

ALIVE Part II
Fully Alive in a Stress Filled World
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Vintage 242 Church
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Last week we began by saying to be Alive, to live an abundant life in a stress filled world, it demands we are honest and honest about the resurrection. We must be honest about our struggles, honest about our frustrations, and honest about our disillusionment. We said our honesty allows the pressure to be relieved in the moment.

It then requires us being honest about the resurrection. We have to be honest about what the abundant life found in the resurrection means and does not mean. We talked about recognizing that God's kingdom has come to earth, but not yet fully, which means we will face trials, fears, anxieties, and stress in this life, and we must learn to shift towards a spiritual view of life, not just a physical one.

Our encouragement last Sunday was Psalm 73, the story of Asaph, who lived life believing God should bless *him* because he lived a life of obedience, a life for God, only to find pain, suffering and struggle in life while the "sinner" lived in abundance, lived without pain and seemingly had life much easier than he did. Quoting Asaph, he said, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you." Asaph, was honest and then God awakened him to truth later on when he said, "All of this was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." God awakened him to an eternal, spiritual perspective of life that awakened him and brought peace in his trial.

Therefore, we must always be honest with God and we must always let God be honest with us! Last week we said April is Stress Awareness Month. The most recent Gallup poll showed that 40% of the world faced a higher level of stress and anxiety in 2020 than they had ever faced. I told you I believe that number was higher in America and even higher in the church, because people in the church care about how they live and how they relate to their neighbor, meaning they struggled more in this highly divisive culture today.

With that in mind, lets pause this morning and do a 100-mph flyover of stress and anxiety...**seeing it from scripture, talking about what it is, talking about its impact on our every part of our body (mind, emotions, and body) and practical things we can do to engage God's desire of holistic healing for us.**

And that's where I want to start this morning... God is a God who heals. Jesus' ministry and the one he led his disciples to was a ministry of holistic healing. I believe that includes the physical, mental and emotional. Therefore, after being honest with God and letting God be honest with us, I believe He wants to lead us on a journey where stress and anxiety no longer "rule" our lives. And I have to confess...not trying to build unneeded pressure on us to perform...but I

believe Christians are BY FAR the most equipped human beings in the world to defeat stress, anxiety, worry and fear in our lives. Why? Because God's Spirit is empowering us!!

As we dive in this morning, I want you to know a lot of the information I am sharing with you is from a book called **"The Anxiety Cure" by Dr. Archibald Hart**. He is a Professor of Psychology and a Dean Emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary and a primary contributor over the years to Focus on the Family. The book was one recommended to me by a gifted counselor friend of mine and one I thoroughly enjoyed reading. I would recommend it for anyone!

One of my takeaways from this book but also from everything else we face in life is this...when facing a legitimate issue in life one of God's greatest tools for helping empower us is through knowledge and understanding of the issue we are facing. As the old adage goes, "Knowledge is power" or as G.I. Joe says, "Knowing is half the battle."

The battle of stress and anxiety begins with our brain. We have to remember that in creation, God designed the body to work in specific ways. And in the creation of the human body, our brain is probably the most profound creation because of all its complexities...and for us to counteract stress and anxiety, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of how the brain functions. (Now, don't forget...I am not a doctor or a psychologist. I'm just a pastor, so my explanation will be rudimentary and simple. I am asking for grace. Haha!

In his wisdom, God designed our brain to communicate to itself. Conversations between your brain cells are happening all the time. The messenger going between these cells are "neurotransmitters." The neurotransmitters are carrying messages non-stop. They tell different parts of your brain whether to be happy or sad, anxious or tranquil.

Some of the messengers are "happy messengers." They energize us, cause us to feel optimistic and vital in life. Other messengers are "sad messengers." They tell the brain to be downhearted, cautious and sad. An excess of these sad messengers causes us to feel depressed, anxious, sleepless, and fatigued.

We need both of these messengers to be healthy in life...but they must remain balanced. One of the key ingredients that creates imbalance is stress. Too much stress is bad for everything in your life! Stress is like a body blow in boxing! It lands with great force and releases sad messengers in the brain. In that moment...the sad and happy messengers are out of balance and in time, if stress is not released, sad messengers overtake your body and anxiety takes over. (2020 caused this for many of us!!)

In prolonged stress, the brain officially tips and you're now experiencing what Dr. Hart calls "biological anxiety," something you have not chosen, is unwelcomed, it happened to you, it is highly unanticipated, and out of your immediate control...unless you take action.

The reason we are talking about this is because of what we discussed earlier...God designed us for a full life, but we are fighting ourselves and fighting God by the pace of life we are living and polluting our minds and bodies by the amount of stress we live under. And now, we have to

lean into Jesus, educate ourselves, ask for His help, and take steps towards healing and restoration.

