

# **How to Survive Personal Tragedy**



**Desmond Ford PhD**

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by

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## ***Preface***

Nearly fifteen hundred years ago, the famous philosopher and statesman Boethius was falsely accused of treason and executed without trial. To be imprisoned so unjustly would seem to be tragedy enough to sour any man, but from his cell Boethius made a point which all of us who suffer should keep in mind.

In his *Consolations of Philosophy* he said that one cannot inquire: "How can there be evil if God exists?" without logically raising the second question: "How can there be good if he does not exist?" On the strength of this question, Augustine, Bossuet and many others claimed that the fact of Providence in the affairs of men was the primary condition for making sense of existence. It is interesting that none of these men attempted an exhaustive solution to the problem of evil and tragedy. Nor does Scripture. And similarly, this little book also refrains from the impossible.

This volume is the outgrowth of a public meeting entitled: "How To Survive Personal Tragedy." My friends Calvin Edwards and Noel Mason have done what they could to pull the raw materials into shape. We earnestly pray that the "God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction" (2 Corinthians 1:4) may minister to every reader of these pages.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Into Each Life**

"It makes all the difference whether one sees darkness through the light or brightness through the shadows." David Lindsay

You have heard the song, "Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall." Has it been that way with you, or has it rather been floods, cyclones, hurricanes, and tornadoes? I think that this song is the greatest example of gross understatement I have ever come across in musical composition. For trouble is normal, not abnormal. Trouble and tragedy are as normal as the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, and the clothes we wear.

Recently, the phone rang in the middle of the night. A friend of mine was in distress. A close relative had just been involved in a car accident and was dying. "Would you mind coming down to pray over him?" was the anxious inquiry. I set off. My destination was four hundred miles away. I didn't make it in time. Tragically, the young man of twenty died as I was traveling. Instead of praying over him I prayed with a large room full of grieving relatives. I endeavored to point them to the One who was the "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

As I stood in that hospital and learned what had happened to this young man, his life so suddenly eclipsed, I thought of the hundreds of tragedies that one hospital represented each year. I thought of all the hospitals in the country and all the hospitals in the world, and the divorce courts, and the criminal courts. I thought of the parents who hear that their children have just been sentenced by the judge. Most of the criminals who are committed to jails are young people under twenty-five. I thought of the road accidents. Do you know that there are more persons killed every year on the road in the U.S.A. than were killed in the Vietnam War? I thought of the 750 million poverty stricken people in the world. I thought of the mentally ill. I thought of all the drug addicts. Is this not a world of grief and graves?

Over twenty years ago the wife of my youth was diagnosed as having breast cancer. She had a radical mastectomy — her breast and more removed. Four years later we were told she had bone cancer. Not long after that they recommended a chordotomy — a severing of certain nerves in the backbone to ease the pain that was so constant. It didn't work, and so she had a second chordotomy, and then she became a paraplegic. I pushed her for hundreds, maybe thousands, of miles in a wheelchair along some quiet country roads. She never complained. She wasted away to sixty-six pounds. She became as thin as a broomstick, vomited every day, and finally died leaving three little children.

### **No Easy Answers**

There is no easy answer to the "why" of tragedy. I would warn every sufferer against some of the pat answers. It has been said, "Well, trouble is good for building a strong character." There is some truth in this statement, but we have to acknowledge that many troubles sour rather than sanctify. There are some troubles that come like a flood and they just about wash us away. Not all trouble is sanctifying. We cannot say it is all character building though in a measure that is true. Without trouble our characters would deteriorate.

Neither must we ever say, "Well, he or she must have done something terrible and it's catching up." That's the most hoary fable about pain and tragedy that's ever been perpetuated. One of the books in the Bible, the book of Job, explodes that one. Job was a perfect man, says the first chapter, yet look at all his troubles. The Sabaeans drove off his oxen and his asses, the Chaldeans stole his camels, the house collapsed on his children, and he was afflicted with boils — this perfect man of the East! Never say that all trouble comes on a person as a result of his or her sins. It is true all trouble is the result of sin. But is it not also true that we often suffer for other people's sins? There is such a thing as vicarious suffering in our world and many of the great sufferers of history have been blameless.

Neither should we say, "If only they had enough faith they could be healed." That is a terrible blasphemy when we have a Bible that speaks of the greatest of the apostles who asked the Lord three times that the thorn in the flesh might be removed, only to be told that God's grace would be sufficient for him.

Nor should we say with the philosopher Hume, "God is either not all good or he is not all powerful." He just couldn't see any way that God could be good as well as powerful, and let so much evil exist in the world. That same Hume said, "Whenever I think of my mother I believe in immortality." You see, it's hard to consistently believe what the skeptics urge us to accept.

Many cry out about the mystery of evil and pain, but how many are there that cry out about the mystery of good, and joy, and laughter, and music, and beauty? There are thousands that shout about pain for every one who shouts about the mystery of good. The truth of course is that we live on a little tiny island of mystery surrounded by the unknown. We don't know much about anything — why should we presume to be able to explain all the troubles of life? We can't, but we must learn to trust God even where we can't trace him.

## **Two Things We Know for Certain**

There are some things we may know for sure. The Bible says, "we see through a glass darkly," but we do see. One thing we know is that for every person destroyed by tragedy, ten are destroyed by prosperity. Howard Hughes said to a woman of his choice who had refused him, "You're the first person that said "no" to me in thirty-two years." What a pity. He would have been better off if a thousand had said "no."

Do you remember the story of the ancient King Midas and how everything he touched turned to gold? How marvelous! Wouldn't you like that? But when he touched his food it turned to gold, and gold is indigestible — and poisonous! And when he embraced his daughter, she turned to gold. Which would you rather have, a living child or a golden one? Some would prefer a golden one, but no true parent. Our lust for prosperity often destroys us.

There is something else we know. Usually the people who have done the most good for the world have been people who have gone through hell first. Read history read biography. Was there ever a sadder man than Abraham Lincoln? He lost his mother before he was ten, and according to some biographers he was rejected by the woman he really loved. The woman he married made his life a hell. The White House was never a restful place for the President, and when he went out and visited hospitals filled with hundreds of wounded men, the strain of home intensified. You could see it in his face. There was never a sadder man than the man that gave joy

when he gave liberty to thousands.

Notice the odds against which he struggled.

He grew up on an isolated farm and had only one year of formal education. In those early days, he was exposed to barely half a dozen books. In 1832 he lost his job and was defeated in the race for the Illinois legislature. In 1833 he failed in business. In 1834 he was elected to the state legislature, but in 1835 his sweetheart died, and in 1836 he had a nervous breakdown. In 1838 he was defeated for Speaker of the House, and in 1843 he was defeated for nomination for Congress. In 1846 he was elected to Congress but in 1848 lost the renomination. In 1849 he was rejected for a federal land officer appointment, and in 1854 he was defeated for the Senate. In 1856 he was defeated for the nomination of vice president, and in 1858 he was again defeated for the Senate. (Ted W. Engstrom, *The Pursuit of Excellence*, pp. 76, 77.)

Everybody who has been a great lesson to the world has passed through cataclysm, storm, tornado, and flood.

### **Jesus: Man of Sorrows**

The Bible in Isaiah 53 refers to a man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief. People often wonder why it is that the Gospels do not recall one instance of Jesus laughing. The Old Testament says that "he was anointed with the oil of gladness" but never in the Gospels do you read that he laughed. Do you know why? There is an Australian painting showing a laughing jackass perched in a tree and underneath at the base of the tree is a dead kangaroo. Everybody that looks at that painting senses the in-congruency of laughter and death. Our Lord came to remove death. "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief ... he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:3-4). Thornton Wilder said, "Only the wounded can minister to those who are in pain." That is why our Lord came as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Some years after the death of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews reminded his fellow sufferers that because Jesus suffered when he was tempted he was now able to help those who were being tempted (Hebrews 2:18) "For we do not have a high priest," he writes, "who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

Temptation in the Bible means more than just an enticement to sin. It embraces the idea of a suffering trial of an agonizing ordeal. The idea is best illustrated in the experience of Jesus in the wilderness and Gethsemane. He is emaciated and hungry for forty days in the wilderness. He sweats great drops of blood in Gethsemane. He agonizes in pain on the cross as he is tempted to listen once more to Satan who tries to entice him to come down from the cross and take the easy path to glory. But Jesus remains faithful to his calling, and after the agony of the cross came the joy of the resurrection and vindication. His pain and suffering became the gateway to the glorious presence of his Father.

It is the life of Jesus that has inspired many of his followers to take courage, to be cheerful in the midst of pain and suffering and to turn a sympathetic hand, lifting the burdens of another weary traveler. Only the Christian has the inner resources to



transform pain and evil into a blessing. As we shall discover in our next chapter, it is those who have been through the greatest of trials who have ministered the greatest blessings to suffering humanity.

## CHAPTER 2

### Tears and Tragedy: Birth Pang or Death Cry?

I listened to the agony of God—  
I who am fed,  
Who never yet went hungry for a day.  
I see the dead—  
The children starved for lack of bread—  
I see, and try to pray.

