



PRESSURE
POINTS

A GUIDE TO NAVIGATING STUDENT STRESS

SHELBY ABBOTT

FOREWORD BY PAUL DAVID TRIPP

“Shelby Abbott has a sharp mind and an even sharper wit, and he brings both to bear on some of the key issues facing so many in our churches today. He writes with the wisdom of a mentor but the tone of an older brother who’s on your side. This is a terrific resource with so much biblical and practical guidance.”

Sam Allberry, Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author of *Seven Myths about Singleness*

“Being a student is stressful. We’re at an age and time where pressure feels perpetual and overwhelming. So we need help. We need resources from those who’ve been there and done that and can give us seasoned, brilliant advice. Enter Shelby Abbott. Shelby’s not only been there and done that—he works full-time with students who are still doing it. He’s funny, biblical, faithful, and wise. *Pressure Points* is a book every college student needs to read.”

Jaquelle Crowe, Author of *This Changes Everything: How the Gospel Transforms the Teen Years*

“*Pressure Points* serves as a timely book full of wisdom to transform life’s greatest pressures into opportunities for spiritual transformation. Shelby Abbott offers a beautifully written, vulnerable, and biblically sound book to guide us on our journey through the stress of finding purpose, managing relationships, and understanding suffering. With excellent discussion questions and relatable examples to explore, you’ll love reading this book alone or with a group. Don’t miss this book!”

Heather Holleman, Faculty Commons, Cru; author of *Chosen for Christ: Stepping into the Life You’ve Been Missing* and *Seated with Christ: Living Freely in a Culture of Comparison*

“Shelby’s put together an excellent work. I know he says it’s for college students, but I can’t imagine anyone in any stage of life not feeling every one of these pressure points. He helps us see that so many things that cause us stress in life don’t have to be distractions that take us away from Jesus, but they can be divine signposts—each one highlighting a unique thirst for satisfaction in Christ. A must-read for all students who will find themselves inevitably struggling through these issues.”

John Onwuchekwa, Lead Pastor, Cornerstone Church, Atlanta, GA; council member, The Gospel Coalition

“The pressure of decisions, relationships, and failures can be overwhelming, yet God’s Word supplies grace to calm our anxious hearts. *Pressure Points* applies God’s truth to these stressful areas in a way that strengthens our faith in the God who promises to care for us every step of the way.”

Garrett Kell, Lead Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church,
Alexandria, VA

“With children in grade school, high school, and college, my family is just now learning to navigate the stresses and strains of student life. My children are grappling with the unique challenges it brings and we, as their parents, are learning to lead them through it. *Pressure Points* is just the guide we needed to do this well.”

Tim Challies, Blogger at www.challies.com

“When it comes to student ministry, there are few people I trust more than Shelby Abbott. I’ve watched him up close and far away. He understands the challenges, the struggles, and the angst that so often haunt the college years. In *Pressure Points: A Guide to Navigating Student Stress*, Shelby deftly blends biblical insight and experiential wisdom to help young people navigate life-shaping questions. Buy two copies of this book—one for that twentysomething in your life, and one for yourself. You won’t regret it.”

Matt Smethurst, Managing Editor of *The Gospel Coalition*;
author of *1–2 Thessalonians: A 12-Week Study*

“Life grows increasingly complex, and adulting brings challenges we underestimate and don’t expect. Shelby Abbott invites you to process tensions under the surface in your life while helping you practically navigate pathways to finding belonging, worth, meaningful relationships, and purpose.”

David Robbins, President & CEO, Family Life

“Shelby nails it with *Pressure Points*. This book is a must-read for any Christian university student who walks passionately with Christ yet is honest enough to admit they struggle with the unique pressures that can trouble a young person at such a formative period of time as college.”

Josh D. McDowell, Author and speaker

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SHELBY ABBOTT



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For Quinn and Hayden.

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Foreword

I've heard things like this said many, many times and have even said them myself.

"I am afraid that . . ."

"I just can't deal with the pressure."

"I know I shouldn't be, but I'm worried about this all the time."

