we also know that life can sometimes be hard, frightening, and even deeply painful. Life has its share of big stresses. Thankfully, we have THE one REAL and PRESENT God of the universe! That's right, life's big stresses call for one BIG God!

No one is exempt from the stresses of life, so we might as well have the one true God walking through it with us. Yes, that is the one Almighty Father who loves us eternally, the one Lord Jesus who holds all the power and authority of the universe, and the one Holy Spirit who dwells within us. The one Creator who thought us up before the foundation of the earth and the one Savior who conquered sin, death and the devil to save us forever. The one who knows us completely and loves us fully. The one who wants to be in an eternal relationship with us. Yes, He actually wants to hang out with us, be there for us when we need Him and comfort us in times of distress. To put it simply, life is going to be stressful, do we want to do this stressful life with or without Jesus? It seems so obvious, but with all the distractions of this world and deception of the Enemy, it is easy to forget our identity is in Christ and we forget just how big God really is and what He has already done for us.

There is a fabulous t-shirt I love to share with people. The shirt shows Jesus sitting around talking with all the superheroes, who are intently listening to Him. Jesus is quoted saying, "And that is how I saved the world!" Most people have seen at least one superhero movie, if not ALL of them. We know Spiderman, Batman, Aquaman, all the X-Men, Black Panther, Wonderwoman, the Avengers, and so many other fictional characters. Of course, all of them have super powers, a passion for justice, and, don't forget, the elaborate back stories. These characters are awe inspiring as they "save" their citizens just in time, although usually with plenty of collateral damage. Just as the superheroes on the t-shirt are so impressed that Jesus saved the entire world in one single action of His awesome love, we have the opportunity everyday to remember, renew, and celebrate this truth with our lives.

Key Point:
No one is exempt from the stresses of life, so we might as well have the one true God walking through it with us.

INTO THE WORD

Read John 3:16-17.

Why did Jesus come?

To save us

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And by the way, when we do take the opportunity to remember what Jesus did for us, it has a similar effect as when we remember those precious moments in our life. We usually feel much better than before we remembered. You already did your first stress reduction exercise! Way to go!

Yes, remembering what Jesus did for us and why is a huge stress reducer! Even though we have head-knowledge that approximately 2000 years ago Jesus actually walked the face of this earth in the flesh, we forget or haven't experienced the heart-knowledge of the truth and POWER of Jesus' REAL heroism in our daily lives. Let's walk through the reality of this. Although He is the only person conceived through the Holy Spirit by our Heavenly Father, He was born in the flesh just like you and me. He grew up by learning to crawl, walk, talk, and eventually run and play. He learned to read, write, be curious, and study God's Word. Have you ever tried to imagine what Jesus was like as a kid? It's kind of a trip to picture Jesus as a teenager, around your same age, but He was. I wonder what pressures He faced. I imagine there were certain expectations His family had for Him like chores, studies, maybe helping with siblings. He may have had responsibilities in His community and the synagogue. As a teen, His body and brain were growing and changing, and we all know how uncomfortable and anxiety producing that can be!

Read Luke 2:40-52.

What did we learn about Jesus as an early teen?

What characteristics do you imagine Jesus developed in His teen years and early 20s based on verse 52?

Jesus did the business of His Father. He lived preaching, teaching, truth-telling, loving, and healing. Now this is the part that leaves the superheroes speechless! As a righteous man, He was tortured and died, He atoned for our sins through His precious blood on that cross, then rose again, as witnessed by hundreds of people, and returned to heaven until one day when He will come for us. Besides these 500 witnesses seeing Jesus resurrected, once skeptic Lee Strobel who wrote *The Case for Christ*, researched for himself the truth and power of this awesome miracle. He found more evidence for Jesus's existence and resurrection than for most other documented figures accepted in our current history books.

Here is a reality check. Everyone take your right hand and gently touch the front and back of your left hand. Feel the realness of your skin. Notice the temperature, texture, and weight of your flesh. Now shake a friend's hand. Your hand and your friend's hand is tangible and you can feel it. Jesus is just as real and walked the face of this earth like us! In fact, it doesn't get more real than knowing that Jesus's hands, which are just like the one you just touched, were nailed to a hard, rough, wooden cross through the skin and muscles...for real...and for us.

Read two different translations (NLT or TPT) and (NKJV or ESV) of Ephesians 2:1-10. Why do we need to be "SAVED"?

Read 1 John 4:10.

Based on Ephesians 2:4-5 and 1 John 4:10, why did He save us?

What thoughts or feelings do you have about what Jesus did for you?

Look at the contrast between the fantasy version of superheroes and how God saves.

In Jesus' time, there were many devoted and faithful Jewish people who believed that the Messiah was going to come and rule Israel by taking back leadership from the oppressive Romans by force, just like you might see in a superhero movie. He loves all of us. Every single one of us. He had to humble Himself and sacrifice Himself, so WE could live free, redeemed, and eternally. As Creator, God established that sin is atoned through blood as our life is in our

Key Point:
Remembering what Jesus did for us and why is a huge stress reducer!

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blood. Jesus, a man who never sinned, atoned for our sin and that of the entire world through His holy blood shed on that cross.

Read Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 1:3; 1 Peter 3:18; Romans 5:12-21; Philippians 2:5-11.