I listen to the agony of God—  
I who am warm,  
Who never yet have lacked a sheltering home.  
In dull alarm  
The dispossessed of hut and farm  
Aimless and "transient" roam.

I listen to the agony of God—  
I who am strong.  
With health, and love, and laughter in my soul.  
I see a throng  
Of stunted children reared in wrong.  
And wish to make them whole.

I listen to the agony of God  
But know full well  
That not until I share their bitter cry.  
Earth's pain and hell—  
Can God within my spirit dwell  
To bring His kingdom nigh.

—Georgia Harkness

Much of our ability to cope with tragedy has to do with how we view it. No one likes pain, but some have the ability not to be devastated and destroyed by it. This rare skill, to see pain as a birth pang on the way to something better, is one that we should develop. Let me illustrate this principle in the lives of many who have influenced the course of history. I believe their lives not only illustrate the truth that pain may be a birth pang not a death cry — but also inspire us to face our personal tragedies with similar courage.

#### Mark Twain

Consider the man who made all the world laugh, Mark Twain. His father was a morose person, a derelict who never played with children, and rarely expressed affection. Samuel Clemens (for that was Mark's real name) was brought up as a neurotic little tramp. The family was always on the move, and always suffering from dreadful poverty. From childhood he saw slaves whipped, and men shot in the streets. When he was in his early teens he lost a brother and a sister in death. At the age of twenty-three his hair went white as another brother was burnt to death when a steamboat exploded on the Mississippi. When he was thirty he pointed a revolver at his forehead. Fortunately for the world he lacked the courage to pull the trigger. His

first child died soon after birth. Another child died because of his neglect. In a moment of forgetfulness he forgot to cover her when she was out in the baby carriage in the snow. She died of pneumonia. A third one nearly died when he carelessly let go of the pram at the top of a hill. When he was away on a lecture tour, Susie, his most talented daughter, died. Not long after he returned another daughter died of an epileptic fit while taking a bath. Yet Mark Twain must surely be one of America's most gifted writers.

### **Charles Dickens**

Most of the men that have made the world laugh have been those who have been through the hell of tragedy. Consider Charles Dickens. His creed was somewhat different from Mark Twain's, who became a skeptic. Dickens was born a feeble little child and suffered repeated convulsions. His father said, "He'll never grow up to experience the bitterness of maturity." But Charles Dickens did grow up in spite of numerous disadvantages. His father never knew how to handle money, so the whole family was in rags. When his dad went to a debtors' prison, every afternoon poor Charles would walk up to see papa behind bars. At the age of eleven the boy went to work from sunrise to sunset pasting on labels in a factory.

This boy who had convulsions, who had known poverty, who was raised more or less in the gutter, was soon to weave into his books all his sorrows in such a way that it would bring about reform throughout the whole of the British Empire. Reforms for children and reforms for workers. Dickens was unhappily married. He was once described as a sad old man of twenty-four. Many of his sorrows are mentioned in the book *David Copperfield*. Remember that the initials of David Copperfield — DC — are the reverse of Dickens own initials.

The men that have made the world laugh have wept in secret. Sorrow and tragedy should not become death cries, but rather, the pangs of birth.

### **Dostoevski**

Take the men that have made the world weep. I think of Dostoevski, perhaps the greatest of Russian writers He received the sentence of death because of his political activities. He was made to stand in the cold. He saw the coffins just a hundred yards off. He faced the firing squad but at the last moment he was forgiven, yet nevertheless he was sent to Siberia for years. With chains on his hands and feet, he lived with the worst of Russia's thieves and murderers. Someone put a Bible into his hands at a railroad station on the way to Siberia. By the few rays of light that came through the glazed frozen window Dostoevski read the Scriptures and found Jesus Christ. The great themes of the New Testament show through in all of his books. And the tears that have been shed by the readers of Dostoevski's books have been, in many cases, the tears of penitence as people found God.

### **Tolstoy**

With Tolstoy it was the same. Tolstoy tried every way he knew to commit suicide. He tried hanging, the rope snapped. He tried to shoot himself; but something went wrong. For years he slept with a loaded revolver under his pillow in case he got the courage to try again. He finally found Christ. Tolstoy made the world weep with the power and pathos of his prose, and his brilliant insight into human life. And his power

came out of his own tears.

For those who have made the world wonder and adore, the story is the same.

### **Beethoven!**

We would never have had the music that thrills us so but for his deafness. Mozart died and was buried in a pauper's grave after being poor all his days.

### **Behind Prison Gates**

Did you know that when Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* he was in prison? The thing that made prison so bitter for him was the fact that he knew his blind, motherless daughter was outside. He made shoelaces to find some money to keep his blind daughter alive.

*Don Quixote*, that famous satirical work of humor, was written by Cervantes who also was a prisoner. The last book of the Bible was written by an apostle in lonely exile. Many of the New Testament letters were written by Paul in prisons. In his letter to the Corinthians he wrote "Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten time without number, often in danger of death" (2 Corinthians 11:23).

There are many things we do not know. There is no one who can explain all the mysteries of trouble. This shouldn't worry us for we don't know much about anything, but we do know that the people who have helped the world the most are the people that have suffered the most. That's the story of history. That's the witness of biography.

### **Joyce Landorf**

You have heard of Joyce Landorf who has authored a number of Christian books, has her own radio program, and often speaks with Dr. James Dobson on his program. She has suffered for years from TMJ, a joint disease of the mouth. She says:

In six years I have been to 18 specialists, all experts on TMJ. I have been treated with physical therapy, holistic medicine, acupuncture and biofeedback, and have changed my diet. I have gone through all of those procedures, and this painful problem is my point of greatest learning. This physical pain is chronic. Chronic pain is the hardest pain in the world to deal with because I either have it with me daily or I don't know when it's going to come. I was incapacitated by the high intensity of pain to the point that I couldn't write or think or anything else. But it has also been the point of my greatest growth. . . . The mail that hurts the most is the kind from people who tell me that there is sin in my life, or that I don't have enough faith, or why don't I just claim healing. When you are hurting, when you are almost out of your mind with pain, to get a letter like that from a fellow Christian, is to be so wounded by a brother or sister and so put down! When my pain is at its highest intensity, I can't express how I feel other than that I feel abandoned by God. . . . Yet when we read about the lives of the saints, they were persecuted and afflicted and wandered in the desert and died. Yet there was nothing wrong with their faith. My mainstay lately has been Hebrews 11 where I read about the heroes of the faith — heroes like Abraham and Moses — but Hebrews 11 also lists other heroes who were whole in their faith but

who died, unhealed and unrescued. . . That physical pain has been the point of my greatest personal growth in the last six years. I have hated every minute of the pain, and yet I have learned that the sovereign will of God is what I want in my life. (*Decision*, February, 1982, p. 7)

### **Joni Eareckson-Tado**

I think of Joni Eareckson-Tada, that beautiful young girl who became paralyzed from the neck down after diving into Chesapeake Bay. After enormous struggle, faced with despair, a sense of hopelessness and a longing for suicide, she finally let Jesus Christ bring triumph out of her tragedy. She now paints with the brush in her mouth. She has written books to the glory of God about how to survive in tragedy. She has created an effective Christian ministry, Joni and Friends, which reaches out to persons who have disabilities and to others who long to understand and help the disadvantaged.

Perhaps Christ is still saying in some of these situations where he has delayed his intervention, "I'm glad for your sake that I was not there." Perhaps he has a much bigger plan than the one we would thrust upon him immediately. This we know — our God does all things well. Our perspective is so cramped and we see but dimly.

### **Carmichael**

You've heard of Amy Carmichael who did much for the children of Japan and India. She rescued many of them from temple prostitution. Amy Carmichael had an accident and then spent twenty years in bed. She wrote while she was in bed. She wrote books that have comforted millions around the world — books that grew out of her painful experience.

### **Carey**

I think of William Carey. At seven he contracted a serious skin disease. As far as the doctors were concerned, that meant he should never go out into the sunshine. Yet he went to India as a missionary. His wife went mad, his assistant missionary, Dr. Thomas, also went mad. It took seven years to win one convert. Carey said later, "Why, it's just like Joseph. Joseph had all these troubles before he saved one man. Remember the butler and the baker? One of them was saved after many years but later millions were saved. Joseph saved the whole world from famine by his wise provision but it took seven years to save one soul." That's the way it was with Carey.

### **Judson**

Remember Adoniram Judson who went to Burma as a missionary? Judson was a genius and as a young man he said, "Ha, ha, my poor father thinks I'm going to be a minister, no way! I'm going to be famous, but not as a minister."

He took off to have a good time and stopped at a wayside inn. The innkeeper said, "Look, there's only one room and next door to it a man is dying."

"Ah, that doesn't matter," said Judson, "we've all got to die sometime. But through the night he heard the groans and the moans and the sighing. When he went out in the morning he inquired, "How did that man get on?"

"He's dead sir, he's dead. He came from a college over in the east," said the

innkeeper. He named the college that Judson had attended, and then he named the boy that had led Judson into atheism and who had died in the night. The experience shocked him so much that Judson turned his horse around and went back home and told his parents he wanted to give his life to God.