"I didn't get much sleep last night, I guess I couldn't get _____ out of my mind."

"I try to push _____ out of my mind, but I just can't."

"I'm dreading having to face _____."

"The thought of _____ just overwhelms me."

"I pray for peace, but I'm anxious."

If you haven't said these things aloud, you've probably whispered them under your breath and if you haven't ever verbalized them, you've most likely thought them. Why are these things the universal experience of us all? Well, the answer is clear. Between the "already" of our birth and the "not yet" of our death, God has chosen for us to live in a world that is fundamentally broken, not functioning the way that God intended. Because this is the address that God has chosen for us, none of us will successfully

escape its brokenness. Inevitably, this brokenness will enter your door. I like the way this is explained in Romans 8. It says that the world we live in “groans, waiting for redemption.” You groan when you’re in pain, you groan when you’re disappointed, you groan when you’re overwhelmed, and you groan when the pressures and anxieties have gotten to you.

But there is more. The Bible teaches us, from cover to cover, that this brokenness is not just outside us, it’s inside us. Since that terrible moment of disobedience in the Garden of Eden, humanity has been broken. Just like the world around us, we don’t always function as God intended. We don’t always think what we should think, desire what we should desire, choose what we should choose, speak as we should speak, or do what we should do. So, it’s not just the physical world around us that groans, we too groan. You could argue that between the “already” and the “not yet,” groaning is the default language of us all. If you listen to yourself, there is probably never a day when you don’t groan about something, and if you listen to others, you will hear them groaning too.

You may be thinking, *Paul, this is not very encouraging. I think I’m too depressed to read the rest of this book!* But wait! Into this brokenness and groaning the Bible speaks the most beautiful message that you could ever hear. It’s not a set of therapeutic strategies, a system of philosophical observations, or an abstract theology. It is a narrative—a story of how God has invaded our world of brokenness and personal struggle in the person of his Son, Jesus. It’s about how he offers mercies that are new every day and form-fit for this particular moment of need. Jesus knows what you need because he, like you, walked the twisted and rocky paths that you now walk. He faced all the things you now face, so he responds to you with life-changing, hope-giving, and life-directing sympathy and understanding.

What gets me up in the morning is the knowledge that Jesus didn’t just die for my past forgiveness (I’m so glad he did!) or for my future in eternity (I’m very grateful that’s my destiny!), but

also for everything I face in the here and now. He died for every hurtful relationship, he died for every personal failure, he died for every temptation, he died for your anxiety, he died for those overwhelming pressures. He did what he did for you so that you would have everything you need to be what you've been designed to be and so you could do what you've been called to do.

Think about what this means. God hasn't given you a self-help manual; no, he's given you a much more wonderful gift, the gift of himself. Which means that you are never alone in any situation, location, or relationship. He hears and understands your groaning and he offers you what you would never have if left on your own.

Now you may be wondering what this has to do with the book you have begun reading. I know the kind of book I want to read and I would suspect it's the kind you would want to read as well. First, I want a book that is honest about the things that all of us face. I don't want to read something that minimizes my experience or denies the things I have to deal with. But I don't just want honesty: I need hope. I want the hope that offers me understanding, comfort, perspective, and direction. The Bible is shockingly honest and gloriously hopeful at the same time. The honesty doesn't crush the hope and the hope doesn't negate the honesty. I love that both of these things are in this book you're about to read, as well as the fact that neither is weakened by the other.

When I am looking for a book that addresses something I will face in my life, I ask four questions:

1. **Does the writer know the topic?** It won't take many pages for you to become convinced that Shelby has much more than a theoretical understanding of what this book is about. He knows from experience what pressure points are about and so he writes not like a seminar lecturer, but like someone who has walked in your shoes.
2. **Does the author understand the audience being addressed?** One of the strengths of this wonderful book

is that Shelby has studied, listened to, ministered to, and lived with the audience that this book addresses. His descriptions of you and what you face will never seem inappropriate, awkward, or off-base. Because he cares about you, he has cared to know you, and that personal understanding adds power and integrity to what he has written.