What was accomplished by Jesus for us?

Jesus swooping in and dominating all earthly power to be the King of Israel would have been an amazing scene and great story for a movie, but it wouldn't have saved us from our own sin, death, and condemnation. This is one of our challenges in dealing with the stresses of our lives. When we don't understand the why and it feels like life down right stinks, we might wonder why God isn't fixing it. When life experiences hurt us and we are in great emotional or physical pain, we want Him to just take it. In those times when we lose someone we love deeply to death and are in despair, we want God to do it our way and change His plans to fit ours. When we don't see God working the way we think He "should", we get anxious, frustrated, bitter, worried...STRESSED! His ways are bigger, better, and more perfect than anything we can even comprehend, but we can certainly relate to the Jewish people.

How often in our life would we want to have Jesus come in like a superhero and conquer our problems by force? Share a time you experienced this feeling.

Just like the Jewish people of Jesus's time, we don't always understand why God has a different plan or method than we think He should have. But unlike the Jewish people 2000 years ago, we have the whole story. Most didn't recognize that Jesus was the Messiah that fulfilled prophecy and was the one they had been waiting for.

Read Hebrews 10:12-18.

Since we have the whole story in His Word, how could we apply the fulfilment of Jesus's story to our life story?

Key Point:
When we don't see God working the way we think He "should", we get anxious, frustrated, bitter, worried...
STRESSED! His ways are bigger, better, and more perfect than anything we can even comprehend.

HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new scriptural knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today:

Study 2: The Roaring Waters of our Life

INTRODUCTION

Last week we learned what Jesus did to save us because of His great love for us. We also discussed the expectation the Jewish people had of Jesus coming to rule as the king of Israel, but God knew that wouldn't have accomplished eternally saving us, so He did it a better way. Just like many of the people of Jesus's time, we want God to conquer the stresses in our life and do it our way, too. In John 16:33, Jesus Himself said, "In this life you will have trouble." In this lesson, we will take some time to examine some of these main troubles or stresses in our life.

The focus was on Psalm 46 at the 2019 LCMS National Youth Gathering with the theme "REAL. PRESENT. GOD." As we prepare to look at those areas of our lives that are stressful, let's read two different translations (NLT or TPT) and (NKJV or ESV) of Psalm 46. With any of the translations, answer these questions.

What are the stressful events in this Psalm? Underline the events that might be stressful.

What does God do? Circle all the things God does.

How does He tell us to respond to Him?

What are some of your "earth giving way" and "roaring waters" stresses in your life?

Take some time to share some of your current life stresses. Do you share some similar stresses with each other? Are some very different? Are some of you in different phases of stress (beginning, middle, toward the end of it)? Can you see the intensity of the stress change over time?

Stress is a normal part of life. We can experience stress through the environment around us, our bodies, and our thoughts. Stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand, perceived or real. Every type of demand or stressor—such as exercise, work, school, major life changes, or traumatic events—can be stressful. Even events that we are excited about, like prom, graduation or a first date, can produce experience of stress.

As we have already discussed, God doesn't always swoop down and take our stress away, but He does teach us how to respond in stressful situations.

Key Point:
God doesn't always swoop down and take our stress away, but He does teach us how to respond in stressful situations.

INTO THE WORD

Read Psalm 94:19. This Psalm encourages us with this reminder, "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation (comfort, reassurance, kindness, mercy, counseling) brought me joy."

What kind of "consolation" does God give? How have you experienced God consoling you in the midst of stress?

The Word provides plenty of examples of the Israelites being completely provided for by God, but as their situation becomes more stressful, they forget to look to His consolation.

Read Exodus 14:1-12.

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What was the stressful situation and how did God's people initially respond? How do you think you might have responded?

Imagine yourself as an Israelite wandering in the desert for forty years with no choice of food, no Chick-Fil-A, or any fast food, no choice of shoes or clothes, or shops to buy them, no cell network available, oh, and no phones, and no coffee shops on every corner for a quick latte. In the book of Exodus, we witness the children of Israel face to face with some extreme stressors.

After the Israelites left Egypt, God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh and his greatest army pursued them into the desert. The Israelites became trapped between the Egyptian army closing in and the Red Sea. The initial reaction of the Israelites was to complain to Moses that they were better off serving the Egyptians than dying in the wilderness. When we consider a contrast in our responses, on one hand, we might imagine it is difficult to believe that God can do anything, even if it seems impossible to us. On the other hand, they had witnessed God's great works in Egypt by saving them through the horrible plagues and experiencing the first Passover.

Read Exodus 14:13-31.

How did Moses respond to the stress? How did God respond in this stressful situation? How do you imagine the Israelites felt after God resolved the situation? What do you think they learned about how big God is in stressful situations?

Moses responds by telling them to not be afraid and that God Himself will fight for them. God tells Moses to lift his staff to divide the sea and He sent an Angel of God to move behind Israel as a pillar of cloud making it dark for Pharaoh's army and light for the Israelites. Verse 31 says that "the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and His servant Moses." They may have been in awe, felt relieved, or possibly sitting in shock from all the great works of the Lord. This Red Sea experience is referenced many times in Scripture as a source of strength and remembrance that God is real, present, and mighty. (Nehemiah 9:11, Isaiah 51:10, Joshua 2:10, Isaiah 63:11-13, Psalm 106:7-12, Hebrews 11:23-29)

Reread Psalm 46:1. How was God REAL and PRESENT for the Israelites?

