

Praying From Pressure - January 1984

Let's face it, most of us pray because of pressure. We don't like to admit it because it's an unpalatable reality. But is praying from pressure wrong? Not necessarily. Paul said we should 'pray with all kinds of prayer' (Eph 6:18). Prayer that springs from pressure is just one, probably the most frequent, kind of prayer. It's also one of the most effective. Already you're mentally arguing with me.' Surely', you say, 'pressure is not of God. He's a God of peace and wants our prayers to spring from rest and faith, doesn't he?'

The Whole Truth

I can understand your feelings. The very phrase praying from pressure suggests that we've been overwhelmed by our circumstances and forced into panic prayer. But remember, one of Satan's most subtle schemes is to have us believing a lie that's hidden behind the truth. It's true, for instance, that 'whatever we ask the Father in his name; he will do it, but that isn't the whole truth, for the Word of God also says, 'This is the confidence which we have before him that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask we know that we have the requests which we have asked from him'(1 Jn5:4-15). No one statement of the Scripture is the whole truth: truth is what the Word of God says in the whole, and that is made up of what he has said to be true in its parts.

Pressure And Faith Not In Conflict

Isn't the same with being under pressure. The pressure may be bad, but it can also be God's way of lining us up with his purpose. It's the arranging of circumstances so as to apply just the right pressure necessary for us to start seeking his will. When that happens we pray according to his purposes. Think of Hannah. Under the pressure of her childlessness and the taunts it drew from others she cried to God for a child. It wasn't audible praying but the kind of praying that pressure so often produces— a groaning and sighing within. When her child was born she named him Samuel, meaning 'Asked of God'. The birth of Samuel, however, was not the end of the story. Hannah's praying hadn't been simply for a child to take away her reproach. In her time of praying from pressure she had covenanted the child to God. So now she took him to Eli the priest to fulfil the promise she'd made. This wasn't a case of God's taking advantage of her pressure. It was rather that the pressure she'd experienced had lined up her will with God's will. Through the closeness of fellowship experienced during her praying from pressure Hannah had gladly made a promise that brought Samuel's life into line with the purpose of God. The consequences, as you know, were very far reaching, going well beyond his own life to touch the whole nation of Israel for good.

Arguing Our Case

We have another example in the early church. When faced with the opposition of the authorities to their preaching in the name of Jesus, the believers went back to God in prayer. These early Christians began praying from their pressure. The substance of their prayer reads like a well-argued case in the court of heaven. The

concept of arguing with God tends to be alien to our mind, of course. This is because we associate argument with disagreement or reluctance. But neither of these things was true in that situation. God wasn't disagreeing with what they wanted done, nor was he reluctant to answer their prayer! To argue your case with God is to come boldly into his presence with an understanding of his will gained from soaking your mind in his Word. Here in the courts of his presence you present your case in perfect harmony with his word of promise. Prayer that springs from pressure discards niceties. It's the cry of the heart laid bare. We stand with naked feelings in God's presence; our pretences and false fronts crumble. We've neither time nor heart to play the fool, our pressures force us to honesty.

Progress Through Pressure

Both the Bible and life-experience prove that pressure need not be a destructive factor in the life of the believer. Indeed, it is through pressure that we progress! In our praying through pressure we progress from desperation to faith. En route, our motives are purified, our feelings are brought into submission and our hearts stilled with his peace. At first, our praying from pressure is self-centred in its concerns. As we become alarmed by the growing pressure of circumstances our defence is to start putting pressure on God to do something. We are like a little child who, feeling his Saturday fun threatened by some tedious plan of the grown-ups, begins nattering his parents. We don't stop to consider what the pressure might mean in terms of our benefit. We're so overwhelmed by the fear and tension it's producing in us that we fail to realise that God has fixed it this way to gain our attention. Such is our pace of life and preoccupation with many things that it often requires such pressure to move us into seeking him the way we should.