One day it seemed to him that Jesus drew near and said, "Go ye and preach my gospel." He went to Burma. He and his young wife were put in a rude hut outside the city of Rangoon. On the left was the offal pit. On the right was where they threw the dead. Through the night the wild animals could be heard. Consider Judson, a little while later, being pushed across parched sands with a bleeding back, bare feet, starving, wishing for death, thrust in prison for two years where his jailers tried everything to bring him misery and destruction. See his wife creeping to the prison to bring him what relief she could. Then she does not see him for three weeks because she is going to have a baby. Then behold the first child, Mary, with smallpox. See the young mother offering frantic bribes to the jailers in the hope that they might release her husband an hour a day. See this beautiful wife of his, dying in her youth.

After fourteen years both his wife and all of his children were buried in Burma. He prayed that his life might be spared so that he could live to translate the Bible into Burmese. He saw his prayers, and more, fulfilled.

At the height of his suffering, Judson said, "Unless I believe that God in his infinite wisdom and mercy ordered all of these things I could never survive them." This does not mean that God originates evil, he does not. What it means is that no evil can touch a child of God but by divine commission. Satan himself said to God, "You've set a hedge around Job, I can't get to him" and God said, "Well you can do this and this, but only so far." God is sovereign, God is king.

As a result of the sacrifices of men like Carey and Judson, thousands of young men in America, England, Australia, Canada, and around the world, volunteered for sacrificial work for Christ. The sufferings of these great persons were not an excrescence, they were a fertilizer. The Scriptures say, "All things are thy servants." When Jacob said on one occasion, "All these things are against me," God at that very time was bringing redemption and relief. The son he thought was dead was alive. He thought that the famine would destroy him and his family. But Jacob, like Paul, discovered that all things work together for good to them that love God (Romans 8:28).

### **God in the Darkness**

The Bible gives us some clues. We read in Exodus 20:21 that Moses drew near to God who was surrounded in thick darkness. God isn't always to be perceived just in the light and glory. He's also in the darkness. According to Scripture justice and righteousness are foundations of his throne, but clouds and darkness are round about him. Isaiah 45:3 speaks about "the treasures of darkness." The Bible says, "The night also is thine." The eternal stars shine brighter in the darkest of nights. Isaiah 46:3-4 says, "Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he; and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made and I will bear, even I will carry and will save." The same book says, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that

you may know and believe me, and understand that I am he. Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me' " (Isaiah 43:2, 10).

The Bible tells us that we are never alone in the darkness. There is one who holds our hand, a very present help in trouble. "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want." The Bible gives us encouragement and strength. Consider John chapter 11. Lazarus was dying and his sisters had requested that Jesus might come speedily before their brother died. But Lazarus died before Jesus came. We read in John 11:15 that Jesus said, "For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe." "For your sake I am glad that I was not there." How strange! He was glad because he had a bigger plan. He had a bigger project. He raised Lazarus from the dead to encourage all who would lose loved ones in death. He gave encouragement to all the bereaved of all ages.

I remember when I went to seminary, one of the students who impressed me most was an older man who was always happy, always positive, always kind, never critical, and never depressed. He was always most thoughtful. Later on I found he had decided to become a minister when his sister suicided. There is a verse in Scripture that says, "Gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost." I believe when we reach the kingdom of heaven we'll find that no fragment of pain has been lost. God will have used it all to feed the world.

God is there. We see darkly. We stumble. We wonder in our pain. But we see a God who loves supremely, who is there, and cares. And we realize that tears are often the birth pangs of greatness. Already tragedy must start to be seen in a new light.

## CHAPTER 3

### Books That Reflect the Reality of Life

Be not impatient of God. Your sorrow is a seed sown. Shall a seed come up in a day, or come up all in blossom when it does spring? Let God plant your sorrows, and water and till them according to His own husbandry. By and by, when you gather their fruits, it will be time to judge His mercy. "Now no affliction for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." Trouble is like any other crop: it needs time for growing, for blossoming, and for fruiting." —Rev. Henry Ward Beecher

In the city of ancient Pompei there were two theatres. One was a theatre of comedy, and one was a theatre of tragedy. The best plays are always tragedies, like Shakespeare's Macbeth and Hamlet. Why? Because the human heart is more conscious of its pain than of anything else. C.S. Lewis said that God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our sorrows, but shouts to us in our pains. God is speaking in pain, not just to those who have it, but to those who love those who have it.

### Questions for Job. Ancient and Modern.

The Scriptures are full of tragedy and pain from the third chapter of Genesis to the chapter third from last in Revelation. It's a story of pain all the way through. There are books such as Job that are wholly preoccupied with the problem of suffering. The interesting thing in the book of Job is that part of the solution it offers is that "God is" and that's enough to know.

Do you remember all those questions that God asked Job? In chapter 38 God answers Job out of the whirlwind and says:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements— surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb; when I made clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors. and said, Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed? (Job 38:1-11)

Read the entire chapter and note the silence of Job. Job didn't know the answers. God was saying, "Look Job. if you don't know these ordinary things, how do you expect to understand the mystery of Providence?"

God asks the same question of us today. Undoubtedly we do know the answers to some of the questions that God asked Job. But let us imagine God addressing a modern Job. According to A.L. Moen some of God's questions might sound like this:

Where were you when I first filled the center of space with neutrons? Tell me



if you have understanding. Who decided the half-life of neutron-decay, that led to electrons and protons and the build up of the elements? Or was that the way the foundations were laid? Do you know? Where does matter get its mass-energy with which it can resist acceleration, and why does it resist acceleration? Tell me, oh modern man, you who have worked with accelerators and measured the effect numberless times. Where is the way to the dwelling of cosmic rays, and where do the elusive neutrinos go? What is in a brain that produces thought? Now you claim that it is RNA molecules that chemically record all its sensations, the secret of memory is at your fingertips. But, oh modern man, where do your thoughts lie — in the brain too? Bring me a thought that we may examine it. (*Some Limitations of Science*, Church Herald, Oct. 7, 1966, p. 4.)

It is true that we have filled in a few gaps of knowledge over the last few centuries. But today modern science is strongly reviving a sense of mystery.

It is not the mystery of the unknown, but rather the mysterious quality of the known. God's questions to Job are still the questions for us today. We do not know all there is to know about the mundane things of life, and neither will we know all there is to know about the mysteries of pain and suffering.

### **Undeserved Suffering - One Solution**

We must not stop in our study of Job with a picture of God reminding Job that he will never know all there is to know about the "why" of suffering. The two incidents from the council of heaven given in the Prologue (chapters 1 and 2) reveal to the reader, though not to Job, the purpose which Job's sufferings serve. According to the Prologue the sufferings of Job are permitted to disprove the accusation in Satan's question, "Does Job fear God for nought?" (1:9) It is God who first calls attention to Job. It is God who permits the trial of his faith. He also watches the experiment, and fixes a limit to the assaults of Job's adversary.

Throughout the entire book of Job God is in control. He permits the attack on Job. He permits it all for a special purpose. That divine purpose is to demonstrate to angels and to men that genuine, disinterested religion is a reality. The book of Job teaches that man can hold on to God, not for rewards and gifts, but for God himself. This is what the author of Job is offering as the fullest solution to the problem of why the innocent Job suffered. That is the thought behind God's first question: "Hast thou considered my servant Job?" God is saying, "I know my servant Job, he is not serving me for what he can get. I can demonstrate that. Even in times of great adversity and suffering, Job, my servant, will remain faithful to me."

Before we dismiss too quickly this solution to the existence of pain and suffering, remember what Jesus said to the question, "Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" Consider the answer of Jesus, "Neither did this man sin nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."

Some years later Paul, the great suffering apostle wrote: "I think God hath set forth us the apostles last of all, as men doomed to death, for we are made a spectacle unto the world, both to angels and to men." We must see like Paul, Jesus, and the author of Job that some suffering may serve a larger purpose, such as a demonstration and vindication of selfless, disinterested piety. "Does Job fear God for

nought?" My friends, put your own name in there where Job's is! Do you serve God for nought? Nothing more than undeserved suffering will help us answer that question. Could God be trusting us to demonstrate an unselfish commitment to him despite the tragedies and circumstances of life?

## **Lamentations**

The book of Lamentations is all about trouble and pain. It was written in the aftermath of one of Israel's greatest calamities. In 587 B.C. the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and burned the beloved Temple. Consider what it says in 3:21-26:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

His compassions are new every morning. It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. The Lord sometimes gives and the Lord sometimes takes away, but you and I have never created anything. We don't own anything. Pain pricks the bubble of our illusions that life is stable, that we are sufficient, that we are strong. Pain helps us sense our fragility, the temporal nature of our life, and the nearness of our death. Pain helps us to learn to wait upon the Lord, to hope only in him.

## **The Psalms**

We have mentioned Job and Lamentations. The Psalms too wrestle with the problem of pain. We need to note that while many of the Psalms start off with a cry of grief, they often end with a paean of praise. While more than one third of the Psalms are Psalms of lament and complaint, only one ends negatively. Only one out of one hundred and fifty!

