

Under Pressure

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Preacher: Dylan Marais

[0 : 00] Well, today we're looking at the topic of pressure, being under pressure. We all face pressure in our lives, stresses of various kinds that sort of impact our, hopefully, general equilibrium.

You know, when there's no real pressure, you're just going along nice and smoothly. I don't know about you, but that doesn't stay for long in my life. And we get pressure from all sides, all kinds of things, big and small.

The kids lift the toothpaste lid off again, you know, it gets irritating. That's minor, but can be a thing. To pressure that's really big, and hopefully not that frequent, but, for example, pressure at work, pressure in the family.

And then when your immediate family, maybe you've got issues with your wider family. And when pressure like that comes onto us and pushes down on us, where's our default position?

What's your default position under pressure? We've all got one. The thing that we normally fall back on to try and make life work for us. For many, it's an extra trip to the alcohol shop, longer hours at the pub.

[1 : 12] A Christian version of that is longer hours at work. For others, it's to start frantically running around like a headless chicken to try and organize things so that nothing will go wrong.

For many, it's sleepless nights and that horrible, sick feeling in your stomach that just won't go away because this problem that you're facing is so big you don't know how to deal with it. You don't know what the outcome is going to be.

Well, what's going to help us work through that feeling of being under pressure? How can we handle pressure well? Well, in our passage today, Israel is facing one of their biggest tests yet. They're seriously feeling the pressure. Which is kind of strange because in the story so far, you'd think, you know, we've had the ten plagues. We've had the Passover. And you'd think once the Passover is there, God made that promise.

It's going to be a major event. But we're going to come out free. And then the promised land is just around the corner. It would be plain sailing to the promised land, you'd think. How much more of this can they take?

[2 : 13] But it's not over. Far from it. And there's some important lessons for them and for us to learn along the way. And the first lesson that we learn is that when we are under pressure, we can still totally trust in God's plans for us.

When we're under pressure, we can still totally trust in God's plans for us. So the Israelites are finally free. All they have to do is waltz down the coastal road, down to Canaan, and all the blessings they've been promised will be waiting for them.

But God purposefully decides not to take them down the coastal road. That would have taken them less than two weeks' travel, just by the way. So if you think of a map of Africa, they're in the very northern part of Egypt.

They just go up north for a few days and then turn to the right to go to Canaan, if you're looking at the map of Africa like that. And less than two weeks' travel.

But God turns them back. He says, now, you're not ready for that road yet. He turns them back into enemy territory. So that's what all those place names are there to tell you.

[3 : 19] We don't, you know, well done to Rho and Pihroth and Balzaphon and Migdol. That's all in Egyptian territory. God's getting them to about face and face the enemy again.

And he's doing that because he knows that they're not ready yet to handle conflict on the way to the promised land. So have a look at chapter 13, verse 17.

When Pharaoh let the people go, God didn't lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines. That's the coastal route.

They would always be along the coast. Although that was near. For God said, lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt. But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.

They still have a lesson to learn in trusting God. And that lesson is going to come in the most intense, precious situation they've faced.

[4 : 16] Far worse than being slaves in Egypt. And that's because they're going to be part of God's plan to challenge Pharaoh to a final showdown and completely destroy him. So, in chapter 14, in those first few verses, the Lord says to Moses, Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-i-Hereth, between Migdal and the sea in front of Baal-Zephon.

You shall encamp facing it by the sea. For Pharaoh will save the people of Israel. They're wandering in the land. They don't know where they're going. The wilderness has shut them in. And then God springs the trap for Pharaoh.

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart. And he will pursue them. And I will get the glory over Pharaoh and all his hosts. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.

So, they're part of God's plan to destroy Pharaoh. But they're going to be under pressure while they do that. Now, typically, when we are placed in precious situations, we either think that somehow God has got that wrong.

He's led us down the wrong path. Or that we've got it wrong. Somehow that we've come out of God's plans for us. We think either God is not with us, or somehow we've strayed outside of his will.

