



MAKE LEMONADE

STAY PRESENT MAMAS
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Chapter 2:

Redeem Stress

By Becky Rosty

This section is titled “Redeem Stress”

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Make Lemonade: Resist Crisis Mode, Redeem Stress, and Reclaim Your Joy

Redeem Stress

When my daughter was just a week old, we nicknamed her "Crazy Legs Magee." All of my babies have been fussy in their own way. But this one was a kicker.

Breastfeeding her was incredibly stressful—for both of us. She had no patience to wait for the flow of milk. No let-down = full melt down. She would release her latch, pitching shrill cries into the air as she thrashed her legs. Her dramatic tap-dance routine debuted for diaper changes too, which made things messy. It didn't matter who was holding her or what the activity was, if Crazy Legs Magee didn't like the situation, she let you know.

Sometimes, I picture those crazy legs when I feel stressed out in my own life. It is a good representation of how I feel through the ups and downs in motherhood:

As a new mom, I had believed the fallacy that things would come naturally: breastfeeding, the new routine, enjoying motherhood, etc. I expected a "let down" of God's provision, a satisfying flow of His grace. But on the days it wasn't easy, I felt betrayed by God. It seemed He was holding out on me.

As my experience in motherhood grew, I felt equally betrayed when my "mom-hacks" for one kid backfired with the next. There have been many seasons when I can't seem to handle even the most common stressors. Kids getting sick, a lice infestation, sleep regression, daylight savings time ending—any little interruption feels like a major crisis. Like lemons in a t-shirt cannon aimed right at my face.

Much like my baby girl, I have no patience. I *know* I need God's help, but am not always ready to trust the process of provision.

My prayers look more like tantrums. Emotions kick and thrash as my doubts grow louder. Sometimes I find myself sucking in air like a fussy baby. Crazy Legs Magee and I are not so different.

Stress is the New Status Quo

Parents today are more stressed out than ever. It has become a state of being rather than a circumstance to handle. We say “*I am stressed*” instead of “*I have stress*”.

It has become so prevalent that, in 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General published an advisory on the issue. It highlights the dangers of parental stress, noting that “when stress is severe or prolonged, it can have a deleterious effect; 41% of parents say that most days they are so stressed they cannot function...”¹

Given that most of us view a Surgeon General Advisories as a warning against something (smoking cigarettes, doing drugs, etc.), it seemed as if the U.S. government was advocating *against* child-rearing. If the stress of parenting is harmful to your mental health, maybe you should just avoid it at all costs.

Cue the mommy-bloggers taking instagram by storm. “Children are not a stressor, they are a gift!” they said. They meant well, and they are not wrong. I wanted to badly to shout it from the rooftops too!

But that year I *was* struggling with mental health.

It *did* feel like I was drowning in my role as a mother.

Unfortunately, this backlash against the advisory for parents under pressure accidentally silenced those of us who needed encouragement and help.

So we kept our heads down. We supplemented our survival with carbs and coffee. We accepted stress as identity and even signification. We competed with other mamas and played the “who is more stressed out” game.

The trend continues today. As moms, we seem to have subconsciously submitted to stress. And it is making it harder than ever to stay present in motherhood.

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf>

#CringeyMom

When life gives you lemons, how do you manage them? If you take a big-picture view of your life, I bet you would see that stress is not just ruining your life, it is *ruling* it. You no longer handle stress; stress handles you. The greatest indicator is your reaction to it.

See, the effects of stress are not just internal (high blood pressure, over-thinking, low confidence, depression), they are also external. Like Crazy Legs Magee, stress triggers a reactive impulse.

Most of us react to stress in 7 ways. Perhaps you have seen one or more of these *C.R.I.N.G.E.Y.* reactions to stress in your own life:

Convenience: You are so over-stimulated that you swing the pendulum of your life into ultra-simplified mode. Keep it simple. Stay home. Say “no” to everything except take-out and tv. If it requires more than a few minutes to get ready for, it isn’t worth doing.