3. **Is the author willing to be honest and transparent?** I love the fact that Shelby doesn't write like a person who thinks he has arrived. He doesn't stand above you and talk down to you. He writes as a fellow traveler who has walked where you walk, struggled where you struggle, has reached out for help like you do, and has discovered the only place to find real help—not just for him, but for you too.
4. **Does the writer have a street-level understanding of the gospel story?** This is what excites me most about this book. Shelby really does understand the rescuing and transforming power of the right-here, right-now grace of Jesus. He has a real grasp of the practical wisdom God's Word has to offer you. He understands we're not just meant to think the Bible's theology, but we're meant to live it as well, and when we do, good things result. And he knows that the gospel of Jesus Christ, when applied to your everyday life, has the power to change everything. For him, what Jesus did is not just about the past and the future, but also about everything you face right now.

So, I commend this book to you. It is worth the investment you are about to make because it embeds your story in the larger story of redemption, and because it does, it will offer you not only hope, but also help that really helps!

Paul David Tripp
September 26, 2018

Introduction

I've felt it before. The push applied to my little world that knocks my routine out of alignment and sends me reeling. Sometimes the push has been small and nagging, and other times it has been suffocating and overwhelming. I've encountered the push recently in the last few hours, and I can remember experiencing it all the way back when I was six years old.

It came once when I shaved my legs on stage in front of thirteen hundred college students simply for the purpose of entertaining a crowd (I won't elaborate on that at this time). It came once when my stepdad called me and told me my mom was being helicoptered to a hospital because she was in a life-threatening accident (she's fine now, by the way).

It came when I stood in a room holding a diamond ring with my heart pounding out of my chest as I waited for my future fiancée to come in and be surprised by my presence. And it came just a few months ago when my wife asked me to my face if I was lying to her about how much television I let our kids watch the night before while she was out.

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The push is called “pressure,” and I’ve felt it before. No doubt you’ve felt it too in your own life and know exactly what I’m talking about.

Maybe you call it by a different name, such as stress, hardship, trials, friction, tension, obstacles, difficulty, or challenges. But regardless of the title you ascribe to it, I’m certain you’ve experienced it. Sometimes it’s pressure that leads to a joyous outcome, sense of accomplishment, or growth. Other times, however, it’s pressure that leads to distress, heartache, darkness, or depression.

Regardless of the outcome, one thing is certain: pressure is present in everyone’s life. Sure, it can come in all shapes and sizes, but pressure is inevitable. It’s also polarizing, meaning that for the follower of Christ it will generally lead a person away from the status quo of everyday life and toward one of two places. One option is toward bitterness, anger, and resentment of God for what he has “done to us,” and the other option is toward a richer understanding of Christ’s life, spiritual growth, and union with God.

I have been in full-time Christian ministry working with young people like you for nearly two decades, and I’ve seen the kind of pressures you as a twenty-something can go through on a regular or even not-so-regular basis. And since I’ve been neck-deep in the issues of college students or young professionals in the context of ministry for many years, the pressure points have become easy to spot. This season of life is uniquely stress-filled, and perhaps even more so than any other life stage because of the amount of decision-making that takes place in such a short period of time. Your decisions as a college student can and will shape your future reality, making college time potentially the most stressful of pressure cookers.

In recent times, however, I’ve noticed different kinds of struggles bubbling to the surface in the lives of young men and women just like you who want to walk with Jesus. In many ways, the root hardships you face reflect the basic obstacles of many who have walked the path before them, but the pressure points today have

taken on a new kind of variance that older generations have not had to deal with at all before.

Our modern age—saturated with technology, constant cynicism, streamlined digital communication, heavy negativity, relationship status posts, and instant information access—has shaped the way many young people deal with the pressure points of life. It has constructed a culture unlike anything we have ever seen or experienced—a culture that promises joyful connection via ever-present social networks, yet in reality is associated with depression, common mental problems, and socioemotional difficulties.¹

In reality, the familiar everyday problems of older generations have mutated into a whole new set of issues because of the current culture’s drastic influence. It’s a real complexity that needs to be met with the weight of the only real solution. Namely, the gospel.