God showed up in a very physical and supernatural way to be "a proven help in times of trouble" by protecting them and hiding them from Pharaoh's army by giving them the pillar of cloud with light by night and cloud by day, by dividing the sea like a wall on the right and the left and dry ground to walk, and by bringing the sea back to full upon the whole Egyptian army once the Israelites were safely across to shore. That would have been AMAZING to experience all that happening right in front of their own eyes!

In upcoming lessons, we will be practicing some helpful responses to stress, but today let's just continue to explore some personal experiences of our own and of others.

The American Psychological Association's annual Stress in America report in 2018 found that 91% of Gen Z, ages 15-21, had experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety associated with stress. That is a huge number. Let's look at Brynn's experience, as a fellow Gen Z-er. This is an excerpt from *Teen Magazine* called "Overcoming Teen Depression and Anxiety: Brynn's Story by Brynn."

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I have always been a quieter kid, so when I started retreating into myself my junior year, it seemed like no one noticed. I got two to four hours of sleep a night, ate infrequently, felt worthless, and began to lose interest in everything—classes, friends. As time went on, I became more and more convinced that this was just how I was. I would think about asking for help and then be afraid of being a burden on my friends and family—constantly reinforcing the idea that they did not want me around. I woke up every morning crying and dragged myself out of bed, feeling like I was carrying around a 50-pound backpack.

Despite this, I kept up my grades and my parents had no idea what was happening; they were frustrated with me for being “too sensitive.”

That winter, I began wanting to hurt myself. I finally worked up the courage to say something to my mom, and she was adamant it was just PMS. My confidence was crushed. And my symptoms only got worse. My relationship with my parents deteriorated as we fought more and more. My siblings, whom I used to be so close with, now asked me “where the old Brynn was” when I snapped at them. It took all my energy just to get through the day.

Eventually that summer, I confessed to my friends how I had been feeling—the worthlessness, the suicidal thoughts. But what could they do? I was entrusting them with something way too important and complicated for 16-year-olds to handle. As the summer went by, I became increasingly fixated on my weight, weighing myself daily, over-exercising, and restricting myself to one meal a day.

Then it was time for school again. I felt crushed and helpless with all the pressures of college admissions, my job, orchestra, good grades, a varsity sport. That’s when the anxiety attacks started. In a way, I think they saved me. The overwhelming shaking and hyperventilating was something physical my parents could see, and that’s when they urged me to see the school guidance counselor. She almost immediately referred me to a therapist who right away saw the bigger issue—depression.

Can you relate to some of Brynn's experiences or know of friends or classmates who can? Stress is a very real challenge, especially for your age group. Which is why it is so important to remember as we did earlier in this lesson, that God is very REAL and very PRESENT in times of stress, even when we still need to walk through it. He is with us. He wants to help us. He is waiting for us to turn to Him. He is our best friend and Savior!

Key Point:
God is very
REAL and very
PRESENT in
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HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new biblical knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today:

Study 3: Earthquakes and Angel Birds

INTRODUCTION

In the last lesson, we discussed some of our stresses and our human responses to stress. We also learned how the Israelites responded both before and after God saved them. This week we will explore some ways we respond to stress and we will study what His Word teaches are helpful responses when we remember God as our REAL and PRESENT help.

I shared some results from a survey on Stress in America by The American Psychological Association. Here are a few more results. They found that Gen Z-ers are most likely of all generations to report the poorest mental health and are more likely to seek a professional for help in mental health issues. This survey also shared that 3 out of 4 Gen Zs are stressed about mass shootings and they report more stress than adults regarding the rise of suicide, issues with climate change, and sexual harassment. Would you agree with this survey? Why or why not?

As we know, stress is a natural part of living in this world. Stress can affect our response to things around us, within us and our ability to move through those experiences. Just as the Israelites dealt with some life and death stressors, in Psalm 46, we get a feel for some more major stressors, like "though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." These are some SERIOUSLY threatening stressors! We shared some of our stresses earlier, and many of these feel just as big in our lives!

For actress Brittany Snow, her chronic stress for nine years was body image. She struggled with anorexia and had to learn how to love her natural body in the midst of the unrealistic body standards placed on us by society.

For actor James Franco, it was addiction and working so hard he found himself in a battle with depression.

For many high school students, the schedule of sports, or band, and the pressures of getting good grades and testing for college entrance can be overwhelming and exhausting as we deal with OUR "roaring waters and quaking mountains".

In previous lessons, we have shared many stresses in our lives. Write down these stresses and any others you think of on a large poster board. Once the list is complete, give everyone the opportunity to circle the ones that they relate to as well.

Which stresses were circled the most? Share why those are the most stressful?

INTO THE WORD

We need God as our refuge and strength in this troubled world. God's Word is one of our strengths as we study how real people of God in history dealt with stress. In Philippians, Paul speaks about being content in the midst of some extremely stressful circumstances. Paul writes in Philippians 4:12-13, "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 all this through him who gives me strength."

Key Point:
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Read Acts 16:16-24 together.

