

## I Am the Good Shepherd

Let's take a quick poll this morning. How many of you have stress? How many of you feel like one of the fish in this blender? Which one of you is the cat?

According to the American Psychological Association we are more stressed than ever.<sup>i</sup> The Oxford English dictionary says stress is, "A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances," but it doesn't seem so technical when we experience it, the pressure and the tension. We are held back by the mistakes of the past: the what-ifs, could have beens, the if onlys. We are burdened by the demands of the present: the strain, the deadlines, the expectations, and we are hindered by the fears of the future: the possibilities, the threats, the worry, the risks.

We are stressed about politics. We are stressed about finances, work, school, and our relationships. We are stressed about our past. We are stressed about our future. To make matters worse, our constant digital connections have us more disconnected from our personal peace than ever before. Researchers have found a direct link between how much time you spend on social media to how much anxiety we have.<sup>ii</sup> We stress about what we post online. We stress about what our friends post. We stress about how many likes we get or don't get. We compare our lives to others and worry we don't measure up.

According to the National Institute for Mental Health, 40 million of us are adversely affected by anxiety and millions more struggle with depression related disorders.<sup>iii</sup> It's wrecking our health, our relationships, our work, and of course our sense of personal peace.

We hear a lot about stress today. It is the cause of so many things, yet this is relatively new. My grandmother told me that she never heard about stress growing up, and that was during the great depression. Talk about stressful, but if the stress isn't new, then what is? Life hasn't gotten harder. In fact, by every measure it has gotten easier. We live longer. We have higher standards of living. We live in a day and age of amazing technological innovation. So, why all the stress? What's changed?

### 1. Greater Expectation

For one thing, we have greater expectations. We simply expect more from life. Things that used to be seen as luxuries are now seen as necessities. Many in my grandparent's

generation considered it extremely fortunate to go to college. My dad's generation expected to work their way through school. My generation expected to get loans to go through school. Today, many students think a university education should be free for them. Meanwhile the actual costs of education are going through the roof.

Another example: In ten years we've gone from where there was no way a rational parent would let their middle schooler have a cell phone to now where it's almost inconceivable that they won't have a smartphone, with camera and data plan. The bottom line is that we used to be happy with less. Now, we expect more, and when we don't get it, we're stressed out.

We are constantly marketed to. We see advertising everywhere. It makes us think we should be more, do more, and have more. How many times have we found ourselves thinking, "This is not what my life was supposed to be." That's the stress of unmet expectations.

Also, if you're a millennial or , you've been raised with the self-esteem gospel. This is an ethos that places feelings over facts. It tries to shield people from disappointment and failure. It's a world where everyone is special, everyone gets a trophy and everyone's a winner. Guess what happens when someone who places feels above all else runs head first into real life? Unmet expectations.

## **2. Greater Diversity**

Secondly, there is the greater diversity we experience in a pluralistic society. We are expected to be tolerant of an increasingly vast array of differing ideologies. Moreover, we are told that every viewpoint is equally valid. In this environment either everything is true or nothing is true. This can create a lot of psychological tension if you have to interact with a wide variety of people every day.

## **3. Greater Competition**

Adding to the anxiety of modern life is the fact that we are no longer comparing ourselves to just the people in our own family, our own school, our own workplace or even our own small town. We are comparing ourselves to the crème de la crème of the entire planet. We are competing with 7 billion people. The problem is we aren't comparing ourselves with the vast majority of those people. You don't compare your life with those living in the slums of

Mumbai. We compare our lives to those we see on reality shows and social media. The average American spends 10 hours a day with a screen within their field of view. According to Psychology Today, only the top 1% of 1% of 1% are able to display their talents, wealth and beauty before the public. What we see on reality TV isn't real. What you see on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat isn't what your friend's lives really look like. That's only the 1% they want you to see. That's what they're pretending to be. That's what we're comparing ourselves to, and it's a recipe for stress.

#### 4. The Pace and Volume of Modern Life

Another factor is the pace and volume of modern life. If you lived 500 years ago and you learned to read, you could read all the classics and you could master what was known about mathematics, science, and philosophy in a few short years. You could be a scholar and people would assume that you knew about everything. Today, you could spend the same number of years become a computer diagnostic technician for one make of car after 2006. It's hard to impress people with that.