Regimentation: Schedule is king. Nothing happens unless you plan for it. If anything seems off, you blame an interruption of your rhythms. The remedy is simple: get back on schedule.

Intensity: You are consumed by “all-or-nothing” thinking. One day you will host 2 play dates, meet new moms at the park, and enjoy an extra-long zoom call with your bestie. The next day, you won’t answer a single text and bury yourself under housework. Your weeks are a mishmash of priorities without any pacing.

Numbness: It is all you can do to drag yourself out of bed, phone in hand, half-paying attention to a reel on Instagram. You coast through morning, afternoon, and evening glued to your screen, swiping from one app to the next. After half-heartedly tucking in each kid for bed, you sink into your couch to watch re-runs until your hand gets tired and your phone falls on your face.

Grouchiness: Nothing is enough—everything misses the mark of your expectations. You are critical of your husband, your kids, and *definitely* yourself. “I didn’t get any sleep last night... Mommy’s having a hard day... can I just get a little help around here!?!... I’m ***fine***.”

(True confession: I must follow this script often, because my family can finish these sentences for me.)

Extravagance: You make it your mission to turn each kid's room into a Pinterest-worthy display. You stage the perfect selfie on the floor with your kids, but don't actually play with them. Did someone request over-the-top treats for a preschool party? This mama's got it covered! Your closet is stuffed with decor totes for every holiday!

Yelling: When you get exasperated with short-attention spans, you respond with volume. Your kids' behavior escalates—so does your voice. (There have been several seasons in which my family sees—and hears!—this reaction more than others. I got so comfortable with yelling, I even found myself yelling at my breast-pump some times!)

Most of these reactions seem justifiable. In fact, you might even get a pat on the back for being proactive with your schedule, creativity, or boundaries. However, I am guessing *cringey-mom* isn't how you want to see yourself in motherhood. And it is far from the abundant and joy-filled life that is promised to you by our Heavenly Father.

There's got to be a better way.

Stress Defined

I was curious about the definition of stress. So I googled it. Instead of a simple definition, I was given a long list of articles about psychological and mental health. Eventually, I searched the Merriam-Webster dictionary for the word and learned that stress is defined as a measure of weight or pressure placed on something to cause tension or emphasis. This has been the simple definition throughout most of our world's history. In fact, the word was not used to describe a person's *discontentment* until just after World War II.²

That doesn't mean, of course, that personal stress did not exist in centuries prior. Since the fall of man in the garden of Eden, human beings have been experiencing frustration with our circumstances. The Bible uses terms like “distress”, “trials”, “suffering” and “affliction” to describe it.

² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8093377/>

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However, it is important to remember that stressors, or “life’s lemons” are not necessarily bad or evil things. Encountering a stressor is actually healthy. Trees need wind to grow strong trunks. Physical muscles need resistance to increase strength. And mamas need healthy stressors to build emotional resilience.

For instance, the stress of someone else’s expectation can keep you accountable. The stress of conflict can challenge you to change or affirm your choices. Chaos can motivate you to restore order. Questions can encourage you to study and learn. Exhaustion can remind you to set healthy boundaries. And as much as we don’t like them, the stress of consequences can lead to repentance.

Still, there are times when a stressor feels like a personal attack. Even the Bible clues us in to this reality of overwhelming stress. The apostle Paul gives us an example in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians.

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death...” 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 ESV

Later in this letter, he lists the various circumstances that felt overwhelming, including:

- Imprisonments
- Countless beatings
- Often near death
- 39 lashes—five times!
- Beaten with rods—3 times!
- Shipwrecked—3 times!
- Adrift at sea for over 24 hours
- On frequent journeys
- Environmental danger from rivers, wilderness, sea, and the city.
- Social dangers from robbers, his own people, people from other nations and traditions, and false believers.
- In toil and hardship

- Sleepless nights
- Hunger and thirst
- Often without food
- In cold and exposure

Note how many of these are not directly related to his calling as an apostle, per se. Some circumstances were environmental, not spiritual. Mamas can relate to Paul's experience of sleepless nights, hard work, frequent journeys, social dangers, isolation, and feeling "adrift".