[5 : 27] And this passage teaches us that both of those assumptions are wrong. God didn't get anything wrong. He hadn't let his people alone. God purposely led them that way.

Away from what seemed like an easy route that he knew was actually too hard for them to handle. And they weren't ready for it. And in fact, he was with them the entire time. In spectacular fashion. With those huge pillars of cloud and fire and smoke. Let's have a look at the end of chapter 13. By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way.

And by night in a pillar of fire to give them light so they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. So God is with them the entire time.

No matter which way they're turning. He's with them. Protecting them. Showing them where to go. He knew they needed time of testing and training before they're ready to face the pressures of going into the promised land.

[6 : 34] And in fact, God does the same for us today. What seems like a straightforward solution to our problem to us is actually a trap. And God leads us away from it.

But for some reason, he leads us into seemingly deeper water. But that's where the deeper water, that's the training ground for us. In our New Testament reading, Paul is making a similar point. He says this, Now we always hold on to that, he will provide a way out so that he can endure it. We forget that God works with us by testing us. So that testing is going to come in the Christian life. Now that doesn't mean that God doesn't give us what we can't handle.

You often hear that, don't you? God will never give you more than you can handle. That's not quite what this verse is saying. In fact, the story we've got in front of us in Exodus shows us that God does give us more than we can handle.

[7 : 48] They can't handle the Egyptians on their own. And they certainly can't handle the sea. That's why God places them in that position. They've got nowhere else to go. Why does he do that?

Well, he does give us more than we can handle on our own. He does that so that we turn to him for help, so that he can handle it for us.

Does that make sense? It's scary though when he does that, isn't it? That's where trust and faith comes in. By trusting in God's leading, we are put into situations where we will be most used by God to push back against evil in the world and to show off his power.

So that's what's going to happen to Israel. Somehow they're going to defeat Pharaoh. They don't know how, but actually they don't do the defeating. God does the defeating. But they've got to be there so that God can do the defeating.

Does that make sense? God is using them, almost like bait, but for a purpose. So, Yes, the pressure situations we're going to face are hard.

[8 : 54] Evil is big and scary. Pressure can be intense. But this lesson says, well, what about it? How can evil possibly win when you've got God on your side leading you every step of the way?

And then just look what happens to Pharaoh. So no matter what situation we're under, we can trust in the plan of God and the purpose of God because he's with us the whole way and he's got a purpose in where he's leading us.

And that brings us to the second lesson to learn is that when we're under pressure, we need to trust God in our weakness and in our inability to kind of fix the situation because God is going to work his salvation for us.

God uses our weakness to show his saving strength. God uses our weakness to show his saving strength. So in our story today, the Israelites are trapped.

They thought they were free going off to the promised land. And this is one last test for them. Well, actually, this starts a whole series of tests for them as they go towards Sinai. This is a big one.

[10 : 01] God has purposely put them in a no-win situation. Pharaoh's armies and chariots are bearing down on them and behind them is the sea. Death in front, death behind.

They can't go forward and they can't go back. Now, this was a modern movie. How would these people get themselves out of that situation?

We've all seen action movies, Gladiator, Ben-Hur. What happens is if this was a modern movie, Moses would lead them in some clever, amazing military maneuver.

He would have his swords flashing. They could take out the Pharaoh. It would all be up to them.

They would win. Pharaoh would die. They'd be free. And they'd think, okay, they've done it.

But, of course, that's pure fantasy. In reality, without God doing something, Pharaoh is going to win every single time. So that's the point of saying, you know, we read the passage, there's chariots, there's horses, there's his chosen men.

[11 : 04] The point of all that is to remind you, here comes death. You don't have the power to stop that horde from slicing you to pieces. The chariots of the ancient world were the tanks of our modern world.

You've got 600 of those things bearing down on you and you don't have javelins or missiles to throw back at them. You're just going to get cut down. Interesting, though, isn't it, that Israel had come out early in the passage in chapter 13.