What kinds of stresses were Paul and Silas dealing with?

Can you think of a time you felt like everyone was ganging up on you?

Paul and Silas were preaching the gospel and staying in Philippi. When they cast a demon out of a slave girl whose masters were making lots of money by her fortune-telling and she was no longer able to tell fortunes, the masters were angry because they no longer were profiting. The masters and others brought them before the authorities. Paul and Silas were accused of teaching unlawful things and many rose up against them, tore their close, beat them, and put them in the most secure part of the prison in stocks.

Now continue reading in Acts 16:25-34.

How did Paul and Silas respond to their stressful day?

On my most stressful days, I would certainly find it difficult to choose singing hymns of praise.

What do you think allowed them to respond like that?

What great act did God do for Paul and Silas and for the main prison guard?

There is our REAL...PRESENT...BIG superhero, doing things behind the scenes and on the front line again. If it was up to Paul and Silas, they may have preferred a safe and quiet evening singing praises to God with friends at a welcoming home, but God had better plans.

Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. A variety of answers may be given for the questions about what allowed them to respond like that. Some might say it could be their trust in God's faithfulness and the power of the Holy Spirit, or their belief, the experiences of God's miracles, or Paul's experience of conversion on the road to Damascus, etc.

God then made an earthquake to release Paul and Silas and used it to bring many, including the jail guard to Christ.

In upcoming lessons, we will be practicing some of Paul's strategies of turning to Christ Jesus as our strength in all things. Paul was able to find contentment through the pain, trials, and the circumstances of life, rather than being paralyzed with serious life and death stresses. We have discovered our stresses, now let's explore how we currently respond to them.

Many times we isolate ourselves and allow the Enemy to bombard us with lies about ourselves or God until we feel anxious, depressed, and overwhelmed. Sometimes we distract ourselves from the pain by numbing out our emotions through gaming or unhealthy substances. Sometimes we take more risks or self-harm to feel physical pain greater than our emotional pain.

How do you usually respond when you are feeling overwhelmed by stress? Have you ever felt like you couldn't handle one more bad thing happening in your day? Have you ever felt like one more trouble in your life might break you?

There are a number of responses we can have to stress. List them together on a white board or large poster board.

Read Psalm 5:1-2

How is King David responding to stress?

What does it mean to cry out and lament?

Key Point:
Many times we isolate ourselves and allow the Enemy to bombard us with lies about ourselves or God until we feel anxious, depressed, and overwhelmed.

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There have been many times in my life I have cried out to God. Some of those times I got the response I wanted, sometimes God had other, better, plans. Sometimes I could see how He was working for my good and His glory at the time or later, sometimes I can't. When we know the character of God, whether we see how He is working or not, we can trust that He is.

I would like to share a personal experience about a time in my life I felt completely overwhelmed, hopeless, and broken. My stress limit was maxed out and I felt defeated! This is now a part of my testimony of faith, because when I cried out to God in my lament, my superhero showed up. Jesus is REAL and PRESENT in our lives.

I went through a challenging time in my life. I was scared, depressed, stuck, and hopeless because I found myself in a situation that felt unfixable, unchangeable, and I was afraid. On Easter Sunday after church, I walked outside to my backyard to try to find a small sense of comfort and peace. My yard was green with trees and flowers and usually had birds chirping or breaking the silence of the air with songs. I pulled up two chairs, one to sit on and one for my feet. I sat alone with a lump in my throat, feeling the pain in my heart and the tears in my eyes. In all my years believing in Him, praying to Him, learning to trust in Him, I never asked God to show me a sign, any sign to let me know everything was going to be okay. It was one of the shortest prayers I have ever prayed, but I know that God knew the pain in my heart. "Please show me, God."

Psalms 34:18 says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

As my request went up to heaven, I heard a loud chirp from across the patio in a group of small trees. I had just turned my head to look in the direction of the noise when I saw a robin-like bird with long tail feathers fly right under my long patio table to perch on the closest table leg next to me. I was stunned. Why would a bird, who clearly sees me here, come this close to me? From this point-on, I wish I could have done the rest in slow motion, because it was so cool, I always want to remember this! Looking right at the bird, I watched it fly from the table leg right onto my lap! It sat for a moment on my left thigh and looking around it looked up at me. You don't have to watch too many National Geographic to know that this is a very vulnerable position for a bird to be in, so it is not a common behavior. When that bird looked up into my eyes, I received, what I can only describe as, a Holy Spirit message. This message was not spoken out loud and it was not a thought form, I knew it bypassed the natural into the supernatural. The message was clear in these words, "Everything is going to be okay." As soon as I received the provided message, a peace washed over me. Then as quickly as it popped on my lap, it jumped down my leg, then onto the chair back with my feet, and flew off. I sat there in shock, but so very grateful. I felt a peace and a calm that I hadn't sat in for some time. Although my situation didn't change right away, just like Jesus did not become Israel's King, I knew that my God heard my cry and that He is real. I could continue walking in the confidence of knowing that my Lord Jesus is REAL and so very PRESENT. I learned that He was trustworthy. From then on, I remind myself, just as Scripture does, that God will be with me always and He has always been there whether I could see Him or not.

This experience taught me that even when it is NOT okay around me, I am okay because He is with me.

