

SURVIVING LIFE'S HARD TRIALS

Ron Christian, Compiler

**“Growing A Godly Life” - Devotional Series
Book 12 - “Adversities”**

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‘GROWING A GODLY LIFE’ - Series (13 Books)

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INTRODUCTION

By

Ron Christian

As a pastor of one local church for nearly 27 years, I officiated at the funeral services for many people - including several infants, young persons, and middle-aged adults, as well as numerous elderly folks. I have no problem in suggesting that it was God’s “perfect will” to call home to Heaven many of the saints of God who had lived long and productive lives. But I do have difficulty in believing that the deaths of infants and children and young adults are an expression of God’s “perfect will”. Yes, it is true that all things which happen (including thousands of deaths which result because of earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, wars, car accidents, etc.) are ‘allowed’ by the God of Heaven, and thus these tragedies are subject to God’s Sovereign Will. It is at this point that we must make a distinction between God’s “perfect will” and God’s “permissive will.” Notes Robert Shank, “All that occurs in the universe is within the permissive will of God. Neither men nor angels nor devils can go beyond the limits of God’s permissive will. But it is by no means true that all that occurs is in accord with the perfect will of God. One may argue that, since the world is filled with greed, lust, violence, debauchery, hatred, and impenitence, God evidently wishes it to be so and is well pleased. But the Scriptures declare otherwise. Although God allows these things to exist in the world, He has revealed His displeasure and wrath with respect to all such things and has commanded all men to repent. Thus it is evident that there are two aspects of the will of God with respect to sin: His permissive will allows it, but His perfect will forbids it and will bring all sin into judgment.” (Life In The Son; pg. 348)

Some well-meaning Christians - Christians who believe they are honoring the “Sovereignty” of their living God - find themselves saying some very hurtful (and erroneous) things to broken-hearted parents of infants or young people who have died. Things like “Well, God wanted another ‘angel’ in heaven, so that is why God chose to take your baby.” How horrible and how heretical! I held a double funeral service for a young couple whose car was hit head-on by a drunk driver, and this young father and mother left behind several children to grieve the tragic loss of their loving Christian parents. Was it God’s “perfect will” for this couple to die on that sunny, Saturday afternoon, as they were enjoying a relaxing ride in the country, and who suddenly were killed as an oncoming vehicle (driven by a drunk driver) hit them head-on at the top of a hill on that country road? And what about the several children who died from one cause or another - from cancer or some other ‘defect’ - whose parents I, as their pastor, tried hard to comfort in their bereavement? Would it have helped those sorrowing parents for me to have told them that they should not grieve too much, for the death of their children was a manifestation of God’s mysterious, sovereign, and “perfect will”? Was it God’s “perfect will” (if not “pleasure”) to take the life of my beloved, godly fifteen year old niece - who died in 1981 from a seizure as she was happily riding on a roller coaster in an Amusement Park? Was it God’s “perfect will” for several of my dear dear dear

friends (and parishioners) to die in their middle age from cancer - cancer that admittedly was caused by long-time smoking? Yes, these latter persons were believers when they died, and I know they are now in heaven, but was it “God’s fault” that these believers succumbed to their “physical weaknesses” and failed to “give up” their destructive habit of smoking cigarettes? I have officiated at funeral services for young adults who chose to take their own lives (suicide). But are those who believe strongly in the sovereignty of God going to declare that such (suicidal) deaths are “God’s will”?

Writes William Barclay, “I read of a minister who visited a mother who had lost a daughter in most tragic circumstances. When the accident was being investigated, a certain phrase was used by one of the chief investigators, a man with long experience in such matters. He said that the accident was so impossible of explanation that all he could say was that it was ‘an act of God.’” Barclay then notes, “It is difficult to imagine a more terrible and a more blasphemous phrase...It is NOT an act of God. When a child or a young couple dies too soon, when there is a fatal accident, maybe due to someone’s mistake or misjudgment, that is NOT an act of God, neither is it the will of God. It is, in fact, the precise opposite. It is against the will of God, and God is just as grieved about it as we are...It is exactly and precisely what God did NOT will. It is due to some human failure or to some human selfishness. God gave men free will because there could neither be goodness nor love without free will, and exactly for that reason the action of men can run right counter to the will of God. I do not think that anyone can calculate the vast amount of damage that has been done by suggesting that terrible and tragic events in life are the will of God. Quite clearly, Jesus did NOT think sickness and illness and untimely death the will of God. Quite clearly, he thought them the reverse of the will of God. They were the very things that he had come to help and to overcome. What then can we say at a time like this? We can say that God is as grieved as we are, that he is sharing in our sorrow and our grief, that he is afflicted in all our afflictions, that his heart is going out to meet our hearts. We can say that he has it in his power to make it up to those who are taken too soon away, and to those to whom sorrow and suffering has tragically come. If God is justice, and if God is love, I am as certain as it is possible to be certain of anything, that there is a life to come. And in that life to come God is seeing to it that the life cut off too soon is getting its chance to blossom and flourish, and the life involved in tragedy is finding its compensation. The eternal world is redressing the balance of the world of time. We can say that Christianity has never pretended to explain sorrow and suffering. It may often be that in any tragedy there is traceable an element of human fault, human sin; in any disaster the reason may well lie in human error. Yet even when all such cases are taken into account, there remains much that is sheerly inexplicable. Christianity offers no cheap and facile explanation. In face of such things, we have often to say: ‘I do not know why this happened.’ But what Christianity does triumphantly offer is the power to face these things, to bear them, to come through them, and even to transform them so that the tragedy becomes a crown.” (In The Hands of God; pgs. 126, 127)

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Notes William Sangster, “People talk at times of sickness and disease as being ‘the will of God’, but it does not prevent them waiting on the doctor for a cure. It is only ‘the will of God’ in the sense that God created the world order in which sin and disease were possible. But man has misused his freedom. So sin has come into the world, and sickness and disease with it. But God is not more opposed to sin than he is opposed to sickness. His will for men and women is perfect health of body and of soul. ‘Why then’, people ask, ‘doesn’t he banish sickness with one stroke of his almighty power?’ If this question troubles you, ask yourself another one. ‘Why doesn’t he banish sin in the same way?’ The answer is, ‘Because our freedom is involved.’ The moment God forced us to goodness, we should be robots and not men. At some level, our freedom is involved in sickness as well - not in precisely the same way, not in a fashion easily recognizable, but in the fact that we sometimes break God’s laws of health through folly or ignorance and the penalties follow (even where we are in no way to blame, as with little children and many adults too). God is fighting disease as he is fighting sin. All who really heal are his colleagues. Medical research students receive his aid - whether they are aware of it or not. He does not write the answers on the heavens for us, because he treats us as persons and works with us in fellowship. But he is against disease.

“There are problems of pain and providence we cannot fully solve, but we have had enough evidence of God’s love to trust. We (Christians) have seen God in Jesus Christ. We are putting our hand in his and going forward unafraid. If this is irrational, then every child in the world is irrational too. All children are perplexed at times by their parents. ‘Why this? Why that?’ They are old enough to ask the questions, though not yet old enough to understand the answers. But they trust their father’s love. That is not what we (Christians) are doing.” (Questions People Ask About Religion; pgs. 89, 90, 94)

What is the Christian answer to the problem of suffering? It is NOT to explain suffering. That is the way of Philosophy, and this way leaves many unanswered questions and many embittered souls. It is NOT to explain away suffering. This is the way of Christian Science, and this produces minds which are ‘disillusioned’ and bodies which are suffering needlessly.

The Christian answer to suffering is not to explain it or to explain it away, but to allow God to redemptively use suffering. It is possible to take broken pieces of colored glass and to shape a beautiful colored cathedral window. It is possible for God to take the broken pieces of man’s life - his broken dreams, disappointments, tragedies, losses - and to produce a beautiful life.

“Christianity teaches that suffering can be USED; that even while a full understanding of origins and purposes eludes our mind, the brave and the bold (by the help of God) can turn the disaster into triumph and force the loss to yield a gain..Tragedy is often fruitful of good. Lighthouses are built by drowned sailors. Roads are widened by mangled corpses. Frustration and testing have had a major part in the higher triumphs of our

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race. And if anybody inquires how Christians came to believe that tragedy can be USED, the short answer is that they learned it at Calvary. In Christ upon the cross they see God meeting sin with love; wresting earth's worst to heaven's best.” (Daily Readings; William Sangster; pg. 87)

God is able to transform tragedy into triumph, to change a Dark Friday into a Good Friday, to make a Death produce Life, to turn a despised Cross into a cherished symbol.

Through the fearful death of crucifixion, God cleansed away fear and brought life (Hebrews 2: 14, 15). The believer must train himself to ask, when facing problems: “What good does God intend for me to salvage out of this problem and trouble? How is this problem to be USED for the development of my character?” Susanna Wesley, who had nineteen children in a span of only twenty years, (two of whom were John and Charles Wesley), was no stranger to suffering. She lost nine of her children in infancy. But Susanna Wesley sought to make tragedy a cause for spiritual formation: “Help me O Lord, to make a true USE of all disappointments and calamities in this life, in such wise that they may unite my heart more closely with Thee. Cause them to separate my affections from worldly things and inspire my soul with more vigor in the pursuit of true happiness.” The apostle Paul USED his prison experience in Rome for his good and for God's glory. *“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”* (Philippians 1: 12-14) If Paul's prison experience resulted in Roman pagans being converted, in timid Christians being encouraged, and in the Gospel message being spread, what do you suppose your ‘prison’ experiences could result in?

Surrender your losses and disappointments and tragedies to Almighty God, and allow Him to USE them to glorify the Savior, to produce Christlikeness within your character, and to bless other persons. John Bunyan was imprisoned for several years because of his religious beliefs, but he patiently endured, that is, he USED his prison experience for the glory of God and for the good of men. He wrote ‘Pilgrim's Progress’ while he was in prison! This classic has been cherished more than any other book, second only to the Bible!

It is important that the Christian learns how to successfully cope with the various kinds of troubles and ‘sufferings’ which he/she will face in life. There are some sufferings which are ‘unique’ to Christians, i.e., they are sufferings which come to one because he/she is a Christian. Let us look at some of those kinds of ‘sufferings’.

First, there is the suffering of ‘infirmities’. While it is true that both Christians and non-Christians experience this kind of suffering, the Christian is best prepared successfully to face this kind of suffering. When the apostle Paul asked God to deliver him from his physical affliction, God refused to deliver him. Instead, God answered Paul: *“My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness”*. Paul

then responded to God (as only a surrendered and Spirit-filled believer is able): *“Now I am glad to boast about how weak I am; I am glad to be a living demonstration of Christ’s power, instead of showing off my own power and abilities. Since I know it is all for Christ’s good, I am quite happy about ‘the thorn,’ and about insults and hardships, persecutions and difficulties; for when I am weak, then I am strong - the less I have, the more I depend on him.”* (2 Corinthians 12: 9, 10, Living Bible)

Second, there is the suffering of chastisement. Wrote the writer to the Hebrew Christians: *“And have you quite forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you his child? He said, ‘My son, don’t be angry when the Lord punishes you. Don’t be discouraged when he has to show you where you are wrong. For when he punishes you, it proves that he loves you. When he whips you it proves you are really his child.’ Let God train you, for he is doing what any loving father does for his children. Whoever heard of a son who was never corrected? If God doesn’t punish you when you need it, as other fathers punish their sons, then it means that you aren’t really God’s son at all - that you don’t really belong in his family. Since we respect our fathers here on earth, though they punish us, should we not all the more cheerfully submit to God’s training so that we can begin really to live? Our earthly fathers trained us for a few brief years, doing the best for us that they knew how, but God’s correction is always right and for our best good, that we may share his holiness. Being punished isn’t enjoyable while it is happening - it hurts! But afterwards we can see the result, a quiet growth in grace and character.”* (Hebrews 12: 5-11, Living Bible)

The ‘athlete of God’ must undergo rigorous training, and necessary ‘correction’. The ‘coach’ (God) has a right to expect submission from the trainees (Christians). *“An athlete who runs in a race cannot win the prize unless he obeys the rules.”* (2 Timothy 2: 5) *“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”* (Hebrews 12: 1) Training and laying aside unnecessary ‘weights’ may be painful, but there is great joy in winning the ‘crown’ at the end of the race! The ‘soldier of God’ must be disciplined, and some of that discipline involves suffering. *“Take your part in suffering, as a loyal soldier of Christ Jesus.”* (2 Timothy 2: 3) But there is joy amidst the suffering because of the anticipation of victory! The branches on the Vine must be pruned, if there is to be a fruitful harvest (John 15). The pruning process in the life of the believer is often ‘painful’, but there is joy because of the anticipation of a fruitful harvest! The potter must mold the clay if beautiful pottery is to be the finished product. Believers must be made moldable and soft in the hands of the Great Divine Potter, but there is usually some ‘pain’ involved in the molding process. One great Bishop once told me: *“God has given me enough success to keep me encouraged, and enough failure to keep me humble.”*

Third, there is the suffering of persecution. The apostle Paul was cast into jail for his faith in Christ, whipped times without number, faced death again and again. Five different times the Jews gave Paul their terrible thirty-nine lashes. Three times he was

beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. Three times he was shipwrecked. Once he was in the open sea all night and the whole next day. Paul further testified: *“I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food; often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.”* (2 Corinthians 11: 27) Even though Paul suffered much for his faith in the living Christ, Paul spoke often of ‘Christian Joy’. *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice.”* (Philippians 4: 4) Notes E. Stanley Jones: “The New Testament does not teach us that if you are righteous, you will be exempt from suffering. Sometimes the righteous are in trouble because they are righteous. Society demands conformity. If you fall below its standards, it will punish you. If you rise above its standards, it will persecute you. Jesus said, *‘Beware when all men think well of you.’*” (Divine Yes pg. 100) Wrote Paul, *“All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”* (2 Timothy 3: 12) Why is this so? Because the true believer’s life is the ‘conscience of society’, and the evil in society will attempt to ‘still’ (destroy) that conscience! Jesus taught Christians to rejoice amidst the suffering of persecution: *“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward I heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”* (Matthew 5: 11-12)

Christians may rejoice amidst persecution, for whatever men may do to the believer, the believer remains ‘free in Christ’ and ‘free in his spirit’. The external circumstances of life cannot remove the inner peace and joy in the believer’s heart. Corrie Ten Boom (whose entire family was killed in concentration camps during the Second World War) once said: “There is no pit that is so deep but what God is deeper still!” Madame Guyon, in the midst of one of her periods of imprisonment for her faith, wrote:

A little bird I am,
Shut from the field of air;
Yet in my cage I sit and sing
To Him who placed me there;
Well pleased a prisoner to be,
Because, my God, it pleases Thee.

