

# LIVING UNDER PRESSURE — THE CHRISTIAN ANSWER

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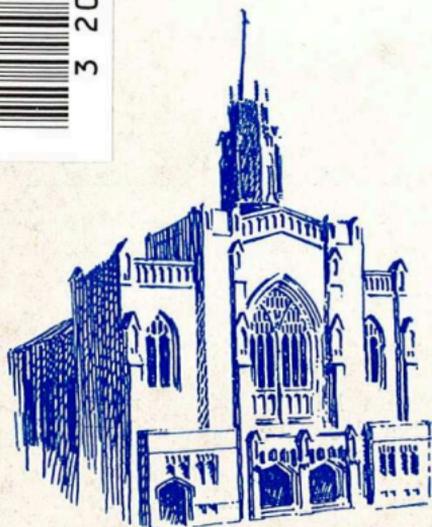
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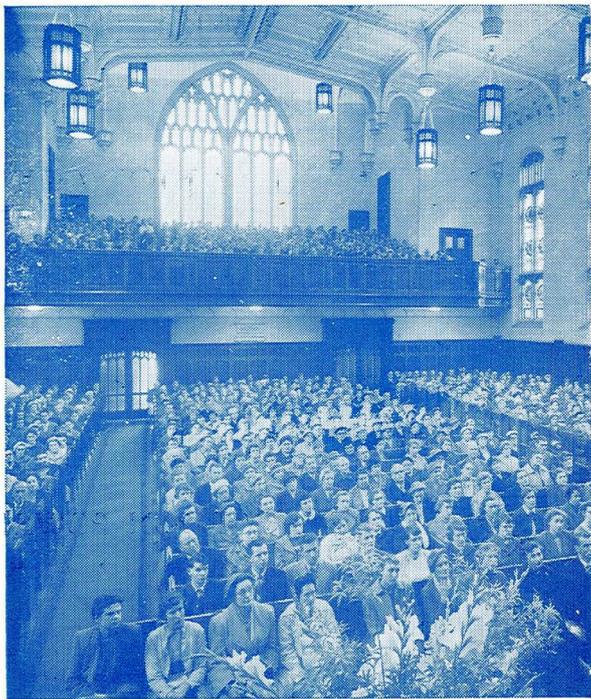
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This is a sermon delivered in St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, Australia, on Sunday, 18th October, 1964, and repeated at the Lunch-Hour Service on Wednesday, 21st October, 1964.

People of all denominations attend the mid-week service, believed to be the largest lunch-hour service in the world. You are invited to attend it from 1.15 to 1.45 p.m. each Wednesday, March to December inclusive.

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## LIVING UNDER PRESSURE — THE CHRISTIAN ANSWER

"I just can't cope with life any longer." Do you ever feel like that? Regularly we have people come to see us, and even more often write to us, telling us that the pressures of life are too much for them. They feel they are cracking under the strain and they are afraid of the future. Several times lately I have had letters from women in their late twenties or early thirties, mothers of several young children, whose health had been undermined by the pressures of life. Frequently we have business and professional men passing through the 'horrible pit' of despair because they have been living under pressure for too long.

Dr. Hans Selye of Montreal has pointed out that chronic emotional stress affects the functioning of the glands and if it continues for too long can cause a serious break-down of health. From my own experience I know that when I am under emotional stress for some time I tend to hold my breath, and I go on holding my breath even after the strain has passed. The result is a reduction in the flow of oxygen to the lungs and thence to the body. This reduces energy and leaves one feeling awfully tired. The pressure of modern life is a prolific cause of much sickness today. What is the answer? Doctors can do much at the physical level. Tranquillizers can modify the symptoms considerably. But if the real cause is mental, emotional and spiritual it is obvious there can be no final solution to the problem unless we seek it at these levels. Let us then consider the Christian answer to the problem of pres-

sure. I want to give you eight texts from the Bible which I have found to be specially helpful. The main points of these texts will form the headings of what follows.

## 1. ESCAPE FOR A TIME

One day Jesus said to His disciples, "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while," for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. (Mark 6:31). Jesus knew all about pressure and even He, the Son of God, had to escape from it when He could.

A year or two ago, when pressure had undermined my own health, I was in the consulting room of a Macquarie Street specialist discussing the problem. In view of the difficulty of getting an appointment with him, it was obvious that he knew all about pressure. He told me that when he realised his health was beginning to crack because of it, he made an arrangement whereby every two months he left Sydney completely for three days and went up into the mountains. This was in addition to his regular weekly days off, which, no doubt, were often interrupted by calls from patients. Every second month he got right out from under and he knew that for those three days he could forget everything. A psychiatrist friend of mine takes his annual holiday in two sections, a fortnight every six months. By getting completely away from it all he finds he can stand up to the tremendous pressures of a psychiatric practice.

