

Can You Feel The Pressure?

Sir Isaac Newton said that every action had an equal and opposite reaction¹. Pushing and pressure produces. Pressure always produces *something*. You may see it. You may not see it. But, pressure always produces. It is true in physics and motion. And it's also true in our lives. There is no more clear example of this than a man called Saul—who we would later know as Paul. Saul was pushed by pressure. And that pressure produced many results in his life. He had this constant pressure on him to be a zealous, good Jew. His teachers put that pressure on him. But the pressure he put on himself was far worse. It was that pressure to be a zealous Jew that pushed him to do unspeakable evil. We see it at the stoning of Stephen. Stephen boldly and caringly preached God's word to the Jews. And, as they tore their clothes and gnashed their teeth, where do we see this pressure showing itself? We can just see Saul there, can't we: "Here, let me take your cloak. Let me hold that. I wouldn't want you to strain yourself or damage your clothing as you murder an innocent man." Such pressure was on Saul to produce. And it didn't end with this pit of stones for Stephen. It grew and flourished into a passion to go out and find more pits and jails for other Christians like Stephen. This pressure wasn't content to just hold the cloaks of murderers. This pressure pushed him to be a murderer, himself.

And, just when this pressure was at its strongest, Saul felt a different pressure. There Saul was on that dusty, dirty road to Damascus and a voice spoke to him. And, it wasn't just *a* voice. It was *the* voice. This voice blinded his eyes and pushed against the pressure in him. It spoke out: "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*"² And, suddenly, all that pressure driving him, guiding him for so many years caught him off-balance as he realized that Jesus wasn't a lie. No, instead, he was the LORD of Lords.

What could Saul say to this voice? What reason could he give to Jesus for so zealously trying to destroy him? What could he say? Months later, what is it he could say to the families of those he put in jail? What could he say when a girl came up to him and said: "you were the one who killed my dad." What could he say to the man who said: "you threw my wife in jail and now she frail and weak and diseased." The only thing he could say to these, his brothers and sisters in Christ, is the words he speaks here in 2 Corinthians: 'The love of Christ. The love of Christ forgives my sins and it will lead you to forgive me too.'

It was that love of Christ, that special, specific ἀγάπη love which loves, not expecting anything in return which took the pressure of Paul's sin, guilt and punishment off of him. But, in its place we find a new pressure. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5: "*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*"³ The pressure of sin, guilt and punishment was gone. And in its place was the pressure of love—Christ's undeserved love toward him. And so, he was pushed, pulled, compelled to share God's word.

Now, there is more we need to say about Paul and this pressure of love. But, right now, we need to pause and apply these words to ourselves. Paul felt a very real pressure to go out and speak about Jesus. He felt a very real pressure to go out and *live* for Jesus. As his brother or sister in the faith, do you feel that same pressure?

I know, that there are times, as I read God's word or hear it preached, when God places that pressure on me—when he says, 'what about you, Steve? Do you feel the pressure, the burden, the urgency to share God's word with people?' When I hear that voice, it's all too tempting for me to answer back like Moses: "*O LORD, please send someone else to do it.*"⁴ And, even worse, there are those times when I know I should feel some pressure, some urgency, some burden to go out and share God's word. But, where there should be some feeling, there is nothing. There is numbing apathy. And that is a very dangerous place to be. When we feel nothing in response to God's words, then we are like the church in Laodicea that Jesus speaks to in Revelation. He tells them: "*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am*

¹Newton's Third Law

²(Acts 9:4 NIV)

³(2 Corinthians 5:14–15 NIV)

⁴(Exodus 4:13 NIV)

*about to spit you out of my mouth”*⁵ There should be something in my heart, either hot *for* God or cold *against* God. But, when there’s nothing, that’s a hypothermic heart waiting for hell.

And so I ask you, do you feel the pressure? Do you feel the proper pressure that God’s word places on you to go out and live for him? Or, do you feel nothing? You feel more pressure to work in the garden than pray for souls. You feel more pressure to cheer for the Steelers than share God’s word. You see, the reason you and I feel no pressure is because we haven’t walked with Paul. We have forgotten that voice which speaks to us: ‘Why, why do you persecute me?’ What would you say to that voice? What would you say to the countless people you have hurt with your words and actions? What would you say to the person whose reputation you shattered with thoughtless, loveless words? What would you say to the people you have hurt again and again in your lives?

Do you feel that pressure? That is the weight of your sin. That pressure—that full weight does not go away by pushing against it. It does not go away by trying to forget about it. There is only one way that pressure goes away: The love of Christ. Hear again what Paul writes to the Corinthians: *“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”*⁶

Notice what Paul is saying here. The great love that Christ has for us compels us. It pushes us. It drives us to live for him. Well, how is it that this happens? We have this conclusion: Jesus died for all. Therefore *all* died. Do you get it? Do you understand the great truth Paul is saying here? Paul felt the pressure of his sin. But, Paul rejoiced that Jesus was the one who felt the pain. Paul felt the pressure of his sin. But Jesus was the one who felt the punishment—and not just for him, but for all of us. So now, you can say: ‘I feel the pressure, but Jesus endured my pain of hell.’ I can say: ‘I feel the pressure of my sin, but Jesus endured the punishment I deserved.’

This is what we come to church for week after week. Week after week our sinful natures seek to make our hearts die with spiritual hypothermia. They seek to make us numb—numb to the pressure God’s law puts on us and the pressure God’s gospel takes off of us. Week after week this happens. But, how thankful we are, that just like Paul, the love of Christ is able to break open and de-thaw our numbing, hypothermic hearts. It puts the weight of our sins on us and then takes the pressure off us as we look to the love that Christ has for us.

And then, as this happens week after week, there is a change inside of us. There is a brand new sort of pressure. It is not the pressure that Saul knew. It is not a pressure to go out and follow our own god out of fear, anger, pride and desperation. And it is not the pressure our sinful nature puts on us to become lukewarm. It is a warm, glorious pressure which grows from Christ’s love for you.

This brings me back to our sermon last week. You will remember that we left our sermon last week with this truth: that very often God gives a choice not between good and evil, but rather good and good. It is the Holy Spirit who pressures us in a such a wonderful way to make a choice. But the choice is our own. We go home and go back into our world. And we have the choice to share God’s word with someone in our lives. Or we have the choice to pray for that person. Or we have the choice to do both. So what do you do? It’s up to you. But know this: these are choices between good and good, not good and evil. And you do them not out of fear or desperation, but out of joyful, wonderful pressure. That, because you know how much Christ has forgiven you, out of thanks, you follow him.

So then, my brothers and sisters, do you feel the pressure? Yes. Let us always pray: ‘O LORD, let me always feel the pressure of my sin so that I never grow numb to your word. And, dear Savior let me always feel the pressure of my sin. For you have placed all of its pain, all of its punishment on yourself.’ That is the pressure we feel and the prayer we speak. Amen.

⁵(Revelation 3:15–16 NIV)

⁶(2 Corinthians 5:14–15 NIV)