Naught have I else to do;
I sing the whole day long;
And He whom most I love to please,
Doth listen to my song;
He caught and bound my wandering wing
But still He bends to hear me sing.

My cage confines me round;
Abroad I cannot fly;
But though my wing is closely bound,

**My heart's at liberty.
My prison walls cannot control the flight,
The freedom of the soul.**

**Oh! It is good to soar
These bolts and bars above,
To Him whose purpose I adore,
Whose providence I love;
And in Thy mighty will to find the joy,
The freedom of the mind.**

The Christian may rejoice during times of persecution, for the persecution provides an opportunity to demonstrate one's loyalty to Christ, and an opportunity to share a witness to Christ's power. “A doctor in China had built up an efficient hospital through years of toil and self-sacrifice. When the Communist wing of the Nationalist army swept northward, they looted his hospital and left it the shell of what it had been. All the work of years went down in a crash. Not an easy thing to forgive! But, undaunted, he followed the army and attended to its sick and wounded. When General Chang Kai Shek, who was in charge of the army, saw this, he asked his wife, ‘What makes this foreign doctor tend to the sick and wounded when these very men destroyed his hospital?’ His wife, who was a Christian, replied, ‘It is Christianity.’ Said General Chang, very thoughtfully, ‘Then I must be a Christian.’ This was one of the three influences that made the General, then President of China, decide to become a Christian.” (Christ and Human Suffering; E. Stanley Jones; pg. 99)

Fourth, there is the suffering of temptation. Says Hebrews 2: 18, “*Because he (Jesus) himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*” (NIV) The Bible promises a ‘way of escape’. “*But remember this - the wrong desires that come into your life aren't anything new and different. Many others have faced exactly the same problems before you. And no temptation is irresistible. You can trust God to keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it, for he has promised this and will do what he says. He will show you how to escape temptation's power so that you can bear up patiently against it.*” (I Corinthians 10: 13, Living Bible) James wrote, “*Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.*” (James 1: 12) Donald Bastian reminds us: “God is getting you ready for a great day of triumph ‘the day of Christ's appearing.’ Everything He permits to come into your life has this day in view.” Said one rugged and discerning believer: “I used to say the devil is tempting me; now I say the Lord is testing me.” It is possible for the believer to experience joy amidst the suffering of temptations and trials. “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*” (James 1: 2, NIV)

Fifth, there is the suffering from life’s losses. Perhaps the hardest experience in the life of a Christian comes when he is called to experience a sorrow or a disappointment, the explanation to which defies reason. Jesus experienced such deep sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane when He cried out, *“Let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.”* Later on the cross Jesus cried out, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”* Notes Barclay, “There are times when a Christian has to learn the hardest lesson of all, the very lesson which Jesus Himself had to learn in Gethsemane; he has to learn how to accept what he cannot understand. There are times when things happen that he cannot understand, but he can still say, ‘God, Thou art love; I build my faith on that.’” (Daily Study Bible; William Barclay; I Corinthians; pgs. 222, 223)

A London minister tells of a father whose son was fighting with the forces in France. “At our prayer meetings,” said the pastor, “he would earnestly pray that God would hide that soldier son beneath His wings. He once added with deep tenderness, ‘The bullet was never made that can pierce Thy wings.’ But the boy was killed all the same.” (Prayer and life’s Highest; Paul Rees, pg. 95) Said George Tyrell: “To believe that this terrible machine world is really from God, in God and unto God, and that through it and in spite of its blind fatality all works for good - that is faith in long trousers.” Writes Eugenia Price, “The only direct statement of Jesus which is simple enough for me to comprehend when my heart is breaking or when I’m discouraged or scared, is: ‘Follow’ ‘Follow me’.” (No Pat Answers; pg. 14) David declared that God “bottled up his tears”. The tears of God’s children are never wasted! God never allows or causes His children needless tears! *“All things work together for good to those who love the Lord.”* (Romans 8: 28)

Writes E. Stanley Jones: “The universe is not ‘a vale of tears’; rather, it is ‘a vale of character-making’ and character cannot be made except in the strain and stress and struggle. We cannot cry out and say, ‘Why hast thou made me thus?’ for he hasn’t ‘made’ us yet, he is only in the process. If that process seems without purpose, let us remember that if the cross reveals God, there must be a glorious purpose behind it all, for he is willing to pay the supreme price to bring it to pass. I once saw some rung weavers of North India. They patiently sat week after week and month after month making one rug. As I stood and gazed at the rug I felt the futility of sitting there so long for the rug seemed to be full of blotches and blurs and knots. But I was looking at the wrong side of the rug. When I came around to the weaver’s side, I saw the pattern that was unfolding—and how beautiful it was! It was worth the patience. We now see the wrong side of God’s purposes, and they seem without pattern as he weaves through the ages. But one day we shall stand and see things as he sees them, and then we will gasp at the wonder of the plan that unfolds. Now we see the blotches and the blurs and the knots, but we also see the cross. That holds us steady. God means well and he means to make us well.” (Christ And Human Suffering; pgs. 197, 198)

**“Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Thro thorny ways leads to a joyful end.”**

When ‘problems’ (sufferings) come, it is very important for believers to look for the lessons which God desires to teach during (and as a result of) the ‘problems’. Christians must learn to discern the ‘benefits’ of having problems and suffering.

First, suffering can cause one to see God more clearly. Great spiritual vision of God is oftentimes the product of great sorrow. Someone said, “The vision of God can be seen more clearly through a tear.”

Second, suffering can cause one to depend more on God’s power instead of on human strength. God’s strength is made perfect through human weakness. God’s power is only available to the one who knows that he is weak and powerless and helpless and hopeless without the enabling presence of the indwelling Spirit.

Third, suffering can perfect ones character and bring about greater spiritual growth and maturity. The Greek work that is translated ‘Character’ is the word that is “used of metal which has been passed through the fire so that everything base has been purged out of it. It is used of coinage as we use the word ‘sterling’. When affliction is met with fortitude, out of the battle a man emerges stronger, and purer, and better, and nearer God.” (Daily Study Bible; Romans; William Barclay; pg. 74). Problems and suffering, successfully met, can perfect ones character. In the world of nature, pearls are the product of pain. A pearl “is a symbol of stress; it is a healed wound; it is the enduring token of a tiny creature’s struggle to preserve its life...If there had been no wound there could have been no pearl.” (Daily Readings; William Sangster; pg. 94). Beautiful character may be the product of suffering! A trial successfully met produces stronger character, and inspires greater hope for further progress towards the realization of final maturity in Christ.

**“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”**

Wrote James, “Dear brothers, is your life full of difficulties and temptations? Then be happy, for when the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow. So let it grow, and don’t try to squirm out of your problems. For when your patience is finally in full bloom, then you will be ready for anything, strong in character, full and complete.” (James 1:2-4, Living Bible) God can use all things in life - the ‘good’, the ‘bad’, and the ‘indifferent’ - and can produce something ‘excellent’ out of them. He can take the ‘raw materials’ of life and do something good with them. Would you eat a cake if the heat of the oven was not first applied intensively to the cold liquid ingredients which were poured into the cake pan? Heat is important to produce a favorable cake. Is it not important for ‘heat’ (suffering and discipline and trials) to be applied to the life of a believer if he is to become a mature and ‘tasteful’ and ‘attractive’ Christian?

Fourth, suffering can enable a believer to develop a heart-felt ministry to other suffering persons. Many times, those who are most effective in ministry are those who minister in an area where they have suffered most. Notes William Sangster, “We see how rich a service the sufferers render to our poor tormented race. Sympathy is a shallow stream in the souls of those who have not suffered. There is something unheeding and harsh in a man who has known nothing of pain. And sympathy is far too precious in this needy world to begrudge the price at which it must be purchased. When Richard Baxter lost his wife, he declared, in his grief. ‘I will not be judged by any that never felt the like.’ It was only another way of saying that he could not be comforted except by those who had suffered. Suffering, in a disciple, can often be wrested to service. It is Christlike work to soothe and sympathize, and only those who have drunk the cup of sorrow are fully equipped to do it.” (Daily Readings; pg. 48.)

Fifth, suffering can help develop a tender heart and a sympathetic nature. Wrote Paul, “What a wonderful God we have - he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of every mercy, and the one who so wonderfully comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials. And why does he do this? So that when others are troubled, needing our sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us. You can be sure that the more we undergo sufferings for Christ, the more he will shower us with his comfort and encouragement. We are in deep trouble for bringing you God’s comfort and salvation. But in our trouble God has comforted us - and this, too, to help you: to show you from our personal experience how God will tenderly comfort you when you undergo these same sufferings. He will give you the strength to endure.” (2 Corinthians 1: 3-7, Living Bible) Think of the most beautiful and lovely and tender-hearted people you have known. Have they not usually been persons who have gone

through difficult trials and tests and sorrows, and have emerged victoriously? Have they not been the persons who, as a result of life’s trials, have become understanding, gentle, stable, caring? Someone said that when certain sorrowing people needed a comforter, they would go to a certain woman who was known for her gentle eyes. Those gentle eyes came from a gentle heart, made tender through much sorrow.

Sixth, suffering can result in making you strongest where you have long been the weakest. It is said that where a tape is spliced, it is stronger at the point of the splice than anywhere else. It is said that the place where the broken bone heals is much stronger than any other part of the bone. Someone might say that an eagle with a broken wing which has been healed can never fly as high again. Or, the ‘fallen Christian’ who has been restored to fellowship with God through repentance can never be really strong again (or ‘effective’ in Christian ministry). But, who can limit the power and the possibilities of grace which heals the broken and the backslidden Christian who had succumbed to temptation, but who had learned his ‘lessons’ (in humility) well from his ‘spiritual reversal’? The story is told of a man who told the passenger in the back seat of his car to ‘kick him forward’ for ‘greater comfort and position’. Will life’s problems (and sufferings) ‘kick’ you forward during your journey of life?

Seventh, suffering can help turn your ‘focus’ away from the transitory and temporary concerns of earthly life, to more clearly ‘focus’ on the permanent and eternal verities of life. Susanna Wesley, whose soul was many times covered with the ‘sea billows of sorrow’, sought to make her sorrows serve a redemptive and beneficial purpose. She sought to turn her eyes toward God and heaven when she was immersed in earth’s sorrows and griefs. She wrote, “Since I must expect to meet with many difficulties, much opposition, many disappointments and daily trials of faith and patience in my passage through this world, may it be my highest wisdom to disengage my affections as much as I lawfully may from all transitory, temporal enjoyments, and to fix them on those more rational and spiritual pleasures which we are to enjoy when we enter upon our state of immortality.”

THE ONLY SOLACE IN SORROW

**O Thou who driest the mourner’s tear,
How dark this world would be,
If, when deceived and wounded here,
We could not fly to thee.**

**The friends, who in our sunshine live,
When winter comes, are flown;
And he who has but tears to give,
Must weep those tears alone.**

**But Christ can heal that broken heart,
Which like the plants that throw
Their fragrance from the wounded part,
Breathes sweetness out of woe.**

**O who could bear life’s stormy doom,
Did not his wing of love
Come brightly wafting through the gloom,
Our peace-branch from above.**

**The sorrow, touched by him, grows bright,
With more than rapture’s ray;
As darkness shows us worlds of light,
We never saw by day.**

**By
T. Moore**

CHAPTER ONE
TRUST GOD AMIDST ADVERSITIES

Philippians 4: 4-9

TRUSTING GOD’S GOODNESS AMIDST LIFE’S ADVERSITIES

There are a few phrases in the American language which strike terror into the heart of the listener. Among these phrases are: “I’m from the I.R.S.”, “I just want us to be friends,” and, my all time favorite from the dentist, “This won’t hurt.” In less than five hours I will be sitting in that uncomfortable dentist’s chair to have my teeth and gums examined. I think I’d rather have an audit!

I cannot explain why I have such a fear of seeing my dentist. We have been going to see him for twenty years. We have totally entrusted our teeth to his care and have rarely faced any problems. Perhaps my fear lies in an illogical assumption that I will have several cavities or will need another crown. I do know he will once again inform me that I need to have one of my wisdom teeth pulled. He has been telling me to have that done for the past five years!

Perhaps my fears go back as far as my childhood where I may have had a bad experience, or maybe I had childhood friends tease me about the torture I would face while visiting the Dentist. On the other hand, it just may be my own defiance against something which I know I ought to do, but do not want to do. Regardless of my fears, I will go. I will survive. I may even be pleasantly surprised!

What it boils down to is trust. I trust my dentist to care not only about my teeth, but about me as a person. I trust he will only make the recommendations which are absolutely in my best interest, not to mention the value of oral hygiene. And, if there would be some serious complication, I trust, even though there may be temporary pain, that his work on my teeth is to prevent further complications and perhaps even greater pain.

Commercials tell me that, if I use a certain brand of tooth paste or a particular style of tooth brush, I will have better check-ups. Whether or not that is true, there is one truth I have discovered: taking a friend with me is a valuable benefit. I always invite my friend Jesus to come with me to the dentist’s office. There’s just something about His presence that helps me through those stressful moments. I can always talk with Him, even when the doctor’s fingers are in my mouth. He is better than novocaine and never says, “Rinse and spit!” He is my calming friend who always gives me a reason to smile.