What was the Psalmist's source of comfort? We can find it in Psalm 139. The Psalmist drew his comfort from the assurance that God was there — that God knew, that God hadn't left him alone.

O Lord, thou has searched me and known me! Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up, thou discernest my thoughts from afar. Thou searchest out my path and my lying down and art acquainted with all my ways, even before a word is on my tongue. Lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou dost beset me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

"We are never alone," said the Psalmist. God knows, and sometimes we have to leave our troubles right there. God knows and in his own time, in his own way, at the best time, in the best way, he will intervene.

## **The Pearly Gates, Raindrops and Teardrops**

Think also of the Book of Revelation. The last chapters of that book tell of the Gates of Pearl that open up into the eternal city of God. Do you know why those gates are gates of pearl? When an oyster gets an irritation, it pours forth a healing balm. This fluid surrounds the intruding grit and that is how a pearl is formed. All the saved will enter through the Gates of Pearl. It's another way of saying, we must go through much tribulation to enter the kingdom of God. God had one son without sin but not even one child without suffering. There is no other way to the kingdom of God than through trial.

In some ways the Book of Revelation is a terrible book. It is full of terrible pictures of the troubles that would come upon the church. We see martyrdom, persecution, oppression, famine, tribulations, and earthquakes. But before the Book of Revelation sketches those things it gives us a picture of the heavenly throne room. In chapters 4 and 5 the word "throne" occurs forty times. That word is only found fifty-seven times in the whole of the New Testament, but here in two chapters it is found forty times. Why? The purpose is to assure us that God is sovereign, and that he is on the throne. It assures us that God's providence is over everything.

In Revelation 4 it pictures the throne with a rainbow over it. We know what a rainbow is. It is a mixture of rain and sunshine. You can't get a rainbow without both elements. We want a rainbow to come out of our lives, but it cannot be unless some rain does fall, unless some floods do come.

Toward the end of the Book of Revelation, the author says that God will wipe away all the tears from the eyes of the redeemed. Note, all will have some tears. It will be the experience of every saint. We must believe in the sovereign God who has a purpose in every tear that comes our way. Jesus said that not one sparrow falls without his knowing. Jesus also said that the very hairs of our head are all numbered. Paul said, "If God be for us who can be against us?" Scripture says, "Be content with such things as ye have for I have said, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

The whole of the Bible illustrates this protection, this shelter, this insight into tragedy. In the first book of the Bible, in Genesis 45, we read of Joseph saying to his brethren, "You meant it for evil when you sold me into Egypt but God meant it for good. Don't be angry with yourself. God sent me before you to save your lives by a great deliverance." What marvelous words! "You meant it for evil but God....." Again and again in Scripture you read, "But God....." Never leave God out of the picture for God never sleeps. He may seem to be distant and silent. He was hidden in the shadows at the cross. But God came down into the shadows to assure us that we are never alone even when we are surrounded with darkness. He is there and we must learn to say to all the evil doers, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good."

On one occasion David was retreating from Jerusalem. His people had turned against him and a man called Shimei began cursing him. According to 2 Samuel 16 ". . . he threw stones at David, and at all the servants of King David. . . ." He then said to David,

"Begone, begone, you man of blood, you worthless fellow! The Lord has avenged upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See your ruin is

on you; for you are a man of blood" (vs 6-8).

In response Abishai says, "Why should this dead dog curse my Lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head" (v 9).

But David wouldn't let Abishai go and decapitate the cursing man who was throwing stones. He said, "Behold, my own son (Absalom] seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjamite! Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look upon my affliction, and that the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today" (vs 11-12).

David could see the hand of God even in the worst thing. Ah! What a gift! What an attitude! An enlightened faith and trust can find the hand of God even in the adversities of life. While the Bible does not answer our every question about pain and tragedy, it does assure us at least of this; God is with us even in the darkest hour.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Secret of Peace

This is my Father's world!  
O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong  
Seems oft so strong  
God is the ruler yet!

—Maltbie Babcock

How shall we cope with those tragedies of life which none of us can avoid? Let me tell you the secret which can guarantee a restful life. Our restfulness will be determined by our application of this secret. Here it is — **God is the absolute sovereign ruler of the universe and despite the seeming contradictions of life he has not lost control of even the smallest trifle.**

He who controls galaxies and giant suns overrules even the evil perpetrated by his rebellious children who misuse their gift of freedom. God does indeed make all things work together for good to those who love God. All things are his servants whether they be rebellious or not.

In the long run everything both apparently good and apparently bad works to his glory and the well-being of those who love and serve him.

### There Are No Second Causes

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus could say as his disciples drew their swords to defend him, "The cup which my father has given me, shall I not drink it?" He didn't say, "The cup that Judas has given me," but rather, "The cup that my father has given me." The only secret of rest in this life is not to admit second causes.

What do I mean by this? The bottle holds the medicine, but the mother holds the bottle. Pain can come our way from wicked people and from the wicked prince of evil spirits, that's the bottle, but before it can touch us it has to pass through the screen of the presence of God. If it is allowed to come through it is for our good.

The final hour belongs to us because we're Gods children. What happens to us is not as important as what happens in us. A ship can be in a stormy sea, but what if the stormy sea gets into the ship! The ship in the waters is alright, but if the water is in the ship that's another thing. If we let the pain overcome our faith, then we are in trouble. To try and save us from that experience Scripture encourages us with verses like these:

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. (Ephesians 5:20)

We can't do that very well when we are in the depths of pain and despair. Hebrews 12:11 says, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." We must be prepared to wait patiently. Seeds do not grow into fruit overnight and neither

is God's will immediately apparent. God is in control regardless of what things look like.

On one occasion when a train was passing through the middle states of the USA it was rocked by a tremendous storm. The passengers were fearful. In one carriage a girl got up, stood in the aisle and began to conduct as though she was weaving the elements of the storm into a symphony. The passengers began to relax. Well, that's what God does. He takes the elements of the storm and weaves them into music for us. He can do that if we trust him.

### **Although and Yet**

Read the last verses of the Book of Habakkuk. "Habakkuk" means "the wrestler." He was wrestling with trouble and tragedy when God said, "Habakkuk, the just will live by his faith." When you get to the end of the book he says; "Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

"Although and yet" — the writer of the Psalms knew that song. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (Psalm 46:1-2). The song of "although and yet" is what we all can sing because we believe in the providential reign of God. We don't know what is coming but we do know who is coming.

We are to learn to rest in the promises of God. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul reminded the Corinthians that "no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." God knows just how much we can take. We sometimes think he is napping, or that he has overestimated our abilities. But remember he has promised that he will make a way of escape.

We are to trust the providence of God. We are to rest in his promises. God said to Joel, "I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten" (2:25). What we have lost in health or wealth or happiness will be restored in the gift of eternal life. We are to rest in the presence of God. Note what it says in Psalm 16:11, "In thy presence there is fulness of joy." Life would seem so different if we really believed in the abiding presence of God.

My problem is I find myself full of self-pity when I'm in trouble. That is the worst way to deal with trouble. It's another form of pride and selfishness. Our life becomes full of mirrors instead of windows. Let's get to work for God and our pain will lessen.

### **The Example of Jesus**

We find our best lesson on tragedy in the cross of Christ. The cross itself is a symbol of pain, limitation, strain, hatred, and rejection. Think of all the worst things involved in tragedy — they are all there at the cross. Jesus is poised between heaven and earth to indicate he's rejected by both, but his arms are outstretched to indicate that he will continue to love us. What a lesson about pain and tragedy! Even when you

feel forsaken by God, stretch out your arms in love. Overcome evil with good.

In the wilderness Jesus was tempted to use his divine power to escape the fierce assaults of Satan. According to Mark 15:30-32 the last temptation that came to him on the cross was likewise a temptation to use his power to escape the insults of the mob and his allotted sufferings. The mob cried out, "Save yourself, and come down from the cross!" So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."

He could have come down and yet he could not have. He had the power to come down from the cross. If he could move a finger he could have destroyed all his enemies. One decision, one thought could have wiped them out. He could have but he could not have. The bonds that kept him there were the bonds of love, not the nails. If he saved himself he could not have saved us. They said, "He saved others but he cannot save himself." They were right. That is exactly the way it works. If he saved himself, he could not have saved others.

You and I on our cross of pain often look for a shortcut. We need to be very careful at that point. To try and dodge the cross may mean an ultimate cross — an eternal loss. We must be careful not to cut the Gordian knot of pain by some drastic act. Suicide is one such act. There are other forms of it. We must remember the example of Christ; he would not come down. He endured. How did he endure?

The first statement of Christ on the cross begins with the word, "Father." "Father forgive them." The last saying of Christ on the cross is, "Father, into thy hands." He could stand the terrible pain because he knew God was there. He rested in the Fatherhood of God. It is true that at one stage the agony of the guilt of the world was so terrible that he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It is not wrong to ask, "Why?" Jesus cried, "Why?" and there will be times when we will ask the same question. But we must move onto — "Father, into thy hands I commit my life."

