

“I Will If You Will”

# *I Will Relieve Your Stress*

October 16, 2016

**PRELUDE – Jesus**

**Jesus / Transition / Lord, I Need You**

**Ministry Moment Video**

**Feature – Help I’m Alive / offering**

Come take my pulse

The pace is on a runaway  
train.

Help I’m alive,

My heart keeps beating like a  
hammer.<sup>i</sup>

I think that’s a pretty good  
description of what it feels like to  
be caught in the grip of unhealthy

levels of stress and anxiety.

- It seems as if life goes faster and faster and the pressure to do it all, manage it all, endure it all gets higher and higher.
- Your mind seems to be stuck on overdrive – it never shuts off and it never stops, like a runaway train.
- And quite often, the stress we feel mentally and emotionally affects our body – our pulse races and our heart literally beats like a hammer.

Have you ever experienced that that kind of stress?

I'm sure you have.

In fact, I'm quite sure that many of us in this room are experiencing at least some level of stress and anxiety today. And I'm sure of that because, as I referenced in my weekly email to you last Thursday, in a recent poll conducted by the American Psychological Association, more than half of American adults say that the impending presidential election is a very or somewhat significant source of stress in their lives.

Not only are we worried about what will happen if *he* wins or if *she* wins (and, sadly, one of them

*will* win), our stress, writes the author of the study, “becomes exacerbated by arguments, stories, images and video on social media that can heighten concern and frustration, particularly with thousands of comments that can range from factual to hostile or even inflammatory.”<sup>ii</sup>

It’s a stressful time in our country.

Of course, there are many other reasons we sometimes feel stressed and anxious: financial pressure, time pressure, the challenge of raising kids, expectation of our job or school, dealing with our parents or our

spouse; health issues, and the list could go on and on.

A couple of years ago, I saw a TED Talk by an English comic named Ruby Wax in which she explained why our stress levels have increased in recent years and how that is often a pre-cursor to the more serious problem of mental illness, which affects one in four adults.

I actually showed you this clip back when it first came out, but it was so good that I'm going to show it again today. So, let's watch.

**Video - Ruby Wax Mental Illness & Stress**

**(2.0 min)**

B - Ruby: "Got some bad news for you folks ..."

E - Ruby: "It's going to be four in four who are really going to get ill in the upstairs department."

So, this morning I want to talk about how to keep that from happening or, if that's *already* happened to us and we're among the one-in-four, what we can do (in addition to the meds that we may need to take for the rest of our lives).

And I'll say a more about that later in this message but, first, let's back up just a bit and give some

context to this.

## **Context**

As Shannon said, what we're talking about this morning is part of a series which we're calling "I Will If You Will"; a series which comes from the observation that many Christians – those who have believed that Jesus is God in the flesh and their savior and (as we talked about last Sunday) have called on Him to save them – many Christians are not experiencing the kind of day to day life that Jesus intended for them to experience.

- Yes, all of our sins past, present and future, known and unknown are forgiven.
- Yes, God’s promise to us of a new life in a new body in a recreated world is ours because we believe and not because we “do”.

But, in everyday life (for example), *we’re just as stressed as everybody else* – which is not God’s intention for us.

So, I’ve been thinking about why this is true and, as I said last week, I think part of the problem is that we have such a strong emphasis on *grace* in contemporary American

Christianity and that emphasis unintentionally discounts a corresponding and necessary emphasis on obedience.

And it's understandable why this is the case: we don't want people to be confused and think that obeying what God says is what leads to forgiveness and salvation because, if there is one thing that comes up over and over again in the New Testament, it's that we are saved by God's grace and mercy, not by our attempts to do enough good things.

**In fact, in his letter to Titus, the Apostle Paul says just that:**

*He saved us, not  
because of righteous  
things we had done, but  
because of his mercy.*

*Titus 3:5 (NIV)*

So, because we want to make sure that is crystal clear ... and because for so many people *outside* of the church ... and because for so many people who have been *in* church every Sunday year after year (including in this church!) that is *still not clear* (you would be amazed), so many of our songs and sermons and books constantly emphasize grace.