Four and a half hours to go!

“Father, in times of distress, comfort me. When I feel all alone, make Your presence known to me. When I face uncertainty, show me Your way. And when I do not feel Your presence...I will still trust in You. Through Jesus, my Lord. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: No matter how low I go, Jesus is lower still.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

I Peter 1: 3-9

DOING YOUR BEST AND LEAVING THE REST TO GOD

Yes, I am a typical male, but at least I am consistent at it! My wife went out of town for a few days, leaving me in charge of the household responsibilities. Big mistake!

It wasn't the stack of dirty dishes piled in the kitchen sink that prompted me to action. It was the fact that I was running low on clean pots and pans for cooking. I rinsed the dishes and placed them into the electric dishwasher. The problem began when I discovered that all we had was hand dishwashing soap. Well, soap is soap, right? I squeezed the bottle to fill the little cup in the washer, and being a very cautious man, put a little extra soap into the part titled “extra cup for dried on soil.”

After turning on the dishwasher, I proceeded to wash by hand those few items which did not fit into the machine. For some strange reason I happened to glance down to notice a nice pile of soap suds flowing around my shoe. With lightening fast speed I grabbed an old towel and started to mop the floor. With keen observation I realized that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the flow, so I pulled out two cake pans and placed them under the dishwasher and emptied them into the sink every few minutes when they were full. If that wasn't enough, I had to leave the house in less than fifteen minutes to speak at a funeral. So there I was, on my knees for fifteen minutes, emptying cake pans filled with soap suds.

Finally, the soap seemed to stop flowing. I knew one of two things about to happen. I would either return home to a house full of soap suds, or the cycle was finished and the crisis would be over. As I walked out of the door praying that there would be no more soap suds to clean when I returned, I realized that we really only have two responses in times of trouble. First, to do the best we can, and second, to leave the rest in God's hands. That's what I had done. There is only so much we can do (especially when we caused the problem ourselves). But we can always turn to God for help. I don't think God expects any more from us than that. Just do what you are able to do and trust God for the final results. He always has a way of dealing with our problems.

God is good. There were no more soap suds coming out of the machine. My only dilemma was how to explain it to my wife.

“Guess what I did, honey? I shampooed the kitchen carpet!”

“Father, You have given me hope time and again. I thank You for the many times You have brought me out of despair into the light of Your hope. Nothing is too difficult for You, not even me. Lead me where I ought to be...in Your presence and abiding love. Through Jesus’ love. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God can turn my mistakes into His victories.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

John 14: 1, 27

THAT BIG FRONT PORCH

Marvelous memories came flooding into my mind as we drove through the old neighborhood where I grew up. I remembered my friends and where they lived. I recalled some of the neighbors from down the street. We used to play football in the street right in front of our house. Trees, even then towered over the road. One branch which stretched nearly from sidewalk to sidewalk was used as a field goal. “Slow down, Dad, you’re going too fast.” I wanted the memories to last and it seemed like we were driving by too quickly. Suddenly we stopped. At first I didn’t recognize it, but then it was all so clear. There before us was the house where I lived for the first sixteen years of life. Though it was painted a different color, it looked the same as I remembered, except for one thing. “What happened to the front porch?” I exclaimed with a sense of disappointment. “It shrunk!” I kept looking at it and I couldn’t believe how small it really was. It had not been remodeled. My childhood memories were just larger than the porch.

Oh, how I played on that front porch. I would play with my trucks and toy soldiers all day out there. I used to sit on the rail and sing. I remember helping to paint the floor of the porch gray once a year. Three bicycles used to be parked on that porch during the winter months. My two brothers and I had our own “parking space,” yet it still seemed like we had a lot of room left. It was home base when we played games and a great spot for watching the hail come tearing down from the dark summer clouds. Actually, now that I saw it once again, the porch was quite small. I felt a little disillusioned.

Our problems are just like that front porch. When we are right in the middle of them, they look so big and overwhelming. There seems to be no way out. Yet later, when we have passed through our struggles and look back at them, they really were not as big and oppressive as we remember. Like my old front porch, given time, the proper perspective will be revealed.

Jesus knew we would face all types of problems and trouble in our life. In order to keep the peace which he brings, we need to trust him. How do we trust God? By maintaining our focus on Him and not on our troubles. When we watch and worry about our problems, they seem to grow larger. In fact, we make them out to be larger than they really are. However, when we keep our focus on Jesus, knowing he will empower us to overcome every bit of turmoil we face, our problems will not grow out of proportion.

This experience of nostalgia is a gentle reminder to keep our problems in perspective. They really are not as big as we think, and God always provides a solution. He has never let me down. I have always been able to depend on Him. The Bible reminds us

“And my God will meet all your needs...” (Philippians 4: 19). He is faithful. He will be with you on your “front porch.” Even if it seems overwhelming, it is not. In a little while you will look back and see how small the problem really was. Believe.

As we started to drive away from my childhood home, my eyes were drawn to the driveway. There was a little slope in our driveway which you had to climb to reach the house. We used to race our bicycles down that steep bank and across the street into our neighbor’s driveway. In winters we would speed down that slope on the ice and snow. It used to be such a huge hill. That slope seemed to have shrunk as well. I remember that it used to be several hundred feet tall!

“Heavenly Father, enable me to see Your face today. Do not allow my mind to wander, for You are my help and in You I trust. When I worry, please remind me that there is nothing You and I cannot handle together. Keep my problems in proper perspective, for You are Lord and they are not. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: My God is greater than any problem I will ever have to face.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

Isaiah 44: 9-20

A BIG GOD FOR BAD DAYS

Fascinating are the stories of the Old Testament; profound are the lessons to be learned from them. In I Chronicles 14 there is this interesting statement: *“The Philistines abandoned their gods (in the Valley of the Giants), and David gave orders to burn them in the fire.”*

The Philistines abandoned their gods because they had had a bad day...David’s army had beaten them soundly. The Philistines had wooden-headed, fair-weather gods that could be acquired or abandoned according to one’s fancy; they had no gods big enough or brave enough for the bad days in the Valley of Giants. How different was the God David served.

How big and brave is the God you serve? On how many bad days have you abandoned your God and walked lonely and defeated through the valley of giants? These giants may take many forms: fear, failure, sickness, tragedy, death, temptations fierce, disappointments, and doubts. These giants cause us to have bad days.

Ours is not a God to be abandoned on the bad days. We forget in the heat of our struggles that God is bigger than the battle, greater than the grief, mightier than the moment, and brighter than the bleakness.

It is strange business in religion whenever one’s gods may be abandoned on the basis of a bad day. Such gods are weak and hardly worth the effort of acquiring.

It is another strange thing that David and his men gathered together the gods of the Philistines and burned them. Surely He is the greater God who enables his faithful to gather up weaker wooden gods and use them as kindling. Is the God you serve wooden or wonderful, kindling or kingly? Whenever the bad days come, it does make a difference how big and brave is the God who accompanies you through the valley of giants.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of giants, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will never exchange our wonderful and kingly God for a wooden, kindling god.

- William Jenkins -

Ecclesiastes 3: 11

TRUSTING GOD EVERY DAY

Joy came and asked if she could borrow my auto harp. I was glad my seldom-used instrument could go on such a mission. Joy brought music each week to a children’s hospital center ward. Her songs cheered the children. Asking later how it went, she told me about a small boy. When she asked the children to choose a favorite song, this little fellow called for “In His Time.”*

The suffering boy, likely bald from his chemo treatments, wanted to hear those reassuring words again: “In His time, in His time. He makes all things beautiful in His time. Lord, please show me every day, as you’re teaching me your way, that you do just what you say in Your time.”

What brought comfort to a bed-bound boy who would rather be out playing, spending time and energy doing those things boys love to do? A verse from wise King Solomon, written almost 3000 years ago! Talk about time! He also told us to remember God in our youth (Ecclesiastes 12: 1). That would give us a lifetime to serve Him. There are very good reasons to trust God with all the events and their timing in our lives - even when we don’t feel like it.

In Psalm 139: 13 and 16, we learn that God knows each detail of our lives: “*You are the one who put me together inside my mother’s body, — with your own eyes you saw my body being formed. Even before I was born, you had written in your book everything I would do.*” How is that for comprehensive insurance and assurance? God has ‘covered the bases’ for us.

I think the little boy in the cancer ward knew that God’s care was big enough, long enough and loving enough for his life. He had time to endure his treatments because he saw the big picture - in His time God makes all things beautiful.

And that is another way of saying, “— *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him*” (Romans 8: 28, NIV). Do you have something in your life that needs submission to God’s time?

“Father, may my heart practice trust that will take me through the ugly things in life, knowing You will bring beauty out of them in Your time.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will trust God ALL the time.

- Beth Stewart -

***1983 Maranatha! (Music copyright)**

NOTES:

Acts 27: 9-25

GOD IS ABLE

A fine Christian couple were sharing a desperate problem with me, their pastor. Finally, the husband said, “Our situation is pretty bad. Do you think we can work through this? Is God really able to help us?” I said I believed God could handle anything. The reason for my confidence was both the Word of God and my personal experience in which God had helped me in tough situations. I reminded them, however, that we have to do our part to make things better as God leads us. Then we prayed together and this couple laid their problem before the Lord. Over the next days and weeks as they were obedient and trusting him, God graciously worked a miracle in their lives. Since that time they have expressed thankfulness to a God who is able.

The storms of life hit each of us from time to time. Some storms are of our own making, but many are caused either by others or life circumstances. All we can do is ride through them, hang on and trust God to be at work for our good and his glory.

In our scripture today the Apostle Paul is a prisoner on a ship toward Rome when a great storm rages for days and nights. The boat is tossed rudderless and without sails on the sea. Passengers are fearful of losing their lives. But one night, the angel of the Lord stands beside Paul and assures him no lives would be lost. The next morning Paul reported in these words, “*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*” Paul was saying, “I believe God!” He confidently asserted his trust in a God who is bigger than any storm or situation.

My friend, as you read this, remember that this is your assurance as well. You have the promises and power of God at your disposal. You can say with confidence, “My God is able!” Reflect prayerfully on these promises of God’s Word:

“My God is able to save completely those who come to God through him.”

Hebrews 7: 25

“My God is able to help those who are being tempted.” Hebrews 2: 18

“My God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound to every good work.”

II Corinthians 9: 8

“My God is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”

Jude 24

“My God is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”

II Timothy 1: 12

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3: 20

“Almighty God, I believe that you are able to meet my need today. I now place my problem in your strong hands knowing you want the best for me. With this confidence I rest in your love. Thank you Lord. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God is able to do far more than I can ask or think!

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

John 16: 33; I Peter 1: 6-7

GRIEF: A COMMON EXPERIENCE

Perhaps you have heard it said, “The only things certain in life are death and taxes.” But I would add one more, and that is “grief”. To live is to experience grief. Every human being has, or will in the future, know what it is like. Grief is a common experience of everyone.

My first overwhelming experience with grief came suddenly. Life was going well for me. Just the week before I had assumed a much larger denominational executive responsibility. Then the dark invader hit. My wife of seventeen years became ill one night and before the next afternoon she was gone. Like the wick of a candle, a massive cerebral hemorrhage had snuffed out this beautiful life. In that moment all my hopes and dreams lay in ashes at my feet. My world was turned upside down. Left with three children ages fourteen, twelve and eight, I knew what pervasive, crushing grief was. Only the person who has experienced it first hand knows the anguish and heartbreak grief brings.

If you are grieving today you are human. Your age doesn't matter. I have an eighty-five year old minister friend whose wife passed away recently. And our eight-year old grandson who lives in Oregon learned that a former friend in Ohio had lost his father in an accident. Both are grieving.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that Christians are exempt from grief. In fact, the Bible is replete with suffering and loss from the fourth chapter of Genesis where Cain killed his brother Abel, to the next to last chapter in Revelation where God promises: *“He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes...There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”* (Revelation 21: 4)

The Bible makes it clear that we *will* grieve! Jesus said, *“In the world you will have trouble and grief. But take heart, I have overcome the world.”* (John 16: 33) In today's lesson from I Peter we are assured that *“now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”* The Apostle Peter is here speaking of the entire spectrum of trials and temptations. He says that Christians will experience the “varied” or “many different colors” of grief, the whole rainbow of suffering.

If you are grieving today, God has a good word for you! Just as there are “manifold” or “many kinds” of grief, God's grace is more than sufficient! In I Peter 4: 10 it speaks of *“The magnificently varied grace of God!”* (Phillips translation) For the whole rainbow of suffering, God provides the whole rainbow of his grace! For every “color of grief” God provides a “color of grace”! Believe! Cherish this truth and trust in God.