Paul finishes his list with this:

"And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?" (for more, see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

On top of all the setbacks and letdowns, Paul was deeply concerned for the people he was spiritually raising. How often do you find yourself overwhelmed by the "daily pressure of your anxiety" for your children? Knowing the Bible directly addresses this is comforting. It reminds us that we are not alone as we face life's lemons. More importantly, the Lord shows us how to live victoriously in spite of stress!

More than Conquerors

If stress is the lemon life throws at you, then Romans 8 is the sugar that makes lemonade out of it. If you do no other type of self-care today, take a moment to go read the whole chapter of Romans 8. I'll wait...

...

Welcome back. Are you in awe? What a mighty and merciful Jesus we serve, right?!

Every time I read Romans 8, I walk away feeling both lighter and stronger. How could you not be empowered by the truth? We are no longer slaves! We are more than conquerors!

These are victorious anthem teach us a lot about contentment. Look at verses 35 and 37 again more specifically:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Romans 8:35, 37 ESV

What in the world is a “more than conqueror”? We know a conqueror is someone who claims territory for his or her kingdom. Often, conquerors will allow the local society to continue life as normal, under the overarching reign of the new conqueror. But someone who “more than” conquers is going to take it all. All the people, animals and assets become loot for the conqueror to bring back to serve in his or her home. The conqueror parades the host of captives in the home country where they will become slaves to the will of the ruler. This more than a conqueror.

It makes me think of Queen Amanirenas of the 4th century. According to one fascinating article, “Under Queen Amanirenas’ command, some 30,000 soldiers of the ancient Kingdom of Kush (located in modern-day Sudan) took to arms and fought back Roman invaders who had advanced from Egypt... The Kush forces plundered the cities and enslaved the Romans.”³

This fierce queen and warrior refused to let the Roman Empire, under the command of Augustus, take any territory in her land. She strategized her attacks and executed them successfully, something other nations in that century had failed to do.

Here’s how she became “more” than a conqueror: she not only pushed back the Romans, expanding her own nations territory into land previously considered Roman territory (near Egypt), but she also turned her enemies into her servants.

Centuries later, in 1910, archeologists found part of a statue of Augustus buried under the doorstep of the nations’ capitol temple. Queen Amanirenas had taken a souvenir from one of the cities she and her army had raided: the broken head from the statue of the Roman ruler. She hauled that head all the way back to her capitol and buried it under her front door. A daily

³ <https://www.history.com/articles/nubian-queen-amanirenas-roman-army>

reminder that she had *more* than conquered. The head was “deliberately placed at the feet of its captors as a constant reminder of the queen’s victory over the powerful Roman ruler.”⁴

This historical tale is a powerful example of what it looks like to be more than a conqueror. Side note: I believe every form of human slavery is abominable and a global issue in our current century (to learn more about how to end slavery today, visit enditmovement.com). However, Romans 8 is not talking about conquering our fellow humankind. It is about overcoming the *distress* of tough things like environmental crises, human conflict, economic hardship, and lack of safety. In other words, in the face of all these “lemons”, we are more than conquerors.

You no longer have to live as a slave to stress. In Christ, you can rule over your stress, not the other way around. The biblical word for this is *redeem*.

Redemption is a fancy word for purchase. In the book of Ruth, Boaz redeemed Naomi’s husband’s land by purchasing it and by marrying Ruth. We call Jesus our redeemer, because he paid for us with his death on the cross. Transactionally, Jesus rightfully owns us like slaves; because our God is a good Father, he instead calls us sons and daughters.

This concept of redemption is important for us if we are to be more than conquerors when it comes to stress. How do you trade being a victim of stress to living victoriously over it? You must redeem stress and make it work for you instead of against you!