Let's talk about anxiety...can it be sin? We have to remember... biological anxiety is birthed out of the stress of our busyness and the transition of the chemicals in our brain...which happen without our knowing! According to Dr. Hart, biological anxiety of the brain is not discussed in scripture. It is his conviction that the multitude of verses referring to "anxiety and worry" in scripture is something he calls "worry anxiety" and it IS something we are fully responsible for because it speaks to us not relinquishing control of our life to God.

In scripture, worry anxiety is what we are told is opposed to God's will for our lives. Scripture tells us "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6) But it is necessary to recognize there are different forms and expressions of anxiety.

Dr. Hart says in his book, "It is unfortunate that we have only one word for anxiety. A good analogy would be the concept of love in scripture. In English we have only one word for love, but we know there are many different forms and meaning behind it." I mean surely when we say, "Oh my goodness, I am in love with this cheeseburger right now," we don't mean it in the same way we love our parents, our children, or our spouse when we say, "I love so much I would die for you!" I mean, no one loves a cheeseburger enough to say they would die for it... (or at least they shouldn't!! Haha!) There are 4 different words for love in the NT: eros - sensual love, phileo - love between friends, storge - affectionate love (burger love), and agape - sacrificial love, think the cross of Jesus!

Worry anxiety in scripture is defined as a lack of trust in God and a failure to fully understand His plan and provision for us. It is what happens in our lives when God's people try to live their lives independently from God. It is clearly harmful to us and, therefore, displeasing to God. Paul recognizes this worry anxiety in Philippians 4:6-7

So, again, worry anxiety...we are responsible for it and scripture speaks against it. Biological anxiety is something that we can't control. It is birthed from the increase of "bad messengers" communicating through neurotransmitters in the brain, and over time anxiety gives birth without us even knowing it has happened! We may be trusting God in life but living biologically anxious because of the amount of stress in our lives!

With that in mind our next step, once we realize stress and anxiety have taken root in our lives, is to wake up, not passively give into anxiety, and take steps towards breakthrough. (Waking up is this...we recognize the signs of stress/anxiety...feeling down, feeling overwhelmed, anxiety/panic attacks etc. These signs are our bodies way of letting us know we need help! They are God's way of speaking through our body!) We obviously rely on God's strength for our steps, but we also have a responsibility in the steps we take. We are not robots! God doesn't pick our legs up and cause us to walk, he doesn't place us on our knees and make us pray, and he doesn't put his hand over our mouth and make us speak...we responsibly choose to do those

things ourselves! Dr. Hart says to his patients, "Self-empowerment is the key to achieving tranquility (I would say, abundant life) and surviving the long-term ravages of anxiety. That doesn't mean God won't help us - of course He will. He provides the power we lack to become effective in our lives. No human suffering can be born without such hope. But at no time does God expect us to surrender control to others and become helpless in the face of anxiety."

With that in mind I am going to quickly, absolutely too quickly, run through causes of stress and action steps to combat it in our lives...

The behaviors we engage that release our bad messengers

- 1) Stress...more on stress in a bit.
- 2) Overarousal, excitement and pleasure seeking...these are not bad, but in excess they can be.
- 3) Conflict...next to stress, conflict is the most common destroyer of our good messengers
- 4) Underassertiveness...this is the unhealthy version of "turn the other cheek." It is unhealthy because in not being honest with people about your struggles or tensions with them, it breeds hostility and frustration. Christians in relationship with other people need to be honest about struggles without feeling like they are being selfish...instead it is loving. People do this ALL the time, and it kills relationships and community...they just sit there in their own minds stewing and brooding over a person or situation rather than being honest and dealing with it...and it breeds anxiety!
- 5) Insufficient Sleep...sleep is needed to keep the body in order
- 6) Giving in to your Type-A personality...the Type A personality has four dominant characteristics they need to face:
 - a. They are always in a hurry or a rush.
 - b. They have a deep sense of justice (expects perfection, is offended by those who break rules).
 - c. Becomes quickly hostile or irritated easily
 - d. Maintains a sense of control (hates feeling helpless)
- 7) Trauma...moving, death of a loved one, giving birth, etc.

Behaviors that Increase your good messengers

- 1) Taking time to rest..."Duty Cycle" for an engine. Every engine has a cycle it is supposed to abide by. A 50% cycle means it should only run for 50% of the time. If it runs more than that then it will overheat and burn out. Our bodies are just like machines...they cannot run endlessly! We must rest! In fact, and I have read this multiple times in the past year and it fascinates me every time when I think about it. Throughout history, in what we could call the "created order", God designed the human body to respond to natural light...to be awake when the sun comes up and to sleep when the sun goes down...about a 50% duty cycle. Only with the invention of the electric light did humans get out of their natural, God designed rhythm.
- 2) Meditation...Obviously we are speaking about the time-tested practice that has been a part of God's people in both the OT and NT...taking time to slow down, stop and focus

our attention unhindered on scripture, the person of God, the beauty of creation as a sign pointing to God. Meditation is a practice that releases Good messengers. When we do it focused on Jesus it is a double whammy!!

