

OVERCOMING TENSION AND STRAIN • J. OSWALD SANDERS

“I will give you rest”—Matthew 11:28

Strain and tension characterize our age. People in all walks of life are subject to their ravages, and if the truth be told, despite the rich promises of heart-rest and serenity held out to the believing soul, Christians are too readily subject to these same disorders. Even ministers and missionaries, who by common consent are expected to know more of God and His ways than the rank and file of Christians, are by no means exempt from harmful nervous tension. In spite of tears and prayers and self-reproach, there are some who seem unable to enter into the rest that remains to the people of God. This should not and need not be.

During the earlier years of his missionary career, and for several years after his founding of the China Inland Mission, Dr. J. Hudson Taylor had been in this plight. Then came his transforming experience. “He had been a toiling, burdened man before, with lately not much rest of soul,” one wrote of him at that time. Then came a fresh meeting with God, a fresh discovery of His endless resources, which resulted in a radically changed testimony. “As to work, mine was never so plentiful, so responsible or so difficult, but the weight and strain are all gone.” Since God is not guilty of favoritism, we can expect that what He has done for one of His children He is willing to do for all.

The word “tension” is defined as “the state of being strained to stiffness; hence mental strain, intensity of striving, nervous anxiety with attending muscular tenseness.” It is, of course, not suggested that all nervous tension is harmful. The string of a harp fulfills its function only as it attains the tension necessary to produce the correct musical note. And so it is with the human life. Its highest achievement is reached only when every power is harnessed to the fulfillment of a worthy life purpose, and this involves a certain degree of tension. One rendering of the words of our Lord in Luke 12:50 is, “What tension I suffer until it is all over.” The fulfillment of the will of God involved Him in tension.

Strain is defined as “excessive tension,” and it is with strains and tensions that are harmful and unnecessary that we are concerned.

Contributory Causes

A common misconception is that it is hard work which generates tension, but work per se is not the real cause. Work, even hard work, when the mind is at rest, is health giving. It produces fatigue but not tension. The fundamental cause of strain is to be found in the mind, not in the body. There would appear to be at least four factors which induce a condition of strain in the Christian worker.

A sense of inadequacy, a haunting consciousness of the lack of spiritual resources and mental acumen for the ministry entrusted to one, is a prolific source of tension, for it is usually so well based. Which of us is adequate for his spiritual ministry? Would not a sense of complete adequacy be proof of our spiritual inadequacy? But with this conscious deficiency, the more conscientious we are, the more we strain and strive to supplement our lacks. It is the perfectionist with an over-developed sense of duty who suffers most acutely in this respect. The greater our sense of spiritual responsibility, the more acute the strain. Consciousness of inadequate mental equipment or insufficient training to meet the demands of our work, a feeling that our spiritual capital is too meager for the heavy drafts being made upon it, combine to bring us to breaking point.

An attitude of anxiety, the habit of worrying over things beyond our power to control, can paralyze the nerve of spiritual endeavor and set up dangerous inner tensions. With some, this is a hereditary tendency which has therefore come to be

accepted as inevitable. The victim knows that it is futile and incapacitating, but seems powerless to break a habit which through long indulgence has become part of the life pattern. Examinations, health, affairs of the heart, language study, preparation of sermons and messages, difficult meetings or interviews, relationships with colleagues in work, each constitute one more source of anxious care. The word used by our Lord for anxious care signifies a dividing and distracting of the mind so that it is kept in a state of agitation, unable to give undivided attention to any one thing.

A condition of fear is a common cause of strain. Some people of nervous temperament are afraid of everything. Fear of new responsibilities, or of undertaking untried tasks, fills the timid soul with an agony of apprehension. Physical fear, which in many cases has factual justification, can have far-reaching effects on both nervous system and spiritual life. It can banish sleep and fill even waking hours with a nameless dread. Fear of failure tends to produce the very condition it seeks to avoid, for God responds to faith, not to fear. Fear and faith are mutually exclusive and cannot coexist in the same heart. The fear of man, fear of what men will think or say, brings with it not only a snare but a strain.