And that's a good thing and a

necessary thing. We don't ever want to lose sight of it lest our relationship with God become one of duty and fear.

However, as I said last week, we have to understand that while grace alone is enough for salvation, the day-to-day experience of the joyful and full life God intends for us requires something more. We have to understand that while grace is *unconditional* (meaning that God offers to us freely with no strings attached), joy and fulfillment – the everyday life Jesus wants for us as a result of that grace – is not.

That is *conditional*. It *depends* on obedience ... on whether or not we're doing the kinds of things that He has promised to bless.

**In fact, last Sunday I said that a good way to think of it is this: The joy of *unconditional grace* depends on our alignment with God's *conditional promises*.**

Would you repeat that with me?

“The joy of unconditional grace depends on our alignment with God’s conditional promises.”

... those places where, in the scripture, He says “I will if you will;” places where He says, “I will

do *this* if you will do *that*.”

**... which is why the Apostle Peter encourages us:**

*In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. 2  
Peter 1:5 (NLT)*

And that's the goal of this series – to try and understand the promises God makes related to specific issues that we all face *and* what conditions He puts on fulfilling those promises.

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For instance, when it comes to the

situations that are producing unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety in us, we know that God wants us to have inner peace.

**Jesus himself said it best:**

*“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid.” John 14:27 (NLT)*

Wouldn’t it be nice to not feel troubled or afraid as we look at the world and everything that’s going on? Wouldn’t it be nice to have a quiet mind and a settled heart as

we deal with the trials and tribulations of our own life?

Good news is ... that's what God wants for us! And the even better news is that He promises to give us that peace ... He says "I will relieve your stress and anxiety" *if* you will ...

Well, that's what I want to talk to you about this morning!

## **Without a Shepherd**

And let's start out by identifying where the problem of unhealthy stress most often begins.

And I use that terminology of “unhealthy stress” because not all stress is bad. In fact, stress is often a really good thing.

- If you’re in immediate physical danger, for example, you *should* feel stressed and anxious. That’s what causes you to take the appropriate action, be it fight or flight.
- If you have a deadline you need to meet at your job, that anxious feeling you have is a good thing. That’s what moves you and energizes you to work extra hard for a brief period of

time.

But ...

- When the feeling of being stressed doesn't go away – for example, when we have escaped the dangerous situation but we still feel anxiety, then that's a problem.
- When the job pressure never seems to end and we're always working past our limits, that's unhealthy.
- When everyday issues and concerns constantly leave us feeling overwhelmed,

something is wrong.

Now, having said that, I should also add that anxiety for some folks is hereditary. It's sort of hardwired in to our physical bodies. For some of us (as Ruby Wax put it) our adrenaline and cortisol switches are stuck in the "on" position. It's an issue of brain chemicals and if there are meds that can help you with that, you should be taking them.

But, having said *that*, let us not minimize the fact that, for some of us, *it gets to be that way* - our brain chemicals go out of balance and we feel stressed and anxious

all the time – because of a problem that Jesus once observed in the people of His day.

**In the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel  
According to Matthew we read that ...**

*Jesus went through all  
the towns and villages,  
teaching in their  
synagogues,  
proclaiming the good  
news of the kingdom  
and healing every  
disease and sickness.*

Now, think about that. Jesus covered a vast amount of territory and He met a multitude of people which meant that He had the opportunity to get a good read on

his culture and the effect it was having on people.

**And this was His evaluation.**

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:35-36 (NIV)*

Jesus felt so much pity for the people that he got knots in his stomach (which is the literal meaning of the Greek word translated “compassion”) because they were “harassed and helpless” ... which, I think, is another good

way to describe how stress and anxiety make us feel.

In fact, when I think about *the stress I personally feel* about this upcoming election, that phrase pretty much covers it.

- I feel *harassed* by the constant blather of both candidates and the media (including TV, print and social media) which almost exclusively focus on their “terribleness” as people and their sordid attempts to horribilize each other instead of the principles and platforms for which each party stands.