Until 1900 human knowledge doubled every century. Today it is doubling every 12 months. IBM expects that soon it will be doubling every 12 hours.<sup>iv</sup> Technology is innovating things at an ever quickening pace. When the human genome was first sequenced, it took 13 years and 3 billion dollars. Today, a machine can do it in less than a day and for a tiny fraction of the cost. The latest, greatest gadget you buy today and all your friend ooh and aah over will only get eye rolls next year. "That's only a version 8. Come on." The bottom line is we can't keep up, and all this rapid innovation stresses us out.

When we do not know how to handle these pressures of life in a healthy way, it leads to insecurity, anxiety, and worry. **Insecurity** is the feeling of being in danger and at risk. We cannot relax or enjoy ourselves because we are consumed with all these things we view as a threat. It keeps us focused on our present earthly lives, and not our spiritual life. **Anxiety** is a state of uneasiness and distress about future uncertainties. It is a maze of self-doubt, endless second guessing, and low self-confidence. This is not to be confused with wise planning and preparation. Anxiety is a destructive obsession with fear. Jesus warns us in Lk 21:34 that the anxieties of this life will weigh us down, if we are not careful. **Worry** is to feel uneasy about

some uncertain or threatening matter. It is to work at a present task under the constant fear of future failure. We worry mostly about things that never happen and it hinders our ability to deal with what does happen. Worry changes nothing, but the one who is worrying. The word worry comes from a root meaning to choke or strangle, and this is exactly what it does. Jesus knows this. In the parable of the soils he says that the worries of this life can choke our spiritual life.

I wish I could tell you that being a Christian made you immune to stress. But it does not. Sometimes we deal with additional stresses of not living up to our own spiritual expectations, of what other people at church think of us, and even what does God think of me. The dangers are not just spiritual. Psychiatrists tell us that when we don't properly respond to stress it can make us irritable, fidgety, and can cause insomnia and poor memory. If it continues, it can eventually lead to a nervous breakdown, ulcers, tension headaches, abdominal pain, nausea, diarrhea, high blood pressure, and impotence.

Would you be surprised if I told you the answer to modern stress is 2,000 years old? Stress has been around as long as man has, so how did God say to deal with it in scripture. One of Jesus' "I am" statements gets straight to the heart of this concern. Jesus says, "*I am the Good Shepherd.*" The image of shepherd was one familiar to the Jews. It was a mainstay of the Judean economy, since the rocky land in Judea was better for grazing flocks, than growing crops.

The image of shepherd was deeply familiar to the Jews. In the O.T. God was the shepherd of his people. The familiar lyrics of Psalm 23 sing, "The Lord is my shepherd..." In Ezekiel 34, God condemns the evil and false shepherds of Israel. They had scattered the sheep and did not care for them. Therefore, God promised to be a shepherd. He would bring them a new covenant, and put one Shepherd over all. So, when Jesus called himself "the Shepherd" he was identifying himself with God, and he was fulfilling this important O.T. prophecy.

But Jesus did not just say he is "the shepherd", he distinguished himself by saying he is the "Good Shepherd." The word for "good" here does not mean morally good, although Jesus is morally good. The word is *Kalos*, which means excellent and beautiful. Jesus is excellent, and he is beautiful. His excellence and beauty surpass all the ugly stresses of modern life.

**BODY:**

We're going to take a couple of weeks to look at Jesus' metaphor of sheep and shepherd, because Jesus makes two "I Am" statements. He says, "I am the good shepherd." And he says, "I am the gate." Both of these things address our stress at its deepest level.

First and foremost, there is the Good Shepherd who is Jesus. Opposed to Him are the false shepherds called thieves, robbers, strangers, and hired hands. The latter group seeks to seize control of the sheep from the shepherd. Finally, there are the sheep.

Jesus compares our lives to sheep whose peace and security could be threatened by many things. Not only were there thieves, who would steal the sheep, there were also wolves and other wild beasts. There was the dangerous terrain. The grazing land in Judea was on a plateau 30 miles long and 15 miles wide. Around the edge of the plateau were many dangerous crags, crevices, and ravines. If the sheep managed to make down from the plateau they found themselves in the midst of the desert with no food and water. There were many sources of stress for the sheep. It was the shepherd's responsibility to take care of the sheep. The sheep did not face these dangers alone, but under the watchcare of their shepherd, but if the sheep went astray, they would be left to themselves. Jesus compares himself to this shepherd.

