

GOD'S ANSWERS TO
LIFE'S DIFFICULT
QUESTIONS

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God's Answers to Life's Difficult Questions

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LIVING WITH PURPOSE



RICK WARREN

GOD'S ANSWERS TO
LIFE'S DIFFICULT
QUESTIONS

ZONDERVAN®

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN 49530 USA

ZONDERVAN.COM/
AUTHORTRACKER²



God's Answers to Life's Difficult Questions

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Previously titled *Answers to Life's Most Difficult Questions*

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Warren, Richard, 1954–

God's answers to life's difficult questions / Rick Warren.

p. cm. — (Living with purpose)

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-27302-8

ISBN-10: 0-310-27302-1

1. Christian life—Biblical teaching. 2. Problem solving—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4501.3.W363 2006

248.4—dc22

2006022096

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Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

*I dedicate this book to my flock,
the members of Saddleback Valley
Community Church.*

*They have an insatiable hunger for
practical teaching from God's Word,
listen intently,
and seek to apply the truth to their lives.
I am grateful to be their pastor.*

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PREFACE



Many books today focus on self-improvement. Everyone wants to change for the better. Americans will spend millions of dollars this year in their search for practical solutions to their problems. Many will move from one fad to another, looking for advice on how to live and for answers to perplexing questions.

Unfortunately, much of the advice being dispensed through television, radio, and print these days is highly unreliable. It is based on popular opinion and current thinking. Therein lies a problem, because today's "pop psychology" will be discarded next year for a new approach or therapy.

Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free!" Lasting freedom from personal hang-ups comes from building our lives on the truth. Only the Bible can be depended on completely to provide truthful insights into the causes and cures for our personal problems. God's Word has stood the test of time. It is just as relevant and applicable today as it was thousands of years ago. It contains the answers to life's most difficult questions.

However, it is not enough to simply *say*, "The Bible is the answer." It is important for Christians to *show how* the Bible answers life's questions. In this book I suggest practical steps and specific actions you can take, based on God's Word, that will help you cope with the common problems we all face. The great evangelist D. L. Moody once said, "The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge, but to change our lives."

When Jesus taught, his intention was that those who listened would "go and do likewise." He aimed for specific actions and commitments. In each of these twelve studies you will discover simple ways to apply God's truth to your personal

life, your family, other relationships, and your job. The way to get the most out of this book is to act on it!

Why are there so many biographical stories in the Bible? The apostle Paul said, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). God gave us these examples from people’s lives for two reasons.

First, they are given to teach us. It is always wise to learn from our own experiences, but it is even wiser to learn from the experiences of others. It is usually less painful too! By applying the principles illustrated in the lives of Bible characters, we can avoid making some of the same costly mistakes they made.

Second, God gave us these stories to encourage us. We are encouraged by the fact that he chooses to use ordinary people to accomplish his plans—in spite of their weaknesses and failures and sometimes mixed motives. That gives us hope that God can work in our lives also!

It is my prayer that these studies of Bible characters will produce two results in your life: that you will learn God's principles for successful living, and that you will believe God can use you in a significant way.

CHAPTER 1

HOW CAN I COPE WITH STRESS?



Jesus Christ was constantly under pressure. There were grueling demands on his time; he rarely had any personal privacy; he was constantly interrupted. People repeatedly misunderstood him, criticized him, and ridiculed him. He had enormous stress, which would have caused any of us to cave in.

But as we look at the life of Christ, we quickly discover that he remained at peace under pressure. He was never in a hurry. He was always at ease. He had a calmness about his life that enabled him to handle enormous amounts of stress. How did he do this so successfully? The answer can be

simply stated: he based his life on sound principles of stress management. If we understand and apply these eight principles in our lives, we will experience less pressure and more peace of mind.

IDENTIFICATION: KNOW WHO YOU ARE

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). “I am the door” (10:9 KJV); “I am the way and the truth and the life” (14:6); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11); “I am God’s Son” (10:36). Christ knew who he was!

The first principle for handling stress in your life is this: *Know who you are*. It is the principle of identification. Jesus said, “I know who I am. I testify for myself” (see John 8:18). This is critically important in stress management because if you don’t know who you are, someone else may try to tell you who *they* think you are. If you don’t know who you are, you will subconsciously

HOW CAN I COPE WITH STRESS?

let other people manipulate you and pressure you into believing you are somebody you aren't.

A lot of stress in life results from our hiding behind masks, living double lives, being unreal with others, or trying to be somebody we're not. Insecurity always produces pressure in our lives, and when we are insecure, we feel coerced to perform and conform. We set unrealistic standards for our lives, and even though we work, work, work, we still can't meet those unrealistic standards. Tension and pressure naturally occur as a result.