- 3) Seeking out and enjoying humor...Alright, as I read, this one stuck out to me primarily because I had never given it much thought, but it is SO true! Healthy humor is so good for the mind and body. One thing I did not know...In the Jewish calendar there is an official day for laughter...the feast of Purim. Everyone dresses up in funny costumes and acts silly. It is connected with the Jewish people turning their fear upside down in the face of impending annihilation in the book of Esther. So, why laughter? Rabbis teach that it is because when you think you are in danger and then find you are safe, you naturally respond with an outburst of joy and laughter. So, Jews believe that laughter is an opportunity to transcend the limitations that blind us to seeing God more clearly. The idea...if you really believe that God is in control of your life, then why don't you laugh at your stress and dangers a little more.

- 4) Breaking out of your Type A Rut... (The focus on Type A personalities is that they are the ones who predominantly struggle with anxiety and panic disorders. All the patterns of Type-A personalities work against the abundant life. You will have to learn to celebrate and engage unhurried rest, slowing down, disconnecting, not making an idol of "producing", etc.

Lastly, here is a list of ways you can proactively, empowered by God's Spirit, take steps to relieve stress in your life...

- 1) Set boundaries for your life...Jesus ministered and then pulled away...boundaries. Determine what you give yourself to in life and what you don't give yourself to. You are not responsible for everything and everyone in your life...allow God to give you clarity on what he wants you to be responsible for and what he is good being responsible for on his own.
- 2) Be firm about setting up your "recovery times." Give yourself more time to recharge between stressful events, moments, or people.
- 3) Resolve Conflicts Quickly Be assertive to love someone by being honest with them. Holding on to anger and resentment will cause stress to increase more quickly than anything else in your life. (Probably every one of us in this room has someone that when their name is spoken or we see them out in public, we get really anxious because we never resolved our conflict!)
- 4) Take care of unpleasant tasks first...Get them out of the way...the longer the "heavier" task is waiting on you the more stress it creates
- 5) Maintain Open and Healthy Relationships. I love that when Jesus went into the garden of Gethsemane, 'He wanted Peter, James, and John with Him. He didn't want to be alone. He wanted his friends with Him. He wanted people to stand with him in prayer. Convo with David..." I told Randel yesterday my favorite moments are when you ramble. One, it gives me a glimpse into how your mind thinks, but two, it also shows how much you trust me and how comfortable you are with me as a friend to not feel you have to

guard or filter your thoughts with me. Thanks.” I went on to add incredible humor in the moment that thought you would enjoy. I said, “Rambling with partners in ministry is how the greatest vision is birthed. I think we saw and felt that yesterday. Let's keep it up. Well done us! Basically, we won yesterday, meaning we are winners. Great to be us.”

- 6) See a Counselor...
- 7) Take medication if needed... This is one of the primary tensions for believers, especially spirit filled believers who believe in the power of God to heal, the reality of the miraculous. There is so much to say here, so many arguments, tensions and concerns we could address, but let me just say this for our convo this morning. All things that have been created according to Genesis have been deemed “good” by the Father if used within His bounds, His created order. Therefore, anything in God’s creation can be abused if used outside of His created order...and that is how I view medicine. It is a gift of God’s creation if used wisely and within His created order, which means it is not abused. Therefore, in our conversation this morning around anxiety and its impact on all of us, I will share my opinion that medicine is a gift in countering anxiety if used wisely and carefully in the midst of an ongoing conversation with a caring and engaged doctor/psychologist/counselor.
However, medicine is not to be THE answer! THE answer is multi-layered approach and involves prayer, community, life change that changes stressors, counseling, education, etc.
- 8) Don’t make major decisions in life when you are stressed...it just ramps up the stress!!
- 9) Change what you listen to...News: Polarized voices that feed on your fears, Worship...Elevation (all about Jesus winning), Maverick City (fun, intimate, etc.) Non-worship...Jack Johnson, light and fun. Friday I was listening to Ben Rector...super fun. His song “Fear” I teared up!! Not so much news!
- 10) Change what you watch on TV...The Chosen!
- 11) Tap Wholly and Completely into Jesus. The idea is simple, we are only alive in Jesus if we abide in Jesus! John 15:4 says, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”

God is a God who heals. Jesus’ ministry and the one He led His disciples to was a ministry of holistic healing. I believe that includes the physical, mental and emotional. Yes, we have roles to play, and yes God moves through everything discussed today, but we have to see everything we talked about today simply being things we give ourselves to in partnership with the way Jesus is moving in our lives!