

For many years, "ABC's Wide World of Sports" opened with various scenes of athletic competition and these famous words, "...the thrill of victory...and the agony of defeat...the human drama of athletic competition." Within those words is the subtle reminder that even skilled and experienced athletes often collapse under the pressure of competition. One of the worst labels an athlete can be tagged with is being someone who chokes when the game is on the line. Whether it be a Retief Goosen three putting on the eighteenth green of the U.S. Open, or a Bill Buckner letting a routine ground ball slip under his glove in the World Series, high expectations can create a pressure that leads to failure on the largest stages that sports has to offer. Such was the case in the 2008 Olympic games in Beijing, China. Having already won a gold medal in the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece, China's own Du Li was the overwhelming favorite to defend her title in the 10 meter air rifle event. However, she buckled under the national pressure of performing in front of her own countrymen and simply missed the bull's-eye. She later admitted, "I wasn't fully prepared for the pressure of competing at home in front of 1.3 billion people expecting me to win."

There is something quite special, if not heroic, about someone who performs well when the stakes are high and the time is short. We admire the doctor who springs to action and rescues a patient whose vital signs are deteriorating rapidly. We honor the fireman who is able to maintain a high level of focus though flames and smoke threaten to consume him alive. The ability to handle pressure is often the gauge which separates the extraordinary from the mediocre. If anyone understood that concept it was the apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians 11:28, the oldest manuscripts record Paul's dealing with "the pressure upon me daily..." When it came to the doctrine, discipline, and direction he provided to the churches, the pressure of duty was one he could not evade or escape. However, it was a pressure in which he learned to perform well. Some people simply cannot handle pressure. Essayist G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "There are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands." In the depths of water, the same pressure which pushes iron to the bottom will lift a cork to the surface. The difference is determined by the material of which each is made. Amidst the decisions, demands, and deadlines of life, just how well do you perform under pressure?

Pressure will reveal **the depth of our character**. In 2 Corinthians 4:8, Paul wrote, "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed..." The word "troubled" means "to press hard upon." It is a picture of pressing grapes or olives for the valuable juices held within the hull. Like squeezing a sponge, pressure does not make a man as much as it will expose the substance of what is really within a man. Gideon may have felt disadvantaged and inadequate, but pressure would reveal he was a "mighty man of valor." King Saul may have stood taller than any in Israel, but pressure would reveal he was a dwarf at heart. Have you ever wondered how fish are able to cope in the ocean depths under the same water pressure that would cause a human body to explode? They are able to function because of an internal counter pressure that is equal to the external pressure. Perhaps that is what Psalmist had in mind when he wrote in Psalm 119:11, "Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin

against Thee." A life undergirded by truth is a life reinforced to withstand collapse under any degree of pressure. When the damage pressure threatens to do to us is matched by the work God does in us there will always be the hope of success.

Pressure will reveal **the direction of our course**. In Acts 18:5, Paul stood to preach to an opposing Jewish crowd in Corinth because he "...was pressed in the spirit..." The word "pressed" carries the idea of something held together by pressing on all sides to accomplish a desired result. It is a picture of cattle being pressed into a cattle squeeze so medicine can be administered. Paul knew what to do and when to do it because of the pressure applied upon his soul. Often when I was doing wrong as a child, my father "spoke" by applying pressure with his hand on my shoulder. If that did not work, the pressure moved to another place until my response gained his approval! It was pressure from Mordecai that gave Esther the courage to do what was right. It was pressure from the belly of a vomiting fish that propelled Jonah toward obedience. It was pressure from the crowd that compelled Pilate to set God's plan of redemption into motion. Howard Taylor learned of his missionary father Hudson, "It doesn't matter how great the pressure is. What really matters is where the pressure lies, whether it comes between me and God or whether it presses me nearer His heart." God-pressed moments are never anything more than grace under fire.

Pressure will reveal **the decisiveness of our commitment**. In 2 Corinthians 7:5, Paul again says, "...we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless..." Paul knew when pressure is rushing in at every port a man will either die in his faith or he will die for his faith. Those who excel under pressure are those whose minds are already made up long before the crisis arrives. When Job was pressured sorely by his circumstances to desert God, it was noted, "...still he holdeth fast his integrity..." When Daniel was pressured to be disloyal to his God, it was noted, "...innocency was found in me." When Jesus felt the crushing pressure of sin in Gethsemane, he cried out, "...nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done." Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." A decisive heart is one that has burned the bridges of retreat and cannot back off, back up, or back down. As I've heard it said, it's how you show up at the showdown that counts!

When a mother is giving birth to her baby, the pressure brings excruciating pain. However, what enables a mother to endure the effects of the pressure is the fact her heart is fixed on the outcome produced by the pressure. Therein lies the great secret to performing well under pressure. In Philippians 4:13, Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ..." When pressure arose, Paul remained focused on the Christlikeness that pressure would ultimately produce. A heart fixed on such an outcome will never miss the bull's-eye and is the making of a gold medal saint.

Your Most Proud Pastor,
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