

The Jesus Box **Stress, Anxiety, and** **Difficulties**

Romans 8:26-32

- S = Stress

- A = Anxiety

- D = Difficulties
 - God loves you

 - Everything does not happen for a reason

 - SAD is not a failure of faith

 - SAD is an opportunity to grow

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The Jesus Box: Difficulties/Anxiety/Stress

One week from today there is an event taking place that is kind of a big deal for people, especially around here. Of course I'm talking about the 116th anniversary of the incorporation of the Boy Scouts. I'm joking (although that is true). We all know it's actually National Kite Flying Day. No? Oh, it's also the SuperBowl.

Let me warn you in advance of the big game: calm yourself down. Please make sure you don't get yourself too excited. Did you know that the rate of heart attacks rises during stressful sporting events? It's true.

Cardiologists say that stress kicked off by the intensity of close-call plays, along with going deep on wings and chips or eating or drinking things that aren't good for you – all put undue stress on the heart and blood vessels. Dr. James O'Keefe said, "Nobody will be surprised to see people within 24 hours of the game with cardiovascular emergencies. When you are emotionally invested in a game, your body prepares as if for battle. Stress hormones flow in a fight-or-flight response, raising blood pressure, making the heart beat faster and making blood more likely to clot."

It reminds me of a study I read about. Back in 2006 my family and I were in Germany on a sabbatical; I was researching the footsteps of Martin Luther. It also happened to be the same time that Germany was hosting the Soccer World Cup. We couldn't afford to see any matches, but excitement was everywhere. Germany ended up getting third place, beating Portugal 3-1. When it was over it was pandemonium – the streets were packed with people celebrating.

Interestingly enough, they did a study of people in Germany during that World Cup, and they found that the incidence of cardiac emergencies was 2.66 times higher on days when the German team played (that's according to a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*). Heart attacks were highest in the quarterfinal, when Germany beat Argentina in a penalty shootout. Most of the cardiac events occurred in the first two hours after the start of matches, though the numbers were higher for several hours before and after the matches.¹ So please don't get too worked up for next Sunday's game!

Actually, stress is part of what we are talking about today. We are in a series exploring areas of our lives that we have a tendency to try to manage on our own instead of submitting them to Christ. That's why we're calling this series "The Jesus Box," because we often compartmentalize our lives so that we have a Jesus Box for one part of our lives, but then we have all these other boxes for all the other areas of our lives, and we keep them separate. But for true followers of Christ, we don't have a church box and a family box and a job box and a school box...we only have ONE

¹ Betsy McKay, "Heart Attacks Rise During the Super Bowl. You Can Take Precautions," *The Wall Street Journal* (2-9-25)

box and that is the Jesus Box. You don't step out of that box when you leave here and then step into a different box tomorrow: *EVERYTHING* IN THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE goes into the Jesus Box. Jesus is your primary and only life; there are no separate boxes; there is only the Jesus Box.

So far in this series we've looked at the boxes of our work and our relationships. Another area that we tend to try to handle on our own is when it comes to the SAD area of our lives. I'm not talking about things that make us sad emotionally; I'm using an acronym; by "SAD" I mean the areas of...

Stress, Anxiety, and Difficulties

(If you are listening in Spanish, the acronym doesn't work. I'm so sorry about that!)

Our pastors were discussing this sermon series a while back, talking about the things that we tend to try to manage on our own without really submitting them to Jesus or truly trusting him. We identified things in our own lives that we struggle with, and things that we see in the folks that we minister to. All of us mentioned the problems of stress, anxiety, and difficult circumstances. So I thought I would lump them all together, because they're all closely related. We experience difficult circumstances, things that stress us out and things that cause us anxiety. Or, we get stressed out and struggle with anxiety over difficulties that we *think* will happen, even if they haven't yet.

Men and women both struggle with this, but a Harris Poll taken for the American Psychiatric Association² discovered that 81% of women *say* they manage stress extremely or somewhat well. Yet, in actuality, 82% of the women polled experienced physical symptoms of stress! Various sources have estimated that up to 75% of all visits to doctors' offices by men and women combined are stress-related.

Most people experience physical or emotional stress daily from the normal pressures of meeting deadlines, driving to work, being a parent, or just making ends meet. Then, when there is an immediate, dangerous, or lingering threat, like a global pandemic or today's political climate, the body reacts with the "fight or flight" or "acute stress" response for protection that can last anywhere from minutes to hours. The body's system is designed to pump adrenaline into our bodies during stress so we have the energy and sharpness of mind to deal with whatever immediate threat we are facing. But the body doesn't know the difference between an immediate threat and a difficult circumstance and the day-to-day grind of stress, so we begin to live at amped up levels of adrenaline. Like constantly running an engine at 5000 rpms, things will begin to break down.