There's an interesting little anecdote. Verse 18, the Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle. So they thought. And then later on, they're going through the desert boldly.

Da, da, da. Let Pharaoh get us. And then the chariots arrive. Moses, what, what, what, what, what, what, what, what is this? You see how quickly their, their ability to, in themselves, just disappears the moment reality arrives.

But surely they would have, they would have to try and do something to save themselves in that situation. Wouldn't you do that? So in the face of oncoming death, the biggest stress situation they can face that God has put them in, what are they to do?

[12 : 16] Well, Moses tells them to do the most counterintuitive thing. Stand. Do nothing. Wait. And watch.

Have a look at verse 14, chapter 14, verse 13 and 14.

Chapter 14, verse 13 and 14. Moses said to the people, fear not. Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.

The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent. So now what would you do if you were standing there and Moses said that to you?

The chariots are coming. You've got a sea behind you. Moses, we're going to die now. Why did you bring us out of Egypt to come and die in the desert? It's way better to be there than to be slaves.

[13 : 19] And humanly speaking, they've got a point. Like, what is this? What? What do we have to do? Form a battle plan.

Do something. You've got minutes, hours to live. You know how many people in the modern world, when they realize that they're coming to the end of their life, they want to do everything they've never been able to do?

So many people want to blow all their savings because they want to go and do everything they've done before they can die and not leave anything behind.

You know you've got one night left to live. What are you going to do? You've got minutes left to live. Stand and do nothing.

What is required of you to stand and do nothing when that is coming at you? Well, you need faith. You need trust that God is going to do something.

[14:14] But then you need God to do something. Otherwise, your trust and faith is going to disappear with you as you bleed out on the desert floor. So here's this moment of truth, you know, and the movies get it really well, don't they?

You know that moment in the Hollywood movies, everything seems to freeze and it all comes down to this one moment. The moment of truth has finally arrived. Israel, like all of humanity, have only one option open to them if they want to live.

They have to trust in God to save them. It's the only option they've got. Now, in the story of our lives, we're either on the side of Israel or on the side of Egypt in this story.

We either have a God who's fighting for us and saving us or we're like the Egyptians. We've got a plan. We want to do whatever we want to in life and then you're going to end up dead.

Because what you're doing is destructive to God. Well, you can't destroy him, but you're destructive to God's people. To people. To the world around us. Now, we know what God is going to do in the story.

[15:28] Moses is going to part the Red Sea. Okay. And it's easy to gloss over what an incredible display of power this is by God. And how surprising. They didn't know God was going to do that.

He just said, don't worry. A few times in the passage. He's like, I'll show them my glory. And you're like, okay, cool. Moses, can you just ask him how he's going to do that, dude?

Because, you know, the chariots are coming. Oh, yeah, I'm going to sort the sea out. You just want to double check that, though.

Because, like, how? Because, you know, we can't swim. Don't worry. I've got this.

You don't need to worry how I'm going to do it. I've told you I'm going to do it. Trust me. The wind. We didn't read it.

[16:23] It's in the next part of the chapter 14. This massive wind blows all night. Think how powerful a wind that must have been to move water apart. He's got the cloud.

There's this cloud of fire and smoke and flame that moves in between them so that the Egyptian army can't get at them. And it's there the whole night. The waters part.

They pile up. Moses puts out his rod. They pile up. And they walk through the sea on dry land.

Who would have seen that coming? You could never plan that in a million years. It takes the wisdom and the cleverness and the power of God to do that for you, for us.

And then, on top of that, God uses the same thing that saves his people, the sea, to destroy their enemy at the same time.

[17:26] It's incredible how God does these things. So here's how God... So this stands as the... I can't overemphasize enough. This is the one big act of salvation in the Old Testament that defines for us salvation.

The word saving and salvation is used here for the first time in connection with God saving his people in the Bible. It's used once or twice before where Moses and, in fact, Abraham has gone to save their people in various struggles, in various fights.

But it's the first time it's used by God when he acts on behalf of his people. So that when... Let's have a quick stop there and pause there about what does salvation do?