A wrong attitude to others is fruitful in producing tension. When an inner resentment is harbored, sometimes almost unconsciously, it can work havoc with the nervous system, as will envy, jealousy, ill will, and hatred. Not without profound reason did Paul exhort that these destructive emotions be resolutely "put off," for they are sinful, soul-destroying, and health-wrecking.

When there is added to one or all of these, the inevitable pressures which descend on us from so many directions, the inner stress often reaches breaking point. On the mission field, lack of time for study, correspondence, interviews, home duties, interruptions—all add their quota. The continual pressure of crowds of people in home or clinic, whether they be concerned or merely curious, deprives of necessary privacy and quiet. Add to these what Paul called "the care of all the churches," the legitimate care for souls and the spiritual welfare of "your Flock of God," and you have pressures before which the mind reels and the body quails. Who can live in conditions such as these, especially in an enervating and energy-sapping tropical climate, without a sense of strain?

Inevitable Results

It requires no physician to tell that strains and tensions of this sort will exact their toll from both body and spirit. And one uncomfortable quality of strain is that it is self-communicating. When we live under tension, others know and feel it and we are unable to impart spiritual lift to the atmosphere.

It manifests itself in physical disabilities. May the nervous dyspepsia, to which some are subject, have its source less in the food they eat than in the thoughts they think? The man in the street knows that ulcers and mental stress are closely related. Is not the tendency of our age to migraine and sleeplessness with consequent dependence on the appropriate tablets merely the outraged nervous system taking its revenge on us for submitting it to strains God never intended it to carry? Are not many of our supposedly nervous disorders, in reality, spiritual in origin? Energy which could be directed to constructive ends is wastefully dissipated.

Mental turmoil. The hymn writer prays, "I would not have the restless mind that hurries to and fro," but unresolved inner tensions inevitably produce mental unrest and turmoil. The mind is unable to give undivided attention to the things of the spirit because it is in a constant whirl. During prayer time thoughts become especially uncontrollable, swinging remorselessly to the latest source of concern, as the needle to the pole. Even in sleep restlessness of body evidences the deeper restlessness of the mind.

Spiritual depression is the logical climax. How could one but be depressed when body and mind form an alliance against the spirit? This condition provides our experienced and ruthless adversary with the unique opportunity of exploiting his advantage with either fiery dart or oppressive cloud as he sees most likely to achieve his purpose. Thus the sensitive and hard-pressed soul is brought into a state of spiritual bondage haunted with a sense of defeat, oppressed with the comparative lack of fruit in life and service.

The Panacea

Is there a way out of this prison house, a real possibility of deliverance? Is it merely pursuing a mirage to expect God to:

Take from our lives the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of His peace?

There is a “way to escape” which will be found by those who are prepared to be ruthlessly honest with themselves and God, and who are deeply in earnest in their search for the key. It would seem that the following steps will need to be taken along the road to deliverance.

A rediscovery of God. Nothing less than this will meet the deepest need of our complex personality. God Himself is the answer and He will grant us this revelation of Himself when we are truly ready for what it involves. To the saints of past ages, He granted a progressive revelation of Himself exactly suited to their present pressing need. What we need is a fresh revelation of Him as El Shaddai, God ALL-SUFFICIENT, immeasurably greater than our conscious inadequacy. Our trouble is that our God is too small, or rather that our conception and knowledge of our God are too small. He is inadequate to cope with the complexities and weaknesses of our nature. We must have a larger God. Magnifying our insufficiency instead of laying hold of His abundant resources is not only harmful, but sinful, for “that which is not of faith is sin.” Did not Moses’ harping on his insufficiency provoke God to anger (Exodus 4:14)? His attitude implied that the God who had called could not be trusted to provide him with the equipment necessary to fulfill his responsibilities.

We will discover a larger God through meditation on His Word, and this takes time. There is no easy short cut. Ponder such amazing assertions as Ephesians 1:3; II Peter 1:3; I Corinthians 3:21. Believe in the availability of these resources, more than sufficient for our every lack. He who knows our need has made abundant provision for it, whether it be in the realm of the body, the mind, or the soul. The disciples’ lack of bread to feed the hungry multitude did not take Him by surprise. “He himself knew what he would do”—He always does. To regain such a confidence in our great God, cannot but eliminate strain, for tensions develop only when we have an inadequate God.