- And I feel *helpless* before the vast political and economic system and the dark cultural and spiritual forces that have produced this bleak state of affairs ... to say nothing of the fact that we're going to have to put up with one of these two for at least the next four years.

I feel harassed and helpless - and that stresses me in not-a-good way!

Of course, we're trying to get at the root of the problem of unhealthy stress - not just describe it - and Jesus, in his observation, does just that.

Matthew writes that Jesus feels compassion for people who are harassed and helpless; for people who are stressed out, overwhelmed and feel powerless; because – and this is the root of the problem – they are “like sheep without a shepherd.”

Now, because we don't live in an agrarian culture as did most of Jesus' followers in the first century, that's a metaphor with which we don't readily identify. But to the people of His day, the imagery was very clear: when sheep are without a shepherd, they're susceptible to being

harassed by other animals – specifically, predators who will kill and eat them – and there is nothing they can do to defend themselves; they’re helpless.

Actually, sheep without a shepherd aren’t only vulnerable to predators. They’re also at risk because they lack a sense of direction. Without a shepherd, they’ll just wander, individually and collectively. And sometimes, they’ll wander into extreme danger.

Maybe you heard about what happened several years ago in one of the provinces of eastern Turkey.

According to news reports, 1,500 sheep followed each other off a cliff. The first four hundred or so fell 50 feet to their deaths in a ravine. Lucky for the 1,100 who followed, those sheep provided a soft-landing so to speak and they survived.

Why did it happen? Turns out that the shepherds had neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free.<sup>iii</sup>

Point being: sheep without a shepherd wind up harassed, helpless and, sometimes, even worse.

*And so do people without a shepherd.*

**People who have no shepherd; people who have no one leading them, guiding them, protecting them are going to experience unhealthy stress.**

And that's where a lot of people are these days. We try to struggle through everything on our own. We tell ourselves we just have to suck it up and try even harder because, in the end, it's all up to us and our efforts and our wisdom and our strength.

And sometimes that works for a while but more often, all that happens is our stress and anxiety

increases to the point where it becomes unbearable.

But it doesn't have to be that way. John's Gospel tells us of another time that Jesus used the metaphor of sheep and a shepherd to describe people.

**And this is what He said.**

*The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

*After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."*

**And then Jesus said.**

*"I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me." John 10:2-5,14 (NLT)*

Friends, there is a Good Shepherd who will lead us, guide us and protect us, and his name is Jesus.

*And if Jesus is our Good Shepherd,* we do not have to be overwhelmed by the situations in which we find ourselves. Even though the circumstances may remain difficult and challenging, we do not have to live as the “harassed and helpless” with unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety ...

## **The Promise of Rest**

... which brings us, at last, to the conditional promise; to the “I will if you will” where God says, “I will relieve your stress and anxiety if you will ... what?”

I'm sure after all this build up it seems like the condition *ought* to be for us to turn to Jesus and follow Him as our Shepherd. "I will relieve your stress if you turn to me as your shepherd."<sup>iv</sup>

And that *is* the condition, technically speaking.

But, again, that metaphor isn't very accessible for those of us who live in the modern world, so I want to take it one step deeper ... because what we really need to know is "what does it look like in real life for Jesus to be the Shepherd of our soul?"

Specifically, what do you *do* with Jesus that will help to alleviate the stress you feel?

**In His own words, here's what He says about that:**

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

*Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)*

Twice Jesus makes the promise of *rest*: “I will give you *rest*” and “you will find *rest* for your soul.” Actually, that word in the original Greek language is a bit broader in meaning. It means relief and refreshment and “blessed quiet.”<sup>v</sup>

What Jesus is talking about here is a life-giving condition of inner peace, as opposed to the stressfulness that burdens us. He’s talking about a soul-replenishing condition of inner calmness, instead of the anxiety that just wears us down.

“If you will come to me,” Jesus said, “and take my yoke upon you,

I will give you peace, calmness, and relief. If you will, I will.”

Of course, there’s another farming metaphor in that which we’ll have to understand, but this is all pretty simple at this point. There are three things we have to do according to Jesus in order to find relief from our stress and anxiety.