How does salvation work? So when God acts to save, the first thing you notice is he does it totally unexpectedly. Who knew that the water was going to open up for them?

Secondly, it's just this total power play by God. And, I mean, we make it... The wind is really going. But, I mean, for God...

[18:35] The water does that. Fire, cloudy pillars. We think... I mean, God must have spent... You know when you start a fire on a blitz on the weekend?

Everyone freaks out. You know? Just wait until I start the blitz, guys. So a total power play by God. Just pure power. Actually, controlled power. Because if God displays the entirety of his infinite power, can you imagine what would have happened?

The people that he wanted to save wouldn't have been saved. It's just we would all obliterate, I reckon. So God has to control that power. And it's a fine control. That little path that let his people escape but then kill the bad guys.

You know, when you're standing in outer space, they look very close together. But, of course, God knows how to do these things. Totally unexpected. So salvation is totally unexpected.

[19 : 39] When God moves to act, the salvation is totally unexpected. Totally powerful. God... What I'm saying by that is God does the total work of salvation.

We'll make a point about that in a second. He totally saves his people and he totally destroys their enemies. You get that from the passage? Now, keep that in your mind because we're going to look at how the gospel does that for us.

But this is why God has put them in that situation. They need to learn that when it comes to salvation, they cannot do anything for themselves.

It's an object lesson and you can't do it. Let me do it. They're totally incapable of saving themselves. And God is the only one with the power and ability to do the saving they needed.

Does that make sense? And would you agree that that's a lesson for them to learn there? Anyone want to just say, ah, you know what? We could have handled the chariots.

[20 : 41] There's 600 of them. We could have done it better. Oh, how thick. How stupid. When people think like that. And then God gives us the salvation in Christ.

No, no. No, no. I'll be able to handle it on judgment day. You what? This God that does that at the flick of her fingertips. You think you can handle him on judgment day by yourself?

No, but fine. Good luck. Good luck. I'm getting ahead of myself there. But first lesson. They are totally incapable of saving themselves.

But not only that. Being placed under that precious situation for us. Being placed in those precious situations gives us an opportunity to let God use our weakness, our inability to show his strength.

That's why he does it. Yeah, it kind of puts the pressure on us. But that's... It's okay.

[21 : 47] Because you've got God doing this kind of thing for you. Not to say it's easy. It's okay. Not to say it's easy. But God's got this. Paul, in 2 Corinthians, writes of something similar.

He talks about that thorn in his flesh sent to torment him. He was facing severe testing while he was taking the gospel to the world. We know about the beatings and the things that he received over and over.

But a point of that, he says, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, chapter 12. He says this, But he said to me, God says to him, My grace is sufficient for you.

For my power is made perfect in your weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions and difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

[22 : 56] How does that help us? Well, first of all, when we face pressure situations, Moses says, don't worry. God says, don't worry. Stand still.

Watch what I'm going to do. Just be quiet. That thing that Moses says in chapter 14, verse 13, 14. Now, we tend to do the exact opposite of that, don't we? Under the precious situation.

God says, don't fear. And we fill our minds with all the anxieties we can think of. We're experts at playing the what-if game. And it never comes out in our favor, does it? We always go down the dark path.

God says, stand still. We run around like headless chickens. God says, watch what I am going to do. We want the world to see what we can do to solve our issues.

God will fight for you. We say, no thanks. We can fight our own battles. God says, be silent. And we either internally scream in terror and pretend that everything is fine, like we've got this under control, or loudly proclaim our own abilities.

[24 : 02] You know what I did? I did this. I did that. It was nothing. All of those reactions to pressure tell you and tell others that you don't really trust in God to do the saving for you.

Okay, but how do we get there? How do we get to this place of calm and deep and real trust and quietness in God's and his saving promises in our lives?

How do we get there? Because, you know, the chariots are big. We don't know that the sea is going to open up behind us. Well, the first thing that helps us is we need to realize we can't save ourselves.

