

## HANDLING PRESSURE

Pressure. Some seek to avoid it. Others seem to relish it. It can come and go in cycles and seasons. It can affect some more than others, and in different ways. Some buckle under and become victims; some are braced up and become victors. But we all have it. We all experience it.

Jesus said:

*"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

(Jn 16:33)

This verse contains an unwelcome promise: *"In this world, you will have trouble."* And the word "trouble" is the word "pressure"—*"In this world, you will have pressure."*

There's the pressure to perform, the pressure to produce, the pressure to meet the deadline. There are *work* pressures, fuelled by drivenness, intensity and uncertainty about the future. There are *family* pressures: misunderstandings; relationships under strain; the short fuse in the long haul. There are *time* pressures—deadline approaching and it's still not done—*financial* pressures, pressures from *terrorism, world events and world news*. And there are pressures from circumstances specific to *us*. The Book of Galatians says that each one should carry his own load (or *pack*). But what happens when the pack gets heavy? Sometimes that which is our responsibility to carry itself becomes a pressure.

To have *no* pressure is a pipe dream. There *will* be pressure.

### The effects of pressure

Pressure is not all negative, but many of its effects are. Pressure can make us feel trapped or hemmed in. It can lead to a loss of perspective or altered priority. It can paralyse us because of a fear of failure. It can make us feel like everything is going wrong—then something *else* goes wrong as if to confirm it. Pressure can make us downcast in our soul.

On the positive side, there are some things pressure can and cannot do. Pressure *can* take an ugly black piece of coal and transform it into a beautiful diamond. Pressure *can* be used by God to shape us and mould us in accordance with His intention. (See for instance Rom 5:3-5.) Pressure *cannot* separate us from God's love (Rom 8:35).

### It's our response that's important

Pressure can make us go back. In Jn 6:60-66, many disciples of Jesus turned back and no longer followed. They surrendered their discipleship to the pressure of hard sayings. And what of the Twelve—would they leave too? They felt the same pressure, but made a different response. As Peter expressed it, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."* (Jn 6:68)

Later, in John 21, Peter himself was under pressure. He'd expressed a willingness to follow Jesus even to death, but when Jesus had been arrested in the Garden, Peter had denied Him three times. Peter rejoiced in the Resurrection! But he still had the pressure of his betrayal, and under that pressure went back to what he knew and was used to—*"I'm going out to fish."* (Jn 21:3). Well, it didn't work. Only as he responded to Jesus did his nets fill up! And it proved to be the beginning of Peter's re-instatement.

As regards the soils in the parable:

*Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble [i.e. pressure] or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.*

Mk 4:16f

It looks like a good result until the pressure comes! But the problem need not be final. If we co-operate in removing the rocks from our hearts, then the root can grow to appropriate depth. Our *response* is critical.

Pressure *can* make us go back, but it can also *advance* us if we respond to it aright.

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles [pressures] are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Cor 4:16-18*

Antioch was Paul's home church, and much good came out of it. Yet the Church at Antioch began only through the faithfulness and persistence of those who had been scattered by the *pressure* in connection with the stoning of Stephen (see Acts 11:19). What would have happened if they'd simply found a quiet place to hide and avoid further pressure?

We rejoice in hope *and in pressures* (see Romans 5:2-5), because they produce the result of God!

## **How do we respond?**

In the midst of pressure, the first thing to do is maintain a spiritual *poise*. Tell yourself not to panic, but to stay calm, maintain perspective, keep your confidence. Don't automatically *react* to the situation, but *choose* to find and stand in the space between *stimulus* and *response*. You then *decide* the response you make to the given stimuli. (This is sometimes called the "Count to 10 Principle".)

## **Seven responses of conscious choice:**

### **1. Meditate on Jesus**

Psalms 42:6 says, "*My soul is downcast [sunk down] within me; therefore I will remember you*". Consider Jesus: fully aware of what lay ahead, He allowed Himself to face the Cross, with all the physical pain and torture, and with all the sin of the world laid on Him, and willingly undertook it for us. "*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*" (Heb 12:3) In the midst of our pressure, that's a conscious, deliberate, active choice.

### **2. Put your hope in God**

The way to avoid despair is to put your hope in God. The message rings out from the Psalms in many places. "*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him*" (Ps 42:5). "*For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth.*" (Ps 71:5) "*O Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and for evermore.*" (Ps 131:3)

### **3. Determine that you'll still praise Him and that you'll not stop**

This takes the edge off any tendency to complain, and any temptation to take "time out" from God. Again, Psalm 42:5 says, "*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*"

### **4. Even in the most adverse of circumstances, rejoice in the Lord**

*Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. Hab 3:17f*

We could each construct a modern-day equivalent to that scenario. For some of us, it might start, "Though the supermarket shelves are empty". Yet we rejoice. Joy is not circumstantial, but is based on truths, realities and events that do not change.

### **5. Express confidence in the Lord**

Hebrews says, "*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ... So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.*" (Heb 4:14; 10:35) It's one thing to believe this in our *heart*. But the real benefit comes when we declare it with our *mouth*, confessing the truth of God's Word over our circumstances.

### **6. Determine that what you're doing with hardships is going through!!**

"*We must go through many hardships [pressures] to enter the kingdom of God,*" (Acts 14:22). The focus is not on the pressures, but on the process — going *through*.

### **7. Press in to Jesus Himself**

We end where we began. "*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*" (Jn 16:33) In the same short verse, Jesus says we will have peace in Him but trouble in the world. How can this be? Our knowledge of storms gives us the picture. We can find a place of peace and calm, of safety and protection in Jesus, right in the midst of the trouble in the world, as in the eye of the storm.

And as we walk by faith, we can *live* there.

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Note: All Bible quotations are NIV unless otherwise stated.