“Lord, I am hurting today. You know the grief I am experiencing for myself or for my friends and loved ones. But you have ‘borne our sorrows and carried our grief’ on your Cross. So, Lord I ask for, and receive, your abundant grace in my life.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: *I believe today that I can be more than conqueror in my grief, for I am confident that nothing can separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 37-38)*

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Share your experience of the ‘calming presence of Jesus’, during a troubling time of illness or loss or grief or tragedy. As you mature in your ‘Christian Faith’, are you increasingly learning to trust in God (for His strength and comfort and guidance) even though you cannot ‘feel’ the presence of God during your times of ‘unexplainable sorrow and loss and disappointment’? Is it encouraging for you to know that ‘no matter how low you go, Jesus is lower still’?
2. During times of trouble and adversity, do you think the following ‘advice’ is both sound and Biblical? - “Just do what you are able to do and trust God for the final results.”
3. When you were facing problems, did they appear to be bigger and more overwhelming to you than they actually were, when you were able later to reflect back on those problems and see them with a clearer perspective?
4. Why is it so vitally important, when facing your problems, not to ‘focus’ on the problems but instead to ‘focus’ on God and His resources? From a Biblical viewpoint, can you declare with certainty that your ‘problems’ are not as big as they seem to you because God always provides a ‘solution’ to your problems? (Note Romans 8: 28; Philippians 4: 10) From heaven’s perspective, when you look back on earth (if God permits you to do so, after you die), do you think you will say: “When we see Jesus, life’s trials will seem so small”? When problems seem to overwhelm you, will you ‘take charge of your mind’ and remind yourself that Jesus is the ‘Lord’ of your life, not your problems?
5. When you go through the “Valley of Giants’ (fear, failure, sickness, tragedy, fierce temptations, disappointments, doubts), is your God big enough and brave enough to cope with your ‘giants’? Is your God adequate for you and your many problems, or is your God too small (too inadequate and too weak) to conquer your ‘giants’ (enemies)?
6. Share a time (occasion) in your life when, following a ‘deep valley of darkness’ and a ‘great sorrow of your soul’, God made “everything beautiful in His time” (i.e., when God gave you “beauty for ashes” and turned your ‘tragedy into a triumph’ and your ‘loss into gain’). (Note Romans 8: 28)
7. Even though God’s power is able to accomplish great things, is it true (accurate) to say that “we have to do our part to make things better as God leads”?
8. From your own personal experience, tell if you think the following advice is ‘sound’ and ‘Biblical’: “Some storms are of our own making, but many are caused either by others or life circumstances. All we can do is ride through them, hang on and trust God to be at work for our good and his glory.” Do you believe that the God whom you serve is ‘bigger’ than any storm or situation you will ever face?
9. Give your interpretation (and application) of the following statement: “For every ‘color of grief’ God provides a ‘color of grace’.”

CHAPTER TWO
PROCESS GRIEF FOR HEALING

Romans 8: 28-39; Philippians 2: 12-13

GOOD GRIEF

Grief, that keen mental suffering over affliction or loss, can be bad or good. Whatever causes grief is generally bad, terrible! However, while it is painful and difficult, grief can be a growing, maturing time in one’s life if approached properly. Much will depend upon your attitude, your belief in God’s sovereign grace, and a willingness to do “grief work”. I found this out the hard way.

That day will forever stand etched in memory. A few days earlier an ominous shadow had stolen over our happy marriage. My second wife had had a routine mammogram that showed some abnormality. A referral to a surgeon and a biopsy had followed. Now my lovely wife and I were sitting in the doctor’s office waiting for his report on the biopsy. As gently, yet honestly, as possible the surgeon said that the biopsy revealed a malignancy. My wife had breast cancer! We both were shocked. How could this be? Our world was shaken to the very core. We sat there stunned as we were told that she would have to have immediate radical, deforming surgery followed by radiation and possibly chemotherapy.

My first reaction was, “How can you do this, God?” Nearly two years after the death of my first wife I had remarried. Now fifteen years later the dreaded invader cancer had come to threaten us. It wasn’t right. But together, with faith and hope in God, my wife and I faced the future. She had what appeared to be successful surgery. But undetected, the fast-growing mass had already begun to spread throughout her body. Weeks of painful treatments followed. There were ups and downs, dark and bright days. We walked together, she and I, though ‘the valley of the shadow of death’. After two years of battling this dread disease, my wife went to be with the Lord.

I was left to grieve all over again as I had nearly twenty years previously. But this time it was a double grief. Old wounds were opened up. You see, I had not properly grieved after the sudden death of my first wife. I had neither the time, nor the knowledge to do ‘grief work’ then. But now I had to. Undergirded by the prayers of countless friends and relatives, and with the help of a Christian counselor and an understanding congregation, I began the healing process. As pastor, I shared what I was experiencing through a series of sermons on grief. I also found a Grief Recovery program through Hospice to be helpful.. But it still wasn’t easy. I just had to live through it.

And that is perhaps the hardest lesson of grief work, the necessity of living in and working through one’s grief. You can be confident that, even as you work through your grief, God is at work in you to bring about His best for you.

“Lord, the way I’m feeling I don’t see how you can bring anything good out of this experience. It’s hard for me to see any future. But right now, I trust you to do what I cannot do. Help me as I walk through my grief. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Because I have been called by God for His purpose, I believe He is at work in my life, even in my grief, for my good and His glory.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

GRIEF: HANDLE WITH HOPE

Persons face many different kinds of grief and loss. If you are grieving it may be due to the loss of a job or a home. The cause may be deteriorating health or finances. Children move away from friends and family, and grieve. Young people know about broken relationships and loss of friends. Perhaps you are lonely, away from family. Maybe you have had a humiliating experience causing severe loss of self-esteem. This can happen with the death of a dream. Many of us know sorrow as we “bear one another’s burdens” and losses. Of course, a primary cause of grief is the death of someone close.

Whatever the cause of our grief, when faced with it we must determine by God’s grace- and there is no other way- that we will live and work through it. How well we succeed is often based upon our understanding of the grief process. Today and for the next few days, I will be sharing some of the stages a person often goes through in grief.

The first one is that of shock, the unbearable loss. In grief, the first thing you feel is no feeling! The effect of shock is a numbing of the senses. Everything seems unreal. It is like a bad dream. Shock is nature’s anesthetic to protect us. A person functions as if in a fog, going through the motions, operating on automatic. There is a heaviness that weighs down; a voiceless void hanging over us. At this initial stage you can’t even ask, “Why?” All you know is heartache and deep loss. The heartache sometimes gives way to hopelessness.

At this point about all you can do is to hang onto hope. That you must do. Don’t give in to despair or give up. Someone has said, “There are no hopeless situations in life, only people who have grown hopeless.” This we cannot do.

A pastor friend of mine has a motto on his study wall behind the desk which reads, “Hangeth in there!” In shock that is about all we can do. And at this stage it is enough. Nature is protecting you, and so is God. In one of his sermons, Robert Schuller says that hope is “Hanging On Praying Expectantly.” Now is the time to exercise faith. You may not even be able to pray. So lean heavenly upon God.

At this stage, the best thing you can do is to let other people love you, care for you and express their concern. Don’t push them away or try to be brave. Most of all, let God love you. Crawl up into his lap. Let him take you in his strong, loving arms, for “underneath are the everlasting arms.” God alone can “wipe away all tears from our eyes.” Let him do it. Trust yourself to his love and care. Things will get better. Believe it. Rest in it. Hold on to this blessing from Romans 15: 13: *“Now may the God of hope*

fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

“I can’t even think, let alone pray right now, Lord. But I know Jesus is interceding for me and I feel the support of the prayers of others. I trust myself to You, loving God, knowing that you will care for me. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: My hope is in the Lord who gave himself for me, and I will trust him now to see me through any grief I am experiencing.

-Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Psalm 34

GRIEF: FACE IT REALISTICALLY

After three days of devotions centered on the theme of grief you may be wondering why we are doing something this in depth. Perhaps you feel that it would be a more appropriate subject for a seminar or sermon than a devotional. But what better way to deal with one of the most distressing experiences of life than through reflection and prayer? An understanding of grief and of God at work in it should help us now and in the future. If you are not grieving over something now, prepare for it, for grief will surely find you! So, let's consider the second stage of the grief process, denial.

After the dullness is gone, and feeling has returned, the most important factor in working through grief is to experience reality. We want to wish away the sickness, salve the heartaches, or shut the door against the knowledge of death or other loss. This is an unrealistic response to the cold, hard truth of loss. If we are not careful this will lead to denial. Denial is dangerous for it is self-deceiving. It is not honest.

Some time ago a neighbor woman was wrestling with cancer of the stomach. She went through a series of surgeries, hospitalizations and other treatment. After some improvement she began to deteriorate. We could see what was happening. So could she. But her husband went into denial. He was sure she would get better. I don't think he ever really faced the possibility that she might die until the very last. She did die and he was devastated.

It is easy to act as if everything is alright when we are actually falling apart inside. We want to put up a good front, wear a mask. We don't want to be vulnerable. A few weeks after his wife had died, this neighbor came to our home and shared his grief. He said, "I am usually pretty good at controlling my emotions, but I can't keep the tears back." He had covered up for so long that when reality hit he felt it more keenly.

Whatever you do, don't deny grief for it will poison your soul. Don't try to dodge it either for it will catch up with you sometime. And don't despair, for *"God will not permit you to be tried about what you are able to bear, but will provide a way of escape..."*(I Corinthians 10: 13). He delights to do that for us.

Denial is dangerous emotionally and physically. Most of all it is dangerous spiritually for it makes us dependent upon our own resources rather than upon the grace of God. So, face your grief honestly, openly and with the help of God. In prayer ask God to show you the truth. Remember, Jesus said, *"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8: 32). It is liberating to face your grief and move on through it, rather than faking your feelings. You will then be on the way to healing.

“O God, it hurts so much! You know how I struggle with the overwhelming sense of my loss. But, I do acknowledge my hurt and ask You to help me face it honestly. I trust you, my Strength and my Redeemer. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*” (Psalm 34: 18).

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Psalm 4; Ephesians 4: 26-27

GRIEF: EXPERIENCING ANGER

Anger is almost always associated with grief. With reality often comes a flash of anger or smoldering resentment. During this third stage of grief angry behavior is often observed. Children fight over a lost toy or a game. Teens are vitriolic in their verbal responses. Adults say or do things they would never do at other times.

Anger is a strong emotion in response to hurt. Someone steps on your sore toe and you yell or retaliate. Something bad is happening on top of where you already hurt. Psychological hurt may be even more painful than physical hurt. The most common response to hurt is to strike out at someone or something. Such anger comes from frustration or resentment. You don't get what you want or realize your goals.

If not handled well, anger which can be used for good can also be like a raging forest fire. Then that smoldering resentment which ignites becomes “the flame that destroys,” causing destruction and havoc in it's wake. Fire can warm, provide fuel for cooking and even cleanse when used properly. But when out of control it wipes out years of growth, building or investment. If unmanaged, your grief anger can destroy months or years of relationships and memories.

Since anger is a festering sore, my suggestion is that you let it out positively. To try to suppress it, repress it or depress it does not work. But healing can come from properly expressing your anger. Why not be angry with our enemy death? What's wrong with hating the disease that has no remedy and debilitates or takes away a loved one? Or the drugs that blight a teenage's life. It's alright to express anger at missing a spouse's love, a child's embrace, a parent's touch or a grandparent's blessing.

If not expressed appropriately, grief will come out in inappropriate ways. Not long after the death of my second wife, Judy, I found myself being angry at inappropriate times, in inappropriate ways, with persons who had done nothing wrong but were actually trying to help me. So, be careful of your response to anger during grief. As resentment builds up it can cause either depression in yourself or striking out at others.

Don't strike out at God. He is not to blame, humanity's sin is. But it is alright to question him. God knows your hurt and your feelings. Share your anguish with him. Striking out at others is equally destructive. It destroys relationships and ties that are desperately needed in times of grief. To be angry with oneself does no good either. You have enough to handle without punishing yourself further. Be constructive with your anger, rather than destructive. Let it work for you rather than against you. In this way you will redeem your grief and move toward wholeness again.

“You know, Lord, how often feelings of anger sweep over me. Please help me to control and use these emotions for good and your glory. In Jesus’ Name.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: With God’s help I will bring every thought and emotion under the captivity of Jesus Christ.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Hebrews 10: 19-25

GRIEF: WRESTLING WITH GUILT

One of the most potent emotions accompanying grief is that of guilt. It seems to wash over the sensitive soul. Remorse, if allowed, will begin to set in. Feelings of failure abound. As all this begins to weigh you down emotionally it becomes an impossible load.

This situation reminds me of an event I attended at the State Fair held annually in our city. It was the Horse Pulling Contest in which beautiful teams of draft animals compete to determine which team can pull the heaviest load. Each team is hitched to a sled piled with weights. As the sled is pulled, more weights are added at specific intervals until the team can make it no further. The team going the greatest distance wins.

During the fourth stage of grief it seems that guilt is piled upon guilt until we can stand it no longer. The only remedy is forgiveness. If there is some valid reason for guilt, some wrong done or something left undone, it must be addressed. Whatever action is required should be taken. If something can be done about it, it should be done. God's forgiveness, and where needed, that of others, can then be received.

But frequently we are faced with false guilt. To blame yourself for what could not be helped does no good. Hindsight is always better than foresight. The “If Onlys” of life will eat you up, destroy you. “If only I had...” will gain nothing. You recognize that such thinking is not helpful, but it is difficult to quit. Even if there were things that could have been done differently, they weren't. One can never go back. You can never live the past over. A friend of mine has a choice saying I have often found helpful. I want to share it with you: “I did the best I could with who I was, and what I knew at the time.” The Apostle Paul said, *“Forgetting those things which are behind, I press on to that which is ahead”* (Philippians 3: 13). That is what we must do also.

To be able to move on in the grief process, we must forgive ourselves and accept the abundant forgiveness of Christ. Only grace can free us from our “guilted” cage. Sometimes we need to hear the word of forgiveness spoken by a fellow traveler. That was my situation. In an earlier devotional I mentioned that I had doubly grieved after the death of my second wife. Along with that I also felt the double weight of false guilt. It was truly an unbearable load I could not shake, even with earnest prayer. So I phoned my superintendent who served as a “pastor to pastors” and asked for an appointment. When I shared my need, he prayed for me and then said, “On the basis of John 20: 23 I say to you ‘In the name of Jesus you are forgiven’.” With that my heart was set free and remains so to the present. My word to you today is not to allow the Accuser (Devil) to torment you further, but to reclaim your position as a forgiven, cherished child of God!