There are those events that can overwhelm even the strongest of people. Sub-acute stress lasts less than a month. Long-term pressures of "chronic stress" that last months to years can result in physical and emotional strain or tension that can take a toll on the body, triggering the premature aging of immune system cells. Medical

² (Stress in America Survey 1/2012)

science has determined that chronic stress is most likely the primary cause of sickness and disease, which includes everything from the common cold to serious and debilitating illnesses. Psychology has shown that negative emotions can also hinder and even stop the immune system from working.

Difficulties and the stress they produce lead to anxiety, which comes in all shapes and sizes. There's the Generalized Anxiety Disorder that includes symptoms such as:³

- Restlessness or feeling wound-up or on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating or having your mind go blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Difficulty controlling worry
- Sleep problems (difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless, unsatisfying sleep)

Some of you are freaking out just hearing this, thinking you must have anxiety. That's okay. You do.

Anxiety Disorder is the most common mental illness in the U.S., according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Anxiety disorders affect more than 50 million people in the U.S.; it is second only to alcohol and drug abuse.

When a person experiences anxiety, they often can't identify what it is they're anxious about. The focus of anxiety is more internal than external. It seems to be a response to a vague, distant, or even unrecognized danger. They might be anxious about "losing control" of their self or some situation. Or, they might feel vague anxiety about "something bad happening."

Anxiety affects a person's entire being. It is a physiological, behavioral, and psychological reaction all at once. On a physiological level, anxiety may include bodily reactions such as rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, queasiness, dry mouth, or sweating. People can experience panic or anxiety attacks. They feel like they are having a heart attack – all the feelings – and yet the heart system tests normal. On a behavioral level, it can sabotage the ability to act, express one's self, or deal with certain everyday situations. Gone unchecked it can then result in physical symptoms like a heart attack or cancer or auto-immune disorders.

Psychologically, anxiety is a subjective state of apprehension and uneasiness. In its most extreme form, it can cause a person to feel detached from self and even fearful of dying or going crazy.

Anxiety has become an unwelcome companion for many, creeping into everyday life with relentless persistence.

³ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders>

What's really concerning is how pervasive stress is among younger Americans. An overwhelming 62% of Gen Z and millennials report feeling constantly anxious, compared to 38% of older generations.

What are they anxious about?

- 53% of respondents cite money as their primary source of anxiety.
- 42% worry about their loved ones.
- 42% fret about pending tasks and to-do lists.
- 37% have health concerns
- 22% have sleep anxiety,
- 19% are concerned by political uncertainties.

For parents, the concerns extend far beyond personal anxieties. 77% express profound worry about the world their children are inheriting. One parent described this generational anxiety when she said, "Honestly, I worry that there won't be a world for my child to grow up in."⁴

Does all that talk about difficulties and anxiety and stress makes me feel stressed and anxious?

You realize that God's heart for us isn't that we live lives troubled by the world's worries, right? You want to have a greater faith and let tomorrow worry about itself, yet it seems so very hard to do that. But then we read passages in the Bible that tell us not to worry, and they feel like chains for those who have pathological anxiety. We don't only feel bad because we're in it, we feel bad because we can't get ourselves out of it. Which means you don't just struggle with anxiety but also with the guilt of getting anxious. You start to doubt your faith, your walk with God, and then anxiety can lead to depression.

So we struggle quietly and privately, trying hard not to let anyone know what we are feeling. We try to handle it on our own, all alone, or worse yet we try to medicate ourselves with alcohol, drugs, or a host of other addictive behaviors.

When these things are happening to us or to people around us, we can wonder, is God *really* good? Can God *really* be trusted?

Let me give you a way forward for followers of Jesus who struggle with anxiety. Let me try to help you see what it looks like to put your stress, anxieties, and difficulties in the Jesus Box. This will give us a way to look at them differently. I want to do that by looking at one passage of Scripture in particular, from Romans 8. Can I ask you to focus your mind and body on this passage by standing with me as I read it to us?

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

⁴ Staff, "Average American Spends 138 Minutes Mired in Worrisome Thoughts Every Day," *Study Finds* (3-31-25)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:26-32, niv)

Thank you for standing; you can have a seat. Packed in that passage are some valuable truths that can help us put our stress and anxiety and difficulties into the Jesus Box. Let's start with the fact that...

God loves you.

You hear me say this every single Sunday, so this shouldn't be a surprise to hear me say this. But where in this passage does it say this? In that kind of confusing part in the middle, in verse 29. Listen to it again:

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”
(Romans 8:29, niv)

What does that mean? It means this: because God loves you so much, he determined long before you were ever born, that he would make a way for you to be saved from sin and have an abundant life in Christ that goes on forever. He didn't stumble upon you one day and then was faced with a decision on whether or not you would be loved by him; he loved you in advance. He predetermined that he would love you so much that he would send his one and only Son to die for you. He already determined your destiny: that you could become like Jesus in all things. Not that you would be a god, but that you could be godly. He loved you so much that, despite all your sin – which he already knows about – he would love you. That also means that, despite whatever anxiety or stress or difficult circumstances you face, He. Loves. You. He always has and he always will. He gives you the choice of whether or not you will accept his love for you through Christ, but his mind is already made up toward you. Let me just say this: if you are not a Christian, you are missing out on all God has for you and can do for you. But you can respond to his love by admitting to him your sin and accepting his forgiveness because of what Christ did in your place through his death and resurrection.

