

PAUL W. POWELL

HOW TO SURVIVE A STORM



Help With The Personal Crises Of Life

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Dedication

To Katie Kallas
Who is teaching her grandparents again
how exciting life can be.

Introduction

Storms are a part of life. Floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and devastating fires are everyday occurrences. And the damage they do is enormous. In fact, according to the Insurance Information Institute, the estimated payoff on just five natural disasters (Hurricane Andrew, Hurricane Hugo, a 24-state snowstorm, a California brushfire, and Hurricane Iniki) in the past four years was more than \$25 billion. There is no way to calculate the cost of these storms in terms of the emotional distress they caused.

The study of storms has become a science. Meteorologists know why some occur, generally when and where they will strike, and their intensity.

We even know the good that comes from them. For example, hurricanes often claim thousands of lives and can do hundreds of millions of dollars of damage. But the good they do more than offsets the damage. They redistribute the heat in the atmosphere that tends to build up near the equator and they provide more than 25 percent of the available rainfall in some areas.

Without hurricanes, heat at the equator would probably rise dangerously high, temperatures at the poles would drop lower and lower, and the lack of rainfall in certain areas would be ruinous to farmers, industries, and drinking water supplies.

But, with all this knowledge, what we need to know most about storms is how to survive them. So we have developed weather alert systems, marked evacuation routes, and designated storm shelters to help us.

There are other kinds of storms in life also. And they are just as varied and just as destructive. They come in the forms of trials and tragedy, suffering and sorrow, adversity and afflictions.

When these storms strike, the first question we ask is, "Why me, Lord? Why has this happened to me? What have I done to deserve this?" There are several possible answers to why troubles and trials come into our lives. Some of them come

from man. They are the result of human evil or human error. Others come from God. They are intended to discipline us. They are either sent or allowed to teach us things we would never learn otherwise. Others come from Satan. They are sent to destroy our faith and make us bitter toward God.

What we really need to know most, however, is not why storms happen or even where they come from. What we need to know is how to survive them. When the storms of adversity strike we can react in one of three ways. We can become stoics, we can become cynics, or we can become stewards.

- The stoic accepts life with grim resignation. He attempts to keep a stiff upper lip, no matter what happens. There is no passion, just indifference.
- The cynic reacts to life with mockery and defiance. He expects evil and misfortune. He may curse God for what has happened. He is as suspicious of blessings as he is of troubles.
- The steward sees life as a trust and attempts to glorify God in everything that happens. He may not always understand, but he leans on Romans 8:28 and looks for meaning that is compatible with belief in a loving God.

We must not blame everything that happens on man or we will become fatalists. We must not blame everything that happens on God or we will become skeptics. And we must not blame everything that happens on Satan, or we will miss the discipline and instruction God has for us.

What we need to do is forget about placing blame or even looking for explanations. Neither of them help. What we need to know most is how to survive them. That's what this book is about.

Heavy waves and weak boats make us vulnerable and afraid. When billows roll we need inner braces for the outer pressures of life. Faith, hope, courage, humility, optimism, and understanding provide them.

Chapter by chapter we will look at these interior resources that are necessary, not just to face the storms of life, but to survive them.

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1

How to Survive a Storm

If you feel like you've had a bad day, listen to this. I think it will cheer you up. It is reputedly an actual statement, written by a bricklayer, and turned in to his company requesting sick leave.

"When I got to the building site I found that the hurricane had knocked off some bricks from around the top of the building. So I rigged up a beam with a pulley at the top of the building and hoisted up a couple of barrels full of bricks.

"When I had fixed the damaged area, there were a lot of bricks left over. So, I placed the extra bricks in a barrel.

"I then went to the bottom and began releasing the line. Unfortunately, the barrel of bricks was much heavier than I was and before I knew what was happening, the barrel started coming down, jerking me up. I decided to hang on since I was too far off the ground by then to jump, and halfway up I met the barrel of bricks coming down fast. I received a hard blow to my shoulder.