Key Point:
If we understand that Christ is REAL and PRESENT in every moment of our lives even if He doesn't respond the way we want Him to, we are more likely to come to Him daily as our greatest resource for stress reduction!

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This can be challenging to remember, because although God is ALWAYS WITH US through the Holy Spirit, we don't always FEEL the presence of God. So, even though I don't always FEEL His presence or see what He is doing, or have a bird sit on my lap, the experience provided me with a measure of faith and trust, as well as a testimony to share of His lovingkindness toward me. If we understand that Christ is REAL and PRESENT in every moment of our lives even if He doesn't respond the way we want Him to, we are more likely to come to Him daily as our greatest resource for stress reduction!

Read John 14:26-27.

How does my experience relate to what the Holy Spirit provides as described by this scripture?

Read Psalm 77.

Based on this scripture and John 14, why is remembering what God has done in our lives and others' lives so important?

Read Psalm 56:3-4; Psalm 16:8; Isaiah 40:31; Philippians 4:6-7.

What does God's Word teach as a response to stress?

What is one word from each scripture to summarize what we can do?

Write them in big letters across the list of our other responses to stress.

How can responding to stress God's way make a difference in our stress level?

As we spend time in His Word, talking with Him in prayer, and giving Him praise daily for what He has done for us, we get to experience more strength, faith, and peace. We learn quickly that this response helps reduce our stress!

Key Point:
As we spend time in His Word, talking with Him in prayer, and giving Him praise daily for what He has done for us, we get to experience more strength, faith, and peace. We learn quickly that this response helps reduce our stress!

HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new biblical knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today:

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Study 4: Our Unseen Battle

INTRODUCTION

Remember the verse from John 16:3, "In this life you will have troubles." What is the source of these "troubles" or stresses in our lives? Fortunately, Jesus goes on in this same verse to say, "But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Why is it helpful to know some of the sources for our stress?

So we don't blame God, so we know what to be aware of or look for, and so we can have a plan how to do it differently next time.

We will be discussing the enemies of peace and some producers of stress in our lives: the world, our flesh, and Satan. These three are part of living in a sinful and fallen world. As we explore how each enemy affects stress in our lives, we need to remember that Jesus already has victory over all things and He shares this victory with us as described in Ephesians 2. The bottom line is that WE NEED JESUS to defeat ALL of these enemies! To keep this on the forefront of your mind.

Key Point:
Jesus already has victory over all things and He shares this victory with us.

INTO THE WORD

Read Colossians 1:19-23 out loud. The reminder is that Jesus has saved us, ETERNALLY!

Read Romans 8:31-39.

What does Romans 8 confirm?

That's right. No matter the enemy, "nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord".

LET'S LOOK AT WHAT THE WORD SAYS ABOUT STRESS THAT COMES FROM THE WORLD.

Read 1 John 2:16-17:

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

What is the lust of the flesh?

Craving for anything that gratifies the senses; ungodly desires of the heart. Example: Sensual pleasures

How does this stress show up in your life?

What is the lust of the eyes?

What we see we want; never having enough

Example: Material wealth; coveting

How does this stress show up in your life?

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What is the pride of life?

Inflates our own prestige and ego; Idolatry

Example: Needing Attention

How does this stress show up in your life?

NOW LET'S LOOK AT WHAT THE WORD SAYS ABOUT STRESS THAT COMES FROM THE FLESH.

Martin Luther speaks regarding our flesh:

“Original sin is in us like our beard. We shave today and look clean; tomorrow our beard has grown again, nor does it cease growing while we remain on earth. In like manner original sin cannot be extirpated {destroyed completely} from us; it springs up in us as long as we live.”

Read Genesis 4:3-7:

In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Read Galatians 5:16-21.

What is our flesh?

Our old man/self with fallen self-centered nature

How does this stress show up in your life?

LET'S LOOK AT WHAT THE WORD SAYS ABOUT STRESS THAT COMES FROM THE ENEMY, SATAN.

Read John 10:10:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Jesus speaks on Satan's motives in this world. Remember in the beginning of this lesson we discussed why it is important to know these sources? Many times when stress is overwhelming us, we turn on God and blame Him for our situation. However, many times our situation directly results from the Enemies work or how he uses the world and our flesh to “steal, kill, and destroy”. Keep John 10:10 close in memory, because one of Satan's lies is to tell us that God is stealing, killing, or destroying, when the truth is as Jesus said. Jesus came so we could have life and have it fully.

Read 1 Peter 5:8-10; James 4:7-8; 2 Corinthians 4:18; Revelations 12:9

What are the characteristics of the Enemy?

Comes to destroy, accuse, torment, distort, steal, seduce, tempt, murder...He is a liar, subtle, crafty, and has studied us well.

Wants to dethrone God in our life, destroy God's creation, and steal our Identity

Key Point:
One of Satan's lies is to tell us that God is stealing, killing, or destroying, when the truth is as Jesus said. Jesus came so we could have life and have it fully.

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How does this stress show up in your life?

Read Matthew 4:1-11 together. On a whiteboard, in one column, write down the words Satan uses each of the three times he tempts Jesus. In a column next to Satan's words write down which category Satan was trying to use: the world, His flesh, or Satan...I know all three are "Satan," but the others may have been used, too. Then in a third column, write down Jesus's responses to the tempter. Bonus points for anyone who can tell the group what book of the Bible Jesus quotes in His responses!

