

PREVAILING OVER PRESSURE

1 Peter 3:8–22

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1 Peter 3:8–22. Rather than reading the passage in its entirety at the beginning, I will simply read it as we have reference to it through the course of the message. Today's message is entitled "Prevailing Over Pressure." How can you and I cope with the pressure and stress that face us? That's a question that many of us ask when we are being assaulted with the whirlwind of demands upon our lives. We live with the pressure of expectations we have of ourselves. We live with the pressure of money and the need for it. We live with the pressure of jam-packed schedules, the pressure of work performance and job security. The pressure of meeting the ideals and the expectations and even demands of others within your family. The pressure of aging and health. Pressure is not something that's just for adults only; kids, young people experience pressure.

Peter is talking to people who in this Scripture are under pressure. He's actually begun talking to them about the subject of pressure all the way back in chapter 2:11 and extending all the way to 4:6. He has so far delineated three groups that are under pressure. Christian citizens who are under pressure by virtue of their belonging to Christ and because they are living in Roman society—he talks about them specifically in 2:11–15. A second group he talks to are slaves. They are under pressure from their owners. We have looked at his counsel to them in 2:18–25. The third group he talks to are married partners—3:1–7, the pressurized home. Especially he talks to marriage partners who are living with difficult partners.

Now in 3:8, he gathers up all his counsel with the words "finally all of you." The word "finally" here does not mean preacher-language for "I'm about to close my sermon," but when he actually

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gets done there's three more chapters to go. It's finally, in respect to these three categories that I've been talking about. Finally, in respect to these three pressurized situations. Here his counsel applied to each person. "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:8-9, NIV).

I'm going to use five words to describe prevailing over pressure drawn from these passages today.

I. Be in control.

The first one from these verses I've just read, verses 8–9, is the word "control." When we are pressured we tend to be at our worst. When we are most tired or our schedule demands the most of us, we tend to be most out of control. Jesus, in Mark 6, sent the disciples out on a training mission which takes them through the cities of Galilee preaching and healing. When they are done with their mission they learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded. They are exhausted physically from their travel and mentally and spiritually from the danger that attends them. Jesus says, "Come away and have some rest." But a crowd shows up, and they have to act as waiters to feed 5,000 men, plus women and children. They then are dead tired. The Lord has them get in a boat to cross the Lake of Galilee. It's probably sunset, about 7 or 8 in the evening when they get into the boat. The next thing we read is that they are in a storm. In the storm Jesus comes walking cross the water to them as they're madly rowing in the fourth watch of the night. The Roman fourth watch was between 3 and 6 in the morning. On top of their travels, on top of their feeding the 5,000, they had been rowing for their lives bailing water for eight hours.

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Just when the situation around them is totally out of control, Jesus is most asking them to be in control and to have faith. Of course they do not fare very well in the test but there are other tests they pass better, learning from that example. I take that as a clue. Expect when you're in a pressurized situation that you yourself may give into that pressure and be out of control. The Lord's saying, "Be in control."

We best develop Christian graces and control under pressure. The fruit of the Spirit, the teaching of Galatians, is not developed by Paul when he doesn't have anything better to do. It's developed in the hardship of the Galatian experience, thereby showing us that the fruit of the Spirit does not grow out of a life lived on a bluegrass lawn of a Kentucky mansion where pink lemonade is being served. But it takes place in the crucible of life. Thick strands weave together to bring us to control. Being in harmony or unity. We tend to be argumentative or disruptive when we're pressurized.

Sympathy is another of the strands. Sharing of sorrows and troubles. It is the reverse of what happens many times under pressure. We want to indulge ourselves in self-pity, thereby becoming self-absorbed. The Lord calls us to reach out beyond ourselves. He calls us to brotherly love when we may feel like selfishness. The word "brotherly love" is *philadelphia*. He calls us to be tenderhearted, to be humble and to be forgiving.

And to back up what he's saying about being in control he quotes from David's Psalm 34. A psalm which David wrote when he had fled from Saul to Abimelech, the king of Gath, and the citizens of Gath remembered that David had killed the Philistine Goliath. David feigns he's a madman in their presence. All the while he is in deep control of his inner being. He writes Psalm 34 and begins in this dangerous time in his life, "I will bless the LORD at all times. His praise shall be continually in my mouth." He goes on to say, as Peter quotes, "Whoever would love life

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and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (3:10-12, NIV).

David could have control in that difficult moment because God was in control. That’s exactly what Peter is saying to Christian citizens, Christian slaves, Christian married partners and everybody else under pressure—God’s calling us to control because He is in control.

II. Have courage.

The second word that I will use in this passage about prevailing over pressure is the word “courage.” “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord” (3:13–15, NIV). Peter is telling us that as Christians we are to be eager to do good.

