



Fall 2004 *Go! Online* Bible Study

## Stressbusting Peace



### Materials:

- *Go! Online* Download Video: *Are You Stressed?*
- Computer, monitor or video projector to display video
- One copy of *Go! Online* Group Activity for “Are You Stressed?”
- Copies of Fall 2004 *Go!* magazine for each student (unless they’ve already been distributed)

### Video Introduction:

When you’re ready to begin your study, play the *Go! Online* download video called *Are You Stressed?* It is 3 minutes long, and it features a group of Christian students answering questions about what makes them stressed and how they deal with it. It’s intended to help your group focus on the issue of stress as you begin your study.

Before playing the video clip, ask your group to think about how they would answer the questions asked. If you have extra time for discussion, you could watch the clip in segments, asking your students to discuss their answers to each question after watching the students on the video.

If you’d like to extend your discussion, you could follow a similar format by asking the questions posed in our roundtable interview on stress in the Fall 2004 issue of *Go!* magazine. It’s called “Stressed Out?” You’ll find it on page 48.

### Group Activity:

Hand out copies of the *Go! Online* group activity for this study. You should have one for each student. Explain the following in your own words:

**Now that we’ve had a few minutes to think about the issue of stress, let’s focus on which areas of our lives are the most stressful. You can use the top of this page to evaluate how stressed you’ve been feeling lately on a scale from 1 to 10 in each of the areas listed. Don’t worry; nobody else has to see your page. We’ll come back and work on the bottom half of the page at the end of our stress study.**

Give your students time to evaluate and select a number for their level of stress in each area.

### Transition:

Over the last few years, stress has become a buzz word. News stories talk about how stressed everyone is—from little kids to anxious parents. Lots of teens are said to have high-stress lifestyles, with more going on than they feel they can get done in a day, a week or a

school year. We all look forward to low-stress moments when we can just hang out with friends or listen to music or watch TV.

The word *stress*, though, actually started out as a description of what happens to physical objects. When too much weight is added to a rope, the fibers stretch and become stressed. Pile on more weight, and the stressed rope will break. And, really, emotional and psychological stress causes physical harm to us, as well. After prolonged periods of stress, the human body starts to suffer. Many medical doctors point to stress as a factor in diseases including heart problems and cancer.

Still, two people with the exact same life circumstances might not feel the same amount of stress. That's partly because stress isn't just an issue of what's going on in our lives—it's also an issue of how we're responding to it. When faced with stressful circumstances, we can either give in to anxiety and worry and anger—or we can choose to practice different responses.

So here's our question today: Does the Bible offer any real answers for dealing with stress? If it didn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

### **Peace That Doesn't Make Sense**

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul offered a very specific path to peace of mind. Remember, stress isn't necessarily about the circumstances of our lives. If anyone had reason to be stressed, Paul did. Check out this list of “stressors” in Paul's life:

“Five times I received from the Jews 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the depths of the sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the open country, dangers on the sea, and dangers among false brothers; labor and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and lacking clothing. Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my care for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:24-28, HCSB).

Talk about a high-stress lifestyle! Now listen to what Paul wrote to his friends living in a town called Philippi: “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Philippians 4:11, HCSB).

Contentment could almost be defined as the absence of stress. By today's standards, Paul should have been stressed out of his mind. Instead, he had contentment. All that outer turmoil didn't dent his inner peace.

Where does that kind of peace come from? Paul described the source of his mind-blowing peace in Philippians 4:4-8:



“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise—dwell on these things” (HCSB).

Let’s break this passage down, step by step, and look at Paul’s path to peace of mind in a stressful world.

## 1. Celebrate God

It’s the command so nice Paul said it twice: Rejoice in the Lord! What’s that mean, exactly? Something like this: Remember to celebrate just how good your God is.

Paul’s not asking us to pretend to be happy when we’re stressed. He’s not saying we should slap on some happy Christian smiles and act like everything’s fine when we’re disintegrating inside. He’s telling us to remember God’s greatness.

In a way, it’s like a birthday party. Every year, we remember to celebrate the birthday of those we care about most. You don’t have to feel happy to buy a friend a birthday card, but doing so usually makes you feel pretty good about the person. The choice to celebrate the person leads to the positive emotion.

Paul tells us to celebrate God’s greatness all the time. The first step to dealing with stress is to constantly remind ourselves how great God really is. Why? Because our great God is in control of everything, including the things that really make us feel stressed.

Here are a few rejoicing questions to ask yourself when stress hits hard: How good is God? How powerful is He? How much does He care about you? How has He showed Himself faithful to you in the past?

The answers to those questions should remind us that the stressful moment we’re in is way smaller than the huge, loving, kind God we serve.

## 2. Be kind

Paul’s next command is to put our graciousness on display. Other versions of this passage use the word *moderation* or *gentleness*. The big picture is this: Don’t lose your cool—or go to extremes—when you’re stressed.

