

Turning Stress Into Strength

Supernatural Help for Academics

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Abstract: God knows everything and can help us with anything. As students and faculty, we often carry needless stress because we don't ask God for help. In this paper I lay out the biblical argument that the Creator has always intended to give us the help we need in our work, if we ask. Then I show the wide variety of kinds of supernatural help available through personal stories of students and faculty, including my own experiences. I suggest a number of practical ways people in academics can ask for God's help.

Stress is a sign that we face an overwhelming situation. Left unchecked, our stress can become anxiety and sometimes a full-on panic attack. I appreciate how realistic the Bible is about hardship; Jesus straight out told his disciples that in this world we will face all kinds of trouble.¹

Living Without Anxiety

It's almost unbelievable, but Jesus taught that we can live without anxiety. When he described how his disciples live in his Kingdom, he said, "Don't worry about tomorrow. Each day has enough troubles of its own."² When a father came to him, overwhelmed because his precious daughter was dying, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just keep trusting."³

But how? Is this even possible?

The good news is that God gives us practical ways to deal with stress. I won't claim to be one hundred percent anxiety free, but through the Holy Spirit's power I have learned to turn stress into strength, and I've seen hundreds of undergrads, grad students, and even professors learn and apply these secrets from Jesus in their academic lives. You can, too.

Created to Work

One of my mentors, Don, is a professor emeritus at the Drucker School of Management. Don published an in-depth academic paper about how God gives us academic help.⁴ He observes that as followers of Jesus, we often fail to realize we have all the resources of heaven at our disposal for dealing with our academic work.

God created human beings to work. Work is fundamentally good for us. Yet it's also the source of endless problems. Our Creator never meant us to carry these massive loads alone. God always intended that God's own Spirit would give us the strength and help we need for everything we face.

Jesus' own life shows us how one human being could face overwhelming problems, such as being harassed and hunted down by the authorities, arrested, and brutally executed. Jesus experienced distress and severe pain. Jesus suffered and struggled, but he never gave in to despair. He experienced intense stress and grief, but never panicked.⁵ How was this possible?

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¹ Matthew 13:21, John 15:18-16:2, John 16:33.

² Matthew 6:25-34.

³ Mark 5:22-36.

⁴ Donald Griesinger, "The Theology of Work and the Work of Christian Scholars," *Christian Scholars Review*, 39:3

(2010), 291-304. Many of my points come from Don's paper.

⁵ Matthew 26:42-46; Mark 14:33-38; 15:16-23; Luke 22:41-46; John 19:18-30

Jesus's Secret

Jesus tells us his secret. He explained clearly how he himself decided what to do and what not to do.

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.”⁶

We might think that these words only apply to Jesus, but Jesus tells his disciples to live the same way.⁷

Jesus says he'll teach anyone his secrets: “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke⁸ and let me teach you.”⁹

That's the secret: “let me teach you.” Jesus himself looked to his Father to find out everything he needed to do. God knows everything, and can help us with anything, if we will ask.

When I've used this approach of asking God for help, I've found my stress doesn't disappear right away—in fact, at first Jesus' way usually seems harder than my own way—but as I listen and follow his guidance, I find I actually have less anxiety and stress.

How Paul Learned This Secret

Paul tells us that he actually learned this secret from Jesus. Paul faced bullying, oppression, and abuse, and survived through the power of the Spirit.

To be clear, neither Paul nor Jesus tells us to seek out suffering. They never support abuse. Some abusers misquote scripture to support their oppression, but the Bible

strongly rebukes people who exploit anyone who is vulnerable.¹⁰

But we often find ourselves in suffering that we're powerless to stop. Paul prayed—in other words, talked to Jesus—repeatedly about a kind of suffering he faced. And, as Paul reports, Jesus told him, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”

Paul took this seriously. He wrote, “So

now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.” When's the last time you boasted about a weakness? It sounds ridiculous. But Paul goes even further. “That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships,

persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”¹¹

To avoid misunderstanding Paul, we need to remember that he always left situations where he was being physically abused. Count how many places Paul left to escape harassment: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Ephesus, and Jerusalem.¹² He tried to talk his way out of suffering in several situations, but never by disobeying or disowning Jesus.¹³

Paul wasn't a doormat. When he said he took pleasure in his weaknesses, insults, and harassment, he didn't mean he was masochistic. He never asked to be hurt, and he ran away from situations where he was being hurt.