Like many a doctor Jesus found it difficult to escape. Once He even left Palestine altogether and went up to the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. But they had heard of Him even there and a Canaanite woman came pleading with Him to heal her daughter. On the occasion recorded in the sixth chapter of Mark, Jesus was seeking

to escape not only from the daily pressure of His work, but also from the pain of a great personal sorrow. John the Baptist had just been executed. But Jesus was not allowed to escape. He faced the problem of feeding five thousand people! However, late that night He did manage to slip away and went up into a mountain to pray.

## 2. REDUCE YOUR DUTIES AND INTERESTS

The classic example of an over-worked and hard-pressed house-wife was Martha. In these days of practically no domestic help and so many outside pressures as well as family pressures, there must be many women who know exactly how Martha felt that day at Bethany. Thirteen or more unexpected guests had arrived and Martha was flat out in the kitchen trying to do a dozen things at once. If ever there was a time when she needed Mary's help it was then. But what was Mary doing? Nothing. She was in there with the men enjoying herself. Do you blame Martha for losing her temper? I can't say I do. Yet, what did Jesus say to her? I take the translation of His words as it is found in the margin of the New English Bible: "Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things, but few things are necessary." (Luke 10:41).

How many of us allow more and more duties to overwhelm us without ever asking if they are all really necessary. The other day I was having a game of golf with Archdeacon Pitt, now of Wollongong, but formerly Dean of Sydney. I asked him how he liked his new position compared with his previous one and he replied, "Well, of course, I have to look after an area two hundred miles long and a hundred miles wide, but it is wonderful to get away from the rat-race of the city. I don't think any man should have to stand the pressure of a city Church for more than ten years." After

twelve and a half years at St. Stephen's I'm inclined to agree with him. I can only carry on by remembering what Jesus said to Martha and restricting the duties I attempt to those which time and strength reasonably permit.

### 3. LIVE ONE DAY AT A TIME

When people begin to feel they can no longer cope with life, too often it is because they are worrying about the future as well as the present. But God broke life up into days and nights and He expects us to live one day at a time, trusting the future to Him. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, as translated by J. B. Phillips, "Don't worry at all then about tomorrow Tomorrow can take care of itself! One day's trouble is enough for one day." (Matthew 5:34).

One of the greatest doctors of all time lived by this principle and so trained himself not only to withstand tremendous pressure, but to go on to attain the highest positions available to a man in his profession. I refer to Sir William Osler who did his medical course in Montreal, and in due time organised the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. After that he was appointed Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, said to be the highest honour that can be conferred on a medical man in the British Commonwealth. What was the secret of his success? As a student in Montreal he read some words written by Thomas Carlyle which led him to concentrate on doing the duty that was nearest and putting out of his mind those that lay ahead. At the age of 64 he sailed back to America to lecture to the students at Yale. He urged them to live in day-tight compartments. Just as the great ship on which he had sailed was safe because it had water-tight compartments, so our human lives are more secure if we take one day at a time. He reminded the students of the petition in

the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." The best way to prepare for the future is to stop worrying about it, doing each day's work as it comes, trusting God to supply strength for that one day—as He will. God said through Moses, who had learned this secret in coping with pressure, "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." (Deuteronomy 33:25).

### 4. REST ONE WHOLE DAY EVERY WEEK

God in His infinite wisdom has given us the rules of life and none more important than the Ten Commandments. The fourth Commandment says, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work." (Exodus 20:8). Thousands of people think they know better than God and they can work seven days a week. God didn't make us that way and sooner or later the pressure beats us. I think of a minister, well known to me, who was so devoted to his work that he thought he could go on day after day without any days off. He was keeping the Sabbath holy, but no minister can treat it as a day of rest. When my friend's health broke down and he consulted his doctor, his doctor ordered him to find a day in the week which he could keep sacred as a day free from work. It needed a doctor to teach a minister one of the most important principles in the Bible.

I have no doubt that there are plenty of doctors who keep Sundays as a day of rest, but do they all remember the importance of keeping it holy as the Commandment orders? I am glad to say we have some thirty doctors on the roll of this Church who remember the sabbath by resting and worshipping. The Bible says "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10). When we are quiet in God's presence and worship Him

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then we are set free from the tensions and strains which result from the pressures of life. Not only that, but we take in spiritual power so that we may not only cope, but become "more than conquerors through Him that loved us." (Romans 8:37).

