

Feeling stressed? Congratulations. You are a typical American. Over the last several decades, the United States has become the world champion in the stress category. According to a recent study, Fifty Five percent of Americans feel more stress than they did five years ago, and apparently one third of us are experiencing "extreme stress," which includes symptoms like heart palpitations, shaking, and depression. Did you know that 75% to 90% of visits to the doctor are for stress-related ailments?

The numbers are shocking, especially when we consider the fact that we live in the U.S. and for the most part are pretty well off. We're relatively secure. We have a higher standard of living than most countries. We have better access to good medical care than a vast majority of other countries in the world. And yet many countries, places like Africa, where basics like; food, security and clean water are in short supply, report lower levels of stress than those of us who seem to have it all.

Theories abound as to why our stress is worse than so many others. Some say it's the economy and work-related stress. Others say our loss of community is to blame, as people spend more time with their eyes focused on screens than the faces of family and friends. Related to this, is the mind-numbing amount of information we receive on a daily basis that causes us to fear threats that aren't even related to us.

Ok, so with everything that causes us anxiety and turmoil, how can we beat stress, or at the very least learn to live with it? Well, the classic American answer is to buy our way out of it. In fact, there's now a whole industry that is focused on de-stressing your life while emptying your wallet. Walk around a mall and you'll see opportunities:- to purchase expensive massage chairs; - to get a quick massage at a kiosk. - to sign up for a yoga class at the local gym and contribute to what has become a \$6-billion dollar industry while you strike a Pose. You can even try

sipping a relaxing drink. Instead of the amped-up stress jolt of a Red Bull or Bang energy drink, why not guzzle a Just Chill or a Slow Cow (the anti-Red Bulls).

The truth is, however, that, despite the billions of dollars we're spending on this type of stuff, you just can't buy peace. It isn't something that can be purchased, and it can often take us a lifetime to figure out how to achieve it, if we don't know where to look. Thankfully though, as Children of God it is possible for us to find an answer in scripture, especially if we are willing to take some time to study our second lesson and think about the people it was originally intended for.

The people to whom John was writing had every reason to be way more stressed than we could ever possibly imagine. While his audience isn't clearly identified at the beginning of the letter, the fledgling Christian churches of John's day were often harassed and persecuted. People were losing their livelihoods, and their lives, because of their association with the person and message of Jesus. At a minimum, they would have been ostracized by their pagan and Jewish neighbors for declaring a crucified Messiah as the Lord of the world.

But instead of rolling out the yoga mat, the early Christians actually thrived in the midst of stress and persecution. The first few centuries of Christianity saw it explode in numbers, and influence, to a point that, by the early fourth century, it was the dominant faith and worldview of the very Roman Empire that had sought the church's destruction. Which might make us wonder, how did the early Christians conquer the world, so to speak? The apostle John gives us a clue, and he offers it to us free of charge!

Keep in mind that John was no sage or guru, but he was a witness to the life of Jesus. He shares with us how to live according to the pattern of Christ. For John, the way to peace didn't involve swiping a credit card to get what we need; rather, it involved remembering the gift that God has already given us. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God," says John. If our ceaseless

striving for security and prosperity is the source of much of our stress, John reminds us that the one thing we really need is the one thing we can never buy or earn, and that's our status as children of God.

When we believe that Jesus is God's Son, it's that faith, and not our striving, that makes us part of his family. Every child of God who loves the parent, then, also loves the rest of his children. If isolation and overwork are the causes of much of our stress, John reminds us that God has brought us together by giving us the gift of Jesus Christ, and offering us a whole new community in which we can both give and receive the love God has shared with us. It's out of that love, then, that God gives us guidance about how to conquer the world, and the stress that comes with it. "When we love God and obey his commandments," says John, it becomes the way in which we can love God's other children.

In a world in which a fire hose of information bombards us constantly, obedience to God sets us free from our worry and stress and is the secret of a life of freedom. When we experience the gift of God's love and grace, it becomes the gift around which we orient our lives. We then focus on what we have, rather than what we don't have. We focus on the present, rather than worrying about the future. We know that our future is secure in Christ.

John goes on to say, that the commandments of God are not "burdensome," but that it's through our obedience to God, in response to God's love, that God's children, in faith, "conquer the world." Martin Luther put this another way when he said, "We are not obligated to do good works in order to earn God's favor. We do good works out of our gratitude to a loving God."

Many of the de-stressing devices that people are buying today are all about escaping from the world. Take the Ostrich Pillow, for example. It is a pillow that fits over the head, leaving just a small opening for the mouth and nose, and puts the wearer into a head-in-the-sand kind of posture on a table while a busy airport

bustles around him or her. (You should try looking it up with Google. It's hilarious!)

The Bible, however, wants us to look up and see the world, not as a place from which to escape, but as a place to be claimed in victory. "Who is it that conquers the world, but the one who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" When we believe that Jesus has already conquered the world, we have nothing to fear from it! Tell you what: No one can sell you that kind of peace!

Moving back to the beginning of our narrative for a moment, John informs us that everyone "who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." And during our time on this Earth, as we deal with stress and try to find ways to cope with it, you might say that each of us is on a search for God, a search that is motivated by a deep desire to be connected to our Creator.

A woman named Laurie Capps of Annandale, Virginia, tells the story of her 8-year-old daughter Grace, an only child. Laurie often hears Grace after she has gone to bed, whispering in her room. Sometimes Laurie hears Grace's footsteps at night, scurrying around the house, retrieving a doll or stuffed animal.

One day Grace was whispering and Laurie asked her what she was doing. "I'm playing hide-and-seek with God, Mom." Laurie laughed and told her, "Gracie, honey, don't you think that God can find you anywhere you hide?" She rolled her eyes, "Mom, I'm looking for God."

Each of us, in our own way, is looking for God. For some, the search ends quickly, and for others it is a lifelong quest. The good news is that we can find God in Jesus Christ, the one who is the human face of God. And when we find God in Jesus, we become a member of God's family. We cease to be an only child, and become part of an enormous family of faith.

Paul echoes John when he reminds the Roman church that nothing, not even the stress-inducing specters of hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness,

peril or the threat of violence, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Paul says, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Peace is possible because the battle's already been won. Jesus himself declares it: "I have said this to you, so that in me you will have peace. In the world, you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

Each of us deals with stress, but it need not be debilitating. A massage is nice, yoga is good (though a bit painful for those who are less stretchy), and we need opportunities to be quiet and to meditate. Ultimately, however, real stress relief comes from knowing that God loves us with an everlasting love, and from our faith that God has already conquered the world. And thanks be to God that through his love, and grace poured out upon us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have been given the gift of peace -- and it's free of charge! Amen.