At this point it is immaterial whether our theology embraces God as the cause of it or as the one who has simply allowed it. The point is, we're feeling the pressure acutely and now he has our attention! We're not just wanting to hear God now, we're desperate to hear him. We're beginning to panic in our pressures. Deep down we know there's no way through so we seek him urgently. Looking back over the years at the frequent prayers from pressure that I have personally prayed, and having counselled with hundreds of others, I want to outline some of the stages in the journey from pressure-panic to faith-petition.

Twisting God's Arm

The pressure intensifies. God must act now. Tomorrow will be too late so we're convinced he must hear us now. In this phase we're very subjective in our judgement of the issue. We know exactly how God should answer and when. Our approach to God is to tailor our prayer according to what we think should be done, and so God is quickly boxed into our narrow limits of judgement and thinking. We're convinced that God will answer in this particular way and that if it isn't done this way it's not worth doing at all! Now if at this stage God doesn't answer immediately we become extremely frustrated. We start reminding him that further delay is a luxury we can't afford. He must act immediately. Our praying takes on an air of increased urgency and becomes in effect an exercise in arm-twisting. . . God's! When there's still no response we move into the next phase: the battle in the mind.

Endless Questions

Suddenly we're bombarded with a host of questions in our mind, all screaming out for answers. Why me? Why now? For what reason? How long is it going to go on? How ever did it happen? The stream seems endless. Foolishly, we try to produce our own answers, only to be mixed up even further, because we're not really convinced by the reasons we concoct for what is happening to us! We're now totally confused as to why God is not responding to our prayer. We've exhausted our ritualistic religious formulas only to conclude that we can't think of one good reason why God should delay his response. At this juncture the enemy accuses us from every direction. He points to our unworthiness. He exaggerates our faults and weaknesses, seeking to disqualify us in the presence of God. The intrusion of such negative thinking into an already jumbled mind only increases our feeling of despair.

Emotional Conflict

Now our emotions begin to fluctuate wildly, alternating between fear and anger. We're like a small child fleeing from the monsters of the night which are merely shadows cast by the moon while at the same time shouting angrily at his best friend running alongside. It's a conflict of emotions. His best friend comes in for the angry backlash prompted by his fears. When our praying centres in our feelings, we're either overwhelmed emotionally through praying out our fears or we threaten to give up praying altogether because of anger— anger with our circumstances, with ourselves and with God. Frustration increases.

We don't know how to pray as we should, our feelings are so mixed up. It's usually at this point that we slide into the self-centred, 'I'm all by myself, 'pity-party prayer meeting' approach. We try coaxing God with reminders of how we love him and how we've sought to walk faithfully with him. When even this brings no response we try the pouting approach of how we feel abandoned and left alone, cut off by heaven. We tell God we just can't understand why he's allowing this or doing this to us. We're scared by the circumstances so we lash out in anger — at God!

Bottom And Beyond

Any further delay now (and sometimes there is!) only serves to take us down so low that we feel we are reaching up to touch bottom! Mentally and emotionally we're drained. We can't think of anything else to suggest to God as a way in which he can meet our need. We're so exhausted that even our fears no longer threaten us. We've come, in fact, to a place of resigned abandonment to the will of God. Is there nothing that can be done? Are we now doomed to be the victim of circumstances? No, the way forward is to progress through our pressure consciousness to a faith for God in the issue. During the early years of the Salvation Army movement, one young officer who had been sent to India wrote to General Booth in great despair at the lack of response to the preaching of the Gospel. General Booth, on reading the letter and sensing the crushed feelings of the junior officer, sent back an urgent telegram. It had only two words: 'Try tears'. It wasn't long before he received news of a great ingathering of people to Christ

Have A Good Cry

Breaking through your frustration to a place of faith often causes you to have a good cry. Try tears. For many persons weeping is the ultimate visible expression of self-surrender. It's the final letting go of ourselves helplessly to God. Such tears often end, once you are utterly cried out, with a simple sigh: 'Oh God!' It's a sigh of abandonment, the refusal to struggle mentally or emotionally anymore. It's the rest, not yet of faith, but of cessation from struggle. You now humbly cast yourself on God for whatever he wills.