### **My God. Why?**

Think for a moment of the experience of Jesus on the cross. We can learn much from the example of Christ. Before his crucifixion, he prayed in Gethsemane for God to remove "this cup" of sorrow and pain. But the answer was "no." God always answers prayer, but he doesn't always answer "yes." "No" is just as much an answer as "yes," and in eternity we will thank him for the "no's" more than for the "yeses." So in Gethsemane God said "No" to Jesus. After this his disciples forsook him, and then the Sanhedrin to which he might have looked for support, condemned him. Even the powers of the state on which he might have relied to remedy the injustice of the Sanhedrin, condemned him. But on the cross, having been forsaken already by his disciples, by his own people, and by the state, and as all the guilt of the world was placed upon him, Christ felt that he had been forsaken by God himself. Yet, in spite of all this his hand of faith reached out for the arm that was thrusting him away.

"My God" — if we can say that in the midst of our pain, we will survive. If we can take hold of the God that seems to be thrusting us away we will survive.

Think on some of the events that happened at the cross. Jesus was like a guilty prisoner at the bar. He had our sin upon him, he bore the guilt of all the world. He was suffering an infinite amount of pain. In those six hours he experienced what was

due to everybody ever born — and so the sun refused to shine. But when Jesus spoke the words, "My God, my God," the light of heaven flashed upon the scene. When we bring God into the darkest depths it brings light upon us. But when we fail to see God in pain and suffering the world becomes a place of chaos and darkness with all the gears clashing. It is a horrid world without any light or love. But if we can say, "Father," our troubles will not overwhelm us.

While on the cross Jesus did not complain about his physical pain. The words "I thirst" are the only indication of his physical sufferings. What a rebuke to our self-pitying attitudes! I find the slightest pain just vitiates my concentration. I think of nothing else but the pain. In contrast, here is my Lord on the cross and he only made one statement about his physical pain.

Consider what happened when his side was opened and his blood poured forth. That wound opened up the fountains of joy and redemption. We know the word "travail" is associated with a woman in childbirth. But there is travail before any great thing is accomplished in our world. There are no gains without pains. The story of the cross underlines the fact that travail always precedes the fountains of joy. As our Lord suffered, the veil inside the temple was rent to tell us that the obscuring veil of sin between us and our God has been taken down by the cross of Christ. He was forsaken that we might never be forsaken.

### **A Refugee**

Our Lord's life was a life of suffering in order that suffering might be sanctified. He was a refugee in Egypt during his childhood that refugees might draw comfort from his plight. In youth he lived in a home of poverty that the poor might know his sympathies are always with them. He knows what it is to be despised and rejected of men in order that you and I might feel that he is always sufficient. And on that cross he thought of all who would ever suffer. In those six hours he sanctified every agony through which every son and daughter of God could ever pass. He gave us an assurance that no matter how terrible our agony, we may have the assurance that the one on the throne of God always knows about it.

Our Lord turned the Black Friday into a Good Friday, but where there is no Black Friday, there can be no resurrection Sunday. Where there is no going down into the valley of grief, there can be no rising up to the mountain of glory. Where there is no torn flesh, there can be no glorified body. Where there is no crown of thorns, there can be no crown of glory. There is no such thing as a Christian life without bearing the cross, but if we will accept that cross, it will become like wings to a bird; it will become like sails to a ship. In lifting the cross we shall find that it shall lift us.

### **Examples of His Sovereignty**

I have said that the key to surviving personal tragedy is to accept life with a realization of the fact that God is sovereign. Now let us ask, "Does the Bible really teach the overruling control of God even in the minutae of life?"

Matthew 27:19 says, "While he (Pilot) was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him. 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream.'" Think of the marvelous providence indicated in this story. We would be tempted to believe that if anything beneath the sun was exempt from law and was a place of pure chance it would be dreamland. Dreams are a



dance of disorder. As Spurgeon once said, "I can well understand that every drop of spray which flashes from the wave when it dashes against the cliff has its appointed orbit as truly as the stars of heaven; but the thoughts of men appear to be utterly lawless, especially the thoughts of men when deep sleep has fallen upon them. As one might well foretell the flight of a bird so the course of a dream. Such wild fantasies seem to be ungoverned and ungovernable."

God intended that Pilot should be warned, and to whom would he be more likely to listen than his own wife? God was the one who sent the dream. You and I forget most of our dreams but God determined that she would remember hers. You and I don't usually tell other people our dreams but God intended she should tell hers. Not many wives in those days would send a message to their husband's place of business but she did, even though he was a judge and a very busy one at that.

A little earlier in the same Gospel of Matthew we read the following:

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain one, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" (Matthew 26:17, 18)

Mark's Gospel is even more specific. It says:

And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the householder, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?' And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover." (Mark 14:13, 14)

Observe the many examples of providence in this account. Jesus knows the exact time when his disciples will meet a man carrying a jar. He knows beforehand that there is a householder who will be willing to give them a room for the celebration of the passover. He knows that the room will be adequately furnished for such a purpose. God is always ahead of us. In the ordinary circumstances of life we will, if we have eyes to see, be able to discern his kindly over-ruling providence.

Consider too, the story found in Matthew 17:24-27:

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, "Does not your teacher pay the tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he came home, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or from others?" And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel; take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

In this account we have the power of Jesus drawing to the surface of the lake at just the right time, a fish, which earlier had swallowed a coin that had dropped from a fisherman's girdle. The coin is just the right amount to pay the tax owed by Jesus and Peter. We can only marvel at the occurrence of these circumstances. They evoke faith in the providential rule of God. In Psalm 8 it is said about the Messiah

that he would have dominion over "whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas" (see v 8).

The story of Gideon is another example of God's ordering of the circumstances of life. Here is the story as it is recorded in Judges 7:9-15:

That same night the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp: for I have given it into your hand. But if you fear to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant; and you shall hear what they say, and afterwards your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the out-posts of the armed men that were in the camp. And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand which is upon the seashore for multitude. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, "Behold, I dreamed a dream; and lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat." And his comrade answered, "This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; into his hand God has given Midian and all the host."

When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise; for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand."

This story too contains a series of miracles. Gideon and his servant stop at just the right tent, at just the right moment, when the right man was telling the right story. Consider the statistical probabilities of such an event happening by chance. There are too many things happening at just the right moment for us to believe that it wasn't under the control of God.

God reigns — there is rest and peace.

## CHAPTER 5

### Too Many Beds in the Ward?

When, sin stricken, burdened and weary,  
From bondage I longed to be free,  
There came to my heart the sweet message:  
"My grace is sufficient for thee."

Though tempted and sadly discouraged,  
My soul to this refuge would flee,  
And rest in the blessed assurance:  
"My grace is sufficient for thee."

O, Lord, I would press on with courage,  
Though rugged the pathway may be,  
Sustained and upheld by the promise,  
"My grace is sufficient for thee."

Soon, soon, will the warfare be over,  
My Lord face to face I shall see,  
And prove as I dwell in his presence:  
"His grace was sufficient for me."

The New Testament never uses the word "chance" except in the story of a parable. Chance is atheism. God has given freedom to men but it's like the freedom of the ways of the sea which come "thus far, and no further."

In a classic piece of literature we read of Emmie, a little sick girl. She says, "If I call to the Lord, how should he know that it is me? There are such a lot of beds in the ward." Yet we know that even among humans it is the people who have the most responsibility who have the ability to care for all the details. So if we want something done we usually ask a busy person to do it. Often it is the mothers with the most mouths to feed who are the best mothers.

It has often been pointed out that if God is great to the point of infinity it follows that he is aware of every stick and stone, every creature great and small. Infinite love shelters the least as well as the greatest.

We do not mean by this appeal to God's providence that believers are never hurt, or troubled, or oppressed. In Luke 21 we find an apparent contradiction that may help us to understand the providences of God.

And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake But there shall not an hair of your head perish. (Luke 21:16-18)

Note also Luke 12:6, 7:

Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God? But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.

In the fourth verse of the same chapter Jesus says. "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." So in both of

these passages Jesus is saying that death is the worst of troubles that can overtake his children, but not without his permission.

### **The Big and the Small**

He who notices our every trouble and who numbers the hairs of our head, he who attends the funeral of every sparrow only permits events to happen for which we shall eventually praise him in eternity. What Christ is promising, in effect, is this: not a hair of our head shall perish, without his permission, and for his glory and for our ultimate good. Could we see all things as God sees them, including the future, we would choose as he chooses.

Unless providence attends all things in our lives, it is difficult to see how it could order anything, inasmuch as the greatest events ever depend upon smaller ones. Huge doors swing on small hinges. A pebble altering the flow of a stream can govern the environment of the city's inhabitants. It was the invention of barbwire which changed the pace and destiny of America.

For the sake of a nail, a shoe was lost  
For the sake of a shoe, a horse was lost,  
For the sake of a horse, a battle was lost.

John Wesley wrote to one skeptic as follows: "You allow general problems, but deny a particular one. What is a general, whatever kind it be, that includes no particulars? Is not every general necessarily made up of its several particulars? Tell me any genus, if you can, that contains no species? What is it that constitutes as genus but so many species added together? What is a whole that contains no parts? Mere nonsense and contradiction!"

