

The background of the cover features a person with short, light-colored hair, seen from behind, wearing a blue jacket. They are looking out over a vast, cloudy sky. A white bird is captured in flight, its wings spread, flying across the center of the frame. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

# GOD in OUR STRESS

the christian's guide  
to stress management

JAMES  
KLOTZLE

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## *The Christian's Guide to Stress Management*

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For my mother and first teacher:  
Thanks for giving me a love for learning and the vocabulary to articulate what I  
have learned.

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Designed for those who want to work on these helpful exercises by hand!  
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## *Introduction:*

1:58 a.m., I am lying on a stiff bunk mattress in my sleeping bag, finally drifting off to sleep. My bag is zipped halfway open for a quick exit. The room smells faintly of boot polish and stale sweat. I am 17 years old, a Fire Explorer on a 24 hour ride-along in a city of 300,000 people at the edge of Los Angeles. I am bone tired. You know that expression? I know it well; the dull ache in my joints, the weariness of being on constant high alert and the muscle-quivering fatigue of spending the last 18 hours on my feet.

It's not just the random, urgent emergency calls that have my nerves stretched taught as a nylon rescue rope. It's also my co-workers. I'm not a city employee. Not a firefighter. I am the lowest person on the chain of command. Even the station rookie gets more respect than me. I am just an Explorer paying my dues; trying to prove my worth so that someday, maybe, I'll get to exchange my black fire helmet for a yellow one with "firefighter" on the side. Until then, I'm carrying the medical bags onto the scene of the emergency, changing out the air bottles at fires, memorizing a map of the city, going over the procedures for setting up an I.V. one more time, cleaning the station, cleaning the rigs, cleaning tools and cleaning gear, memorizing the contents of a 45-foot ladder truck, dragging hose, climbing ladders, carrying buckets of mop water, scrubbing toilets, and dealing with all of the good-natured hazing that comes my way.

I drift into a dream. I am climbing the training tower, carrying a bundle of hose. Now I am tangled in the hose and stumbling; falling out one of the windows. I fall for an impossibly long time and land on my back. In bed.

*Beeoooooooooop! (click) "Engine 21, Rescue 21... report of domestic violence, possible head injury..."*

The lights flip on automatically, my pupils contract and the dream that was nipping at the heels of my subconscious vanishes with a poof. My feet hit the floor and I reach for my boots. *Where are my boots?* Others are moving around in the room. I am straining to hear the dispatcher give us the street address and squinting against the sudden light, looking for my boots.

*Oh yeah, a firefighter put them outside the door earlier because they were stinking up the room.*

I locate my boots just outside the dormitory door and step into them, zipping them up and heading for the pole. Diesel engines roar, the doors go

rattling up and red lights dance across sleeping buildings as we thunder into the dark city streets.

My mind is racing, still sorting dream from reality. I start going over protocols for head injuries... normal blood pressure and pulse ranges... neurological checks. Powerful stress hormones - cortisol and epinephrine - are pumping through my body. The weariness is forgotten and the dull ache has faded into the background. I live for this moment. *This is what I want to do for a living.* I glance over at the firefighter next to me. He is beginning to look more alert by the second.

*(click) "Engine 21, Rescue 21..."*

The dispatcher's voice crackles in our headsets.

*How does she always manage to sound so calm, so understated?*

*"Cancel and return... cancel and return... please confirm."*

*What? Why? Was it a crank call? Did the police arrive on scene and discover that there were no injuries? Did the patient just drive to the emergency room?*

I will never know. We back our truck into the station, trudge up to the dorm and kick off our boots. I zip my sleeping bag halfway up and lay there, my mind still buzzing.

*That was call number fifteen for this shift. Well, it was canceled, so fourteen and a half....*

After staring at the dark ceiling for twenty minutes, I finally start to drift off to sleep from sheer exhaustion.

### *Four years later*

There is a soft beeping sound. My head feels thick. Or fuzzy. Or something, I can't tell. I open my eyes and then shut them quickly. The room is undulating. I'm lying in another bed... there are white hospital sheets over me and an IV in my arm. I start to remember why I'm here.

*How embarrassing. Nothing heroic, no daring rescue or battle scars to speak of...*

I open my eyes and the room slows down as the anesthesia fades away. A doctor comes to my bedside with a chart in his hand. He is a kind Indian man in a blue dress shirt and white lab coat who speaks in pleasantly-rounded syllables. I try not to imagine what he was doing to me half an hour ago.

*"We have the results of your colonoscopy..."*

I nod and wait for him to continue.

*"You have ulcerative colitis. This is a chronic autoimmune disease that is aggravated by stress..."*

Part of me is relieved that it's not cancer. For the past month, bloody diarrhea has caused me to brace for the worst news. Part of me is annoyed.

*What does this mean for my future? For my career? Will I still be able to fight fire? What is it like, living with this chronic illness? And what exactly does 'autoimmune' mean?*

Over the next few weeks I learn all about autoimmune disease. I learn about anti-inflammatory medications and corticosteroids, immunosuppressants and dietary triggers. Over the next few years, I find out what the doctor meant when he said "*aggravated by stress.*"

My health is up and down for a number of years, but the disease slowly starts to gain the upper hand. If someone cuts me off in traffic, my stomach churns. Important interviews and exams cause me to cramp up painfully. I can never be more than 40 seconds away from a toilet. Travel is difficult and 24 hour shifts are out of the question. Just a few late nights in a row, and I start bleeding again. The doctors wag their fingers at me and threaten more colonoscopies.

### *Using This Book*

My interest in stress management springs from a variety of rich and often painful life experiences. In all of my battles with stress, this lesson continues to repeat itself: our spiritual and physical selves are so inextricably intertwined that *stress management goes hand in hand with spiritual growth.*

This book is meant to help you on your journey toward the deep joy and lasting fulfillment that we are promised as followers of Christ. I hope you will benefit from some of the lessons that I had to learn the hard way! For me, this book is a sweet break from the maddening confines of stodgy academic writing. But it is also a chance to glorify God for all the work that He has done in my life and share what I have learned about stress management since those long sleepless nights with the fire department.

*God in Our Stress* is divided into two parts. Part I is focused on stress and how it relates to the Christian experience. Part II is a practical guide for dealing with stress day to day. I recommend that you start a journal if you don't have one already; there are some exercises in this book that you will want to review and extend into the future. If you're ready, then please join me on this journey!