The word “eager to do good” is the word *zealot*. It comes from the political party that were fanatics in their beliefs. Peter is saying to Christians, “Be a fanatic to do the good. When we are doing the good, who is there around us that can harm us?” Then he immediately realizes that there are people who will still harm us if we do good. So he turns right around and says, “Even if they harm us for doing good, what is there to fear? We need never fear when we are doing the right.” Then he quotes in verse 14 from Isaiah 8:12, “Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.” That quotation is pulled out of a time in Isaiah’s life during the ministry of a king by the name of Ahaz. His motto was “In Assyria we trust.” His grandfather Uzziah’s motto had been “In God we trust.” Isaiah is trying to tell this stupid King Ahaz, “Don’t get into political alliances with Assyria. If your heart’s right with God, He’ll take care of you and you can learn to

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unconditionally trust in Him rather than your own might.” But Ahaz refuses his counsel. Isaiah then turns around and, in Isaiah 8:12, God has His strong hand on Isaiah and tells him not to fear what the other people fear. But rather to fear the Almighty. He is the one you are to dread or to be in awe of.

What Peter is saying to Christians on this basis is that in a time of pressure we need to be true to God. We may be in a business in which the business whittles away at our ethics and our morality. We seemingly are being made to choose between our livelihood and our Christian testimony. You may be being pressured into doing something which is wrong. Peter is saying on this occasion your ultimate fear is not the fear of your employer. Your ultimate fear is the fear of God. Please the Lord before you please your employer. You may be at a time when you’re being pressured morally in some area. The Lord is again reestablishing this fact that to Him you owe your primary allegiance.

It is fascinating too that in a time of economic recession and difficulty the people of God are tested in respect to financial commitment to the ongoing of the Lord’s work. Here again, the Lord puts His favor upon us as we not fear what others fear. But simply trust in the Lord. Peter says, “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord” (1 Peter 3:15). You need not fear if Jesus is Lord. He is the sovereign. He’ll take care of the situation. He’ll be with you. Hurry to face whatever is being demanded. Hurry because you’ve fixed in your life that Jesus is Lord.

III. Recognize your commission.

The third key word that I will use in this passage is the word “commissioned.” “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (3:15, NIV). Commission, of course, refers to the fact that the Lord establishes each of us as a witness for Him and has given us the commission to

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be a witness. There is no effective witness that is simply from the mouth. It begins by setting apart Christ as Lord in our heart. But then we realize that when we are pressured, a non-Christian friend is always watching us to see many times how we will react more under pressure than when we react when everything's going good.

When we're asked a reason for our hope when everything's against us, Peter says be prepared. Think about it in advance. The hope and the reality you have in your heart. When you respond, respond with gentleness and respect. Don't hassle people. Don't talk down to people. Don't be bellicose. Don't be argumentative. Be gentle and respectful. But give an answer.

All of us, at one time or another, have problems with witnessing and knowing exactly how to proceed. Maybe sometimes in our desire to witness we face a lack of courage to do so. The Lord wants us to hurdle that.

I'm reminded of the story of the Christian barber who wanted to witness with all his heart. He determined one day as he went to his shop that he would witness to every customer that day. The whole day came and went and he hadn't witnessed to a customer. The last customer walks in and it's closing time. He hangs the word "closed" on the door, pulls the blinds a little bit and gets the last customer seated in the chair. He begins to prepare himself mentally that he's at least got to witness to this last one customer. He gets the man in the chair, lathers up his face with shaving cream, gets out the razor, walks to the front of the chair and with a quivering voice and a shaking hand says to the man, "Brother, are you prepared to die?" The guy jumps through the plate glass window and runs screaming down the street. Most of you don't witness that way.

Peter is saying, "Be always ready to witness. Don't necessarily force the situation, but do your witnessing with gentleness and respect."

IV. Keep a clear conscience.

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The fourth key word in this passage is the word “conscience.” “Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (3:16, NIV). It’s interesting that when you read the close of the Book of Acts, Paul is facing trial, imprisonment, how he continually keeps saying, “I have lived before God with a clear conscience.” That’s important when you’re under pressure. That there be no ongoing disobedience in respect to sin in your life. But that your life be continually purged and cleansed by the blood of Christ. The compelling argument of the Christian life is not in word only, but it’s behavior that springs from a clear conscience.

Someone has said that the Christian is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God. A Christian is actually more than that, but that’s a good little phrase.

If you have a blotted conscience, a troubled conscience, the way to clear the conscience is not through trying to do more good deeds but through coming to God for His forgiveness and then walking in the light of that forgiveness without trading upon it, but instead walking with God.

Keep a clear conscience. All the water in the world can’t sink a boat unless it gets inside of it.

And all the sin and pressure around you can’t sink you unless it gets inside. Reverence Christ in your heart.