“O Lord Jesus, in the confusing emotions of my grief you know the load of guilt I sometimes carry. Forgive me, Lord, and help me to sense your forgiveness. Make me glad with the freedom you so graciously offer. In Your Strong Name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: My name is Forgiven. When Jesus sets us free we are free indeed. Today I will live as a joyful, forgiven, cherished child of God.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Psalm 25: 16-21; 68: 3-6, 19-20

GRIEF: LOVE FOR THE LONELY

The fifth stage of grief is marked by utter distress! Here you will experience and must work through self-pity and loneliness. Feelings have moved from questioning “Why me?” to exclaiming “Poor me!” In fact, our neighbor, whose wife of over fifty years died of cancer a few months ago, has often said since, “It’s just not fair!” Somehow you feel as if you are the only one who has ever experienced what you are going through. You feel that you are “different” than others. And, in some ways you are. Debilitating disease makes you different than someone healthy. Loss of a job is the opposite of being employed. Divorce leaves it’s mark. So does estrangement from close loved ones. When death takes a marriage partner you are suddenly a single in a couples’ world. Or a single parent among two-parent families. Feelings of alienation sweep over you because of this “difference.” So you have a “pity party.” The longer it lasts, the more you turn inward and stew in your own sympathy. If you don’t get enough from someone else, you’ll get it from yourself!

Loneliness accompanying the loss, whatever it is, only adds fuel to our emotions. Our neighbor also told us, “It’s so lonely. I don’t know how I am going to make it.” In such times of distress it is easy to withdraw into oneself. The danger is that we will shut out the friendship of those who care and could help us. We curl up in our own misery. We may even push others away while we drown in our own misery.

I had a friend whose middle-aged wife had to be admitted to a nursing home. This sudden loss of his wife’s companionship hit him hard. One day I tried to reach out to him in his grief only to be rebuffed. I told him, “I will love you anyway!” But it took some time before he realized the resources available in life friendships.

Therefore, it is important to force yourself to be with others. Keep close contact with family and friends. Resume an active social life as soon as possible. Don’t neglect worship services and fellowship groups. Even work is good therapy. So are hobbies. Get your mind off yourself and onto others. Focus outward instead of inward. Work on the answer rather than the problem. Reaching out to neighbors and friends will make your own sorrow seem less severe. There is always someone to whom you can bring comfort. Most of all reach out to God. He knows your heartache and loss. Let him be your comfort. His is an eternal friendship, one that never fails!

“Lord, you are the lover of the lonely, the keeper of those who are alone. You know the feelings of the aching void, the loss of companionship. You are aware of the empty house, the shadowed hearth and the sighing heart. And, Lord, you not only know but you care! When you were here on earth you too were lonely. So you feel with all who

experience loneliness. And you live for, love fully and lift up the lonely. Thank you for your touch today. Praise you, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I am no longer alone, for Christ is with me by his Spirit. His presence is my security, his peace my rest.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

I Corinthians 15: 20-28, 50-57

GRIEF: RECOVERY AND VICTORY

Recovery is the natural result of a healthy grief process. It may have been long and difficult, but you will make it. One thing you discover is that others have gone through similar circumstances and have made it. So can you. You will never be your “old self” again. Grief changes you. Yes, there is a season where all you can do is to “hang in there.” But if you move through the grief process with openness and trust in God, you will come out a stronger, more mature person.

It all depends upon your response. The choice is yours to react negatively or positively. Sorrow can shrink the soul or expand it’s horizons. Like a beautiful butterfly you can emerge from your cocoon of grief a beautiful creature.

Countless Christians can bear witness to this fact. I can too. You wish whatever caused your grief had never happened. You acknowledge that it was painful and difficult. You hope never to face it again. Yet, somehow God uses suffering to shape us more into the image of Christ. God never causes something bad to bring about good. But “in all things” God does work his purposes in our lives.

I have found God’s grace to be abundant in my grief. As a result I know I have become more sensitive to others and their hurts. God has used my experiences to minister to others, just as I have with these devotionals. I trust he will continue to do so. And he has graciously provided another life companion each time of my loss. A multitude of friends and family continue to be encouragers. God is surely good.

Grief comes to everyone. But the Christian has God on his or her side. He is “*the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles*” (II Corinthians 1: 3-4). The secret is to lean heavily upon God, accept with gratefulness the assistance of others, keep in touch with your own feelings, and believe in a brighter future.

That future is promised by God. Christ’s resurrection provides the basis for our hope. Our scripture lesson today assures us that Christ will reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet, even death. Everything that causes us grief has been conquered. So we can face whatever comes our way with confidence that the One who called us will accompany us in every life situation.

So, remember in your grief that the sun *will* come up tomorrow. The long, dark night of grieving will pass. Joy will return. The sound of singing will be heard again. In fact, life will be richer and fuller because of your grief experience. You will have complete victory! “*Where, O grief, (whatever the kind, intensity or duration) is your sting?...thanks*

be unto God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 15: 55, 57)

“Thank you, Lord, for my recovery from that awful experience of grief. You were with me even when I could not sense you there. Out of the ashes of my loss you have helped me rise to new life and new victory. In the Strong Name of Jesus.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Because He lives I can face tomorrow and whatever it brings.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it a ‘sin’ for a committed Christian (a follower of Christ) to experience heartbreaking sorrow and deep grief, following a great loss such as the death of a loved one? (In other words, does it demonstrate a ‘lack of faith in God’ when a Christian ‘sheds many tears’ and ‘feels a sense of despair and anger’ and ‘questions God regarding the reasons for his loss’ after the death of a loved one or after another great loss? Why or why not?) (Note John 11: 33-36)
2. Is it ‘legitimate’ for a Christian to take considerable time to ‘recover’ from the deep emotional hurt and sense of loneliness and ‘disorientation’, following the death of his loved one (or following some other kind of great loss)? Why or why not?
3. List some of the ‘common losses’ which people experience, all of which cause considerable grief.
4. When one experiences the terrible ‘initial shock’, as a result of a great loss (of a loved one or of a job or of one’s health, etc., etc.), does this ‘shock’ often give way to a sense of ‘hopelessness’? When you suffer a great loss (grief), what can you do to resist the strong temptation to ‘fall into the trap’ of hopelessness and despair? When one is tempted to despair, can he ‘lean heavily on God’ even if his mind is so confused and his emotions all so injured that he finds it ‘impossible’ to verbally pray to God? (Note Romans 8: 26-28; Romans 15: 13)
5. How important is it for heartbroken (grief-stricken) persons to put aside ‘pride’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ and ‘aloofness’, and to allow friends and relatives to express their love and care and comfort to them?
6. As time progresses and as the harsh reality of one’s terrible loss sets in, why is it so important for the ‘grieving person’ to accept his loss (with the ‘fuller implications’ of that loss), rather than to ‘run from his loss’ in denial?
7. During a time when you were observing the deterioration of the health of a loved one, did you try to act as if everything was ‘alright’, even though you were actually ‘falling apart inside’? Is it possible, ‘in the name of faith’, for a Christian to deny that his loved one is in the ‘process of dying’, and as a result fail to provide opportunity for his dying relative (like a spouse) to openly share his/her ‘honest feelings and thoughts’ about death and about future plans following death? Does it demonstrate a lack of faith in God’s ‘power to heal’ if a care giver talks openly to his/her sick loved one about his/her loved one’s ‘impending death’? Do you think that refusal to talk about death with one’s dying loved one shows insensitivity to the ‘needs’ of the dying one? Why or why not?
8. From a realistic (Biblical) viewpoint tell why it is ‘tragic’ to react to your grief in any of the three following manners:
 1. Deny Grief.

2. Dodge Grief.
3. Despair during Grief.

9. Give your interpretation and application of the following statement: “Denial of your grief is dangerous emotionally and physically. Most of all it is dangerous spiritually for it makes us dependent upon our own resources rather than upon the grace of God.”

10. From your own experience, did you find ‘liberation’ when you faced your grief honestly and moved through it progressively, rather than ‘burying your feelings’ in denial?

11. Since ‘anger’ is a strong emotion which is a response to hurt, can you expect to experience a certain degree of anger when you feel the ‘deep hurt’ from the ‘death of a loved one’ or the ‘death of a friendship’ or the ‘death of a vision’ or the ‘loss of your health or your job’? Is it ‘legitimate’ (i.e., God approval) for a Christian to experience ‘anger’ as a result of his loss (grief)? Why or why not?

12. Do you agree that, if ‘grief anger’ is not handled appropriately it can become like a ‘raging forest fire’, destroying months or years of relationships and memories? Even though the expression of anger (by a grief-stricken person) to those around him may be ‘understandable’ and even somewhat ‘therapeutic’, would you agree that most of one’s anger (during a time of grief) should be expressed directly to God? Why or why not? Is it possible that one’s anger (during a time of grief) can easily harden into deep resentments and bitterness and hostility, the consequences of which can be most devastating and unhealthy and alienating (in terms of maintaining ones past ‘warm relationships’ with friends and relatives)?

13. If suppressing or repressing one’s anger is not appropriate or helpful, how can a grief-stricken person positively express his/her anger (without hurting ones self or ones friends and associates)? Is it alright for a grief-stricken believer to express his great anger at missing a spouse’s love, or a child’s embrace, or a parent’s touch, or a grandparent’s blessing?

14. Do you agree that, if anger is not dealt with positively and constructively, it can be expressed at inappropriate times and ways and to persons who have tried to help the grief-stricken person? During your times of grief, how can you avoid ‘scapegoating’ (or venting) your frustration and anger upon those persons who most wish to ‘help’ you (or upon other persons - even strangers - who surround you)?

15. If ‘grief anger’ is not ‘processed’ correctly, can it lead to inner resentments and bitterness, or even to deep depression? Do you think that it is possible for a conscientious believer, who wishes to be rid of all anger (Ephesians 4: 26-27), to deny (suppress) his feelings of frustration and loss and anger, and thus fail properly to “process his grief”, and as a result become seriously depressed?

16. If you intend to ‘redeem your grief’, why is it important for you (during your times of grief) not to ‘strike out at God’ or ‘strike out against others’, or ‘strike out against yourself’?

During your time of loss (grief), when your mind is confused and your heart is broken, is it appropriate (legitimate) for you to share your anguish and to question the ‘justice’ of what has happened to you, with Almighty God? Why or why not? Even though you likely will never receive a full or satisfying answer as to the ‘reasons’ for your crushing loss, is it nevertheless helpful for you to question God and to share your feelings of ‘deep hurt’ with God? Why or why not? Is the ‘fall of mankind into sin’ (in the Garden of Eden) the ultimate ‘reason’ for all losses (griefs) in life?

17. What should the grief-stricken person do about the genuine guilt which he feels as a result of contemplation of his ‘failures’, ‘mistakes’, ‘negligence’, and ‘transgressions’ committed intentionally, and more often unintentionally, against the person (relative or friend) who has died?
18. As it relates to the tendency to ‘feel guilty’ regarding the circumstances and decisions surrounding the death of a loved one, give your interpretation of the following statement: “The ‘If Onlys’ of life will eat you up, destroying you.” What was Paul’s attitude regarding the past events (both ‘successes’ and ‘failures’) of his life? (Note Philippians 3: 13)
19. To the grief-stricken one who is carrying a ‘heavy load of guilt’, what can you (as a burden-bearing brother , Galatians 6: 2) do to help bring comfort and relief? (Note John 20: 23)
20. According to Revelation 12: 11-12, what is sometimes the ‘source’ of guilty feelings in the lives of believers, and what can believers do to deflect this imposed guilt?
21. During your time of ‘grief recovery’, how can your discipline of forcing yourself to be with others (family, friends, fellow parishioners in your local church), help you to resist the temptations to fall into the traps of ‘self-pity’ and ‘loneliness’?
22. Do you believe that your reaching out to neighbors and friends (during your times of grief) will help make your own sorrow less severe, since such action will ‘break’ your own unhealthy ‘self-preoccupation’ and will provide opportunity to receive wholesome empathy and comfort from others?
23. How can the comfort which you receive from God during your times of grief, better prepare you to comfort other sorrowing persons? (Note 2 Corinthians 1: 5-7)
24. Share a time (occasion) in your personal life when, during a time of great loss and grief and loneliness, you sensed in an unusual way the comforting and the companionable presence of Almighty God.
25. Do you believe that, if you move honestly and thoroughly through the ‘grief process’ with openness and trust in God, you will come out a stronger and a more mature person? Do you believe that, as a result of experiencing deep grief, no one remains the same as he/she was before his/her experience of grief, that he/she will be either ‘bitter or better’ depending upon his/her reaction to the ‘crushing sorrow’? Do you believe that sorrow will either ‘shrink the soul’ or ‘expand the horizon of the soul’? Do you believe that, although God is not the

‘author of sorrow’, He never allows His children to shed ‘needless tears’, that every sorrow can be transformed and redeemed for beneficial purposes in the life of a believer?

26. As a result of your own wonderful recovery from great grief, tell if you agree with a ‘fellow sufferer’ who said: “The secret (in dealing with grief) is to lean heavily upon God, accept with gratefulness the assistance of others, keep in touch with your own feelings, and believe in a bright future.”
27. Do you believe that, because of the resurrection of Christ, everything that causes grief to human beings has been conquered, and that the time will come for every believer when all tears will be wiped away and all will be peace and joy forever in the heavenly presence of our loving Savior? (Read Revelation 7: 9-17; 21: 1-5)

CHAPTER THREE
REJUVENATE LIFE FOLLOWING DEFEATS

Luke 13: 1-9

GOD-GIVEN NEW LIFE OUT OF YOUR BARRENNESS

Fifteen years ago, when we first moved into our house, there were several rose bushes planted beneath our living room window. We anticipated seeing beautiful roses throughout the summer months. However, the roses never bloomed. We fertilized and worked the soil and did all that we could to help the plants develop, but to no avail.

I recalled the little lesson in the Bible where someone wanted to dig up a fig tree, which had not produced any fruit, but the owner of the land said to wait. If it did not produce fruit later, then it could be cut down. That little story kept me from digging out the rose bushes because I kept believing that “next season” they would blossom. They never did. Finally, I took the old spade out of the garage and began to dig. They were stubborn and hard to remove, but I completed the task and we planted a different type of flower in its place.

About two years ago a rose bush started growing in that same location. Apparently I had not completely removed all of the plants. For those two years I was tempted to dig it out, but never found the time to do so. As I walked by the side of the house today, I witnessed three dozen roses blooming on this one bush.