And the thing that that does for us is that he immediately takes the pressure off. Yes, I actually don't have to run around. I don't have to have all the solutions. God has said that he's going to help me.

God has said that he's with me. God never does things without a purpose. I don't know what the purpose is. Do you need to know? You want to know.

[25 : 03] Do you need to know? No. God's given you enough information and enough experience in history so that you know that he's got this. I don't have to come up with a scheme or plan to fix or save the situation.

I can trust that God is going to do it. Our problem is we're so full of our own false sense of ability and strength, we don't think that God can do anything for us if we can't do it ourselves.

So that's the one thing. Realizing you can't save yourself takes the pressure off. But realizing that I can't save myself isn't enough to fix the situation. Because if God doesn't do anything, in other words, if he hasn't done any saving, if you haven't experienced any saving in your life from him, that's just going to lead to panic.

Let go. And if God doesn't do anything, that car is going to smash. You need to trust in the power of God to uphold and to save you. You need to trust in the gospel.

You need to trust in what Christ has done for you. And friends, this is exactly how the gospel works or how salvation works in the gospel. The gospel tells us in no certain terms we are just useless at saving ourselves.

[26 : 16] We're useless at fixing the problems in our own life, in our lives on our own terms. Let alone trying to make things right with God. Just trying to sort the little fires out in our life. And the gospel tells us of a mighty act of God that saves us.

It's infinitely more powerful than what you see on display in Exodus. And that was some serious power. I'm just going to give you an example of this. Paul again in Colossians chapter 2.

Paul says, When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, means you were really filthy.

It's their way of saying unholy. God made you alive with Christ. So just notice. You're dead. Dead people can't do anything.

That's the point about being dead. Dead people can't fix stuff. They don't do anything. They don't respond. So for you to start doing something, God has got to make you alive. You can't make yourself alive.

[27 : 20] You can't perform CPR on yourself. By definition, then you're not dead. God has to provide or do the divine CPR. You're dead.

Look what God has done. He has made you alive in Christ. Now, it takes power to open a sea. I don't know of any power stronger than raising dead people back to life again.

If you can bring dead people back to life, we're talking power. Not only that, he forgave us all our sins. Having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us, he's taken away and nailing it on the cross.

You can't do that. You can't tell God, yes, that's fine. I want you to forgive me. You can't forgive yourself. You can't undo what you've done. Only God can.

And Jesus Christ, who's paid for your sins, gives that to you. Is that? You with me on that? Not only that, verse 15.

[28 : 22] Having disarmed the powers and authorities or principalities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. And so you've got this.

The cross both saves you and defeats these powers, these evil forces. You see it there? Having disarmed the powers and authorities.

Those things that are coming at us, those evil, the bad things in our life that give us pressure, God's dealt with them at the cross. You don't have to stress about that.

So when we realize that he's done all of that for us, that he has done it all for us, taking away all the things I've done to make my life a mess, and defeated every evil we could face, it's already defeated in the cross, then there's nothing left for me to worry about, is there?

I can walk through my problems on dry ground with a song in my heart, reveling in the God who does the saving and defeating of my enemies for me.

[29 : 25] But we'll look at that in more detail next week. When we're under pressure in our lives from things that are threatening our joy in God, we can totally trust in God. He hasn't abandoned us.

He's placing us in those situations on purpose so we can experience his salvation and be a witness of God's power to others. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we can't thank you enough for your great act of salvation in the story in Exodus, walking through the Red Sea, saving your people, saving an entire nation.

Lord, you are so powerful and so mighty, and Lord, you are so loving that you would do the same thing for us at the cost of the life of your son.

Lord, help us in the precious situations that we face on a daily basis or precious situations that are going to come up in our lives that we haven't even begun to know is going to arrive. Lord, help us to do what Moses says, to trust you, to stand still, to have no fear, to watch what you are going to do, what you have done for us in Christ, to have faith and to move forward.

[30 : 57] Help us to do this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.