## **5. GET YOUR MIND OFF YOURSELF ON TO GOD**

Too many of us, when we become tired and nervy through the pressure of life, feel sorry for ourselves. The more we think of ourselves the more tired we become and the greater our fear of being unable to cope with the future. Norman Vincent Peale tells how on one occasion a young Jewish business man asked him to have a talk with his father, the head of their business. He said, "I'm very worried about Dad. He is so nervous and tense. There are a lot of pressures and problems in this business and Dad is giving way under them." When they went into the older man's office they found him fussing over some papers. He certainly looked nervous and tense. He glanced up and said, "Glad to see you Norman," but then went on to explain that he was busy. "There's always so much to deal with," he said. Dr. Peale induced him to relax and talk over this problem of pressure in business. After a time he said, "I don't suppose you ever read the Old Testament do you?" The other man replied, "Certainly. I'm a good Jew." Dr. Peale said, "You read it, but you don't practise it?" The Jew replied, "Of course I practise it. I'm a moral, ethical man." Norman Vincent Peale then said, "I was not talking about morals and ethics. I was talking about the healing power of God. Have you never read the 26th Chapter of Isaiah, the 3rd verse, 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee'?" He then went on to explain that the other man had not been keeping

his mind on God, he had been letting it dwell on his problems. He urged him to repeat this text three times a day and get it well into his system.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee." If we leave God out of our thinking, if we leave Him out of the day to day concerns of our life, then our problems will grow bigger and bigger until they overwhelm us. Faith in God more than anything else helps us to keep a true perspective and cut problems down to size.

## **6. SEEK CLEANSING**

If you want to build up inner tension a good way to do it is to keep suppressing guilt feelings into the unconscious mind. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. We may deny that, but once we start thinking about God and trying to stay our minds on Him, we soon become conscious of the gap between the holiness of God and the moral state of our own lives. It is no good suppressing guilt. That makes us tense and saps our energies. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1st John 1:9).

When the four men lowered their paralysed friend through the roof of the house in Capernaum, Jesus saw that in his case the paralysis was related to suppressed guilt feelings. He said to the patient, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee . . . Arise take up thy bed and walk." (Mark 2). If you are paralysed by the fear you cannot cope with life, accept the forgiveness which God offers in Christ and let the burden roll away.

## **7. LEARN TO ENJOY YOUR WORK**

When the pressure of life gets us down we tend to hate our work and wish we could get free from it

altogether. The real answer is to find a new attitude towards our work. Provided it is a worthy occupation in God's sight, serving our fellow men, and provided it is within the talents God has entrusted to us we should be able to cultivate a spirit of enjoyment as we do the things we have to do day by day. Paul urged Christians to be, "not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." (Romans 12:11). Nehemiah said, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10). Jesus said, "These things have I spoken unto you that my joy might remain in you and that your joy might be full." (John 15:11).

A friend of mine who has a responsible position in the radio world told me once that for years he was a martyr to migraine headaches. For two days every week, almost without fail, he was blinded by this pain and frequently was unable to go to the office at all. Pain-killing drugs had little effect. Then he switched his attitude towards his work. For years he had been telling himself he had one of the most nerve-racking jobs there are, all the time meeting split-second deadlines. But now he suddenly realised he liked his work. More and more he trained himself to enjoy it. He lost his nervousness and tension. The sense of pressure was lifted and his health improved enormously with practically no sign of the migraine.

Outside this Church late one afternoon, my wife and I were just about to step into the car to drive home when a member of the Wednesday congregation came by. Knowing he lived on our route we invited him to travel with us. On the way he said, "I'm glad to get this opportunity to tell you the amazing difference one of the St. Stephen's Tonic Cards made to me. For quite a time I used to get a dull, nagging head-ache every afternoon. Nothing seemed to do any good till

one Wednesday you printed the Serenity Prayer on the Tonic Card. It is quite amazing how I have been able to keep that head-ache under control by repeating the prayer. "O God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference."

## 8. WORK FOR HIM AND BE GLAD OF PRESSURE

Finally, let us lift our sights and seek a new motive for all that we do. If we work only for our own selfish gain we are likely to develop guilt feelings. It makes us more and more obsessed with self and we tend to fret and worry about every little loss or frustration. But if we learn to live and work "serving the Lord," doing everything for Him, it lifts life to an entirely new level and takes so much strain out of it. We serve the Lord by serving other people. The mother of a new baby does not think of it as work though she may give sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, to the service of him and the home. Love makes the difference. As John Wesley wrote in 1743:—

"Love of God and all mankind is the centre of religion. This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world."

Seventeen hundred years before, Paul had put it this way, Love "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." (1st Corinthians 13:7). Before that, our Lord Jesus Christ had taken pity on all those suffering beneath the pressures of life and He said, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you . . ." (Matthew 11:28). In His presence and in joyful service we lose the strain of life. Notice the

kind of rest He offers us. It is not inactivity. It is not freedom from all pressure. In His divine wisdom He knows that for our own good we need a certain amount of pressure, the right pressure in the right place, so He invites us to take on a new pressure, the pressure of His yoke. This yoke is adapted to our true nature as the sons and daughters of the living God, so it is easy and it is light. "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you."

Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?  
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

**BOOKS.** The following books by the Rev. Gordon Powell may be obtained through any bookseller, or by post from the Assembly Book Shop, 44 Margaret Street, Sydney.

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