The first way to balance stress in my life is to get an internal balance of who I am. And I know *who* I am by knowing *whose* I am. I am a child of God. I was put on earth not by accident, but for a purpose. I am deeply loved by God. I am accepted by him. He has a plan for my life, and because he put me here, I am significant.

And because he put *you* here, *you* are significant. To handle stress you must know who you are. Until you handle this issue, you will be hindered by insecurity.

DEDICATION: KNOW WHOM
YOU'RE TRYING TO PLEASE

The second principle of stress management in the life of Christ is found in John 5:30: "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me."

The principle is this: *Know whom you're trying to please*. You can't please everybody, because by the time one group becomes pleased with you, another group gets upset with you. Even God doesn't please everybody, so it's foolish to try to do something that even God doesn't do!

Jesus knew whom he was trying to please; it was a settled issue with him: "I'm going to please God the Father." And the Father replied, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17 KJV).

When you don't know whom you're trying to please, you cave in to three things: *criticism* (because you are concerned about what others will think of you), *competition* (because you worry

about whether somebody else is getting ahead of you), and *conflict* (because you're threatened when anyone disagrees with you). If I "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," then all the other necessary things of life will be added unto me (Matt. 6:33 KJV). This means that if I focus on pleasing God, it will simplify my life. I will always be doing the right thing—the thing that pleases God—regardless of what anybody else thinks.

We love to blame our stress on other people and obligations: "You *made* me ... I *have* to ... I've *got* to." Actually, there are few things in life (apart from our jobs) that we *must* do. When we say, "I have to, I must, I've got to," we may really be saying, "I choose to, because I don't want to pay the consequences." Hardly anybody *makes* us do anything, so usually we can't blame other people for our stress. When we feel pressure, we are *choosing* to allow other people to put us under pressure. We are not victims unless we *allow* ourselves to be pressured by other people's demands.

ORGANIZATION: KNOW WHAT
YOU'RE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH

Here is Christ's clue to the third principle for dealing with stress: "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going" (John 8:14). The principle is this: *Know what you want to accomplish*. Christ said, "I know where I came from, and I know where I'm going." Unless you plan your life and set priorities, you will be pressured by other people to do what they think is important.

Every day, either you live by priorities or you live by pressures. There is no other option. Either you decide what is important in your life, or you let other people decide what is important in your life.

It is easy to operate under the tyranny of the urgent, to come to the end of your day and think, "Have I really accomplished anything? I used a lot of energy and did a lot of things, but did I accomplish anything important?" Busyness is not necessarily productivity. You may be spinning in circles, but you're not accomplishing anything.

HOW CAN I COPE WITH STRESS?

Preparation causes you to be at ease. To put it another way, preparation prevents pressure but procrastination produces it. Good organization and good preparation reduce stress because you know who you are, whom you're trying to please, and what you want to accomplish. *Having clear goals greatly simplifies life.* Spend a few minutes each day talking with God in prayer. Look at your schedule for the day and decide, "Is this really the way I want to spend a day of my life? Am I willing to exchange twenty-four hours of my life for these activities?"

CONCENTRATION: FOCUS ON ONE THING AT A TIME

Do you sometimes find yourself pulled in different directions? Several people tried to detour Jesus from his planned schedule. They tried to distract him from his goal in life. "At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them" (Luke 4:42). Jesus was going to leave, but they tried to make him stay.

Jesus responded, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (v. 43). He refused to be distracted by less important matters.

Principle number four for stress management is this: *Focus on one thing at a time*. It is the principle of concentration. Jesus was a master at this. It seemed that everybody tried to interrupt him; everyone had a Plan B for him. But Jesus responded, "Sorry, I must keep on moving toward my goal." He kept right on doing what he knew God had told him to do: preach about the kingdom of God. He was determined. He was persistent. He was focused.

When I have thirty things to do on my desk, I clear my desk and work on one thing. When I finish that, I pick up something else. You can't catch two jackrabbits at once. You've got to focus on one.

When we diffuse our efforts, we are ineffective. When we concentrate our efforts, we are more effective. Light diffused produces a hazy glow, but light concentrated produces fire. Jesus Christ did not let interruptions prevent him from

concentrating on his goal; he did not let others make him tense or stressed or irritated.

DELEGATION: DON'T DO IT ALL YOURSELF

One day “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him” (Mark 3:13). He appointed twelve men, whom he designated as apostles, so they might be with him and he could send them out to preach. In other words, Jesus delegated his authority. This is the fifth principle: *Don't try to do it all yourself*. Use the principle of delegation.

Do you know why we get uptight and tense? Because we think everything depends on us. “Here I am—Atlas—holding up the cares of the world. They're all on my shoulders. If I happen to let go, the world will fall apart.” But when I really do let go, the world doesn't fall apart! Jesus enlisted and trained twelve disciples so that they could share his load. He delegated his work. He got other people involved.