First of all He says “come to me” which actually expresses two things we need to do.

**1. We need to come to Jesus – meaning, to bring our burdens to *Him* and not someone or something else.**

And this is important to

understand because what happens with a lot of us – myself included – is that when we feel stressed out or anxious there are lots of other things we can turn to.

We turn to food. We're online with Amazon buying stuff left and right. Or, we're looking at stuff we shouldn't look at on the internet or reading books we shouldn't read. We binge watch TV. We do all kinds of stuff because there's an emptiness that we feel and we want to relieve it. We want to escape. We take our burdens to something or someone else.

And there are other people we can

turn to as well. Not that it's a bad thing to share our burdens with people who know us and care for us, but that's not the condition that Jesus lays out for us.

“Come to ME,” he says. “Bring your burdens and stress to ME and I will give you rest.”

**In fact, the Apostle Paul repeats that exact same thought when he writes:**

*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything*

*we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 4:6-7  
(NLT)*

So, the first condition Jesus gives us if we want our stress to be relieved is that we need to come to *Him* with our burdens and not something or someone else.

The second condition is ... and this is going to seem like overly obvious but we need to spell it out because so many of us rarely do this.

**2. We need to actually come to Jesus –**

**meaning, to regularly and intentionally spend time with Him.**

It's not enough just to think and to know, "Oh, how wonderful! Jesus cares for me and my burdens."

Peace comes by spending quality *and* quantity time in the *presence* of Jesus. "COME to me," He says, "and I will give you rest and relief from your stress."

What does that look like? It's different for different people based on personality but the one thing that's common is the regularity and intentionality.

Some of us can spend five minutes with Jesus every day and it's just what we need. Some of us, like me, I need a sledge hammer! I need to spend hours with the Lord. And lucky for me it's part of my job and I get to do that. I get to look at what God is doing in my life, what I think God is doing in your life, what's in the scripture, and then I preach to me and let you all listen in. It's really a great experience for me!

In fact, the last two Sundays I've been gone and I didn't have that time where I was intentionally spending time with Jesus. I was cranky and I just didn't feel right. I

was stressed and wondering what was wrong with me. Then last weekend I got to get back into my rhythm. For me, that's Friday afternoon or evening, all day Saturday and early Sunday morning, intentionally spending time with Jesus as I prepare for Sunday.

However that looks for you. Jesus is saying, "Come, make it intentional, make it regular, and spend time with me."

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The second thing Jesus says (which is actually *the third thing we need to do* - and this will take a little bit

of explanation but it's worth it because it's so brilliant) ... Jesus says "take my yoke upon you and learn from me."

Again, as I said, this is another farming metaphor and if you know anything about farming (which I do not) ...

**... you're familiar with the idea of a yoke. As you can see, Jesus isn't talking about eggs.**

Sorry, that's just a bad yoke on my part.

**Instead, Jesus is talking about an instrument you put on your plow animals that will keep them in line and focused on the task of plowing.**

And he says, “Take *my* yoke on you and learn from me.”

And by saying that part of what He means is, “I’ll be on one side of it and you’ll be on the other” which is cool because Jesus is saying He’ll help us. So it’s not all up to us. We’re in it together.

But the really interesting thing He says (and those who first heard Him say it would have immediately understood Him) ... the really interesting thing is when Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” And what Jesus was doing when He said that was

drawing a contrast between Himself and the Pharisees, the Teachers of Religious Law for the Jewish People.

On many occasions Jesus would say things to them like, “you guys have made the Law so complex – you’ve added so many things that are merely traditions of men and not commandments of God – that you yourself can’t keep it. And yet you continue to lay that heavy burden on the people without lifting a finger to help and encourage them.” (A lot of the harassment and helplessness felt by people Jesus came into contact with, came from that heavy burden

of legalism).

And what Jesus was saying to the people of His day was “as long as you try to stay in *their* yoke (which is actually what the Pharisees called it – ‘the yoke of the Law’), you’re going to be stressed out. You’re going to be burdened.”

Of course, in our day, the yokes we get sucked into aren’t necessarily religious legalism – though for some that’s true. Instead, the yokes we get sucked into are based on ...