A biological illustration of God's guidance being extended to details is found in the sequence of events which led F. W. Robertson to choose the ministry rather than soldiering as a calling. His father, grandfather, and his three brothers had enlisted in military service, and Robertson felt that it should be his profession as well. The commission he sought from the government was long delayed, and during the interim a series of trifles eventually led to his decision to be a clergyman. He has recorded the details in his persona papers:

"If I had not met a certain person, I should not have changed my profession; if I had not known a certain lady, I should not probably have met this person; if that lady had not had a delicate daughter who was disturbed by the barking of my dog, if my dog had not barked that night, I should now have been in the dragoons or fertilizing the soil of India."

He became one of the greatest preachers of his era, and despite a short life which terminated when he was thirty-seven, he set in action ripples of beneficent influence which are still widening in our own day.

It is because of this wonderful truth about God's love, perpetual care, and supervision that the Bible is so full of hope and good cheer. This is why the Psalmist can declare that all things are God's servants (Psalm 119:91), and why Isaiah can speak of the treasures of darkness. The truth about God's providence should help us to understand scriptural allusions to songs in the night and even its unusual expression that "the night also is thine" (Psalm 74:16).

Of course, the very best example of God's providence is found in the death of Christ

itself. Observe the following verses:

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. (Acts 2:23)

For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. (Acts 4:27, 28)

It is clear from these verses that both God and man, both divine sovereignty and human freedom, were involved in the death of Christ. Compare now John 10: 17, 16.

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

## Yes and No

Belief in God's providence does not mean that he always answers our prayers affirmatively. He does answer all of them, but he answers some of them negatively — and for the very best reasons. Let us consider 1 Corinthians 12:7-10.

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me. "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Paul's request was repeatedly answered with a "no" from heaven. However, he was assured that God's grace was sufficient for him. Charles Spurgeon confesses that he laughed when he thought about that text. He pictured a little mouse in the granaries of Egypt after Joseph had gathered them up for seven years. He imagined that the sacks of grain were saying to the little mouse. Don't be afraid, our grain is enough for you." Then he pictured a little fish in a mighty ocean wondering whether it was going to drink all the water. Then he heard the ocean whisper, "Don't be afraid, our sea with it's mighty waters is sufficient for thee." Then Spurgeon imagined a man standing on the edge of the world about to breathe in, wondering whether he would exhaust the atmosphere, yet hearing the wind say, Fear not, the atmosphere is enough for thee."

Yes, God's grace is sufficient even when he seems to say "no." Never forget the story in John 11:1-15. It was because he loved Mary and Martha, and us as well, that Jesus stayed away and gave a negative answer to those he loved so much. It's God's faithfulness, not his unfaithfulness that leads him at times to puzzle us. But in heaven instead of being puzzled, we will be full of praise.

It is a solemn thought that whatever happens to me is of no account whatever compared to what happens in me. For this reason many of God's saints have been through terrible experiences, developing a character of patience and trust which will

endure for all eternity

## **Summary**

To answer our inquiry as to how we shall cope with tragedy, we have suggested the main secret. It is resting in the providence of God, his overruling sovereignty concerning great and small. It is believing that "God makes all things work together for good to them that love him."

In closing this chapter, let me reiterate an earlier point that ties in with this view of God's providence. The only secret of rest in this life includes the refusal to admit second causes. The bottle holds the medicine but the mother holds the bottle. Pain can come our way from wicked people and from the wicked prince and wicked spirits — they constitute the bottle. But before that pain can touch us it has to pass through the screen of the presence of God. And if it is allowed it is for our own ultimate good.

Remember that God's time may be different to our time — but his is always the best time. By faith we can understand that the final hour belongs to us because we are God's children. A ship can be in a stormy sea and not be in danger unless the sea gets into the ship. Similarly, it's when we let worry and fear get into our minds and hearts that we are in danger.

There aren't too many beds in this world's ward. God, the great healer of the universe, is in control, his providence superintends the great and the small. We have a physician who cares for our every pain or problem.

## CHAPTER 6

### In Thy Presence Is Fullness of Joy

The shuttles of His purpose move  
To carry out His own design;  
Seek not too soon to disapprove  
His work, nor yet assign  
Dark motives, when, with silent tread,  
You view some sombre fold;  
For lo, within each darker thread  
There twines a thread of gold.

Spin cheerfully,  
Not tearfully,  
He knows the way you plod;  
Spin carefully.  
Spin prayerfully,  
But leave the thread with God.

—Canadian Home Journal

Moses was told long ago, "My presence shall go with you and give you rest." We are not only to rest in the providence and promises (see chapter 7) of God, but also in the presence of God. Read often Psalm 23. It contains a beautiful picture of the shepherd who is always with his flock, and prepares a table before them even in the presence of their enemies. He guards them even through the valley of the shadow of death.

We are told in Hebrews 11 that Moses endured, as seeing the one who was invisible. And in Psalm 16:11 we read, "Thou wilt shew me the path of life; in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." Think of God as being above you and about you, before you and after you. Study Psalm 139:1, 2, 12 and observe God's thorough acquaintance with all our ways and the impossibility of ever being separated from him:

O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising. Thou understandest my thought afar off. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

### Rest and Prayer

We practice the presence of God by ejaculatory prayer — many brief prayers throughout the day. We should learn to pray in each new situation. Pray when taking up a new duty, in opening a letter, in beginning to write a letter, in making a new contact, whatever the situation — pray. Many short prayers are far superior to a single time of prolonged prayer. They make God seem present and make us aware that we are not alone.

### Rest and Obedience

Rest in tragedy can also be found by obedience to the precepts of God. In times of

tragedy, our daily work can bring healing. We are prone to self-pity and it is vital to our well-being that our energies and attention be directed away from self, preferably to the helping of other people. Self-pity is a form of pride and selfishness and when we indulge it, life becomes full of mirrors instead of windows. We need to go to work for God and the pain will lessen and finally go. However bad our personal situation, life is worthwhile as long as we can ease the burden of others. Go to work. Remember that one of the precepts of God is "Do thyself no harm" (Acts 16:28).

Among the laws given to ancient Israel were many that concerned their physical well-being. Similarly in the opening chapters of the Bible we have reference to all those things that are required for good health — air, sunshine, physical employment, good diet, water, social fellowship, worship. Whenever we violate the laws of nature we are violating the laws of God. The healing of a person stricken by tragedy is accelerated when that person attends to the laws of health. We dare not be careless about our physical habits. Abundant exercise in the fresh air, regular sunshine and a simple nourishing diet are "musts" for good health. Filling the mind with positive thoughts by the reading of inspirational literature such as Christian biographies is essential. (See my book *Coping Successfully with Stress and Distress* for more information regarding these principles.)

### **Trusting His Overall Plan**

We should not only rest in the providence, promises, presence and precepts of God, but also in the plans of God. God's thwartings are often our grandest opportunities. C.S. Lewis had a malformed thumb which prevented him from successfully engaging in manual activities. As a result he became a writer and has blessed millions.

Observe the wording of Isaiah 61:3:

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness: that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

In Jeremiah 29:11 we read, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." Trust in God as though you are the only person in the universe with whom he has to deal. He will plan for you and he will make all things work together for good as you trust him.

### **Remember A Key to Rest**

Learn also to rest and remember. Remember that you own nothing. The Lord gave and the Lord takes away. Remember also what you have left over. Too often we dwell upon what we have lost. The remedy is to count what remains and be grateful for everything we have. So long as you have health and can walk and talk and eat there is really nothing to complain about. Remember that Christ is left, eternal life is left, the promises of God are left. There is no greater aid to health than the regular practice of counting our blessings. As for the rest we can say, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight."

In summary: "Believe and thou shall see the glory of God" (John 11:40). God has promised that not a sparrow can fall without his will, and that the hairs of our head are numbered. This does not mean that there will be no losses and no crosses and no afflictions But it does mean that none of them will come without the screening of



God and his ultimate purpose of good in each and every one of the trials. When Simon of Cyrene had the cross of Christ placed upon him suddenly and roughly, undoubtedly he construed it as a tragic trial. But it brought him into a fellowship with Christ, and his role as a crossbearer for Christ has been envied across the centuries. So it is with all the crosses laid upon believers.

We add to tragedy when we complain that God gives us no full answer or explanation for our troubles. We need to learn to be content with being less than God. It is appropriate to try to thrust our head into the heavens. But it is not appropriate to try and thrust the heavens into our head. If we do not know one millionth about anything in creation why should we expect to know more about God's work in providence? Read the series of questions that God addressed to Job when that patriarch was in severe trial. (Job 38-41).

Many of our troubles are a result of our own follies as Lamentations 3:39 reminds us. But in some cases the evil comes out of the clear sky apparently un-caused by anything in our own behavior. Then it is that we have to trust God with the unknown. We are to trust him where we cannot trace him. The well-known J.C. Penney had a crisis in health which brought him to the gates of death. He was staying at the Battle Creek Sanitarium when he heard the voice of song and wandered into the chapel of the hospital. Here patients were singing, "God will take care of you." Immediately his burdens were lifted and his health was renewed, and for the rest of his life he rejoiced in God. So it can be with each of us.