Our stressful moments are the ones in which we’re most likely to lose control of our emotions and treat each other badly. What does that lead to? More stressful moments. Paul reminded his friends in Philippi that feeling stressed is a lousy reason to treat others in lousy ways.



# STRESSED OUT

When the pressure is on, we've got to concentrate extra hard on treating each other with kindness, compassion, forgiveness and understanding. And you know what? Those acts of kindness to each other often lead to less stressful feelings. We remember that life is not all about us; it's about the people God has put into our lives to show His love to.

### 3. Where is God?

When our lives feel like they're falling apart, it's easy to think that God is off working on a more important project. He's not.

Paul addresses these doubts for us: "The Lord is near." He's with us. He's involved in our lives, even when we feel the most stressed. We're not in this alone.

### 4. Instead of worrying, tell God what you want. Then tell Him again.

Taken by itself, the first phrase of verse 6 sounds impossible: "Don't worry about anything." Yeah, right! But the phrase isn't delivered alone. Instead, Paul followed it with another way of thinking when we start worrying about the things that stress us out: tell God your requests.

That sounds too simple, doesn't it? But telling God what we want to happen (giving Him our requests) makes us take a step that can bust our stress down a peg.

First, we have to figure out what we want. You'd think you know what you want, but stress often pops up because we feel like things are out of control. Everything is happening, and we don't know if we like where it's going.

Here are a few things most people want when they're stressed, even if they can't name them at the time: I want to get done on time. I want to do my best. I want everyone (or someone special) to like me or respect me or think I'm funny. I want to stop working on this. I want everyone to get along. I want to be safe and healthy.

Notice something here: These verses do NOT promise that God will give us what we want. Instead, the stress gets busted when we trust Him with the results. He might say no; what we want might not happen. But telling Him about it requires us to say, "I know you're God. I know you can help with this. I trust You to do the best thing, even if it's not the thing I think I want to happen right now."

It's a choice to replace anxiety with trust.

### 5. Thanksgiving, no turkey

Too many of us miss the little phrase "with thanksgiving" in the middle of verse 7, and that can derail this whole stressbusting way of thinking.

Why does it matter that we give thanks to God when we're stressed? For one, it reminds us of all the ways He's taken care of us up until now. In the middle of stressful circumstances,

we forget that stuff. Prayers like this take us back to the fact that God always comes through for us:

“Thanks, God, for helping me finish all my projects last semester. Thanks for helping me through that hard time with my family last week. Thanks for the good friends you give me who really seem to like me and want to be with me. Thanks for the athletic ability to even be on this team in the first place. Thanks that You’ll be with me and I’ll be with You long after this day is ancient history.”

Giving thanks forces us to remember that God loves to give us good things. He’s not going to stop today, even if everything doesn’t go exactly how it seems best to us at the moment.

## **6. Peace beyond figuring out**

Finally, the promise and the payoff: If you take the time to change your focus from your crazy circumstances to God’s rock-solid love for you, wild peace will invade your mind and emotions.

When stressful times hit, here’s the path to follow: Celebrate God. Treat others especially well. Remember how close God is. Tell Him what you want to happen with your circumstances, and then trust Him to do the best thing. Thank Him for all the good things He’s already done for you. Expect to feel peaceful.

One translation says that this kind of peace “transcends all understanding.” From the world’s point of view, it doesn’t make logical sense to feel peaceful when there’s more to do than you feel capable of or when it seems everything is crashing down around you. But that’s how God’s peace is. We can let go of the stress because we’re trusting Him to take care of us.

## **7. Think peacefully**

Lots of times, Christian teachers quote the final verse in our passage to encourage teens not to think about impure things. But it comes after Paul’s path to peace for a reason. If we want to keep feeling that peace that comes from trusting God, we’ve got to train our brains not to go back to worrying about all the negative stuff that could happen if things go wrong.

Paul gives us a list: true, noble, right, pure, beautiful, excellent, worth praising. He says to find things that fit these descriptions and set your mind to work on them instead of the negative, worry-filled thoughts.

### **Group Activity:**

Now ask your students to go back and work on the second half of their sheets to put into practice some of the stressbusting guidelines from Philippians 4. Encourage them to keep their answers to themselves and to be honest.



Help them to understand that practicing this kind of trust in God should give them peace in the middle of stressful times, but remind them that peace can evaporate as they go back to worrying about problems and deadlines. Sometimes, we have to practice Paul's path to peace lots of times every day. We have to retrain ourselves to rest in God when the pressure builds.

This might also be a good time to emphasize the idea that people who walk in peace during stressful times become evidence for God's power. Their ability to walk in peace when people expect them to fall apart may bring them opportunities to share the good news that permanent peace is available to all who trust in Jesus.

**Conclusion:**

Close your group time in prayer, walking through some of these stressbusting, faith-building ideas as you talk to God about the stress you and your group will face in the coming week.

Make sure each of your students has a copy of the Fall 2004 issue of *Go!* magazine. If you didn't use it in your time together, encourage them to check out the teen roundtable interview on stress called "Stressed Out?" on page 48.