But with all this talk of foreknowledge and predetermining, does that mean that God planned for my stress and anxiety and difficulties? No...

Everything does not happen for a reason.

There is another verse in that passage that often gets misunderstood, and that is verse 28 that says:

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28, niv)

So you might hear people say it means, “Everything happens for a reason.” That is *not* what it says. If that were true, then it would mean that God is the one causing you your stress and anxiety and difficulties. But we already know that God loves us, and that doesn’t sound like the kind of thing a loving God would do. The Bible actually tells us in James 1:13 –

“Remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, ‘God is tempting me.’ God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else.” (James 1:13, nlt)

You and I live in a broken world that is filled with sin and its results – and that wasn’t God’s doing; that’s our doing. And yet the Bible is honest with us that we will face these things; Jesus himself said:

“Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33, nlt)

We will have trials and sorrows, but we can put them in the Jesus Box.

God doesn’t create your anxiety and stress and difficulty, but God does plan to work through them for your benefit – which is his predetermined purpose to help you be more and more like Christ. The Bible is saying in Romans 8:28 that God can choreograph all things, even bad and painful things, and even evil, for our ultimate good, so that we are made more like his Son, Jesus. *Not everything happens for a reason, but God can bring a good reason out of everything when we trust him and let him use it to shape us more like Christ. (repeat)*

So experiencing...

SAD is not a failure of faith.

Please, please hear me on this: if you are experiencing stress or anxiety or difficulty, it does not mean you are failing spiritually. God loves you, stuff happens in this world, and God wants to work in it for your good; and remember that passage says that the Holy Spirit even prays for you when you don’t know how or what to pray; when your stress and anxiety and difficulties are so heavy you feel like they might bury you. The Holy Spirit prays in your place what you would if you could! So if anything, what feels like weakness means your faith is working.

What this means is that the gospel doesn’t condemn you in your brokenness; in fact, instead of being ashamed of it, use it as a trigger to push you to Jesus; it’s likely the very key for your growth in Christ, for your experiencing the power of God in your life. It doesn’t mean you have to stay there; God will help you through it and with it through all kinds of ways.

The beauty of God's love is that He will use everything and anything to grow you closer to him, especially your stress and anxiety and difficulty.

God's love through Christ frees us from the chains of shame because it uses the very brokenness that seeks to suffocate our lives and builds a bridge with it to know Jesus in a way we never could before. *If we will run to him in it.*⁵ And when we do...

SAD is an opportunity to grow.

Paul, here in Romans 8, writes about how creation itself is groaning, that the world is suffering, it's going through pains like an expecting mother in labor who wants to deliver her child. And Paul is saying creation groans for new life.

As we look further in Romans 8 (verses 35-36), we see that Paul writes about facing all kinds of suffering, danger, and even possible death (and we know that Paul experienced all these things). But it's interesting that Paul NEVER says these things are good in and of themselves, they are bad things. Dangers, sufferings, possible death. Talk about stress and anxiety and difficulty! But what Paul is saying in this passage is that if we belong to God, if we put our lives in the Jesus Box, God can take all of these things, even things that are bad, or even evil in and of themselves, and cause them to work for our ultimate good.

Now when Paul says that God causes all things to work together for our good, Paul is referring primarily to our spiritual good.

Remember we already said that when the Apostle Paul talks about "all things working together for good for those who love God," "the good" that he means is our being made like Jesus Christ.

Let me just interject something here: this also means that it's okay to see a counselor or psychiatrist or doctor if you feel like your anxiety is chronic or is creating physical or emotional issues for you. This is another means by which God has given you to grow.

Putting our stresses and anxiety and difficulties in the Jesus Box means we are confident God loves us, that he is at work for our good, and that we can grow closer to him and more like Christ from it and through it.

This is why we are told in the Bible:

"Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you."
(2 Peter 5:7, nlt)

God is for you; who or what can be against you? Even what the world or the enemy intends for evil against you, God intends for good. Put your stress and anxiety and difficulties in the Jesus Box—put your life in the Jesus Box and all things, all things, all things ... will start to work for your *ultimate* good as God weaves your life into something truly glorious and beautiful. As God makes you like his Son, Jesus Christ.

⁵ From Yancey Arrington, teaching pastor at Clear Creek Community Church in Houston, Texas, and the author of the newly released *Preaching That Moves People* (2018). He blogs at YanceyArrington.com

Prayer

Benediction (based on Romans 8:38-39)

As you leave today, you can be sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go in the grace and knowledge of the Love of God.