I don’t know why the original bushes never bloomed. I don’t know why this one plant did not die. I cannot explain why only this year did the roses appear. But I do see that God has a message for me, which took fifteen years to be told.

God is patient. He is in no hurry. And what seems hopeless, even to the point of being destroyed, is simply a new and better beginning. We tend to give up. God never gives up. We may feel useless, but just as God puts life into the root and the plant produces beautiful fruit, so will we, as He puts His life into us.

Do you feel like God has given up on you? Be patient. He isn’t through with you yet. No matter how much you have been torn apart, where there is life, there is hope. He will make something beautiful of you.

“Thank You, eternal Father, for never giving up on me! Thank You for always giving me another chance. By Your grace, stir within me the desire to serve You with all my heart. Like a summer rose, I desire to display Your splendor, so plant me where You want me to bloom, prune me that I may grow straight and strong, and patiently work the soil of my soul until I bring forth the fruit of Your glory. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The Lord will make something beautiful of my life.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

Matthew 6: 25-34

GOD-GIVEN OPPORTUNITY TO ‘START OVER’

I felt like a home-wrecker! The Christmas wreath which had hung on our porch was beginning to turn brown, and, since Easter was only a week away, I decided to take down the wreath. As I placed it in the trash can I noticed a small bird’s nest built in the top of the wreath. I felt so bad! I was destroying some little bird family’s home. If birds have feelings, I am certain they were absolutely devastated by my unkind actions.

Immediately a familiar scripture came to my memory: *“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them”* (Matthew 6: 26). I could just picture the little birds sitting in a neighbor’s tree watching me tear down the home on which they so ardently labored. Perhaps they were chirping at me and I didn’t even notice. Yet I knew, because of God’s love for each sparrow, they would be building a new nest the very next day.

There is a tremendous lesson to be learned by a bird’s tenacity. Even though their home was destroyed, they did not despair - they simply started again. Had that been one of us, we would have cried and screamed and even cursed God for our bad fortune. We would have spent weeks, even months, agonizing over our loss, complaining how unfair life is.

Jesus taught us to consider the birds of the air, but actually we are taught to consider what God does for the birds of the air. He gives them feathers so they are warm and able to fly. He provides them with food. He gives them ample opportunity to build their homes wherever they choose to raise up a strong and happy family. He gives them a song with which they sing their praises to the Lord. Most of all, God gives them faith, for in the face of adversity, they choose to keep going. Jesus added in verse 26: *“Are you not much more valuable than they (the birds)?”* Yes, we are, and yes, we can face all of our tomorrows!

To prove the point, I watched the little sparrows build a new nest the very next day. They built it in my gutter, right above a downspout. So, I climbed my ladder to clean out the gutter and put some screen over the opening. Home-wrecker!

“Help me to consider Your ways, O Lord, for they are far above my understanding. Even the birds of the air notice Your love for them...that You provide for their every necessity. May I, too, soar in Your grace, hide in the shelter of Your Hand, feed on Your provision, and sing Your praises. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God is always with me, even when I must start over.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES:

John 14: 27; Mark 2: 21; Psalm 23:3

THE RESTORED QUILT

When all six children had left home, my husband and I moved from Seattle to Timberlakes, a wooded community on the Olympic Peninsula.

One day our youngest daughter, Monica, arrived on our doorstep and announced what she really wanted to take with her to graduate school in Boston, MA, - on the other side of the nation. “I really want my baby quilt with all the little angels on the back side,” she announced. “Those angels always helped me to go to sleep. They have been my friends since I was born.”

“No amount of money could pay me to restore that quilt,” I exclaimed, “but love will find a way since you want a bit of the past to carry into the future.” How many times I regretted agreeing to that assignment as I worked on it. It was impossible. Much of it was threadbare. The tiny animal blocks were still in good condition, so I removed them.

I remembered how my mother had drawn the outlines of a cat with “c-a-t” under it, a dog, a duck, an owl, a bird, a deer, and a rabbit on the blocks along with the word. When I was eight years old, I had learned to embroider on those blocks. The blue borders for each block were pretty frayed, so I removed and discarded them.

When my grandmother’s sister died, her children gave me several 12 by 12 quilt blocks.

At 87, my great aunt had cut pieces and hand sewed them together to make eight pinwheels, but now, years later, they had all come apart. I carefully removed the blocks and hand sewed the pieces back together. Then I reinforced them with a backing. What a job!

Now what to do? Anyone knows you do not sew old material and new material together for the new will tear the old. I finally found a large piece of sky-blue material and superimposed the blocks on it. I did manage to keep the pink backing with the angels, although it was quite faded. This time the lining was batting. Monica was elated I presented her the completed quilt. Her beloved quilt had been restored.

Many times as I was working on that quilt, I thought of how God was working on me, His creation. When my life becomes frayed with anxiety and the worries of this world, I need my Lord to restore the peace that only He can give. When sin and sorrow leave their mark on me, I need cleansing from my Lord.

His word says, *“Peace I give to you, not as the world gives. Let not your heart be troubled.”* Psalms 23 tells me that the Lord restores my soul and I experience His gentleness as he renews my spirit and, taking the broken pieces of my life, puts them

together to become something beautiful.

“Lord, here I am again with my life all torn and tattered. Restore it with Your beautiful touch that the world may wonder at the mighty works of your hand”.

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God loves me and shows it by constantly making me a specimen of His love.

- Laura Drewer -

NOTES:

Philippians 3: 12-16

A FLAG ON THE PLAY

It matters very little when the NFL or the colleges begin their football seasons. In Texas, football season officially begins with the first Friday night game by the local high school team. In small Texas towns, there are signs posted for the away games: LAST ONE TO LEAVE, TURN OUT THE LIGHTS. Texas high school football is unique among our nation’s sporting activities. It does, however, share a language common to all of football at all levels. Go to any football game and you will hear things like: first and goal, blitz, draw, screen, sack, safety, clip, pat, etc.

In every game, sooner or later, you will hear the announcer say, “Hold everything, folks. There’s a flag on the play.” A flag is a yellow handkerchief thrown on the field by a referee to indicate an infraction of the rules.

The most penalty-marred game in NFL history was played on November 25, 1951, between the Chicago Bears and the Cleveland Browns. The referees stepped off an incredible 374 yards on 37 infractions. Cleveland was flagged 21 times for a record 109 yards. In spite of this, they won the game 42-21.

It is always disheartening when your favorite team has a flag on the play. It means something went wrong; things did not turn out as planned; somebody broke the rules.

In this respect, football is like life. There are victories and defeats, successes and failures. In the business of living, things do not always turn out as planned, and there is “a flag on the play”. Things go wrong, people make mistakes, trouble happens...there is “a flag on the play”. These flags come in a variety of forms; Bob lost his job; George lost his leg; Erlene lost her marriage; Peggy lost her life. There are hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires. People hurt themselves; sometimes people are hurt by circumstances beyond their control. It is not possible to anticipate “the flag” before it is thrown.

I have noticed that whenever there is a flag on the play in a football game, it does not mean that the game is over. There will be a delay. Some adjustments will be necessary, but the game goes on. The penalized team has a huddle, goes back to the line of scrimmage, and tries to overcome the disadvantage.

So it is in life. Whenever there is a flag on the play, it does not mean that you are defeated and the game is over. Adjust, regroup, take a time out; then go back to the line of scrimmage and carry on in the game of life and the adventure of living. Winning is always a possibility.

In John 16, Jesus said something to this effect: “In the world you will have some flags on the plays; but take heart! I have overcome the world.”

“Dear God, help me to see beyond my defeats to the glorious victories You give.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Whenever discouragements and disappointments happen, I will not give up. I will press on.

- William Jenkins -

NOTES:

Judges 6: 1-16

GIDEON IS MY NAME

“If God is with us, why is this happening to us?” (Judges 6: 13)

I wish I could say that I have never asked Gideon’s question; unfortunately, I cannot. I have heard well-meaning preachers lash out at his unbelief, but I have heard his words in various contexts from many lips. Whenever tragedy strikes the innocent or sin blinds the believer, whenever power struggles demoralize the universe with murder and war, whenever plagues and earthquakes and floods overthrow the earth raining disaster on good and evil alike, the question thunders behind the clouds of catastrophe: “Where is God when we really need him? Why would a God who cares allow such things to happen?”

Make no mistake. Gideon had experienced hardship from birth on. He had been hungry and cold. He had worn rags and been beaten by enemy whips. He had been forced to bow at the feet of a strange god fashioned by the hands of men. His question was not so much a question of accusation as it was one of confusion. First of all, why would a “mighty man of valor” be threshing wheat by a winepress and hiding it from the Midianites at night? If Jehovah who brought His people out of Israel was present, why were they again in bondage? Gideon had only heard the stories. He hadn’t experienced first-hand deliverance. He hadn’t known about the Moses from the backside of the desert, only of Moses, the great emancipator of the Jews. No wonder he pointed out to God that not only was he not born in a strong man’s house, but he was also the baby in the family.

As much as I hate to admit it, I would probably have asked for a fleece, too. The thing that amazes me most about this story is that God understood and obliged. He didn’t tongue lash Gideon for his lack of faith. He didn’t look for another volunteer. He didn’t belittle his question or sidestep the issue. He simply gave him his sign and reassured him of his closeness. The end result was a hero who conquered a sea of Midianite soldiers with three hundred men, some trumpets, pitchers, and torches.

If I had my choice, there are other Bible heroes I would rather emulate, but the truth remains that too often I find myself in Gideon’s shoes. Standing on the street corner of confusion, I step out into the highway of unbelief and find myself asking: “If God is with me, why is this happening to me?” Too shallow to see beyond the present, I limit God’s power by questioning His judgement. The miracle of it all is that He gives me my fleece and uses me anyway.

“Heavenly Father, thank you for understanding my weakness. Help me to utilize Your strength.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God’s strength moves in unlikely vessels.

- Loretta Jenkins -

NOTES:

Matthew 5: 11, 12; 27: 27-44

KNOWING HEALING FROM PAIN

My blind friend Rod lived in a large apartment complex for the handicapped. One dark night, he left his guide dog in his apartment, and alone made his way to the top floor and found an open balcony, and jumped off!

Life had become too painful. He was overloaded with problems he could not solve. He felt isolated and abandoned. What Rod could not know was that the balcony he chose was above a scraggly tree. In God’s providence, his plunge was broken by that tree. His broken, almost lifeless, body was taken by the Aid car to the local Trauma Center, where life support began immediately, and Rod lived.

When I saw Rod, he was bound to his bed by tubes, wires and restraints, a picture of pain and suffering.

When we read the Scriptures (above) we see another Man, nailed to a cross, (his bed of pain and suffering) and see One who went there voluntarily, but in no way with suicide on His mind. It was not loneliness or depression that put Him there, but the weight of the sins of the world, for which only He could atone!

From both Rod and Jesus I learned that unbearable pain and suffering can lead to positive outcomes, if we will read through to the end of the story.

1. There is fellowship in suffering. Rod felt forsaken and abandoned. When he regained consciousness, he found a long-lost brother at his side, along with care givers and counselors and officials, all eager to help him recover.

Jesus found fellowship on the cross. Count the family and others at the cross who countered the abuse of opposers. In times of great suffering we need companionship, not explanations. Jesus was identifying with sinners, to give them hope in their darkest hours.

2. Peace is possible in the midst of suffering. Did not Jesus find peace in committing His spirit to God?

“Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.” (I Peter 4: 19) In the midst of anguish and desolation, there is a Rock beneath us. God knows what we can bear, and will temper our trials to enable us to endure them in peace, to which Jesus showed the way.

3. There is value in suffering. Hebrews 12: 11 - *“For the moment all suffering seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* The Cross of Jesus has proven to be incalculably

fruitful. There is value there. Find it.

“Dear Lord, I know suffering will come. Prepare me now to find peace, healing and fellowship in those times.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: My times are in His hands. I know He will not fail to support me when suffering comes.

- Eugene Stewart -

NOTES:

Hebrews 6: 19; I Corinthians 15: 12-19

HOPING FOR THE BEST

HOPE: “I HOPE SO.,” “Don’t lose hope.” “I’m hopeless.” “I’m hoping.” Hope is a common word, often used carelessly, but it refers to something very precious. Without it, we can die.

I won’t forget Pastor Joe. He used his computer concordance to print out every Bible verse on ‘the poor.’ Computer paper spilled down the front of the pulpit and onto the floor. We got his point - God cares for the poor. If we printed out the 125 verses about hope, we would be just as convinced of its importance. God has given us hope as a ‘shining rope’ we must hang on to. We need it very much in these turbulent times when new crises comes so often, so suddenly.

The dictionary defines hope as “desiring with the hope of obtaining.” The Bible goes beyond this and illustrates hope for us. David said, “*we wait in hope for the Lord. He is our life and shield!*” (Psalm 33: 26) So hope isn’t a vague abstraction but it is alive and it protects us.

In I Timothy 1: 1 we see it is “*Christ Jesus our hope.*” As He shares His life with us “we have his hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

Other Bible pictures show hope as confidence, a stronghold, a refuge, a fortress and a helmet of salvation, strengthening, steady and keeping us.

We can count this ‘chicken before it hatches’ because it is guaranteed by Jesus. “*He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead — into an inheritance that can never perish.*” (I Peter 1: 3, 4) Now that is something you can hang on to!

Some days you need to do like the Psalmist and talk to yourself. He asked himself why he was so depressed and then told himself “Put your hope in God.” So he did. And so can we. Reach out and hang on to that ‘shining rope’ which is anchored in Jesus in heaven - that life insurance with an unbreakable guarantee.

This hope not only strengthens us in daily life now, but it assures us of heaven. It can sustain us in suffering now because we know we will spend eternity in our pain-free and beautiful resurrection bodies. (I Corinthians 15: 19) We know what is ahead and it is good! It fills us with joy and hope here and now.