Accept reasonable answers, but suggest:

- 1. Satan says, "turn these stones to bread"- Flesh- as we want to satisfy our own needs or lust of the flesh which are the cravings of our bodily senses (Jesus response from Deuteronomy 8:3)*
- 2. Satan says, "throw yourself down"- Pride of Life or ego (Jesus response from Deuteronomy 6:16)*
- 3. Satan says, "I will give you these things"- Lust of the eyes or coveting (Jesus response from Deuteronomy 6:13)*

Jesus uses Scripture to reply to each of Satan's temptations. Each of Jesus' responses are found in Deuteronomy. Notice the power of God's Word to defeat the power of all the enemies. Notice, Satan can't give any of those things he offered...he told Jesus to do it, because Jesus has the power.

Thank you, Jesus, for being perfect in every way! You never sinned, even though you were tempted! As Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet he did not sin."

God's Word tells us to separate ourselves from the way of the world, deny our flesh, and resist the devil. Temptation plagues us all and we are not perfect like Jesus. We learned from Jesus' response to Satan in Matthew 4 that there is power of God's Word which helps us defeat our enemies. Check out Ephesians 6:17, where God equips us with the weapon of His Word to conquer the lies of the Enemy.

Read Ephesians 6:10-18.

How do each of these weapons equip us for battling temptation?

Here is an example of a Spiritual Warfare Battle Plan.

1. PRAY
2. BE ALERT & FOCUS ON HIS WORD
3. FILL YOUR MIND WITH SCRIPTURE
4. REBUKE LIES WITH BIBLICAL TRUTHS
5. REASSERT YOUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST JESUS
6. PRAISE GOD
7. PRAY...REPEAT!

How is the armor of God a part of these plans? What would you add, or change for your own Battle Plan?

Take a few minutes to write your own. Feel free to use any part of this one too.

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This brings us to the Gospel, the Good News of Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior. God defeated the enemy and He has given us His authority through the blood of Jesus. He is equipping us through the power of His Word and to use our Battle Plan.

HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new scriptural knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today:

Key Point:
God defeated the enemy and He has given us His authority through the blood of Jesus. He is equipping us through the power of His Word and to use our Battle Plan.

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Leader Notes

Study 5: Designed to Thrive

INTRODUCTION

In last week's lesson, we learned that the world, our flesh, and Satan are some sources of our stress. These enemies are no match for how God made us and what He provides us as we deal with the stresses of life. We also developed a Battle Plan based on the armor of God in Ephesians 6 which we can continue to practice daily so we can be effective on the battlefield. Now, let's explore what superpowers God has given us and how He designed us to thrive in this life, even with all the challenges.

Read Genesis 1:26-27.

How did God make us?

Read 2 Peter 1:3-4.

What has God given us?

Read 2 Timothy 1:7.

What else has God given us?

Did you realize how God made you?

What difference could it make in your day when you remember the truths of these Scriptures?

So we know we are made in His image, we know we have everything we need as God gives us power, love, and a sound mind. Great! It is helpful to remember who we are.

Why is it so challenging to remember our God-given strengths? What gets in our way?

Key Point:
We are made in His image, we know we have everything we need as God gives us power, love, and a sound mind.

INTO THE WORD

Let's "flip" back to Philippians 4:8-9. Remember I said we would go back to what Paul wrote about how we are called to respond to the stresses of this life. Reread this Scripture together.

What does Paul tell us to think about? What does he say the result of this thinking will be?

On a large piece of posterboard, make a vertical list of the way Paul tells us to think. Opposite of that, write the antonyms of each word across from them. Write a real life example of a way of thinking that fits that word description for each.

Discuss the difference between these ways of thinking.

Now bend the poster back so that only the Paul way to think is showing.

If you chose to listen to Paul's teaching, how would the shift in focus of your thinking be helpful in responding to stressful situations in your life?

How do you suppose making this way of thinking a habit, or as Paul refers to "putting these things into practice" make a difference in our overall stress level?

Let's build on this Scripture with another. Read Romans 12:2.

What does Paul mean when he tells us to "be transformed by the renewing of our mind"?

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How do Philippians 4 and Romans 12 support each other?

In the lesson prior we explored some sources we contend with in this life that contribute to our life stress. Read 2 Corinthians 10:4-5.

Paul is letting us know that this battle is real and that through our Lord Jesus Christ and the weapons He provides us and with His help, we can "pull down strongholds, cast down arguments, and anything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God."

What does it mean to "bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ"?

As we bring all three of these Scriptures together, 2 Corinthians 10:4-5; Romans 12:2; Philippians 4:8, how can we apply these awesome truths to our lives to help reduce our stress?

HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new scriptural knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today:

Key Point:
This battle is real and through our Lord Jesus Christ and the weapons He provides us and with His help, we can "pull down strongholds, cast down arguments, and anything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God."

Study 6: Our Identity in Christ

INTRODUCTION

In last week's lesson, Paul taught us the importance of our focus of thinking and to bring our thoughts under the obedience of Christ. This brings us back to the cross. Our response to Jesus on the cross is the power of Christ living in us. It is not only a relationship, but it defines who we are and how we live.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19.