## I. The Shepherd

**A. Possess** (vs. 3,12) The first thing the shepherd does that helps the sheep deal with stress is that he possesses the sheep. The sheep don't have to worry because they belong to the shepherd and the shepherd cares for them. God was the shepherd of Israel. In Ezekiel 34:12 God tells the prophet, *"As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness."*

We belong to Jesus; We are his possession. As the church's shepherd, he cares for you. Scripture tells us that we were bought at a price. 1 Cor. 6:20 says that we were bought with price. Jesus paid with his life so that you could be his and he could love you and care for you.

This tells us two important things. 1.) It is the owner of property that is responsible for its security. You are responsible for the security of your car and home, not me. Now that Jesus owns us, he provides for our security. As verse 28 says, *"they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."* No thief, robber, stranger, or hired hand can threaten our

security in Christ. No one can take you from Jesus and no one can take Jesus from you. You are safe! You are secure! You can wander like a sheep gone astray, but no one can snatch you out of his hand.

2.) The price he paid for us was his own blood. In Acts 28:28 Paul tells the elders of the church in Ephesus to exercise great care of the church because they are acting as under-shepherds and the flock belongs to God. He says, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”*

Shepherd the flock with great care, because they are God’s possession. This tells us something important. If Jesus was willing to shed his own blood and give his own life to save you, can’t you rest assured that he will go to whatever length necessary to keep you? Listen to verses 17 and 18:

*<sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

Christ gave up his life for you willingly. He didn't lose it, he didn't goof, or get caught. It was his intention to voluntarily give up his life for us.

The story is told of a French soldier in WW1 whose arm was severely injured in battle. The doctors had to amputate. The surgeon was so grieved that he could not save the young man’s arm that he waited at his bedside to tell him the bad news. When he awoke, the doctor apologized and informed him that he lost his arm. The young man replied, “No, I did not lose my arm; I gave it for France.” Jesus looks at you and says, “I did not lose my life. I gave it for you.” He can have peace because you know that your Savior, who died to save you, will do what he needs to keep you. Because the shepherd possesses the sheep, the sheep have security.

**B. Provides** (vs. 9, 10) The Good Shepherd not only possesses the sheep, he also provides for them, so that they can have a fruitful and fulfilling life. His provision enables them to grow. He takes them to green grass, to fresh water, to shelter, and to warmth.

Our shepherd provides for us as well. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and he knows the sheep and he cares for them. Verse 9 says that he gives us pasture. What does this mean? Well,

verse 10 explains 9. Jesus gives us life abundantly. The Greek phrase here means the superabundance of life. It is life far beyond what most worldly people even imagine. It is rich life eternal, but we need to know that this life begins now.

The world urges us to pursue the “good life”. This is a life marked by the pursuit of pleasure and the accumulation of things. If you can just sit by a pool with the right beer in your hand and the right car in the driveway, you are really living they say. What they don't tell you is the insecurity, anxiety, and worry this life leads to. It is all so unstable and can disappear. Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount (Read Mt. 6:19-21). Why place our trust in something so uncertain, and something that may cost us our eternal life.

It is Christ who gives the true good life, the abundant life, life free from the risks of insecurity, the burden of anxiety, and the ensnaring trap of worry. In Christ, there are no ghosts from the past, there are no realities of the present, and no uncertainties of the future that are beyond the provision of Christ. No problems of money, health, or personal relationships can rob us of the abundant life we have in Christ.

We have a very Good Shepherd, a beautiful and excellent Savior. We can have peace because he possesses us and he provides for us. Next week we will also see that he protects us. We don't have to carry the burden of everything we stress about because we have a Good Shepherd.

***Conclusion:***

Perhaps you remember the story of Shrek the sheep from a few years ago. Shrek was a Merino sheep that wandered from his flock in New Zealand. For six years, Shrek wandered living in caves.

Merino sheep normally have their coats sheared every year, but Shrek kept packing on the wool, year after year. By the time Shrek was found and was sheared, he had 60 pounds of wool. Enough to make 20 suits for grown men, or hundreds of pairs of comfy merino wool socks. He was carrying this huge burden all because he wandered away from his shepherd. It took the shearer less than half an hour to rid him of his extra weight.

Do you realize how much of the stuff you stress about are burdens you don't even have to carry? You have a Good Shepherd who knows you and cares you.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://journal.thriveglobal.com/new-poll-says-americans-are-more-stressed-than-ever-58855e84924>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/02/checking-devices.aspx>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>