### **The Cross: Pattern for Suffering**

The supreme pattern of life is a cross. Here we see limitation, pain, nakedness, shame, thirst, hatred, injustice, delay in deliverance, and a bewildered "why?" But nonetheless we see also here one who wore the crown of thorns on his brow of patience. And while things looked so wrong and while God seemed so distant on that black Friday, Easter Sunday was coming and with it life, joy, and vindication.

Where there is no torn flesh, there can be no glorified body. Where there is no dark valley there can be no mountaintop. Where there is no crown of thorns there can be no crown of life. Where there is no cross, there can be no resurrection.

In Mark 15:30 we read, "Save thyself and come down from the cross." The following verses describe the chief priests mocking Jesus, and likewise the thieves. Christ could have descended from the cross. Only his love kept him there. Or perhaps we should say his love and his faith kept him there. He saved others by refusing to save himself. But in due time God rescued him from death and pain, and then glorified him.

That's exactly the way it works for all the sons and daughters of God. If we save ourselves by some unlawful act when in trial, we will never be able to save others. While on the cross with pain we will often be tempted to take a short cut. We need to be very careful at that point. To try and dodge the cross may mean an ultimate cross for eternity. Suicide is often inviting but it is a denial of the love of God.

Ponder what Father Giovanni, an Italian priest, wrote to his congregation in 1512:

The gloom of the world is but a shadow Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy.  
There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see; and to see, we  
have only to look. I beseech you to look.

Life is so generous a giver; but we, judging its gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard. Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love, by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it and you touch the angel's hand that brings it to you. In everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty; believe me, that angel's hand is there; the gift is there, and the wonder of an overshadowing Presence.

Life is so full of meaning and of purpose, so full of beauty — beneath its covering — that you will find that earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage then to claim it; that is all! But courage you have; and the knowledge that we are pilgrims together, wending through unknown country, home.

And so I greet you; with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away. (David Francis, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 64).

## CHAPTER 7

### Promises Which Empower

No offering of my own I have,  
Nor works my faith to prove;  
I can but give the gifts he gave,  
And plead his love for love.

And so besides the Silent Sea  
I wait the muffled oar;  
No harm from him can come to me  
On ocean or on shore.

I know not where his islands lift  
Their fronded palms in air;  
I only know I cannot drift  
Beyond his love and care.

—Whittier

Every promise of God is worth more than a billionaire's fortune. To be able to claim one promise to the believer is worth more than to be able to sign any check in any bank in the world. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of promises in Scripture and it should be a Christian's delight to study them and apply them prayerfully, remembering that the divine promises take eternity into account and must be judged from that perspective. Typical of the many other promises of Scripture that we should write upon the tablets of memory are the following:

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.  
Deuteronomy 33:27.

You will surely forget your trouble, recalling it only as waters gone by. Life will be brighter than noonday, and darkness will become like morning. You will be secure, because there is hope; you will look about you and take your rest in safety. You will lie down, with no one to make you afraid, and many will court your favor. Job 11:16-19.

But no one says, "Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night," Job 35:10

The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you. Psalm 9:9, 10.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me Psalm 23:4.

For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. Psalm 27:5.

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. Psalm 30:5.

I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul. Psalm 31:7.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all. Psalm 34:4,19.

The Lord delights in the way of the man whose steps he has made firm; though he stumble, he will not fall for the Lord upholds him with his hand. The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives; but the Lord will not leave them in their power or let them be condemned when brought to trial. Psalm 37:23, 24, 32, 33.

The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness. Psalm 41:3

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. Psalm 42:5.

And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me. Psalm 50:15.

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. Psalm 55:22.

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times. O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done. Psalm 62:1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12.

God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land. Psalm 68:6.

Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up Psalm 71:20.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:26.

Unless the Lord had given me help, I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death. When I said, "My foot is slipping," your love, O Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul Psalm 94:17-19.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. Psalm 103:13.

Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man. Psalm 112:4.

When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O Lord, endures forever — do not abandon the works of your hands. Psalm 138:3, 7, 8.

The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.  
Psalm 145:14.

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Psalm 147:3.

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat: For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall and like the heat of the desert.  
Isaiah 25:4, 5.

O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them.  
Isaiah 30:19, 20.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.  
Isaiah 40:1, 2, 29.

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid. O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you," declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. "The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them." Isaiah 41:10, 13, 14, 17.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. Isaiah 42:3.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Isaiah 43:2.

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God. Isaiah 50:7-10.

Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. O afflicted city lashed by storms and not comforted. I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. Isaiah 54:4, 11.

And if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. Isaiah 58:10.

In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Isaiah 63:9.

For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men. Lamentations 3:31-33.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:4, 10-12.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Matthew 10:29-31.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid," Matthew 14:27. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Luke 7:13.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." John 14:1-3, 14, 18, 27.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. And our hope for you is firm,

because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, 7.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 2 Corinthians 4:8-10.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Revelation 7:14-17.

Each of these golden promises is worth more than a king's ransom. Read them often and store them in your memory.

## CHAPTER 8

### What To Do When Tragedy Strikes

You think that there is much to do in a crisis like this. There is only one thing to do. Link your lives on to the Divine Forces, and then, it is as much My work to see those lives and their affairs run in an orderly right manner as to see that to-morrow's Sun rises.

It is not passionate appeal that gains the Divine Ear so much as the quiet placing of the difficulty and worry in the Divine Hands. So trust and be no more afraid than a child would be, who places its tangled skein of wool in the hands of a loving mother, and runs out to play, pleasing the mother more by its unquestioning confidence than if it went down on its knees and implored her help, which would pain her the rather, as it would imply she was not eager to help when help was needed.

—Unknown author

### Immediate Practical Steps to Take When Tragedy Strikes

#### Attitudes

1. Remind yourself that experience is not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens. All the water in the world cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside the ship, and all the sorrow in the world cannot sink a person unless it gets inside the mind. To alter one's inner attitude alters one's relationships with the whole wide world, and with every event, however traumatic.

#### Give Thanks for What Remains

2. Count what you have left and give thanks. Though your life seems a disaster area at the moment, if you look around you will discover that there have been many things which have survived the disaster. Be rich in what you have rather than being poor by dwelling on what you have lost.

There is an old saying that "he who has health and no debts is rich enough." Perhaps not all of us have those riches, but all of us have some wealth. There are friends and family members who love us. There is beauty to see and melody to hear. There is blessed therapeutic work to engage in helping others and thereby helping ourselves. Most of us can still walk, talk, see, hear, eat, and serve.

#### Guard the Emotions

3. Because whatever gets your attention gets you, it is of the utmost importance that you stand sentry over all your thoughts when tragedy strikes — indeed on all occasions. Feelings ever follow thoughts and one must learn to live in the will rather than in the emotions.

Williams James once said:

There is, no better known or more generally useful precept in one's personal self-discipline, than that which bids us pay primary attention to what we do



and express, and not to care too much for what we feel. If we only check a cowardly impulse in time, for example, or if we only don't strike the blow or rip out with the complaining or insulting word that we shall regret as long as we live, our feelings themselves will presently be the calmer and better, with no particular guidance from us on their own account. Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not.

Thus the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. If such conduct does not make you soon feel cheerful, nothing else on that occasion can. So to feel brave, act as if we were brave, use all our will to that end, and a courage-fit will very likely replace the fit of fear.

Again, in order to feel kindly toward a person to whom we have been inimical, the only way is more or less deliberately to smile, to make sympathetic inquiries, and to force ourselves to say genial things. One hearty laugh together will bring enemies into a closer communion of heart than hours spent on both sides in inward wrestling with the mental demon of uncharitable feeling. To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind: whereas, if we act as if from some better feeling, the old bad feeling soon folds its tent like an Arab, and silently steals away.

The best manuals of religious devotion accordingly reiterate the maxim that we must let our feelings go, and pay no regard to them whatever. In an admirable and widely successful little book called *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, by Mrs. Hannah Whitall Smith, I find this lesson on almost every page. Act faithfully, and you really have faith, no matter how cold and even how dubious you may feel, "It is your purpose God looks at," writes Mrs. Smith, "not your feelings about the purpose; and your purpose, or will, is therefore the only thing you need attend to ... . Let your emotions come or let them go, just as God pleases, and make no account of them either way .... They really have nothing to do with the matter They are not the indicators of your spiritual state, but are merely the indicators of your temperament or of your present physical condition.

### **Praise God**

4. Practice saying. "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Remember that you own nothing, that you can create nothing, and that everything lent to you is really God's and his to dispose of as he sees best. Be content to know at least a little less than God, and not destroy yourself by seeking to answer every question that tragedy arouses. It's much better to get your head into the heavens than to try to get the heavens into your head.

### **Physical Exercise**

5. Remember the relaxed body cannot entertain strong emotions. If you're physically tense, all the negative emotions excited by tragedy will inevitably control you. But if you will adjust your physical program so that you can learn to relax naturally, then unpleasant emotions cannot tarry long.

Because only muscular activity can yield a relaxed physical and nervous system,

pursue a steady but increasing pattern of exercise — gardening, walking cycling, swimming. Choose something that you enjoy doing and do it daily.