What does His Word say about who we are?

It is Jesus conquering the stress in our lives by prepaying our sin debt, by defeating the Enemy, and by establishing a new covenant based on complete atonement and love. In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind...you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's all about love!

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21.

Again, what does His Word say about who we are?

In light of knowing who we are and we look at Jesus, beaten and unrecognizable on that cross, what is our response?

Do we turn away and pretend we don't see Him, so we can continue to do whatever we want based on how we feel or what we think according to our flesh?

Do we appreciate what He did for us, but not recognize the fullness and power in our lives of what His loving and heroic sacrifice really did for us as the world distracts us?

Do we stare and not feel worthy to accept this great love freely given as a gift to simply be received as the Enemy lies to us?

Or do we recognize and acknowledge this great love poured out for us with full awareness of the power and truth of Jesus's fulfillment of God's Word and respond by giving our love and lives to Him?

Key Point:
Our response to Jesus on the cross is the power of Christ living in us. It is not only a relationship, but it defines who we are and how we live.

INTO THE WORD

Most of us can relate to responding each of the ways described above. Consider for a moment examples of how you have responded to each by how you live your life.

Share and write down each response on a white board or large poster board.

When we fully recognize the significance of what Jesus did for us, and how much He loves us, we understand that our identity, which is who we are, is totally defined by Christ and not us! It is not our power, our abilities, our strength, or our intellect, that defines us, but it is Christ alone who establishes who we are. Him in us! His power in us! His love in us! His Spirit in us! Christ Himself in us!

Read Galatians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:14-15.

What is this Scripture confirming?

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Read Galatians 4:4-7 and 1 John 3:1. So Christ is living in us and we are adopted into our Heavenly Father's eternal family. So our identity is confirmed. We are in a royal and holy lineage with all the authority, responsibility, and humility of our King. That is who we are through our Lord Jesus Christ!

It is so clear! What gets in our way of knowing this? Well remember, we have the knowledge that Satan doesn't like this. Remember his plans for us are based on John 10:10. He came to "steal, kill, and destroy us." If he can get us to see ourselves as our sin, he can fool us into forgetting we are adopted children of the one true God which is our Christ-given identity. This is identity theft because he wants to steal our identity.

He wants our Identities to be distorted by the world, our flesh, and his lies so we desire power, control, money, looks, possessions, lust, glory, etc.

With this identity theft, we focus on what we do and what others think. We are run by our feelings, our looks, our needs, our flaws, our wounds, our will, and our desires. With these glasses, we put other things that seem more important than God on His throne! We are out of alignment with who we were created to be, so we will have more experiences of feeling lost, confused, helpless, afraid, alone, rejected, incomplete, unknown, invisible, depressed, anxious, fragile, never enough, unsatisfied, worried, hopeless.

Read Galatians 5:1.

How do Pauls' words apply to Satan's identity theft?

Now let's go back to God's plan for us. Jeremiah 29:11 describes His plan to "prosper us, give us a hope and a future." Let's compare the results of what happens with Satan's identity theft compared to knowing our identity is solid in Christ Jesus.

Our Identity in Christ Jesus is made clear through knowing, receiving, and giving the love of Christ. Take a minute to give examples of each: knowing, receiving, and giving the love of Christ. Knowing our true identity in Christ, we focus on what God has done and what He says about us. We focus on things like God's love for us and others, His will, His guidance, His Word, and our relationship with Him. With these glasses, He remains on the throne of our hearts! When we are in complete alignment with who we were created to be, we will likely have more experiences of feeling included, stable minded, empowered, courageous, connected, accepted, complete, known, seen, joyful, assured, confident, always enough, satisfied, calm, hopeful.

Have students act out the skit "Life's Big Stresses Call for One Big God."

Read Colossians 2:6-7.

How can we continue to have our identity "rooted and built up in Him"?

HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new scriptural knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today:

Key Point:
Our identity is confirmed.
We are in a royal and holy lineage with all the authority, responsibility, and humility of our King.
That is who we are through our Lord Jesus Christ!

A PDF of Life's Big Stresses Call for One Big God can be found at <http://www.youthsource.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Lifes-Big-Stresses-Call-for-One-Big-God-Skit.pdf>

Study 7: Cast our cares on Him

INTRODUCTION

As we complete this study, we recognize more and more how loved we are by our Heavenly Father. Our Heavenly Father shows us this from the beginning as He created the beautiful garden providing for us and to be with us, then as He sent Jesus to atone for us through His death and resurrection, and even now, He continues to work in us through the Holy Spirit.

From birth, we begin forming attachment bonds with our caregivers. As infants, when we are under "stress," whether we are hungry, tired, cold or in desperate need of a diaper change, we learn who we can count on for help. When our parents comfort us in our stress through their words or actions, we build trust. Loving relationships are built on trust. It feels good when we are around people we know care about us, recognize and express our value, love and accept us, and consider our needs and feelings.

How does being around people like this affect your stress level?