This book will be an intentional push toward the life-giving spirit who is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45), because “our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”² While our current crisis may appear to be new in nature, Scripture still has the best insight on how to deal with the inevitable pressure modernity thrusts upon us. Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), so the writing that follows in this book will take God at his word and apply the principles of Scripture to today’s unique pressure points. My prayer is that you will be able to see the clear gospel solutions to our troubles in the modern age as you ask important questions like:

“What do I really believe?”

“How do my beliefs change the way I deal with the pressures of my day-to-day life?”

“Does knowing Jesus *really* make a difference in my life? If so, how?”

The Setup

For the sake of ease and clarity, I've separated this book into three main sections I believe thoroughly tackle what categories of life most weigh on you as a young person once high school ends and your new life begins: Purpose, Relationships, and Difficulty. Additionally, each chapter concludes with three reflection questions to help you think deeper on the topic and perhaps write out a few thoughts.

Within the three main sections, we'll talk about some of the specific pressure points where the "heat of life" is applied to your reality, and how we as followers of Jesus Christ can appropriately apply the gospel. The unique trials you face might initially tempt you to escape or default to your favorite coping mechanisms, but what I want you to discover is that life's pressures are not an inconvenience to be retreated from or sidestepped. They are a wide-open invitation from Jesus to draw near to him and connect with him in ways you may have never done before. Jesus says in John 16:33, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Christ promises us difficulty (tribulation), and hardship should never come as a surprise to the believer because the Bible is filled with it. Yet in the midst of such trials, Jesus says that in him, we can have peace. Why? Because even though the world is filled with trouble, Christ has overcome the world.

This is such great news because it removes the burdens of life from our shoulders and pushes us to embrace the power of the gospel over its inferior substitutes we have a tendency to run toward. But first, let's make sure we're talking about the same thing here when we say the word "gospel."

What Is the Gospel?

All human beings think they know what is best for themselves, and that is why we are born to be rebels. All of us turn our backs

on God and go our own way because we think we've got it all figured out. We substitute purity for poison and drink deeply from the unwashed cup it rests in.

And although we are condemned to separation from God because of our rebellion, he still chooses to move toward us by absorbing the deserved punishment himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The solution has presented itself quite clearly, and every person in the world is faced with a choice: personally receive the punishment for our own defiance, or let him do it. The price has to be paid.

Those who humble themselves and take the gift God offers become children of God, and they no longer bear the burden of condemnation (Romans 8:1). But the incredible reward God offers in Jesus is not just a ticket to glory; it is the beginning of a relationship unlike any other. It is a personal relationship with our Maker, built upon true love, trust, intimacy, tenderness, and care. Eternity with God begins the day we make the decision to receive what he has offered, and when we take it, he begins the good work of healing us from within. Then, and only then, are we able to live a life characterized by the gospel, because the foundation is solid.

Jesus is in the business of changing lives. He always has been, and he can do the good work of transforming you to be more like him, despite the run-ins you will undoubtedly have with life's pressure points. All you have to do is ask him to get involved and trust he'll follow through with his promises.

And he will.

This is the good news of the gospel that dramatically alters the way we view not only our eternal future but our present struggles as well. In the midst of the pressures that will inevitably come our way, we can choose to lean into Christ, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) with power over sin and death (Romans 6:1–11), instead of fleeing toward the escapism of our vices.

I'm praying that my words in the form of this book will guide you well as a means of great encouragement. If you allow what is

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presented here to mold your perspective regarding the craziness of our modern environment, I think I'll be able to help turn your gaze toward Jesus, even as your phone buzzes in your pocket.

SECTION 1:

The Pressure of Finding Purpose

Many college students wonder, *What is my purpose in life?* And as you begin to draw conclusions to answer that question as a university student, you make decisions that begin to shape the look of your future. First you make your choices, then your choices make you. So asking the right questions about life and looking for the answers in the right place is key. Section 1 will guide you to ask the right questions when the pressure points hit, seek biblical answers, and help you understand your purpose.

Does God Even Like Me?

Back in college at the beginning of my sophomore year, I liked this girl named Katie. She was cute, funny, and fairly involved in our campus ministry, so we got to hang around each other quite a bit for the first couple months of that school year. Katie and I would often find ourselves pairing off at group gatherings to talk and get to know each other a bit more in the midst of the chaos that is the Christian collegiate social construct.

One such event was a group hangout at someone's apartment off campus, talking, snacking, and playing games until it got late. I remember talking with Katie at the party and sticking close to her as things wound down so I could walk her home to campus and get more time with her that evening.

Sure enough, after the hangout, I found myself sitting on a couch with Katie and another friend Anne, when Anne spoke up to the room and said, "Katie and I are gonna go. Would any man here like to walk us back to campus?"

I quickly volunteered to walk them both back, and after doing so in what I could only assume was an attempt to be funny, my friend Anne looked at Katie and said, "Does he count?"

Here's the thing—I'm short. I've always been that way, and from a very early age, I remember being made fun of for being below average when it came to height. Naturally, I joked about this on a regular basis to get laughs and protect myself from getting injured by the cruelty of people's words, should they be inclined to get laughs themselves at my expense. I would just try to beat them to the punch.

And because I was regularly willing to shell out short jokes about myself, Anne probably felt comfortable that night doing so, thinking it would be funny and really no big deal. What Anne didn't know, however, is that I would carry that little three-word question with me for years to come. It deeply wounded me and defined the heart of my struggle in life as a person, man, friend, romantic option for a girl, missionary, and even child of God.

Does he count?

For the longest time, I have struggled with that question, wondering in all seriousness if I was the kind of guy anyone was looking for on any particular, relational level. I remember asking myself questions like,

Does anyone really want to be friends with you?

Are you good enough to be a part of that group?

Why would a girl like her ever consider having feelings for a guy like you?

Why would God ever do something remarkable with someone like you?

The Bible says God loves you, but does he like you?

Do you count?

Inevitably, this line of thinking led to some fairly dark places, and the resulting insecurity made me think and act in ways I'm pretty embarrassed about when I examine my behavior as a young person. In other words, I overcompensated for my insecurity with constantly trying to be the goofy center of attention.

It wasn't until a mentor of mine looked me in the eye one day and asked, "Do you *truly* believe God isn't disappointed in you?"

Do you really believe there is no condemnation for *you*, who is in Christ Jesus?"¹

Of course, when he asked me those questions in the tone he did, I couldn't help but realize I was living with an anti-biblical mind-set about who I was in Christ. He was implying (and rather bluntly, I might add) that my day-to-day behavior would suggest I needed the approval of others to feel validated because I wasn't receiving my validation from the truth of God's Word. Upon deeper examination of my heart, his implications were correct.

I felt convicted about my attitude and behavior, so I turned to the Lord. Here were his words to me: "The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

Rejoicing over me with gladness and exulting (or joyfully celebrating) over me with loud singing told me quite clearly that God delights in me as his child. Nobody is joyfully singing about someone if she is simply tolerating that someone. You can't cheerfully celebrate people if you love them but don't like them. God's affection for me isn't something he begrudgingly checks off a list because he has to. His care and love for me is as clear and intentional as parents for their newborn child. Look at Psalm 149:4: "For the LORD takes pleasure in his people . . ."

If you were playing a group get-to-know-you game with a bunch of people and the question posed to you was, *What do you take pleasure in?*, your mind wouldn't go to things, events, or relationships you felt had to come out of your mouth. You'd immediately think of the people, things, or experiences that brought joy to you in the past, and a smile would no doubt come to your face.

This is the way God thinks and feels about us, his people. God takes pleasure in us. He delights in us. He celebrates and sings loudly, fawning over us, his precious children. God reminds us of his love all through the Bible (Psalm 147:11; Romans 2:29;

1 Corinthians 4:5; and 1 Peter 1:6–7). And once I realized this truth from the pages of Scripture, I began to realize how real it was that God delighted in me. I do count. He does like me. And he likes you too.