“Father, we thank you for providing this sure hope. Confirm it, we pray, in our daily experience of you.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Today I am holding on to hope in Jesus, my ‘shining rope.’

- Beth Stewart -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Even though you may (at times) feel ‘inferior’, ‘unneeded’, ‘unproductive’, ‘discouraged’, ‘inadequate’, and ‘unsuccessful’, does God ever give up on you? When you stop believing in yourself, does God stop believing in you? Does God see ‘potential’ in you that you don’t see in yourself? Is God more concerned that you are ‘successful’ in life than you are concerned in your own ‘success’? Can God give ‘new life’ and ‘new adventure’ and ‘new productivity’ to you, in place of your own long-time barrenness? Can God enable you to ‘stir up’ your dormant talents and gifts in such a way that your life will be amazingly ‘fruitful’ for God’s glory and for the benefit of many other persons?
2. When life’s difficult circumstances ‘wreck your plans’ and ‘destroy your dreams’ and ‘bring an end to your projects and accomplishments’, are you tempted to give up, and to despair, and to become embittered towards God and your fellow men? Why is the way of despair and quitting, the death knell to faith and hope in God? (Note Galatians 6: 9) In terms of ‘tenacity’, what can you learn from the ‘birds of the air’? (Matthew 6: 26)
3. From your understanding of Scripture, and from your own experience, tell how God is able to make something beautiful out of the brokenness of a person’s life. (Psalms 23: 3; John 14: 27; Isaiah 61: 3; Psalm 51: 12)
4. When a Christian experiences ‘reverses’, ‘setbacks’, ‘disappointments’, ‘failures’, ‘losses’, ‘tragedies’, or other ‘unexpected changes in circumstances’ (i.e., ‘flags on the play’), what should be his reaction or response to these hurtful experiences?
5. Have you known persons who, in spite of the fact that they experienced many reverses and losses and ‘failures’ in their lives, finally and ultimately experienced great healing and restoration, and eventually came to the end of their earthly lives with great hope and assurance and spiritual victory? Does the fact that, in a football game, there are many ‘flags on the play’ necessarily mean that the faltering team is ultimately going to lose the football game? Does the fact that a Christian has experienced many ‘flags on the play’ (i.e., many ‘failures’ and ‘setbacks’) decide his ultimate failure in life? After many failures (mistakes and sins), can a Christian become ‘strong in Christ’ and ultimately become a ‘winner’ and find eternal life in heaven?
6. Is it ‘wrong’ (‘sinful’) for you (as a Christian), when you are experiencing heartbreaks and losses in life, to ask God why certain things are happening to you? (Note Judges 6: 13) Is one’s questioning of God always a sign of faithless despair and unbelief, or can such questioning be the result of a confused child of God wanting to find ‘rational’ answers, and a hurting child of God wanting to find comforting reassurance? Even though the mysteries of life usually remain unsolved, and the questions of life usually remain unanswered, why is it nevertheless important for a hurting child of God to ask questions and to seek ‘solutions’ in conversation with Almighty God?
7. As in the case of Gideon, does God often ‘accommodate’ Christians who need special reassurance and confidence, when they are confronted with life’s great ‘challenges’ and are

called by God to fulfill great ‘assignments’? (Note Judges 6: 36-40)

8. When the Lord spoke to Gideon and called him a ‘valiant warrior’ (Judges 6: 12), what was Gideon’s response (Judges 6: 13-18)? When you personally feel ‘inadequate’ and ‘overwhelmed’ because of the magnitude of God’s call in your life, what can you do to experience rejuvenation and renewed confidence to involve yourself in the fulfillment of God’s ‘assignment’ to you? Does God’s ‘great confidence’ in you (as shown by the ‘great assignment’ which God gives to you), the basis for your ‘renewed confidence’ in yourself? Does God ever give a ‘difficult assignment’ to a person unless God also gives His ‘enabling power’ to a person to fulfill his God-given task (call)? Does God like to use ‘unlikely’ vessels (persons) to accomplish His amazing purposes and places? (Note I Corinthians 1: 26-31)
9. From your own observation of life (people), share an experience of God’s amazing power to heal a broken-hearted and depressed person, to enable that one-time ‘drop out’ or ‘failure’ in life to become a productive and strong ‘servant’ of Christ. (Have you ever known any drug or alcoholic or sexual addicts who were totally transformed, or ‘suicidally’ depressed persons who were restored to total mental health?) What scriptural evidence is there that Jesus understands those person whose pain is ‘unbearable’ and whose suffering is ‘extensive’ and that Jesus is the great defender and healer of such persons? (Note Luke 7: 11-17)
10. Tell why you agree or disagree with the following statement: “In times of great suffering we need companionship, not explanations.”
11. When a Christian is experiencing great suffering (i.e., when his heart is broken and his mind is confused and his body is weak), what should he do, according to I Peter 4: 19?
12. Give your interpretation and application of the following statement: “God knows what we can bear, and will temper our trials to enable us to endure them in peace, to which Jesus showed the way.”
13. Why is it so important to hang on to the ‘shining rope of hope’, during times when new crises come so often and so suddenly? (Note Psalm 33: 26) According to I Timothy 1: 1, who is the foundation of the Christian’s hope?
14. According to Hebrews 6: 16-20, in whom can you find ‘an anchor’ for your soul and why do you know that this ‘anchor’ is so trustworthy and strong for time and eternity?
15. According to I Peter 1: 3-4, what is the basis of your assurance that heaven will someday be your ‘eternal home’?

CHAPTER FOUR
TRANSFORM 'LOSSES' INTO GAINS

Romans 8: 18-28

“ALL THINGS”

Not everything that happens in a Christian’s life is good. Not everything that happens in a Christian’s life is pleasant.

After having heeded the call of God to serve as a missionary in Alaska, there were events in our lives that brought tremendous stress. Because there was no hospital in the village where we lived, we had temporarily moved to the city of Nome, Alaska, to await the birth of our second child. Very early one cold February morning, my wife woke me with an urgent plea for help. We immediately transported her to the hospital where the doctor announced to me that we had a serious problem. His words were frightening indeed. He said, “I am not certain that we can save either one of them; I will simply do my best.” He proceeded to do an emergency caesarean section and several pints of blood were required for saving the life of the mother and child. Both were saved but the financial implication of that experience was devastating. We had no health insurance, and what little savings we had was wiped out completely. Our tendency was to wonder why God would call us to be missionaries and then allow such devastation in our lives. It was a difficult period of time.

About eight and-a-half years later, my wife passed away from a cerebral aneurysm very suddenly. After her death, we visited the doctor who expressed great surprise that the aneurysm had not occurred during childbirth. By this time, there were three children. It was explained to him that, due to this emergency eight-and-a-half years previously, both of the younger children had been born by caesarean section. He immediately said: “That’s the secret.” That caesarean section had given her another eight-and-half-years to live.

It does not always happen, but occasionally God gives us glimpses of the truth of His Word that “all things work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to His purpose.” That which had seemed so devastating was now seen in a totally different light.

Your circumstances are probably totally different today. However, they may seem just as devastating. Please be assured that there is complete integrity in the promise that “all things work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to His purpose.” You can take that promise to the bank.

“Dear Lord, help me to see my circumstances in the light of your promise that “All things will work together for good” to me. Amen!”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Not all things that happen to us are good, but all things that happen to us can work together with all of the other circumstances in our lives to bring good and positive results.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Romans 8: 18-28

“I AM HERE”

When my wife passed away very suddenly with a cerebral aneurysm, it was a very traumatic event. When the doctor pronounced her death at 4:00 in the morning, it took a little time to gather myself and to exit from the hospital. On that early May morning as I exited the hospital at 5:00 a.m., it seemed like every bird in the world was sitting in the trees singing the words of the old familiar hymn: “All nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.” It was at that moment that it seemed the Lord almost spoke audibly to me and said: “I am here.”

They say that time heals everything. However, time is likely not long enough in this life to heal every wound. The days passed, the years passed. The Lord helped me in significant ways to put my life back together. He gave me a wonderful new wife and an additional child. However, in the Spring months, I continued to experience an annual depression that just about destroyed my ability to function. Such was the case on an early May day exactly five years after my wife had passed away. I was extremely tired and very depressed and even considered the possibility of ending it all. In fact, as I was driving along toward Cincinnati, I fell asleep. When I awoke I had crossed the median and was heading toward the oncoming traffic. My first thought was “just let it go!” However, God helped me and kept me safe. On that particular night, I laid in my bed somewhere in the middle of Cincinnati and prayed desperately that God would deliver me from this terrible depression. I prayed: “Lord, if you don’t deliver me from this terrible depression, I can’t go on.” At exactly 5:00 the next morning, I awoke to hear all of the birds sitting outside my window ‘singing at the top of their lungs’. God again spoke to me and said: “I am here.” At that moment, the depression disappeared and has never returned.

The great truth of the Word of God is that there are times in our lives when we are so destitute of strength, emotion, and resources that we cannot even think clearly, much less pray. The promise of the Word of God is that at those times the Holy Spirit takes over and prays for us. And the beauty of that truth is that the Holy Spirit already knows how to pray and what to pray for, better than we. Thank God that in the moments of our problems and destitute condition, the Holy Spirit is at work on our behalf. And again, He will work out all things to His honor and glory and to our good if we trust Him.

“Dear Lord, please take the circumstances of my life today, and the devastation and the depression of my life, and turn them all into good for your honor and glory. Amen!”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: When I can't pray, the Holy Spirit does pray and intercede for me in ways that are beyond my comprehension!

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Mark 4: 34-41

“UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES”

Benjamin Disraeli once said: “Man is not the creature of circumstances; circumstances are the creatures of me.” This is a truth that is well supported in scriptural ideals. God never intended that His people should be victims of their circumstances. Yet when we look around us and evaluate even our own lives, it often seems that it is indeed the uncommon individual who is not a victim of his own circumstances.

As Christians, we are not the victims of circumstances. Certainly the question is in order - how can we avoid it in the environment in which we live? The answer is just as simple. We must be conquerors and victors over our circumstances by using them to develop the God-given character, abilities and principles He has for us. Think of the many great leaders of whom you have read. Many of them faced seemingly impossible circumstances, but faced those circumstances with confidence and determination, and turned them into a magnificent victory in their lives.

Think of Jesus Himself. Has anyone faced more difficult circumstances than when He prayed in the Garden with the haunting knowledge of the cross weighing heavily upon Him? Was He a victim of circumstances? No! There was never an expression describing Himself as being a victim. He faced the circumstances and used them to fulfill the greatest plan ever devised by God Himself. When Jesus clearly faced the circumstances of heading toward the cross, it was His finest hour. He was purchasing deliverance for every individual. He was not a victim. He was a conqueror!

The disciples of Jesus faced some very difficult circumstances. Here they were in the midst of a great storm with clouds, lightning, thunder, and waves so high they were overflowing into their boat. In fact, the boat was nearly full. What was their reaction? Their reaction very closely resembled panic!

However, there is another part of that same picture. With the storm raging around them and the disciples in panic regarding their circumstances, here was Jesus asleep in the same boat. It’s all part of the same picture. Twelve persons in panic over their circumstances and one individual at perfect peace.

The disciples should have learned something from that picture. But apparently they didn’t. Instead, they awoke Jesus with a strong accusation, “Don’t you care that we’re about to perish?” Obviously there was something missing in their lives. They didn’t yet get the connection between their circumstances and the abilities of the Master.

But what about us? What about your circumstances today? Do your circumstances

seem overwhelming? Do your circumstances seem impossible? Does it appear that you cannot survive the circumstances of your life? If so, we need to be reminded that it only takes a word from Jesus to wipe away all of the circumstances and deliver us from the cause of panic and fear. It only takes a word. The question of Jesus to these disciples was simply this - “How is it that you have no faith?” What a stinging indictment!

Where is your faith today? Have you allowed the circumstances of your life to drown your faith? Remember, Jesus is still there. He knows your circumstances and it will only take a word for Him to wipe those circumstances away and to set you free. Why not trust Him to do so today? If Jesus does not ‘remove’ your difficult circumstances, He will give you strength and wisdom to face your difficult circumstances and to use them for your ‘good’ and for God’s ‘glory’.

“Dear Lord, you see my circumstances today and you have the ability to deliver me, to make me victorious, to make me conqueror over all my circumstances. Please to so today. Amen!”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God always uses the circumstances of our lives to draw us to Himself. If we allow circumstances to move us in any other direction, we are the losers. Moving toward Him will make us conquerors.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

I John 1-10

COMING TO TERMS WITH ‘CHOCOLATE MESSSES’

There are times when life tumbles in, and hope is gone, and despair sets in. Did you know that it is in times like those that God begins to do a great work in us?

Someone has said, “When God wants to do a miracle, He begins with an impossibility.”

Ken Taylor’s Living Bible begins with these words...

“When God began creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was a shapeless, chaotic mass, with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark vapors.” (Genesis 1: 1)

It was Easter, 1972. Our family had presented us with a copy of The Living Bible. We kept it on our coffee table.

The next morning our two granddaughters came to visit briefly before they went on to grade-school and day-care. As we were about to have our family prayers, Cindy, just 6, said: “Grandpa, can I read the Bible for prayers?”

“Of course,” I said, “take the Bible and read.”

“But where shall I read?” Cindy said hesitantly, unsure she could handle just any passage.

“Just find the first verse in the Bible and start there,” I said.

She had no difficulty finding Genesis 1, and without delay, began to read.” She did well until she came to the second phrase, where, in word-recognition haste, she read -

...the earth was a ‘shapeless chocolate mess!’

We collapsed in merriment at her misstatement, done in childlike innocence, and we never let her forget her choice of words! It’s true, isn’t it, that her rendering of that great First Event, was almost right? At times our world can really seem to be nothing better than a ‘chocolate mess!’

And how shall we put the ‘chocolate messes’ of our lives right? The next verse is “And God said,

“Let there be light.”