But he didn't back down from what Jesus asked him to do, even when he knew doing it

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⁶ John 5:19, NLT

⁷ For example, read John 14:12-21.

⁸ Ancient Hebrew rabbis used the term yoke to refer to their way of reading and living out the scripture—to their teachings.

⁹ Matthew 11:28-30, CEB & NLT

¹⁰ A few examples out of hundreds: Exodus 22:21-27, Ezekiel 34:1-24, Matthew 23:23-36, Luke 17:1-2, and James 2:1-17.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NLT

¹² Acts 13:50; 14:6-7; 14:19-20; 16:35-40; 17:10; 17:14; 20:1; 20:24-29, 23:12-24, and 25:9-12.

¹³ Acts 20:1, Acts 27:9-11, 27:21-26, 27:30-36, Acts 18:16-20.

might bring bullying, harassment, or abuse.¹⁴ This is the most essential part of Jesus’s secret: Like Paul, we have to *respond* to what Jesus says. If we won’t do what he tells us, soon we’ll lose the ability to hear his voice.

Learning to Hear God

Honestly, we all struggle to hear God, and this is why: because for years we haven’t practiced *doing* what we sense God saying to us. Our hearts grow harder and our ears get duller.¹⁵

The good news is that Jesus says this process works the opposite way, too. Each time we do what we hear, our hearts get softer and our ears get more sensitive.

It’s never too late to learn how to hear God’s Spirit. Paul says that’s what God created us for, and Jesus’s death made that possible.¹⁶

Whole books have been written on this, like *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard. The Bible shows us God speaking to people—from Genesis through Revelation. Someone counted over forty ways that God spoke: in images, words, dreams, visions, convictions, and so on. Sometimes God used an audible voice.

Personally, I don’t think I’ve ever heard God speak audibly. Different people hear God differently. For me, it’s often an idea that I recognize isn’t my own. Sometimes it’s a picture or a scripture. Often it’s a feeling prompting me to do or to stop doing a certain action.

Practical Help

We can apply this secret—turning to God for help—to our academics, wherever we feel stuck, overwhelmed, or weak in any way. In fact, we can often avoid getting stuck by going to God for help first, like Jesus did.

I can’t give you a single method for doing this, because we’re all different. But I can tell you some stories and list some ideas to spark your creativity.

Yesterday a student told me he had gotten overwhelmed studying for a test. He said, “I took a break to walk and listen to worship songs for a few minutes. And it worked! My studying went

better after that.”

One day in grad school, I was staring at a blank document, trying to figure out where to start my paper. In frustration I started typing a prayer to God. I just poured out my feelings about the paper. After a paragraph or so, ideas started coming, so I listed those. Then I realized I could turn those into an outline.

Soon that became my habit whenever I got stuck in writing. Sometimes I typed bullet-point prayers so I could get out a lot of feelings and thoughts in a raw, unfiltered way without worrying about complete sentences and punctuation.¹⁷

In daily life, I often write out a list of all my tasks, and then ask God to make the top priorities stand out to me. Once, when I asked that, two ideas popped into my head: “Get your wife flowers, then take a nap.” I was shocked; neither of those was on my list. But I wanted my heart to get softer, so I did

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¹⁴ Paul and his teams proclaimed Jesus boldly even when they expected harassment in many cities, including Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:44-46), Iconium (Acts 14:1-7), Lystra (Acts 14:19-20), Philippi (Acts 16:12-40), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10), Beroea (Acts 17:10-14), Corinth (Acts 18:9-17), Jerusalem (Acts 21:13-15), Caesarea (Acts 23:33-26:29) and Rome (Acts 25:10-11, 28:16-31).