Our Heavenly Father is the only PERFECT parent. He is trustworthy, loving, and our greatest comforter when we are stressed. God knows we do our best, yet there are no perfect earthly parents, and so many times we assume God is imperfect like them. Many times we project our imperfect experiences with our parents onto God. We can use this information to challenge some of the distorted views of God, so we have a more accurate picture of Him. When you know HE is REAL, PRESENT, and never leaves us, the feelings of security and peace tend to follow.

Attachment research supports that many times we transfer onto God the traits that belong to our earthly parents. For example, if we grow up with a more critical parent, we come to think God is critical. If we have a harsh or unforgiving parent, we grow up believing God is harsh and unforgiving. If we experience a parent who we feel doesn't understand us, we think God doesn't understand us. If we grow up with an absent parent, we may think God is absent or rejects us. On the contrary, when we grow up with parents who are mostly, loving, approachable, understanding, and compassionate, we will likely transfer those traits to God... and have the knowingness that God is indeed loving, approachable, understanding, and compassionate. With this, we can be comforted and soothed in our stress knowing that we are in the hands of a powerful and loving Father.

This finding is supported by a research team from the LCMS Youth Ministry in 2017. Their findings show that parents remain the number one person influencing the faith of young adults. They also discovered a profound correlation between young adults who had felt ministered to and supported during life transitions or crisis and those who felt ignored or dismissed. These results demonstrate that during times of change or stress, our key relationships, specifically parents and members of the congregation, have an impact in these times "when faith and community is deepened or lost". Clearly, relationships are of utmost importance in stress reduction.

Read Father's Love Letter. <https://images.app.goo.gl/HwPDK7Q72NMyYLSp6>

What can we say about our Father's love for us based on these Scriptures?

With all this information, what are some of your thoughts about the importance of knowing God accurately and how it can affect us seeing Him as a source of comfort to help reduce stress in our lives?

Key Point:
**When you know
GOD is REAL,
PRESENT, and
never leaves
us, the feelings
of security and
peace tend to
follow.**

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INTO THE WORD

Read John 17:13-26 together. Jesus is praying to the Father with great love for His disciples and all believers. Jesus even included us in His prayer over 2000 years ago.

How does it feel to be thought of, loved, and prayed for by Jesus before you were ever born?

Read Philippians 2:1-11 together.

How does this show that Jesus loves us and we can trust Him?

Now continue with Philippians 2:12-16.

How do we "shine as lights in the world"?

I want to share an abbreviated story from a sermon by Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke based on an experience he had while speaking and discussing the power of the blood of Jesus with an atheist. The atheist contended that there is no power in the blood of Jesus because the blood of Jesus is already 2000 years in this world and the world is in the worst shape than it has ever been. The atheist continued by saying that since the presence of the blood of Jesus in this world has not made it better, he says it has no power. Bonnke replied, well, there is soap in this world, yet many people are still dirty. Bonnke continued that you can stand next to the bar of soap, you can even work at a soap factory, but unless you apply the soap and wash the soap it can't make you clean. When you do apply the soap, you will know the power of it to wash you clean. He said, it's the same with the blood of Jesus when you apply it to your sinful life. He describes the atheist being surprised and impressed with Bonnke's amazing response and passion that he told him you are different from other people I have met. Bonnke responds by saying that he is living evidence that there is power in the blood of Jesus. Bonnke goes on to explain that this atheist accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior in the parking lot after the speaking engagement.

Read 1 John 1:1-4.

How does John's testimony of witnessing the reality of Jesus's power allow our "joy to be full"?

Continue reading 1 John 1:5-9.

What is the connection to walking in the light and the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus? How does Bonnke's testimony tie into this scripture?

In verse 9, what is the action that we are called to take with the sin we become aware of in our own lives? What does God do in response? What does it do for you to know that?

Read Psalm 55:22, Matthew 11:28-30, and 1 Peter 5:6-7 together. Also recall Philippians 4:6-7... worth a reread!

What are we to do with our stresses?

"CAST MY BURDEN" PRAYER

God tells us to lay all of our worries and heavy burdens on Him. We are going to experience a demonstration of this physical and spiritual release of our stresses.

Gather rocks of all different sizes, shapes, colors, and weights. Choose rocks that fit the intensity of each of your stresses, including sins, worries, fears, anxieties, or any other heavy burdens. Write these down on the rocks or on post-it notes, place it on each of the rocks you

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chose. Use the prayer provided, filling in your stresses. After praying each of these to yourself, place your stresses (rock) at the foot of a cross or at a designated area by your youth leader.

Dear Heavenly Father,

You love me with an everlasting love and You demonstrated that when You, Jesus my Lord and Savior, laid down your life for me on that cross. You paid for my salvation and the price of _____. Forgive me for thinking _____ was bigger and more powerful than You. Thank You for forgiving me through Your blood, Jesus. I give You _____ because You are ALL mighty, powerful, and loving, and desire for me to have a peace that only You can give. _____, you will no longer be welcome with me. _____, I renounce you and disown you and I cast you off in the name of Jesus Christ. Thank You, Jesus, for the peace that passes all understanding, that guards my heart and mind through You. In your mighty and loving name, Jesus, I pray. Amen.

HEAD AND HEART

Take a few minutes to answer these questions then please share with the group.

How were some of your thoughts of God challenged today in light of some new scriptural knowledge?

How has God spoken to your heart?

Truths spoken in the Word today: