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The Pressure of Pressure!

People panic at the very mention of this word which need not be as negative as it sounds. I am talking about pressure from peers which wraps itself around every age group. Pressure also has a good side to it though pregnant with pain. It pressures to make healthy choices. Peers are the little world around us, fighting tooth and nail to influence our thoughts, values and actions. Healthy peers give us strong smiles and push us into moulds that shape our values and our behaviour to be crafted like Him! I mean, Jesus Christ! Dare we forget the not-so-good peers who drag us into a pen, so subtly. The door of the pen would be locked when we realize we are poisoned with a dead conscience! The difference between negative and positive peer pressure is the outcome!

From the outside, life seems to be a cakewalk without having to face this pressure but it's real on the inside. The hidden blessing is maturity and development, a Biblical exercise of our will and choice. Though coconut trees swing to the rough sea breeze all day, they stand tall in their territories.

None of us is stranger to this pressure nor can any of us escape this by trodding around it. It creeps in at childhood and stays for a lifetime. Knowing the nature of this pressure and learning to handle it is the best way to handle it.

We will either be a loner or a minority when we refuse to bend to the pressure from peers. It's a scary place to be in, as it seems, but the Fourth Man in the furnace with Daniel's team is a reality. He came in after the fire was increased upto seven times (Dan 3:25). He didn't come till then. Help from above will come in time. If Daniel and his friends had thought aloud, I guess they would have fought against these dangerous excuses while they stood before the golden image, fighting against peer pressure in their minds (Dan 3:15) —

- We will fall but not actually worship the idol.
- We will worship just once and ask God's forgiveness. The king has absolute power and should be obeyed. God will understand.
- The king appointed us and we owe this to him.
- God will excuse us if we follow the 'customs.'
- This is not as sinful compared to what goes on in other places.
- We are not hurting anybody.
- We shouldn't lose our position in the palace.

Ever argued like this in your minds?

Caleb and the eleven leaders of Israel went up to survey Canaan. They met giants. Two had to carry a single cluster of grapes. Sure it was a challenge. They did look like grasshoppers comparatively. But Caleb and Joshua presented the report very differently. Yielding to the discouraging feedback of the other leaders, the Israelite mob began to rebel and crib. God called this rebellion, sin. But Caleb cultivated in him a “different spirit,” didn’t give in to this pressure from this difficult community and went ahead. Victory was his gift (Num 14:24). To “give up” was the pressure here. The voice of the minority is often not given a hearing. But truth cannot be measured by numbers. God’s Word is the last word. Agreeing with the majority may be disagreeing with God. We shouldn’t base our decisions on what everybody else is doing. Caleb “quietened” the crowd and was willing to take the unpopular stand to obey God. To be effective when we go against the crowd, we must like Caleb have clear facts and know for sure what we are fighting against. Caleb had seen the land himself. We must also have in us the right attitude when we stand in the face of such pressures. He had humility, obedience and courage backed by God’s promises. As Caleb knew this was what God wanted them to do, he did not doubt God’s absolute support. He said, “We certainly can do it!” When we choose to do the right thing based on Biblical values and standards, we will never lack God’s support (Num 13:30-32).

Caleb’s discouraging peers were the leaders themselves, mind you! Pressure can flood in from anywhere!

Uncle Mordecai too came under the edict that all should kneel and pay honour to Haman. Mordecai had his values

set well in place. He did not take a poll first to ensure safety or choose the most popular course of action. He had the bone to stand alone. Doing what is right may earn us unpopularity and you may be pushed to the back seat as a minority. For Mordecai, obeying God was more important than obeying man. The royal officials were his peers. “Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply” (Esth 3:4). Peer pressure can be strong, repetitive and nagging. The temptation to swim with the tide will be at its heights. It almost cost him his life and the lives of the rest of the Jews. He trusted God and sought help. Organised a prayer chain with fasting. Deliverance came. Mordecai was honoured with the king’s signet ring and promoted over Haman. Trusting God with a quiet confidence and seeking appropriate help gives victory over wrong pressures. Grow in this courage and decide never to bow down to anything less than God’s ethics. Convincing friends or convictions? (Esth 3:2,4).

