

Ever been to a football game at half time when the band forms words or pictures in the middle of the field? They look great from up in the stands. But have you thought about what they look like from the sidelines? Pointless, confusing, apparently meaningless. We see life from the sidelines. God sees it from the stands. As we gain perspective, we leave the sidelines and start working our way up.

G.K. Chesterton's character, Father Brown, said "We are on the wrong side of the tapestry." How true. We see the knots, the snarls, and the frayed underside. But God is on the right side of the tapestry—the side He is weaving into a beautiful work of art. We may not always know what the Master Artist is doing in our lives. But the important thing is, He does.

When we see the all-powerful God on the throne of the universe—God our Father committed to our good—we are relieved of much stress. And the stress we must still experience leaves us far richer.

Having a biblical perspective is seeing life through God's eyes. It is seeing order in chaos, use in the useless, and good in the bad. If we are to develop eyes to see God's hand in everything, we must believe (not necessarily understand) what Scripture says about the purpose of stress.

Stress is an effective tool in the hands of our God, a tool that is intended both for His glory and our good. In this article we will look at some ways God uses stress.

God uses stress to get our attention. God created our bodies. He designed them to send us messages. If I stick my hand in fire, my body will send me a message, quickly and clearly. If I ignore it, I'll pay the price. C.S. Lewis said "pain is God's megaphone." Some of us are hard of hearing. We ignore physical, mental, and spiritual warning signs. God wants us to tune our ears to the messages He sends us through our minds and bodies.

God uses stress to help us redefine or rediscover our priorities. Bill and Evelyn's marriage relationship was a distant one. They had drifted apart over many years, pouring themselves into their jobs and shortchanging their family. But when their son Jason was found in possession of heroin, the months that followed brought unprecedented crisis... and also the desire to pull their marriage back together.

Everyone has priorities. Some have never chosen or experienced the right ones and need to redefine them. Others of us have long known the right priorities and merely need to rediscover them: we've tasted right priorities, but we've allowed ourselves to drift away from them; we've replaced fellowship with entertainment, giving with buying, and family time with the television, the lawn, the remodeling job, the causes, and the committees.

By abandoning our God-given priorities we set ourselves up to learn a hard lesson. In essence we do what the Israelites did: lived in paneled houses while God's house became a ruin (Haggai 1:4). In response, God sent lack of fulfillment, disillusionment, and failure as His messengers. He withheld His blessing till His people rediscovered their priorities.

Twice in Haggai 1:5-11, God's people are admonished to "Give careful thought to your ways." Stress should take us back to the basics. It is an opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities and bring them in line with God's.

God uses stress to draw us to Himself. Time and again it was said of the people of Israel, "But in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought him, and he was found by them" (2 Chronicles 15:4). It was in Jonah's darkest hour, in his most stressful circumstances that he said this: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me" (Jonah 2:2). The Psalms are full of references of turning to God, seeking Him and finding Him in times of intense stress.

In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears (Psalms 18:6).

I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me (Psalms 120:1).

When our lives are comfortable and stress-free, too often we withdraw from the Lord into our own worlds of spiritual independence and isolation. Smug and self-satisfied, we forget what life is really all about. But as the thirsty seek for water, those under stress often seek God. Many non-believers have come to Christ and many believers have returned to Him in times of stress.

God uses stress to discipline us. Quoting Solomon's words to his son, the writer of Hebrews offers what he calls a word of encouragement:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons (Hebrews 12:5-7). (The word son, of course, is generic for "child," and applies equally to God's daughters.)

To some of us, this doesn't sound so encouraging. But we fail to realize how essential discipline is. Scripture says that to withhold discipline from a child is, in essence, child abuse: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24). Discipline is corrective. It is remedial, not revengeful. God sends stresses not to get back at us for doing wrong, but to deepen our dependence on Him in order to do right. Though the stressful experience may seem excruciating at the time, it is ultimately all for good:

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 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 12:10-11).

God uses stress to strengthen our faith. 1 Peter 1:7 tells us: "These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

There is only one way a muscle grows—through stress. A muscle that is rarely exercised atrophies; it shrinks into uselessness. A muscle seldom stretched beyond its usual limits can only maintain itself. It cannot grow. To grow, a muscle must be taxed. Unusual demands must be placed upon it.

Stress is a demand placed upon our faith. Without it our faith will not, cannot, grow.

Ever seen grass grow through asphalt? It's amazing if you think about it. How does grass, pressed flat and robbed of light, persevere and break through hard ground? Yet we've seen it. Somehow God made those tiny blades of grass to rise to the greatest challenge.

In the crucible of stress, as we draw on our resources in Christ, He gives us faith and strength to crack through and rise above the asphalt coat of life under the curse.

This article originally appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of *Eternal Perspectives*, EPM's quarterly Magazine.

Randy Alcorn, Eternal Perspective Ministries, 39085 Pioneer Blvd., Suite 206, Sandy, OR 97055, 503-668-5200, www.epm.org