V. Have confidence in Christ.

The fifth word that Peter gives—actually I draw it from the passage—is “confidence.”

Confidence in Christ (1 Peter 3:17–22). This is a lengthy passage. It has two of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to interpret. “It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (verse 17, NIV). That’s the start of Peter’s statement as he begins to develop this theme of confidence, that we can have confidence even if we’re being pressured unjustly.

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That the Lord prevailed over pressure, and we can too. He starts off with this theme of suffering for doing what is right. We expect to suffer when we do wrong.

Suffering for doing right. Not taking a masochistic pleasure in it in a sick sense, but in a joyous sense that we are following in Christ's steps. This confidence that we are to have in something when we do right is based upon the death of Christ, His descent into hell and His resurrection and exaltation. Peter says, "For Christ died for sins" (verse 18, NIV). He didn't die for sins because He needed punishment. But He died for us. It's not simply dying. People die. But Christ died for sins. For our sins. And Christ died for sins once. Not an ongoing sacrifice repeated day by day, week by week. But He died for sins once. And He died for sins once for all. Meaning all of us. Not for a limited few. But for all. Everyone can experience Christ's atonement and forgiveness.

Why did He do this? To bring us into access with God. To bring us to God. The word for "bring us to God" in the Greek is a technical word meaning "access." It describes someone who is in a position of getting you through to someone important. Peter is saying this is what Christ has done for us. He has given us direct access to God because of His death for our sins. Peter goes on to indicate that we have confidence in God because of Christ's descent into hell. "He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built" (3:18–20, NIV).

What in the world does this mean? "Christ preached to the spirits in prison following His death." There are four major views on this. I'm only going to give you one—my view. It'd take me an hour to give you the other three.

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“Descent into hell”—we know this in the Apostle’s Creed the statement, “. . .after Christ died he descended into hell.” Paul talks in Ephesians 4 about Christ descending into the earth and leading captivity captive. Peter here uses it from the vantage point of preaching to the spirits in prison. I’ll take a moment to set the context of what probably is involved here. The common word used in the New Testament for hell is the word *Hades*. It is different from the word most often used for eternal punishment. *Hades* was simply the abode or the place of the dead. It is used ten times in the New Testament. It translates the Old Testament Hebrew word *Sheol*. In the Old Testament all men and women go to *Sheol*. The wicked go there (Psalm 9:17), but the righteous also go to *Sheol* (Psalm 88:3). Jacob expected, when he thought he had lost Joseph, to meet Joseph in *Sheol* (Genesis 37:35). In the centuries before Christ many of the faithful began to believe that there were at least two divisions in *Sheol*. “Abraham’s bosom,” or paradise, which was the abode of the righteous. And there was *Hades*, the abode of the wicked. Jesus appears to give His approval to this understanding. In Luke 16:19–31 He talks about the rich man being in *Hades* and Lazarus being in Abraham’s bosom, or paradise. Jesus on the cross tells the thief, “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Yet Jesus will later say to Mary, “I have not yet ascended to heaven.” So paradise at this moment was not with the Father but the place to be thought of as the righteous dead.

Peter insists in his Pentecostal preaching in Acts 2 that God had not abandoned Jesus to *Hades*, or the place of the wicked dead. Christ came up out of death, Ephesians 4:8. “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives.” What’s this mean? Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:3-4 talks about being caught up into paradise. This time it’s being caught up into paradise. The third heaven. The abode of God. One is left to think in the New Testament that as a result of Christ’s death and

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resurrection He relocated paradise from the place of the dead, the underworld, to the place of being with God. That a positional change occurred in paradise.

Paul does not think of dying and going to Abraham's bosom to be at home with the Lord and to depart and be with Christ. Given this context for *Hades* and paradise and Abraham's bosom, it is my understanding that when the Lord speaks to the spirits in prison He's not preaching to the righteous dead. But He's describing His descent into the lower part of hell, what we call *Hades*. His mission there was to preach. The Greek word is not *evangelize*, which means to bring people to the good news of salvation. But instead the word that means simply "to proclaim or to announce."

What was the Lord doing to the spirits who were in prison who disobeyed in Noah's day? He was announcing once more and for all times that Noah's faith and those with Noah, their faith was vindicated. That He had accomplished redemption for the faithful, and their doom was all the more sure. This was the nature of His announcement.

Why does Peter use this? Because his congregation is being faced with unbelievable pressures from the ungodly. What Peter is simply saying is drawing upon Christ's mission and saying there will be a moment when those who resist the gospel will hear from Christ himself that their doom is sealed. That's what Peter is saying. And he is calling the believers to confidence in that Christ communicates even with the unrighteous dead and shares with them the announcement of His triumph.

We not only have confidence because of Christ's death for our sin and because of His descent into hell, but we have confidence because of His resurrection and exaltation.