The strength of what we believe is measured by how much we are willing to suffer for our beliefs. Joseph was a man of strong beliefs, prepared to do what was right though he knew the pain that would come along. He wanted also to do the right things, the right way. He decided to break the engagement without causing Mary shame. But Joseph changed his plans when he heard from God and obeyed Him by taking pregnant Mary as his wife. Culturally, his well-meaning family and friends would have tried hard to talk him out of this and would have given him ‘ideas’ to set Mary aside. He perhaps lost some friends on the way! Joseph made a difficult choice and obeyed God. Joy was his! Feelings are not accurate measurements of the rightness and wrongness of an

action. God said it and he did it! No arguments! No logical discussions! Joseph became the most special dad only because of his obedience to God. Sometimes we avoid doing what is right because of what others might think. Seek to obey God rather than the approval of others (Mt 1:19,24). The question, "What will people think of me?" bothered him not!

A new generation of Israelites abandoned the faith of their parents and worshipped the gods of their neighbours. This they did with the strong desire to be accepted by the surrounding community. All of us have the need to be accepted and to belong to a group but never should it be at the expense of compromise. This desire to be accepted should not blind us and lead us into behaviours that are unacceptable (Judg 2:11-15).

Herod did not want to kill John but gave the order to avoid embarrassment in front of his guests. Do you remember a situation in your life when you did something you hated just to protect yourself from embarrassment? Determine to do what is right no matter how embarrassing or painful it might be. Herod warns us not to get into a situation like he did where it will be too embarrassing to do what is right. He should have been careful with his words when he made the offer to Salome. He could have also apologized to his guests about the unwise offer and taken back his words. It would have saved a precious life. His friends would have respected him for that. It was sheer cowardice on his part to do wrong when he could have avoided it. Peer pressure for him here was invited trouble. Pressure here was quiet and strong. No one convinced him into anything but wanting to avoid

embarrassment became silent pressure. Have you ever been trapped in a corner like this? (Mt 14:9).

Pilate wanted to release Jesus but not wanting to risk losing his already shaky position, he contemplated on releasing Barabbas. He subtly planned on avoiding a riot because he knew the importance of compromise as a politician. He sentenced Jesus to death when the "crowd roared." Pressure from the mob was building up as they "shouted thrice," "shouted louder" and "insistently demanded." Pilate gave in. Repetitions don't make wrongs right. Friends and other peers may coax consistently and loudly, placing a false guilt onto us making it more difficult for us to resist. This is when we need to be firm with our Biblical convictions and beliefs over life issues. Sometimes like Pilate we know what is right and decide not to do it. If Pilate had been a man of courage he would have released Jesus no matter what the consequences might be. Right decisions can have unpleasant consequences like social rejection, career derailment or even public ridicule. Hands up, Pilate, you are guilty! Approval of people was more important to him (Lk 23:13-25).

Never let peer pressure dictate your moves. God cares for us in spite of what the world thinks. Paul stood faithful to God whether people praised or condemned him. Circumstances or people's expectations should not control us. Refuse to compromise God's standards of living.

None of us can outgrow this pressure. It will be real and with different faces in all phases of life. Children and the elderly have this in different intensities.

Touch the rewind buttons of your life and analyse a scenario where you were forced by friends and family to do what you did not want to do. Did you have to give in? Did you hold fast to your convictions? Have you ever regretfully thought that you could have done or said something but didn't because of the many reasons which really didn't matter? Here are a few tips that I have drafted to help you live with a spine for God —

“May God give us that heart of a lion, the strength of a rhinoceros!”

- You have the right to say ‘no’ when you are cornered to do anything against your conscience. It actually makes us feel good that we have exercised that freedom to refuse, only after we have actually said it. Often you'll find others agreeing with you. Adam lost the game over just a fruit. His pressure came from just one peer, his wife, the first lady! Job won amidst pressure from his wife and closest of friends. The one leper probably had to fight his way to walk back all alone to give God thanks! He refused to join hands with ungrateful hearts.
- Remember the values learnt from the Bible and from parents. It'll keep you strong.
- Grow in the skill of choosing likeminded friends who will only give you healthy positive pressures to choose rightly when you are at crossroads. The influence of friends makes a huge difference.
- Think of yourself as the leader in the situation and take the lead of your next move based on what God whispers

to you. Know where you stand on issues like unlawful sex, drugs, alcohol, lying, stealing — which will always be a ‘no.’ Make up your mind.

- Being rude is sometimes ok if that’s the only language pressure-givers would understand. Remember there are always other options. You can leave the place. Stay away from even the appearance of poor choices or if you feel guilty by mere association (Psa 1). The deceptive side of pressure is that it blinds you to available options. Pressurisers make it sound that every other door is closed and we are left with just one choice, the wrong one.
- Shape your thinking. If someone doesn’t like you because you make good decisions why should you be the one who feels rejected? Take pride in the positive difference you bring to others around you. Learn to be assertive, politely, yet firmly. TAKE CARE! YOU CAN!