A recognition of self (i.e., our sinful flesh)* as the villain of the piece, the center and source of strain, will help us further along the road to deliverance. Do we often feel that more is being asked of us either by God or man than we are able to bear? But this is just not true, for our God assures us that He “will not suffer you to be tempted [tested] above that ye are able” (I Corinthians 10:13). He knows our load limit. If, as the Scriptures teach and we profess to believe, there are no second causes, then we shall be able for all of God’s commands. “If . . . God command thee so, then thou shalt be able” (Exodus 16:23) is an abiding principle. Do we complain that there are not sufficient hours in the day for all we have to do? Yet Jesus said, “Are there not twelve hours in the day?” This clearly implies that for every task we have to fulfill, there is the time to fulfill it. It is more than probable that some of our numerous activities are self-imposed rather than divinely ordered, and should therefore be discontinued.

When we loudly depreciate ourselves and our capacities, does not our insincerity become apparent when we hear someone else say the very same things about us? Are we not often more anxious to secure the approbation of men than the praise of God? And does not a great deal of the strain lie in our endeavor to keep up spiritual appearances so that we may obtain it? Are we not prone to indulge self-pity and are frequently and vocally sorry for ourselves and our hard lot? Yet in His startling words to Peter, Jesus made it clear that self-pity was satanic in origin (Matt. 16:23).

Self is indeed the villain in the piece, and the real root of our trouble is that self (our flesh principle)* has not abdicated the throne of our hearts in favor of Christ. When His flag flies over the citadel of man’s soul, strain gives place to serenity.

A renewal of mind is a third step toward deliverance. There must be a radical change of attitude, a genuine renewal of mind, if there is to be lasting deliverance. So long as the mental attitude remains unchanged, the tension will continue. Instead of pitying and excusing ourselves because of the pressures under which we labor, we must view them no longer as amiable and unavoidable infirmities, but as culpable and unnecessary sins. We will view them no longer as a burden which will crush us but as a platform for the display of His glorious sufficiency. We will hear Him say: “Now shalt thou see what I will do” (Exodus 6:1), now that our eyes are off ourselves and fixed on God. The greater our weakness, the greater glory will be His, as we work in His power.

But how does this change of attitude, this renewal of mind, come? How can we induce it? It is the outcome of a definite, purposeful choice of the will. Do you choose to transfer all the burden of responsibility to Christ and to leave it there? Do you choose to have done forever with anxiety and fear? Then Paul exhorts: “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Ephesians 4:23), and “be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). This is obviously not something we can do, but something God will do within us in response to our faith, and Titus 3:5 indicates that it is the work of the Holy Spirit. When we are willing once and for all to cease excusing and exonerating ourselves and to cast ourselves wholly upon God, then the way is open for the Holy Spirit to work the miracle of renewing our minds. We will so look on things as to magnify our glorious Lord and His boundless resources, and even to rejoice in our infirmities when they afford Him the opportunity of displaying “His more than sufficient grace.” In other words, the Holy Spirit will work in us “the mind which was in Christ Jesus” in ever-increasing measure. That this would be supernatural is true, but is not Christianity a supernatural religion from beginning to end? We may expect the Holy Spirit to make real to us the reinforcing presence of the Lord Jesus, who dwells within to meet

the daily and hourly needs of the soul and remove every tension and strain. Did He not promise, “Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest”—heart rest?

Regular relaxation and quietness will make a valuable contribution on the physical plane. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10) is a prescription we heed too little in these days of rush. “One of the ways in which man brings the most trouble upon himself is by his inability to be still,” wrote Pascal. We are busier than God intends us to be if we are too busy to take time for relaxation. The Lord Jesus constantly sought the stillness of the mountaintop. He impressed upon His disciples the necessity of coming apart for relaxation, and we disregard His counsel to our own loss. Let us covet the ability to move from one duty to another with a leisured heart.

One of God’s gentlemen recently concluded his prayer with a self-revealing sentence: “And so we go blithely into the new day.” Blithely! No sense of strain, no quivering tension -- only a heart at perfect rest in a God who is sufficient.

* Parenthesis ours