We find in this Scripture, this verse, "... in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that

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now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body [that is, baptism is not a bath] but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (3:20–22, NIV).

Peter has illustrated in the previous verses the fate of those in Noah’s day who disobeyed. Now, he demonstrates the fate of those who are saved. They are saved by water. How are they saved by water? They are saved by water because they were in the ark. Otherwise they would have been drowned by water. Everyone else was destroyed by the water. So to be saved by water leaves unspoken that the means of being saved by water was the fact that they were in the ark. And the water bore the ark up and they were saved.

Peter then says, “You in like manner are saved through baptism.” How is this? What is he referring to?

If you’re a baptismal candidate and I’m the minister, if I place you in the water and I leave you there you’re a goner. Baptism will be for you not an instrument of salvation but an instrument of death. You are saved by baptism only on two conditions. Only on the condition that you are in the ark of Christ (to stretch the symbol that Peter is using). It does you no good to be baptized as an unbeliever. You’ll simply go down a dry sinner and come up a wet one. The only effect water will have on you is confirm judgment to you. But where water comes is that it is a pledge of a good conscience toward God. Peter uses the word “pledge of a good conscience toward God.” Evidently it was the only Christian practice that when a person was to be baptized he took that as kind of a formal contract. The word “pledge” is a word from business in the New Testament world. It means that when you entered into a deal you put a sum of money down in advance. It was earnest money. It was a pledge that you would perform the contract. What Peter is saying

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about Christian baptism is that when you are baptized in water you are pledging your life to God.

It is an affirmation on your part that you're going through with the deal. You're serious about it.

I think we would have fewer people falling away from the faith if we had more serious conversions rather than cheaper conversions.

But what is this “you are saved by baptism”? Let's avoid two errors about baptism. Let's avoid the error that baptism itself produces salvation. It doesn't. It's the ark of Christ that produces salvation. The water is a part of that ark process. The water will do you no good unless in your heart there is a pledge of a good conscience toward God. Theologically the unbeliever would be left in the water because there is no resurrecting activity of the Lord. Only the believer can rise to walk in newness of life. So the one view we ought to avoid is that there's something sacramental about baptism—that you're not saved unless you're baptized and baptism means you're saved.

That's not what Peter is saying.

The other view we ought to avoid is the easy Protestant view that baptism is optional. Whenever you get around to it is fine. That's not the case. The Bible says, “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). People will say to me, “I believe in Christ but why should I be baptized?” I have a very good answer to that. Because the Commander in Chief has said be baptized. I wouldn't think of disobeying an order from the Commander in Chief. I wouldn't think of disobeying an order at the start of my Christian experience. If I start out by disobeying Him, what's to say I won't maintain that characteristic all of my Christian experience?

But can't you be saved without being baptized in water? Of course you can. The thief on the cross was saved without being baptized in water. So if you are a thief on a cross you can be saved without water baptism. Otherwise get baptized. Baptism is an expression of obedience. It

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is an expression of identification with Christ, His death and resurrection. If you take your baptism seriously, I think you'll take your Christian life seriously.

Peter has digressed. He started out talking about suffering for what is right. Then he has digressed. The Spirit has caused this. We come back to this word "confidence." How are we to prevail over pressure? What is the basis of our confidence? The basis of our confidence has to do with Christ. He died for our sins. He himself appears to the unrighteous dead and therefore has the last word in all human affairs. Our basis of confidence is that at baptism we have the assurance and the pledge of a good conscience that we will share in the resurrecting power of Jesus Christ.

Prevailing over pressure. Peter puts five concepts before us: control, courage, commission, conscience, and confidence.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, for these words today we again give You thanks. For persons in this room who are facing out-of-control situations, may the mind of Jesus Christ dwell in them richly so that they might be governed by the attitude, language, and actions of Jesus. Teach us control in these moments. For those in this room undergoing pressure that would daunt their courage and make them draw back if it's a choice between right and wrong, between good and evil, between what is moral and what is immoral, give them the courage to act. Even if it seems to promise enormous consequences that are hard on them. Lord, we know that when we do right You will establish us. There are those here, Lord, who are in a difficult situation. You're calling upon them not to be so lost in the situation that they lose the opportunity to witness for You in it. Teach us anew how we can be involved in the Great Commission, to have a ready answer for the hope that is within us. When other people around us are caving in because of the same pressure

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that beats on them as on us, they'll be able to see in us the confidence in You. Let our consciousness be open to You, Lord, so that they may be void of offense toward You and toward others. Cleanse our hearts. Renew a right spirit within us. Make us clean. Turn the stains of our sin as though they were not at all, having exchanged the crimson, the indelible stain for pure white snow. Teach us confidence that in every situation You are the Lord. And that, if we will be faithful to You, that alone is what counts when all is said and done. We ask through Christ.

Amen.