Jesus Is the Proof

I know that many of us have real reasons and real guilt that lead us to believe God might possibly not like us, but with a clear understanding of Scripture, we can see that's not true. The Bible points us to the gospel, and the gospel shows us that God does more than just tell us he loves us; he shows us as well. He proved his love to us when he sent his Son to this world. If you've ever wondered exactly how God feels about you, you'll find your answer in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Seriously. You never have to wonder how God feels about you, because he's already made his feelings abundantly clear through the words and actions of his Son made known through the Bible.

How much does God want to be in relationship with you? Well, he sent Jesus to live a life of suffering so you might benefit. He was attacked by people trying to kill him. He was misunderstood, rejected, and disrespected. He was unjustly condemned to a painful death, he was deserted by friends and even his God. The fire of God's wrath burned him to the core and blazed unchecked over him. He was utterly and entirely alone. And why? Because on the cross, Jesus was suffering not only *with* us but *for* us.² That's how much God wants to be near you. That's how much he's willing to sacrifice to get close to you and be in relationship with you. He plunged himself into the fire for you when he went to the cross, and all doubt about his feelings for you should end with the truth of the gospel. Jesus is the proof. Case closed.

So what exactly does this mean? It means you and I are free to live in the security of knowing how our Maker feels about us. We are not under the oppression of public or private opinion about who we are, what we look like, or how other people might treat

us. We are fully known, loved, liked, accepted, and adored by our Father in Christ Jesus.

Counting the Likes

I have known many people who clamor for attention and acceptance both in person and on social media because they are clearly starving for the approval of others. It's almost as if every posted selfie and self-congratulatory humble brag online says to the world, "Please like me! Please validate me! Please think and comment about how beautiful, funny, sexy, or talented I am! Please give me worth!" We count the "likes," pore over the analytics, tally the views, add up the followers, and make an evaluation of who a person is based on the numbers.

This is just the status quo of our modern age. We're devastated when someone unfollows or unfriends us to the point that we wrap our value up in the sum total of individuals who may or may not want to look at what we post online every other hour. Today, unlike any other moment in human history, social media presence equals real world importance.

But this is not so with the God of the universe. In his eyes, you are not how many friends you have on Facebook. You are not the number of followers you have on Instagram. You are not the number of views or thumbs up per YouTube video post. He sees you for who you truly are, flaws and all, and still says, "Yes please."

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Did you see that? Paul leads off in 2 Corinthians 5:21 with, "For our sake." God took all of our sin and placed it on Christ, making him into sin, and he took all of Christ's righteousness and placed it on us, making us pure. He performed this "great exchange" *for our sake*. He did it for us so we might know him and be close to him. This is what God thinks about you. He likes you!

If and only if we embrace the fact that God already embraces us, we will have the ability to snap out of the enchantment our social media feeds have on us. We won't rest our worth on the shaky ground of digital public opinion. We won't fight to gain and keep new followers as if our lives depended on it. We won't obsess over the perfect picture to post that will get the most likes, and we won't get downtrodden when the likes don't add up the way we would've assumed. Additionally, our drive for acceptance by others in the context of our real-world relationships too will dwindle in the face of God's affection.

In fact, it will be the way God intends for life to be. We will live contently in the warm embrace of the One who likes us no matter what, because the payment for his acceptance was made by the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. That internal faith and security we hold will be reflected in all our interactions (in person or online), helping authentic followers of Jesus to stand out in bold contrast to a world that lives and dies by the like.

Does God Even Like Me?—Reflection Questions

1. Is there any anti-biblical viewpoint you hold concerning your self-opinion? If so, what is it?

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2. How have you convinced yourself that God might love you, but he also just tolerates you? After reading passages like Zephaniah 3:17, how are you able to definitively say God loves you *and* likes you?

3. How have you been tempted to believe social media presence equals real-world importance? Be specific.