1. The unwritten law that says “happiness equals more money

and stuff” so we carry the burden debt for it.

2.The unwritten law that says “I need to please everyone in order to be liked” so we never tell people the hard truth they need to hear; we end up carrying burdens that they themselves should be carrying

3.The law that says “I have to be first, best, right, respected” so we carry the burden of winning at all costs and destroying ourselves and our relationships in the process.

4. The law that says “I have to look good in front of people all the time – physically and emotionally and professionally or relationally” so we carry the burden of always pretending to be something we’re not.

You get the idea, I think. A lot of the things we are drawn into by our culture are yokes that produce burdens. And stress and anxiety are the natural by-product. And by saying “yes” to those yokes – those unwritten laws, we bring it on ourselves.

And to us, Jesus says, “There’s a better way. My yoke is easy and

light. Learn it *from* Me and do it *with* Me and it will bring relief instead of stress.”

So, what is that way? What is the yoke of Jesus?

The Bible tells us that one day a religious leader came to Jesus in private and he asked, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment of all of the 613 laws we attempt to keep?”

*Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest*

*commandment.*

*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

*Matthew 22:37-40  
(NIV)*

That's the yoke of Jesus: instead of trying to keep 613 laws - and instead of trying to keep our unwritten cultural laws of consumerism, people-pleasing, perfection and pretense - just make it your focus to try to love God and try to love people. Recognize that God is in the center of everything and build your life

around him. And then be generous, gracious and good to everyone you run into.

So, the third condition Jesus gives is ...

**3. Focus on loving God and loving people (instead of other “yokes” that bind and burden).**

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So, if you want a prescription from God for improved “mental health” ... if you want a plan for minimizing stress and anxiety in your life, that’s it.

- Come to *Jesus* - bring your burdens to Him and not

someone or something else.

- *Come* to Jesus – to regularly and intentionally spend time with Him.
- Focus on loving God and loving people.

“If you will do that,” God says, “I will relieve your stress.”

## **Reflection Time**

I think that’s what Jesus is saying and inviting us to experience this morning.

Specifically, I think He is saying he is the Good Shepherd and He wants

to be *your* Shepherd. He loves you. He's concerned when He sees you feeling harassed and helpless.

So, He says to you, "if you're weary and burdened from all the stress and anxiety, come to me."

And in the next few minutes, that's what I want us to do. I'm just going to guide us through what we've just learned.

So, first of all, let's come to come to Jesus - let's bring your burdens to Him.

What is it that is causing you stress right now?

Who is it?

<pause for prayer>

For me, I'm concerned and anxious about our country. So, I'm going to pray for this election.

<Hillary                      repent/Donald  
repent/country      turn      back      to  
founding principles>

Now, what yoke are you in?

1. The unwritten law that says "happiness equals more money and stuff" so we carry the burden debt for it.

2. The unwritten law that says “I need to please everyone in order to be liked” so we never tell people the hard truth they need to hear; we end up carrying burdens that they themselves should be carrying

3. The law that says “I have to be first, best, right, respected” so we carry the burden of winning at all costs and destroying ourselves and our relationships in the process.

4. The law that says “I have to look good in front of people all

the time - physically and emotionally and professionally or relationally” so we carry the burden of always pretending to be something we’re not.

Just admit that to God and thank him that this, too, is forgiven by grace. And ask him to give you the power to get out of that yoke and into the yoke of Jesus ... with Jesus.

- Focus on loving God and loving people.

<guided prayer time by Rick>

Amen.

## Feature – Let It Fade

### CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

1. Next week ... continue the series with God’s promise “I Will Direct You ... I will provide guidance for you if you will ...”

### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> From Metric’s song, “Help, I’m Alive”

<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/metric/helpimalive.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2016/10/presidential-election-stress.aspx>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-07-08-sheep-suicide\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-07-08-sheep-suicide_x.htm)

<sup>iv</sup> 1 Peter 2:25

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<sup>v</sup> From the Amplified Version, see  
<https://www.bible.com/bible/8/mat.11.29-30.ampc>