Worship Him

At this point God draws near, knowing you can go no further Suddenly you feel strengthened by his love, by his presence. He's with you and you begin to worship. No longer are you accusing. You throw yourself at his feet because you love him and your spirit pours out its adoration to God. It's here that you learn to unlock the secrets of your heart by speaking with tongues. Not in empty speaking but in conscious adoration and conversation with God. Although you no longer know how to pray as you ought, you're already experiencing the Spirit 'making intercession' for you 'with groanings that are unutterable' In doing this you open yourself to the quickening power of God in your inner man. Up to this point, strength has drained from you, but now strength begins to surge afresh to your mind and your emotions like the surging of the tide that, once turned, rushes back to the shore. This renewal is not to equip you to engage again in questioning, arguing or fighting your circumstances. Rather, it renews you to lay hold of a hope that leads to faith in your situation.

The Word- Soaked Mind

Read the Scripture now, not hunting for a promise but just to drink of its fountains, to feast at its table, to imbibe whatever the Word of God may speak to you. Yours is no longer the restless desperation of the panicked heart but the quiet trust of the resting soul. It's into such ploughed ground that God drops the seed-word of his promise and breathes on it by the Spirit, causing it to come alive in you with faith. You no longer see your circumstances working against you, threatening to crush you like some giant wastepaper press. Instead, you see how they've worked in God to bring you to a new place of trust in him, of confidence in his love for you, of faith in his power to work on your behalf. You suddenly realise that when you asked God to increase your faith you were inviting this new set of impossibilities and Faith, after all, is never needed for the possible, only for the impossible! Your impossibilities no longer overwhelm you, however, for you've found the faith necessary to deal with the situation. You realise now that you have the mind and will of God concerning the matter. You know what he wants in the situation. You don't have to think it through because you know that mental reasoning won't produce what's required. You can't imagine how he will do it but you do know what he wants to achieve.

A Covenant Plea

Now, using the promises which have produced faith in you, you present your case before the Lord. Your argument for response is not now how you feel, or what the situation's doing to you, or what might happen, but what God has said You're coming before him as a child of the covenant and you're pleading the promises of that covenant Your plea basis in prayer has moved from the fear and frustration generated by the pressure of your

circumstances to the promises of his covenant. We can see this principle at work in Nehemiah. When he heard about the terrible condition of Jerusalem and the distress of the Jewish remnant who had survived the captivity, he entered into a time of intense intercession in which his plea basis is an example to us: 'I beseech you. O Lord God of heaven; the great and awesome Go4 who preserves the covenant.. . Let thine ear now be attentive and thine eyes open to hear the prayer of thy servant' (Neh 1:5- 6). He knew it wasn't worth-while trying to convince God of any merit on Israel's part for his mercy, because they had none. His prayer basis was the covenant God had made with his people. Nehemiah didn't ignore the condition of Israel, but neither did he forget the covenant of God. In the same way, our praying is not now motivated by our circumstances but by his covenant promise.

The Rest of Faith

Having come to a knowledge of his will and come back to him with his covenant promises, we receive the answer from him in our hearts. We no longer engage in praying out our problems or in vain repetitions. We pray in faith and rejoice that what once overwhelmed us is now under our feet! It's this praying that brings God's glory into the situation. The very thing that once threatened to destroy our faith has turned around to work for the increase of our faith experience of God! It's worth repeating: 'This is the confidence which we have before him that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know we know that we have the requests which we have asked from him'(I Jn 5:14-15). Prayer from pressure may be where I started but praise for the pressure is where I've finished! Instead of being crushed I have conquered. In every way it has worked for my good. I have been 'enlarged in my distress'.