¹⁵ Jesus teaches this in Matthew 13:3-20 and Luke 8:4-21; Paul makes the same point in Acts 28:23-28.

¹⁶ Romans 8:2-28, Galatians 5:13-25, Ephesians 2:1-10.

¹⁷ I also learned that if I typed my prayers in italics, it would help me remember to erase them before I turned in the paper.

them both. They turned out to be incredibly helpful.

After I woke up from the nap, I found out one assignment was canceled, another was postponed, and someone wanted to work together on a big project. I felt like God was telling me, “I got this!”

Tasks in Which God Can Help You

- Picking a project topic
- Refining research questions
- Honing a thesis statement
- Which articles to read first
- Which data to focus on
- How to analyze the data

Ways God Has Guided Academics

- Insights through prayer or dreams
- Rabbit trails to avoid
- Warnings not to obsess over something that isn’t worth the time
- Recognizing a mistake
- Avoiding perfectionism: “Good enough is good enough!”

Task Questions You Can Ask God

- What should I do now?
- How should I do this?
- What’s your perspective on this topic or assignment?
- Who or where can I get help?
- Is there anything you want to say to me?

One student told me she asked Jesus to help her pick her classes. I started doing that, too. *RateMyProfessor.com* gives valuable advice, but Jesus knows our specific needs. So I listen to both.

Other people can be extremely valuable in helping us hear God’s voice. Recently, a high school senior asked me to lead a listening prayer time to help him decide on which college and program to enter. He invited his parents and youth group leaders, and we spent over half

an hour asking God for scriptures, pictures, and ideas to help guide him. We intentionally didn’t give him advice, but told him what we thought we heard in prayer. A number of things we “heard” seemed random, but when we shared them a couple strong themes emerged. A few days later he decided, with a new and profound level of peace and confidence.

Guidance Questions You Can Ask God

- Where should I apply?
- Which courses should I register for?
- What factors should I consider?
- What do you have for me in this?
- What posture do you want me to have in this process?

Helpful Habits for Cultivating Faith

- Ask others to help you discern spiritually.
- List out your fears, and give them to God.
- List out lies you believe.
- Ask for a truth or promise of God from scripture to replace each lie.
- Commit to trusting Jesus wherever he leads you.
- Trust that God is the sole source of your good and happy future.

Care for Your Body and Soul

Ignoring our own health ramps up our stress levels. Then we make poor choices and get more out of sync, creating a vicious cycle.

God created our minds, bodies, and souls, and God cares for us. The more we take care of what our heavenly Father has entrusted us with, the more we’ll be able to hear the Spirit, respond in faith, and do excellent work.

Jon and Dave Ferguson use an easy acronym to help us pay attention to four critical categories of our health. RPMs stands for Relational, Physical, Mental, and Spiritual

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health.¹⁸

Monitoring Your RPMs

Take a few minutes to reflect on the following categories. I like to either journal my thoughts or get together with a friend to go through them. We spend half the time on each of us, asking each other these questions. We end by asking what Jesus is saying to us and how we want to respond.

Relational Health:

- How are my various relationships at home, work, school, church, and neighborhood?
- Who are my working buddies, accountability partners, mentors, and mentees?
- Which relationships support me?
- Are any relationships strained or in need of attention?

Physical Health:

- How am I doing in my eating, sleep, physical exercise, and overall physical health?
- What do I need to cut out?
- What physical practices do I need to add?
- Where do I need help?

Mental Health:

- How is my inner life—my thoughts, emotions, and imagination?
- What am I consuming—watching, listening to, and reading?
- What helps me flourish mentally?
- What do I need to weed out?
- What helps me deal with negative and unhealthy thoughts?
- What sources of help can I seek out?