Start the Car, Nigel

I have decided to give my stress a name and a job. Any time I begin to feel the tension of stress, I remind myself that I do not serve this feeling, rather this feeling serves me. Essentially, stress has become my imaginary butler. I’ve named it Nigel. Nigel is my butler who ushers me into the presence of Christ. He announces my name, and reminds me of my next appointment. Nigel used to tell me how to feel and think and react; now he is my slave.

What if you reimagined stress to be like your favorite pop culture butlers—Alfred Penniworth (Batman), Charles Carson (Downton Abbey), or even Jarvis (Iron Man)? Like a

⁴ <https://www.history.com/articles/nubian-queen-amanirenas-roman-army>

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butler, stress stands at the door, ready to open it for you to meet with Christ. Stress may not offer white glove service, but it does serve 3 courses of pride to swallow. It may not wear a 3 piece suit, but it does usher you into rest and repentance.

In fact, according to God's Word, there are at least 12 ways that stress works for your good:

1. Stress can sharpen your character. (Proverbs 27:17)
2. Stress alerts you to call on the Lord for help (Jonah 2:2)
3. Stress increases your dependence on God, not on self (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)
4. Stress empowers you to comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:6-7)
5. Stress enables you to give glory to God (1 Peter 1:3-7)
6. Stress welcomes you to share in Jesus' glory (1 Peter 4:12-14)
7. Stress produces in you endurance, which leads to good character, which gives us hope that does not disappoint! (Romans 5:3-4)
8. Stress drives you toward holiness and wholeness (completeness) where you will receive the crown of life (James 1:2-4, 12)
9. Stress allows you to identify with, and advocate for, the sake of Christ. (Philippians 1:27-30)
10. Stress sets the stage for Christ to astound you. (Psalm 18:6)
11. Stress unites you with other believers (1 Peter 5:8-10)
12. Stress holds you accountable to right living (1 Peter 4:15-16)

A Day In the Life of a Conqueror

You cannot avoid stressors in life. The lemons are inevitable. However, you can redeem stress by changing your perspective of it. When you live as more than a conqueror, stress works for you and your relationship with God, not against it. Like Queen Amenirenas, you can tread on the head of your enemy every day.

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Training your mind to redeem stress will take much practice. You can begin today by adjusting your reaction to stress. Here's a few ways a conqueror could respond to stress:

Laugh it off: Martin Luther once said “you have as much faith as you have laughter.” Laughing is a way of telling yourself that you know God can handle this (even though you can't). Laughter is also a way to show power (which is why you feel small when other's laugh at you). When you let yourself genuinely laugh when you feel stressed, you are flipping the script and being more than a conqueror.

My in-laws are really good at this. They choose to laugh when my kids get over-zealous about snacks or argue over a toy. My husband, also, has perfected the shoulder-shrug and chuckle when we face an interruption in our day. I, on the other hand, have to *choose* with every fiber in my being, to laugh when I feel frustrated.

If you are like me, laughter seems inappropriate when you are stressed. It feels wrong to act nonchalant, like you aren't concerned. But maybe you and I need to lighten up about some of these lemons, especially when it comes to stress over what people think of us.

It isn't all or nothing here. You can be concerned about a stressor and still trust that God is going to take care of it. So let yourself laugh. Force a villain's guffaw if you need to: “Muah ha ha ha—take that stress!” Or take advice from Ecclesiastes:

“So I recommend having fun, because there is nothing better for people in this world than to eat, drink, and enjoy life. That way they will experience some happiness along with all the hard work God gives them under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 8:15 NLT

And when you can't laugh, cry.

Cry it out: Ecclesiastes also says, “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4 NLT)

Too many of us bottle up sorrow, discrediting the gift of grief God has provided for our wholeness. There is absolutely a time to cry, but remember—there is a difference between despair and grief:

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- Despair is a pity party, with all or nothing thinking; Grief is sadness over the pain, obstacles, or set backs.
- Despair can quickly spiral into depression; grief empowers you through a healthy expression of sadness.
- Despair has no end in sight; grief has boundaries.

