

Do you ever feel stressed out or very anxious? If you do, you are not alone. According to a Gallup poll done at the end of last year 80% of Americans report they frequently or sometimes experience stress in their daily lives, compared to 21% who say they rarely or never do. This past May 40% of Americans reported in a Time Magazine poll that they are more anxious than they were a year ago. 40 million Americans have an anxiety disorder. So stress and anxiety are normal. The most common causes of stress and anxiety are safety, health, work, finances, kids and family. While I've been fortunate enough not to deal with high anxiety or personal health issues, I do get stressed with ministry, with the financial and staffing challenges we face at Peace. Family life, even with adult kids, can be stressful.

But God does not want us to live the normal, stressed out high anxiety life. God has given us a Not Normal life. Paul tells us, **“So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise.”** (vs. 15) How do we do that? It begins with realizing that God is in charge and we are not. God knows the future, we don't. So God invites us to bring our stress and anxiety to Him. The Disciple Peter tells us, **“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.”** (1 Peter 5:7) Paul tells us, **“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.”** (Philippians 4:6-7) To put it another way, **“Let Go and Let God be in control.”**

So how do we hand our stress, anxiety and worries over to God? Paul tells us, **“Don't act thoughtlessly.”** (vs. 17) The Prophet Elijah was all stressed out when Queen Jezebel threatened to have him killed. Elijah ran away in fear. Eventually he ended up on the side of the mountain where there was a windstorm, an earthquake and fire. But God wasn't in any of them. When it got totally quiet, God spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19:11ff) It is so easy for us to be like Elijah, to be anxious and fearful, to grumble and complain. That may be normal, but it doesn't do a lot of good. God tells us, **“Be still, and know that I am God!”** (Ps. 46:10) God speaks to us in the quiet by His Word and Spirit. He tells us that He loves us and that His love has the power to drive out our fears.

If we want to hear God speak to us, then we have to open our minds to Him. Paul tells us, **“Understand what the Lord wants you to do.”** (vs. 17) That happens when our lives are open to and filled with God's Spirit (vs. 18). Since we live in a very secular world, it is too easy to turn away from God and dismiss what He has to say. But God warns us not to follow the destructive ways of the world. Paul warned about the dangers of drunkenness. Many people use Drugs and alcohol to deal with anxiety and stress. Instead of making things better, they frequently make things worse. God sees the whole picture, we don't. God tells us through the Prophet Isaiah, **“For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”** (Isaiah 7:9)

How many times have you worried needlessly about something that God took away before it could even happen? How many times has God given you a solution to a problem that you never thought about or expected? Some people call those things coincidence. I prefer to call them acts of God in our lives working things out for our good because He loves us. (Romans 8:28) How many times has God spoken to you through His Word or through the advice of a Christian friend and given you a whole new way of looking at things? Opening our minds to God opens the door to countless opportunities for God to work in our lives.

Opening our minds requires that we open our hearts to God. People who reject God are called “hard hearted.” When David confessed his sin, he prayed that God would give Him a new heart. (Ps. 51). The Psalms conclude with a song of praise to God that says, **“Let everything that breathes sing praises to the Lord!”** (Ps. 150:6) We praise God when we come together in worship. But we can also praise God on our own. Paul tells us, **“Singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts.”** (vs. 19) When we praise God, we take our minds off our fears and anxieties. When we praise God, our hearts are filled with the joy and the peace of the Lord.

Opening our hearts to God also means giving thanks to God. Paul wrote, **“Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** (vs. 20) Thanksgiving means recognizing that every good gift we have in life comes from God. Thanksgiving also means knowing that the gifts God gives to us are not just for ourselves, but for the good of others. So we can open our hands to help others. We can open our hands to be generous to others. We can open our hands in service to the Lord. We can open our hands to bring an offering to God.

God does not want us to be “Normal People.” The normal life of people who have turned their backs on God just doesn’t work. God wants us to be His “Not Normal” people. That has been our theme for the messages this month. Let me review them with you quickly.

- Not Normal people are people of Integrity, people who don’t just do Christian things but try to live out their Christian faith 24/7 relying on God’s love and forgiveness.
- Not Normal people deliberately practice living out their faith, reflecting God’s love and grace to the world around us.
- Not Normal people don’t try to hide their faults of their faith. They confess their sins and ask for forgiveness. They let the light of God’s love shine through them in a way that gives glory and honor to God.
- Finally Not Normal people relax, knowing that God is in Charge. They give their stress and fears to God, trusting in Him to help and guide them. Isn’t that better than living a stressed out, anxious life?