



WHEN THE PRESSURE IS ON

Today we're going to think about another subject that is popular at the moment (if you can call it that): a little thing called 'stress.' Now you won't need me to tell you that modern life is made up of all kinds of 'stress-causers.' Here's the top 10, according to thriveglobal.com:

- 10) Adolescence – both educationally, and relationally.
- 9) Retirement, with a loss of both purpose and identity.
- 8) Chronic illness / injury – for both victim and family.
- 7) House-moving – even when the move goes smoothly!
- 6) Money problems, and the need to make ends meet.
- 5) Work pressures, whether it's people, or deadlines.
- 4) Starting a new job – and proving you were worth it.
- 3) Marriage – both getting married and staying that way!
- 2) Divorce / break-up, and the impact on family, etc.
- 1) Bereavement – particularly when it's someone close.

The word 'stress' comes from the Latin *strictus*, 'to tighten.' And it can be a devastating thing. Doctors warn about the impact on health; analysts warn about the impact on productivity; and counsellors warn about the impact on relationships – which is all you need to hear if you're already feeling stressed!

But the concept is also nothing new – which is why you find evidence of it in the Bible. Now this is a complex problem, so I'm not promising any 'quick fixes' here, but today's psalm does give us some valuable pointers on how to manage it.

So let's take a look at:

Psalm 4

Do you see that word, *selah*? It means 'break' or 'pause', a direction for the temple musicians (and us?). *Selah* occurs twice here and divides the song into 3 sections, each one a lesson in how to sing when the pressure is on:

1) Consider Your God (vs1-2). What was going on in David's life that led him to write this song? There's a clue in Psalm 3. In the copy of the Psalms found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Psalms 3-4 are rolled into 1, so the background is the same. David's kingdom had been taken over by his son Absalom, who was out to kill his father and destroy his legacy. Now *that's* pressure!

What did David do? He went to God. Now this is vitally important, because often, when our time is at a premium, the temptation is to drop what we deem to be of least urgency – and often, that will be our relationships. But those relationships are something we desperately need, and that is also true, *especially* true, of our relationship with God – particularly when times are tough. We need God's wisdom, His comfort, His power, His intervention.

So when you're feeling the strain, get on your knees, and consider the One who can hold you up. Your God.

2) Consider Yourself (vs3-4). This section is addressed to David's followers, and he's encouraging them not to lose heart. So he says, "Speak in your hearts while you lie on your beds, and be still." There are times in all our lives when we need to give ourselves a good talking-to; to remind ourselves of some 'home-truths.' Such as:

- Who am I? I am a child of the Living God.
- How does God feel about me? He loves me more than I can possibly imagine.
- Why do I matter so much to Him? Because He's my dad!

We can easily get so busy / tired / worried that we forget.

But it's also vital that we do what David describes here: take a break, and relax! That can look different depending on how you're wired. It might mean getting a decent night's sleep (perhaps that's why God designed us to sleep for 25 years of a 70-odd year life-span - to re-charge the batteries). It might mean turning off the phone or avoiding your inbox. It might mean having a long bath rather than a shower. It might mean immersing yourself in a good book, a good movie, a great album. It might mean discovering / rediscovering a hobby. It might mean taking up exercise (a dirty word for some, I know). It might mean playing a game with friends, or just spending time with people. It might mean just learning to say 'No.'

The point is: it can be easy to forget the personal resources that God has given us – or dismiss them for not seeming 'spiritual' enough. But each of those things is a gift from the God who loves you, and He expects you to use them. So *use* them!

All of which paves the way for this final point:

3) Consider Your Blessings (vs5-7). When Absalom usurped the throne, David lost almost all of his material possessions: his palace; his gold and silver reserves; the respect of his people – all the things that made him feel secure. But instead of saying "Woe is me", David rejoices over the one thing he can never lose – God's love (which is worth more than all the wealth this world has to offer).

Sometimes we experience stress because our priorities are out of whack. We break the 10th commandment and covet our neighbour's goods; we tell ourselves "This is what our standard of living should be", even if it's unrealistic; and we work ourselves into an early grave trying to achieve it. And then we wonder why our marriages are struggling, our kids are unhappy, and our lives feel squashed!

But David realises an important truth here: consider what you've got, rather than what you haven't. And be *thankful*.

From Negatives To Positives

Now look at how the psalm ends (vs8). David finds peace or *shalom*, and a good night's sleep too. Why? Because he puts these principles into practice. Absalom went on to be defeated; David was able to regain control; and he lived to a ripe old age, full of years and loved by his nation. He survived the pressure. And so can *you*.

To end on, here's a sort-of-prayer I found on the internet a little while ago – a 'Prayer for the Stressed':

*Lord, grant me
The serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I cannot accept;
And the wisdom to hide the bodies of
the people who get on my nerves.*

Joke! But the reality is: stress isn't all negative. What would life be like without any stress at all? A bit like a meal without seasoning – pretty boring! But too much and we ruin the taste (or give ourselves a heart-attack). So remember: consider your God; consider yourself; consider your blessings.

And learn to manage the stress.