The beautiful thing about grief is it has limits. The Bible says “sorrow may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.”⁵ God’s word also tells us that grief has a limit to how deep and wide it reaches.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul encourages the believers to grieve in a way that also recognizes the hope we have because Jesus has resurrected from the grave. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

This resurrection power applies to believers who have passed away, but the principle can also apply to the losses we feel sad or overwhelmed by. When we allow ourselves a good cry over stress, we do so as mamas who are more than conquerors who have hope!

And when you run out of tears, try kick boxing.

Move your body: On one extremely stressful day, the gym was closed and I was going stir crazy in the house. My husband drove me and a truck full of cardboard boxes to an empty parking lot. He asked if I wanted to try “box-kicking”. Together, we kicked and punched the boxes until they were shredded and broken down enough to fit in the green bin. That day, I wasn’t just more than a conqueror; I was a recycling superhero!

Seriously, many of us just need to quit doom scrolling to escape our stress and get some endorphins flowing! There are endless benefits of moving your body as a way to respond to stress:

⁵ “For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Psalms 30:5 NLT <https://bible.com/bible/116/psa.30.5.NLT>

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“Exercise can offer relief while the body is reacting to stress, such as the flight-or-fight response. It can help the body's systems practice working together when dealing with stress. This can have positive effects on the body — including the heart and blood vessels, digestive, and immune systems — helping protect against harmful results of stress. For example, it can lower resting heart rate and blood pressure, and help improve the immune system. It can even lessen the effects of aging.”⁶

I notice the days I get my heart rate up, I sleep better. Weight training also improves hormone regulation and metabolism! While you are at it, take care of your body with good nutrition and supplements. Ashwaganda, Magnesium, and Vitamin D are worth looking into with your healthcare provider.

And if you’ve kicked all the boxes and still can’t seem to redeem stress, maybe it is time to get out of dodge.

Change your environment: One sign that stress is ruling you is overthinking. It can be easy to hyper-fixate on either solving or escaping or grieving that lemon in your life. Changing your scenery might just give you a fresh perspective.

If a mini-vacation, trip to a park, or drive around town doesn’t do it for you, then park yourself at the soup kitchen and roll up your sleeves.

Serve Others: Make use of your brilliant body and mind by blessing others, especially when you feel like sinking into crisis mode. I can think of no better way to more-than-conquer stress than to use it as a trigger to serve others. Now your stress is a slave to you, and you are a servant to others. God is glorified when we stop stressing and become a blessing.

As a mom, you probably think you’ve got this “serving others” thing covered. After all, you cook, clean, wipe butts and boogers, and chauffeur your little humans anywhere they need to go. While it is a holy and beautiful way to serve your family (and our world) by sacrificially raising your children, you might try serving outside of your everyday context

⁶ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469#:~:text=Exercise in almost any form,distract you from daily worries.>

once in a while. Even Jesus did this: he served and trained his 12 disciples AND he traveled to minister all over Judea and Samaria.

Sign up for a missions trip or cross cultural experience. Sort clothes in the homeless shelter downtown, or in a city a few hours away. Not only are you following God's command to "count others more significant than yourselves"⁷, but also you will gain some much needed perspective. Serving people who are not like you reminds you how much bigger the world is, and sometimes helps puts your smaller problems into perspective.

Remember Your Training: Above all these tips to redeem stress, this one is most important: train you heart, mind, and soul in the art of conquering through the study and application of God's Word. This involved research, journaling, community discussion, and obedience. It may also require coaching or pastoral counseling.

Read the Old Testament, and take comfort in the stories of how God's people handled stress, or how God rescued them in miraculous ways. Write down every way God is bigger than a trial or frustrating circumstance. Refer to this list often.

Study the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul, Peter, and John. Highlight their prescriptions for handling suffering, distress, or hardships. See the profound ways God used stress to grow His Kingdom throughout the Book of Acts. Read and re-read the truths in Romans 8: I am no longer a slave; nothing can separate me from the love of Christ; I am more than a conqueror.