Why don't we delegate? Why don't we get other people involved? Why do we try to do it all ourselves? For two reasons. The first reason

is *perfectionism*. We think, "If I want a job well done, I'll do it myself." That's a nice idea, but often it doesn't work well because there are just too many things to be done. We simply don't have time to do everything ourselves. It's really an ego-tistical attitude that says, "Nobody, but nobody, can do it the way I can."

Do you think Jesus would have done a better job than these disciples? Of course he would have. But he let them do the work even though he would have done it better. We need to let other people make some of the mistakes so that they can learn, the way the disciples did. Don't rob others of an education!

The other reason we don't delegate is personal *insecurity*. "What if I turn over this responsibility to someone, and he does a better job at it?" That thought is threatening to us. But you won't be threatened by that possibility if you know who you are, whom you're trying to please, what you want to accomplish, and what one thing you want to focus on. In order to be effective, you *must* get other people involved, because you can't

focus on more than one thing at a time and do it effectively.

MEDITATION: MAKE A HABIT
OF PERSONAL PRAYER

Jesus often got up “very early in the morning, while it was still dark, . . . and went off to a solitary place” to pray (Mark 1:35). The sixth principle of stress management is, *Make a habit of personal prayer*. This is the principle of meditation. *Prayer is a gigantic stress-reliever*. It is a God-given tool for letting off your anxieties. No matter how busy Jesus got, he made it a practice to spend time alone with God. If Jesus made time for prayer when he was busy, how much more do you and I need prayer! A little quiet time alone with God can be a decompression chamber for life’s stresses. We talk with God in prayer; we tell him what’s on our minds and let him talk to us as we read the Bible. Then we look at our schedules, evaluate our priorities, and wait for instructions. (In my book *Rick Warren’s Bible Study Methods* there is a detailed explanation of how to develop and

continue the habit of a daily devotional time with God.)

Many of our problems come from our inability to sit still. We just don't know how to be quiet. Most of us cannot sit in a car for five minutes without turning the radio on.

If you walk into your house and find that you're all alone, what's the first thing you do? You probably turn on the TV or a music CD. Silence makes us uncomfortable. But God says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). One reason many people don't know God personally is that they can't be still. They're too busy to be quiet and just think.

Someone once said, "It seems to be an ironic habit of man that when he loses his way he doubles his speed"—like an Air Force pilot in World War II who flew out over the Pacific. When he radioed in, the controller asked, "Where are you?" The pilot replied, "I don't know, but I'm making record time!"

A lot of people are like that: they are speeding through life, but they don't know where they are headed. We need to start our morning with

prayer, as Jesus did, and then periodically through the day stop and pray again, to recharge our spiritual batteries.

RECREATION: TAKE TIME OFF TO ENJOY LIFE

Once Jesus' twelve men gathered around him and reported all that they had done and taught. "Because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest'" (Mark 6:31). Principle number seven for stress management is, *Take time off to enjoy life*. It's the principle of relaxation and recreation. Jesus looked at these men who had been working hard without relief and said, "You deserve a break today. Let's get some rest. Let's take some time off." So they got into a boat, rowed to the other side of the lake, and went out to the desert to rest.

One reason why Jesus could handle stress is that he knew when to relax. He frequently went to either the mountains or the desert just to unwind.

Rest and recreation in life are not optional. In fact, rest is so important that God included it in the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath was made for mankind because God knows that our physical, emotional, and spiritual constitutions demand periodic breaks. Jesus survived stress because he enjoyed life. One of my favorite verses, Matthew 11:19 in the Phillips paraphrase, says that Jesus came “enjoying life.” Paul wrote that God has richly provided “everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17). Balance in life is a key to stress management.

TRANSFORMATION: GIVE YOUR STRESS
TO CHRIST

The eighth principle of stress management is one that Jesus didn't need because he is the Son of God, but that we need because we're merely human. Jesus says, “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” (Matt. 11:28–30). So the final principle of stress management is, *Give your stress to Christ*. You will never enjoy complete peace of mind until you have a relationship with the Prince of Peace.

Christ did *not* say, “Come to me and I will give you more guilt, more burdens, more stress, and more worries”—even though that’s what a lot of people seem to teach! Some churches tend to create pressure rather than relieve it. But Jesus said, “I want to give you *rest*. I am the Stress-Reliever. When you get in harmony with me, I will give you inner strength.”

Christ can transform your lifestyle from stressful to satisfied. The greatest source of stress comes from trying to live our lives apart from the God who made us, trying to go our own way and be our own god.

What do you need? If you have never committed your life to Christ, you need a transformation. Give your life, with all its stresses, to him and say, “Lord, please give me a new life. Replace the pressure I feel with the peace you offer. Help me follow your principles of stress management.”

PUTTING THOUGHTS INTO ACTION

1. Which two or three of the eight principles stand out as the ones you most need to deal with right now?
2. Identify three specific ways you can begin to simplify your life within the next week.