### **Healthy Diet**

6. Watch your diet. Those who eat junk food, or even the popular traditional refined foods of our day, are a good target for emotional upheaval. Only a diet rich in minerals and vitamins can enable one to remain poised amidst life's storms.

Those who eat freely of sugar, refined flour, refined oils, and who use little by way of fresh vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, are inviting trouble. Remember that death is mainly eat. What you eat and drink today will walk and talk tomorrow. Indeed, you are what you eat. All refined foods destroy the B vitamins within the human system and leave you open to nervous excitement. The use of drugs such as caffeine and nicotine have a similar affect.

### **Get Outside**

7. Remember that sunshine and natural scenery are nature's own relaxation medicines. At least an hour a day out-of-doors is a good tonic for all.

### **Keep Busy**

8. Only a busy person can resist worry. Get moving in areas that benefit others and that will bring you a sense of fulfillment. Lifting the burden of others is therapeutic and results in easing your own burden.

### **Read Inspiring Literature**

9. Feed your imagination with the best conceptual nourishment. Read biographies of men and women who have made the world a better place by their dedication and genius. You will find that they too were no stranger to tragedy, but they refused to accept defeat whatever the loss or the cross. Make the Bible first and last and best in all your reading.

### **Pray**

10. Practice the presence of God and ejaculatory prayer. Troubles loom the largest when God seems absent. Nothing can threaten us in his presence. Learn to speak to him in short, brief prayers on all occasions, without necessarily moving the lips or closing the eyes. Talk to him as you would to any close friend. As negative emotions overtake you, commit them to God. Take to him everything that perplexes the mind. Remember he cares for you and is interested in everything, however small, that affects your well-being.

### **Some Reactions to Pain and Tragedy To Avoid**

#### **Exaggeration**

1. Let us not exaggerate the nature of the problem. The chief reason our pain overwhelms us and is so horrific is that it is the exception in our experience rather than the rule. Human beings would not continue to choose life rather than death if

intense pain was life's main characteristic. One only has to observe any normal group of people and their interchange of laughter and smiles to be reminded that not all of life is tragic. It is the man crossing the road on crutches that we notice, not the man who's walking across in the joy of health.

C.S. Lewis gave us the well-known illustration that if there are ten people in a dentist's office with a toothache that produces  $x$  amount of pain, then the extent to which any one of them suffers is not 10 times  $x$ , but just  $x$ . All the world's pain is only felt by one being in the universe — God. The rest of us only know our own and we must not exaggerate it.

Also, evil in the world of nature is usually exaggerated. Pain for animals, as in the case of man, is essentially protective and beneficial. It becomes devastating only in its extreme manifestations and when it is prolonged. That animals have extreme sensations of pain is no doubt true, but it is also rare. Even Darwin could say, "We may console ourselves with the full belief that the war of nature is not incessant, but no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply." (*Origin of Species*, 6th edition, p. 96.)

There is no evidence that animals have a time consciousness or even an imagination like our own. Therefore they are almost immune to many of the distinctively human forms of suffering that depend upon our capacity of anticipation. Active pain reflexes in animals do not therefore necessarily signify suffering.

Suffering is connected with the brain and the mental development of animals is much less complex than in man. The lower forms of life probably do not suffer at all. Thus a crab will continue to eat, and apparently relish, a smaller crab, while it is being devoured by a larger crab. The almost universal effect of pain is to destroy the pleasure of eating.

As with man, pain in the case of animals is also not a useless phenomenon. Though they do not have a moral nature requiring improvement, they have a physical nature to be preserved, and pain is essential for this. Pain is a sentry, and warns of dangers. If animals felt no pain from excessive heat they might not escape when a forest was burning. And again if they felt no pain from hunger pangs they might die of starvation. Pain thus becomes a preservation of life and is often not an evil at all.

Similarly, man's experience of pain is too often exaggerated. The great missionary to Africa, David Livingstone, wrote as follows about his experience when he was seized by a lion:

He shook me as a terrier dog does a rat. The shock produces stupor similar to that which seems to be felt by a mouse after the first shake of a cat. It causes a sort of dreaminess, in which there was no sense of pain nor feeling of terror, though quite conscious of all that was happening. (*Travels and Researches in South Africa*, p. 4.)

## **Having All the Answers**

2. Let us not behave as though all the evidence was already in. It is noteworthy that in the book of Job, God never answered the sufferer with a full solution to his problem. Instead he asked him scores of questions to convince him of his ignorance about the natural world. It was as if God was saying, "If you don't understand about these things on every side, why should you expect to understand the mysteries of

my providence."

The truth is, we know very little about anything. Scientists have suggested we do not know one ten millioneth part about anything in the natural world. It is sheer egotism to assume that we should know more about God's workings in providence than we do about his workings in nature.

On the other hand there are some things that we do know and upon these we should concentrate. Paul E Little, in his little book, *Know Why You Believe*, has summarised as follows:

First, as J.B. Phillips has put it, "evil is inherrent in the risky gift of free will." God could have made us machines, but to do so would have robbed us of our precious freedom of choice, and we would have ceased to be human. Exercise of free choice in the direction of evil, in what we call the "Fall of man" is the basic reason for evil and suffering in the world. . . .

Unless the universe is without significance, the action of every individual affects others. No man is an island. To have it otherwise would be like playing a game of chess and changing the rules after every move. Life would be meaningless.

Second much of the suffering in the world can be traced directly to the evil choices men and women make.

Third, some — but not all — suffering is allowed by God as judgment and punishment. This is a possibility which must always be considered. God usually allows such suffering with a view to restoration and character formation, and those suffering as a result of their deeds usually know it.

Fourth, God has an implacable enemy in Satan. He has been defeated at the cross but is free to work his evil deeds until the final judgment. That there is in the world a force of evil stronger than man himself is clear from revelation and from experience.

Fifth, God himself is the great Sufferer and has fully met the problem of evil in the gift of His own Son, at infinite cost to Himself. The consequence of evil for eternity is forever removed as we embrace the Lord Jesus Christ. Our sin is forgiven and we receive new life and power to choose what is right; the Holy Spirit forms the image of Christ in us. (pp. 126-127)

### **Forgetting the Pluses**

3. Let us not forget the positive aspects of suffering and tragedy. Whatever reminds us of the fragility of life and our dependence upon God is to some extent salutary. Whatever prevents us from building our nest securely down here below in such a way as to forget our Creator, is a disguised blessing, to some degree at least. Whatever manifests the great truth that evil only brings pain is also a plus in human experience.

John W. Wenham says:

It is a paradox that although the mature Christian is committed to a fight to the finish against suffering in others, yet (at least in retrospect) he welcomes it in himself. Though the prospect may be frightening and the reality itself almost unbearable, Christian teaching and Christian experience both indicate that the

path of the crown is by way of the cross. The saint is to be half soldier; through hardship he gains toughness, powers of endurance and comradeship; through suffering he learns sympathy and he grows in purity. At first sight suffering may appear to have the opposite effect, bringing impatience and fretfulness. But God thereby brings unsuspected evil to the surface in order gently to skim it away. Our Lord, we are told, for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. He called his disciples happy when they were persecuted. However reluctant we may be to embrace it, we know that suffering rightly received is one of the Christian's supreme means of grace. It is one of the means of keeping him dissatisfied with this world and sustaining his yearning for his true home in heaven. He can sincerely thank God that all his joys are touched with pain. [*The Goodness of God*, p. 79.]

It is clear that God has not left himself without witness, but the only panacea sufficient for life's tragedies remains that paradox of paradoxes — the bitter-sweet of Calvary which unveils the heart of him who does all things well, even amid storms and darkness.

In his essay, "The Fish-pens," F.W. Boreham tells of his visit to Lake King — a New Zealand fishing center. Here he saw the great fish pens where fishermen emptied their daily catch till needed for packing for the market.

Boreham asked a fisherman friend whether the fish could survive in their marine shelter indefinitely. The reply was: "Oh, dear, no . . . they soon get slack and soft and flabby. The life in the pens isn't a natural one. They haven't to work for their living and they are in no danger of attack. . . . In the ocean they have to be active and vigilant and spry. But here they lie at their ease . . . and they soon go to pieces in consequence."

Then Boreham tells a legend from the Dogger bank, of those days when each fishing-boat was equipped with a tank with perforated sides. In these tanks the crop of the sea was kept till the boats got to shore. But inevitably the fish became limp and listless, and lost their flavor — except for one fisherman and his catch. His catch was landed at Billingsgate as healthy as though just caught a few minutes earlier. After his death, the fisherman's daughter revealed the secret. Her father always had a venomous catfish in his tank. It kept the fish in a ferment of agitation. They never rested. And they never lost strength or sweetness.

The moral is not hard to draw. Nothing could be worse for us than uninterrupted sunshine and ease. In his mercy God uses upsets to set us up, downs to bring us up, humiliation to lead to glory, pain to usher in unending pleasure. Believe this, and you will find the treasures of darkness as you fellowship with the One who became the Man of Sorrows for our sake, but who now as our great High Priest is anointed with the oil of gladness.