Spiritual Health:

- How is my relationship with Jesus right now?
- What practices help me connect with God such as prayer, worship, confession, lament, solitude, and sabbath?
- Where am I being fed by scripture?

Relating to God in our Academics

One day on the bus, I cried out to God (silently, of course) that I didn't have time to pray as a grad student, husband, and dad of three children. Immediately a thought popped into my mind: "Reading is prayer. Writing is prayer."

Normally, my reading and writing wasn't prayer. But I did a huge amount of those daily. If reading and writing became prayer, I could relate to Jesus a lot! So I asked the Spirit to teach me how. Here are some ways I learned to pray.

Reading and Writing Can Be Prayer

As I did my reading, the Spirit had me pay attention to my emotions. When I got disturbed, those feelings could become lament—crying out and complaining to God. If I read about the past or present troubles of a particular group, those feelings could also become intercession—begging God to help others. When I got exciting new insights, I praised God. When I read amazing things about creation, I thanked the Creator.

I'm not quite sure how to describe this, but it feels like simply choosing to turn my thoughts towards God as I study. I can't really think of two things at once, but as feelings arise, I let them come up and face them towards God. I like how Paul says the Spirit helps us pray with groaning that is too deep for words.¹⁹ So I began to let my groans be prayers.

¹⁸ Dave and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How to Accomplish the Jesus Mission*, Zondervan, 2010, pp. 135-137.

¹⁹ Romans 8:22-26.

Often it was as simple as saying, when I started my reading, “Lord, hear my feelings as prayers!” When I forgot, often the Spirit would remind me in the midst of reading.

I learned that in the same way, while I was writing, my thoughts and feelings could become prayers.²⁰ While I was doing math or science problems, I often lamented and asked for help, and when insights came I would rejoice and praise God. Sometimes those insights came by asking others for help, and I thanked God for giving me the humility to ask.

Listening and Speaking Can Be

Prayer

Later, the Spirit taught me, “Listening is prayer. Speaking is prayer.” When speaking up in class, I could relate to Jesus by applying all the ways I was learning to pray while reading. While listening to others in class, if I was frustrated with someone’s ignorance, that could become lament and intercession—plus asking forgiveness for my arrogance. If I sensed they were confused or in need, I could pray for God’s grace to help them. If they had a great insight, I could thank God for them.

Examples of Academic Prayers

- Supplication (I need help! I’m confused or stuck.)
- Lament (I’m angry! The world is broken and corrupt.)
- Confession (I’m broken. I’ve been guilty myself.)
- Repentance (I’m convicted. I need to change my heart and life.)
- Intercession (Others need your help!)
- Praise (Your works are awesome. I love what I’m learning. This fills my heart with worship.)
- Thanks (I love your creation. I appreciate these people, materials, insights, and this education.)

- Calling (I see a need: here I am, I’ll go help, Lord!)

Disciples are Students

I believe that people in academics have a natural advantage in following Jesus. Jesus calls us to be his disciples. The Greek word *disciple* means student, apprentice, or learner. Our word *discipline*, as in the academic disciplines, has the same root. Academics is about learning; unlike many professions, students and faculty spend most of their time learning.

Jesus taught that the secret of dealing with anxiety and stress is to *learn from him*. He was constantly listening to and following the lead of his heavenly Father through the guidance of the Spirit. He wants us to learn that from him.

Jesus promises to teach us, his students, how to live every aspect of our lives. Jesus is the most brilliant teacher the world has ever seen. If we will rely on him, he will guide us step by step.

He has also given us his Spirit—the one he called our Helper, Counselor, and Comforter—to be our Teacher. If we’re open, the Spirit will fill us with the wisdom, courage, and strength we need to face every situation in our academics and beyond.

*Lord Jesus,
you are our teacher,
we are your students.
You are our master,
we are your apprentices.
You are the King,
we are your subjects.
You are the leader,
we are your followers.
Teach us your ways.
Amen.*

²⁰ Maybe every kind of feeling can become a prayer? Try experimenting with this.