Let the light of God’s Word shine on the messes we make. Read His infinite wisdom to see things set right.

Psalm 119: 105 tells us *“(His) word is a light unto our path and a lamp unto our feet.”*

I John 1: 7 says: *“If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.”*

“O Lord, please shine the light of your Word on the messes I have made of my life, and the path I take, so I may more perfectly please you and serve you in love.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: When I spill ‘the brownie dough’ I have the light of His love to help clean it up.

- Eugene Stewart -

NOTES:

2 Timothy 2: 1-13

FROM PIT TO PEDESTAL

The best known lady in America lives on an island. She’s 151 feet tall and weighs 156 tons. Her name is Liberty, of course. She stands on a pedestal that itself would be an imposing monument, for it is 154 feet tall, weighs 27,000 tons and has a museum in it! She sways five inches in a 50-mile wind, which is not uncommon in New York Harbor. To keep Liberty on her feet the pedestal is on a foundation dug down some sixty feet to solid rock. Observation: The first thing they did in 1884 when erection of the statue began was to dig a pit.

One of the best known stories of the Old Testament begins with a boy in a pit. Joseph, the pride of his father’s old age, was envied by ten older brothers. To kill him, they threw him into a dry cistern (a hole built into the ground to store water that was impossible to escape from). Then they were able to sell him to foreign traders, who took him to Egypt and sold him into slavery (Genesis 37). Observation: This story ends with Joseph on a high pedestal of power as the ruler of Egypt second only to the pharaoh (Genesis 41: 40).

Application One: An experience in the pit may be necessary to prepare us for greater responsibility and its challenges.

Who in the New Testament had more “days in the pits” than Paul? In his first letter to the Corinthians he lists the turmoil he had been through (11: 16-33) and it is more than we can imagine surviving. Then he says that God promised, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (12: 9) and *amazes us by saying that because of these painful events he has learned to “delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (12: 10). The pit experience, Paul says, helps us become stronger.

Application Two: It may be necessary to be in the pit so that we know how to enjoy the “pedestal experience.” Near my home in beautiful southeastern Tennessee the altitude in the river valley is about 650 feet above sea level. The rugged cliffs and wooded slopes of the Cumberland escarpment rise above to about 2,300 feet. It is a beautiful area. The highest point in Kansas, Mt. Sunflower, at 4,039 feet is a lot higher. Mt. Sunflower is a wheat field so flat that it is very difficult to find the highest point. As a native Kansan I appreciate how beautiful that can be in its own way, but it lacks drama. Sometimes it is contrast that makes the view.

That can be true in life experiences, too. We may fail to appreciate our rewards without the costs. Sigurd Olson, the great naturalist and writer of the northern Minnesota canoe country, wrote eloquently about one of his favorite lakes, a remote destination that required many miles of paddling and several difficult portages. He was captivated by the lake’s beauty each time he visited until the time he flew to it on a float-equipped small plane. It wasn’t the same place, he said, because it wasn’t the same experience. Not working for the prize cheapened it. Maybe when God spreads a table before us we don’t properly find meaning or have gratitude for it unless we have gone through the valley of the shadow of death. (See Psalm 23).

“Dear God in Heaven, I claim to want to be rock solid for you, but I run at the first sign of a ‘pit experience’ that would prepare me for higher service. Forgive me. I wish to be ready to move closer to you through whatever it takes to prepare me. Amen!”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Timothy 2: 12).

- Richard Walters -

NOTES:

Psalm 111

HE KNOWS; HE’S NEVER LATE

This is my understatement of the year: “It’s been a hard two weeks. Never in my life have as many frustrations crashed into my life, one after the other, than in these weeks. Never have more questions not only been unanswered, but seemed unanswerable. Never have I been misled more often by persons who claimed kinship in Christ. Without wanting to I have said, irritably, “Where are you in all this mess, God?”

Last evening, driving to have supper with my son, I turned on the truck’s radio and the first phrase I heard was a gospel group singing, “He knows what you’re going through.” On the return trip the first words I heard from another song were, “He’s never late; Jesus is never late.”

Think of that! He knows what I’m going through and he will not be late with his responses of love and care! Hallelujah! That’s better than seeing the Cavalry arrive in an old cowboy movie! But God’s grace doesn’t stop when the cup is full! This morning my first Bible reading was this: “Relax, everything’s going to be all right; rest, everything’s coming together; open your hearts, love is on the way!” (Jude 2, from The Message).

Yesterday I saw a motor home headed back to Ohio from its occupant’s revelry in New Orleans. It was painted “Mardi Gras or bust,” with other slogans describing the various forms of debauchery for which Gulf Coast Mardi Gras events exist. Today, Mardi Gras is bust, except for the hangovers. Whatever the people looked for and found is over, but God’s love endures.

I write this on Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten season, when we turn our thoughts from Christ’s birth to his death. The crucifixion, with all its ugliness, is the event that brings the possibility of a beautiful new way of life for all who will believe. The Way is not easy for us, just as it was not easy at times for Paul, Peter, other early Christians, or even Jesus. But it is precisely because it was not easy for Jesus that we can sing, “He knows what we’re going through.” He knows, because he’s been where we are.

Because he cares, he died. Crucifixion was such a horrible way to die that the depraved Roman Empire which sanctioned abortion and slavery, and for whom watching gladiators fight to the death was a spectator sport, did not crucify its own citizens. Jesus, loving us, said “I’ll go.”

He knows; He cares. Because he cares, he provides what we need, when we need it. “Where are you, God?” The answer is astonishing. It is the most reliable truth that exists: God says, “I am with you, for you!”

“Thank you, mighty God, for your never-ending love. Because you love me, you provide all - yes, all - that I need, and when I need it. You are never - yes, never - late. No sacrifice is too great for you, who owns the universe, to make sure that little old me can have what I need. How can I thank you? I lift my wobbly voice in praise, ‘Holy God, I adore you, and I am yours.’ Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I give you back the life I owe, today and always.

- Richard Walters -

NOTES:

Psalm 105: 1-6; Philippians 1:12-18; 4: 6-7

LIVING BY THE “AT LEASTS” OF LIFE

Good advice is often received from unlikely sources. You expect to receive guidance for daily living through the ministries of the church. One reason for the spiritual discipline of regular devotions is to receive inspiration, encouragement and admonition. While reading the Bible there are truths which impact you, and in prayer God enlightens. But if we are tuned in to receive ideas from daily surroundings we will pick up some jewels for living as well.

Recently my wife and I were in the office of a medical specialist. While waiting for the doctor, his nurse was busy taking my height, weight and blood pressure. I’m not sure what brought up the subject, but she also shared the following story from her own life.

“When my first husband walked out on me I was devastated. That’s when I was so helped by a psychiatrist friend – my husband was a psychiatrist, by the way. I just had to have someone help me get my life together and this woman did that. One thing she said I will always remember, ‘We live by the “at leasts” of life.’ By that she meant things could be worse; ‘I may not have any shoes, but at least I have good feet.’ ‘I may be bald, but at least I have a good looking head!’ And you know, that made a real difference in my life. Don’t you think that was pretty good advice?”

We had to agree that it was. She was on to something. Situations in life may be bad, but they could be a lot worse! When we think in terms of the “at least” we change the negative into the positive. Self-pity becomes praise, and grumbling is translated into gratitude. If we take this rather homely principle and add the mercy and grace of God, we get not only “at least”, but “abundantly above.” God with us means that we will realize his best in life. With God in control the bad can be turned into good.

In Philippians chapter one the Apostle Paul declares that his being in chains has served to advance the gospel rather than to inhibit it. God was using Paul’s imprisonment to reach persons who otherwise wouldn’t have heard about Christ. He goes on to declare that some people are preaching Christ out of selfish ambition and not sincerely. But here Paul says, *“Whether from false motives or true, the important thing is that ‘at least’ Christ is being preached.”* And Paul rejoices in that fact.

Are you facing a situation, which seems nearly hopeless? Does the future appear bleak? Are you worrying about circumstances or people? Then, why not let God help you see the “at leasts”? Let him suggest a way out or through. Remember, “in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.”

“Lord, I am truly thankful for all your blessings. And I thank you that you have made it possible for me to live today by the ‘at leasts.’ I want to sense you working strongly in me to accomplish your purposes, whatever they are. This I pray with thanksgiving in your name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will live by the “at leasts” of life, thanking God for his all-sufficient grace, trusting him, and giving him glory.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever had a time in your life when, after a crises or calamity had passed, you ‘looked back’ and realized that God was working ‘in’ and ‘through’ that difficult experience to being great good to yourself and increased glory to God? How does the truth of Romans 8: 28 give you comfort and reassurance of God’s intervening power in your life? Even though all things which happen to you are not ‘good’ or ‘pleasant’, do you believe that God (with your cooperation) can use everything (both good and bad experiences) to bring ultimate benefits and blessings to your life?
2. From your own experience, share a time in your life when you sensed the unusual presence of God and the reassuring ‘voice’ of the Holy Spirit, giving you comfort and encouragement soon after the death of your loved one or friend.
3. Share a time in your life (or in the life of someone near to you) when, after you had suffered a hard and long depression, you were miraculously delivered from that horrible and debilitating depression.
4. During those times in your life when you (as a believer) are so destitute of strength and emotion and resources that you cannot think clearly or even verbalize a prayer, what is the basis of your comfort and hope and strength? (Read Romans 8: 26 and John 14: 16)
5. Instead of being a ‘victim of circumstances’, is it possible for a follower of Christ to ‘take control of his circumstances’ and to use all circumstance (regardless of how ‘bad’ they are) to help him to develop a more Christlike character? What is the difference between a ‘thermometer Christian’ and a ‘thermostat Christian’? Tell if you believe the following testimony (by the Apostle Paul) accurately describes a ‘thermostat Christian’: “I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of contentment in every situation, whether it be a full stomach or hunger, plenty or want; for I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power.” (Philippians 4: 11-13, Living Bible)
6. During your ‘storms of life’ (when the ‘waves’ of adversities are high, and the ‘winds’ of persecution are strong), how does your faith in the wisdom, love, and power of God help ‘still’ your fears, and ‘calm’ your heart, and ‘restore’ your peace? (Note Mark 4: 34-41) (remember the following during your ‘storms’:
 - (1) God is all-wise (i.e., He knows what is best for you).
 - (2) God is all-loving (i.e., He wants to do what is best for you).
 - (3) God is all-powerful (i.e., He is able to do what is best for you).
7. Give your interpretation and application of the following statement: “When God wants to do a miracle, He begins with an impossibility.”

8. In the midst of your personal chaos and darkness (confusion and calamities) and ‘messes’ (mistakes and sins), how has the ‘light’ of God’s Word helped bring guidance and comfort and forgiveness and deliverance to you? (Note Psalm 119: 105 and I John 1: 7)
9. How would you describe the ‘pit experiences’ of your life, and how have such experiences helped prepare you for your ‘pedestal experiences’ in life (and your appreciation and enjoyment of such experiences)?
10. Tell with what degree of ‘conviction’ (assurance) you believe the following statement: “Jesus knows what I’m going through and He will not be late with His responses of love and care!” Share your response to the following promise from God’s Word (Jude 1: 2): *“Relax, everything’s going to be all right; rest, everything’s coming together; open your hearts, love is on the way!”*
11. Does it give you encouragement to realize that the ‘evil pleasures of the world’ soon will come to an ‘end’ and be ‘justly punished’, and that the ‘unjust sufferings of the godly’ soon will also come to an ‘end’ and be justly vindicated and rewarded - because of God who is sovereignly powerful, altogether holy, and longsuffering in His mercy?
12. When you are experiencing ‘grief’ because of a great loss in your life, do you think it would help you to ‘gain perspective’ in life if you would acknowledge that, even though you think that your situation is ‘bad’, there are other heroic persons whose troubles are ‘worse’ than your troubles (or that your ‘troubles’ could be far worse than they presently are)?
13. From your knowledge of the Bible, or from your ‘general observation’ of life, or from your own ‘personal experience’, share an illustration which demonstrates the truth of the following statement: “With God in control the ‘bad’ can be turned into ‘good’”. (Note Philippians 1: 12-18; 4: 6-7)
14. Put a ‘T’ by those statements which you believe are ‘True’ (from a biblical viewpoint), and a ‘F’ by those statements which you believe are ‘False’.
 - ____(1). When one becomes a Christian, his problems are all over.
 - ____(2). In the early days of Christianity, when one became a Christian, a variety of problems oftentimes resulted - such as separation of family, persecution, and sometimes even death for one’s faith.
 - ____(3). The innocent people many times have to suffer problems, caused by the wrong moral choices of the godless people.
 - ____(4). God is not the author of suffering and problems.
 - ____(5). Because God is all-powerful, He should prevent the good people from suffering.
 - ____(6). Jesus is with us during our problems and sufferings, because Jesus was called ‘a man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief.’
 - ____(7). God can turn every problem into a ‘project’ of divine grace, and God’s

- _____ (8). 'projects' are always successful.
The Lord can use every problem for the Christian's growth and for God's purposes.
- _____ (9). I see the following advantages in having problems and/or suffering (check those statements you a with).
- ___ a. Problems and suffering can cultivate Christlike character in a person.
 - ___ b. Problems and suffering successfully met are a powerful witness to unbelievers.
 - ___ c. Suffering causes one to fix his focus and attention on heavenly glories instead of on problems.
 - ___ d. Problems cause one to depend more on God's power and resources, instead of on man's wisdom and strength.
 - ___ e. Man's weaknesses provide opportunity for God's power and glory to be manifested.
 - ___ f. Problems help produce spiritual growth and maturity and strength.
 - ___ g. Problems and suffering can develop a tender heart, more responsive to God's love and human needs.
 - ___ h. Those who are most effective in ministry are those who minister in an area in which they have personally suffered most.
 - ___ i. It is a Christlike work to sooth and to sympathize and only those who have suffered themselves can truly sympathize with other people who suffer.