And lastly, memorize God's word, which will not return void. Say it as your war cry in resistance of crisis mode. Sprinkle it out loud over the lemons you face as you turn them into lemonade. Let God's truth stir in your spirit as you redeem stress, making it pour you a glass of contentment in Christ. Here are some verses you can memorize today:

- "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41:10

⁷ "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." Philippians 2:3 ESV <https://bible.com/bible/59/php.2.3.ESV>

- “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped; therefore my heart greatly rejoices, and with my song I will praise Him.” Psalms 28:7
- “They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord.” Psalms 112:7
- “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.” Romans 8:26

Content and Conquering

I believe every moment is redeemable, we must simply stay present to see how. When I began to hush the hustle and re-think my reactions, I could see each season for what it was. That this life is not something to survive or get through, but an opportunity for God’s glory to shine through.

I learned that I don’t have to let stress turn me into Crazy Legs Magee, with out-of-control reactions to every stressor. I also learned that my daughter’s panic tap dance was short lived in the grand scheme of her life. She grew out of it quickly and is honestly our most relaxed and tempered kid. Although she is looking forward to joining the track team next year in middle school. Maybe we will have to bring back her nickname for the races. Go Crazy Legs Go!

Knowing that contentment is learned, not achieved or accidentally picked up, reminds us all that this motherhood thing is going to take courage. If you want to turn cringey-ness into conquering, you must be brave and stay alert.

This means when you want to live another episode of grouch on the couch, you choose redemption. Restart the day with a dance party to your favorite tunes from high-school (ban the pre-school learning songs for just one day; your soul will thank you).

Or, when your kids are running through the house like banshees, and you are tempted to start yelling, you choose redemption. Toss a quick prayer to God for help, then put a little

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“honey” in your voice. Model that delicious kindness in your actions, and your kids will have a blueprint to follow next time you tell them to “be sweet to your brother.”

When you feel like sinking into despair or escaping into a phone screen, redeem that feeling by really feeling it: cry, shout, or laugh. Let this stress usher you to the next room of God’s grace, announcing your name as you enter.

Queen Amanirenas-level conquering doesn’t come naturally. It takes intentionality. It won’t be perfect and it won’t always *feel* redemptive. But stand tall because, as you trust Him, God will infuse your days with redemptive power, transforming you and your home into a place of victory.

So ring for the butler, my friend, and have him bring us both a tall glass of lemonade.

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Squeeze the Day:

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. Name the top 3 stressors you've experienced this month. What is the source of each: internal (like over-thinking or unrealistic expectations), environmental (health, weather), relational (conflict with a friend, spouse, child), spiritual, professional, etc.
2. If you could redeem stress, and make it work for you, what would be it's butler name?
3. In what way do you want to practice being more-than-a-conqueror over stress?

SCRIPTURE:

Did you read Romans 8 yet? If not, take some time to explore this passage that has been called "the Everest of the New Testament."⁸ Pay careful attention to the beginning, the middle, and the end (wink). It's all profoundly impactful!

GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Share about a time you felt God was holding out on you, but then it turned out He was providing all along.
2. Which of the 7 C.R.I.N.G.E.Y. reactions do you relate to most? How does that play out in your life?
3. Read Romans 8:35, the list of things over which we are more than conquerors. Name a "lemon" you are ready to be victorious over? How can you make that stressor work for you, not against you.
4. Take turns reading the 12 Scriptures listed that show how stress can work for you. (Proverbs 27:17, 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, 2 Corinthians 1:6-7, 1 Peter 1:3-7, 1 Peter 4:12-14, Romans 5:3-4, James 1:2-4, 12, Philippians 1:27-30, Psalm 18:6, 1 Peter 5:8-10, 1 Peter 4:15-16, Jonah 2:2)

⁸ J.I. Packer quote: "the Everest of the New Testament and a high peak of all biblical writing" (*Atonement*, 2)