“I then continued to the top of the building, banging my head against the beam and getting my fingers pinched and jammed in the pulley. When the barrel hit the ground hard it burst its bottom, allowing the bricks to spill out.

“I was now heavier than the barrel. So, I started down again at high speed. Halfway down I met the barrel coming up fast and received several injuries to my shins. When I hit the ground I landed on the pile of spilled bricks, getting several painful cuts and deep bruises.

“At this point I must have lost my presence of mind. I let go of the line. The barrel came down fast, giving me another blow on my head and putting me in the hospital. Therefore, I respectfully request sick leave.”

Now, that's what I call a bad day!

We all have bad days like that, regardless of who we are. And being a Christian doesn't alter that fact. Christians have bad days just like everyone else. There are some today who are preaching a health-and-wealth theology. One of the messages that comes through from them is that if you are really a Christian, if you are truly dedicated, hard times won't come to you. Your life will be one long emotional high. You will enjoy endless health, boundless wealth and perpetual enthusiasm all your days.

By carefully editing out certain parts of the scriptures and ignoring other parts, these preachers are telling people what some want to hear. And, by so doing, they have built a rather large constituency and

a lucrative ministry.

I have not found the health-and-wealth theology to be true to either experience or to scripture. Fiery Zorba the Greek was more nearly correct when he said, "Life is trouble. Only death is not. To be alive means to buckle your belt and look for trouble."

And these troubles often come at times when we are following closest to the Lord. At the height of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, I was a young pastor. One Sunday I preached a strong sermon on race relations. The next day one of my elderly deacons met me on the sidewalk leading to my study and said, "Preacher, you had better be careful. You can get off in a storm not following the Lord." I replied, "Yes, I know. But sometimes people have gotten into storms while following the Lord."

Then I reminded him of the time when the disciples of Jesus were caught in a sudden storm while crossing the Sea of Galilee. So powerful were the winds and the waves that it appeared their little boat would be swamped. Calling to Jesus, who was asleep in the stern of the ship, the disciples cried out, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!"

Then I pointed out that they had set sail that day under direct orders from Jesus, and he was in the boat with them at that very time. It is obvious then that a person can be obeying the Lord and be in close relationship to him and still gets caught in a storm. Having Jesus in your life does not keep the storms from coming. But when he is there he gets you through when they do come.

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We must not equate being saved with being safe. We delight to say that Daniel's faith got him out of the lion's den, but we forget that it was also his faith that got him into the lion's den. God never promises us safety and security in this life, only strength to get us safely to the shore.

Storms come to all of us and it may be that you are going through a storm right now. Perhaps it is a financial storm or a marital storm or a physical storm or an emotional storm. And you aren't sure you are going to make it through safely. You, like all of us, need to know how to weather a storm.

The Bible is our survival manual. In it the Lord gives us the answers on how to survive a storm. He instructs us through the experience of the apostle Paul.

Paul was on his way to Rome to stand trial for his life. The ship on which he was sailing came to the port of Fair Havens. It was winter and sailing the Mediterranean Sea was not safe at that season. So Paul advised the centurion in charge that they should winter in Fair Havens and sail for Rome in the spring.

But both the captain of the ship and the owner of the ship were determined to press on. So, against Paul's counsel, they set sail for a more favorable place to stay the winter. Not long after they sailed, they were caught in a great storm. The little ship was tossed about like a cork on the open seas. The frightened sailors began to lighten the ship, first throwing the cargo overboard and then the tackle. A lighter ship would ride the waves better.

For 14 days they saw neither the sun by day nor

the stars by night. The storm continued so long and was so severe that even the most experienced of the sailors gave up all hope of being saved.

At that critical moment the apostle Paul revealed that an angel of the Lord had appeared to him in the night and assured him that, while the ship would be destroyed, none of the passengers or crew would lose their lives. Paul then said, "Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me" (Acts 27:25).

The experienced sailors kept careful check on the depth of the water and realized that they were nearing land. Fearing the ship might be driven on the rocks and be wrecked, they decided to lower the lifeboats and trust themselves to the smaller and lighter vessels. As they were preparing to abandon ship Paul spoke again. This time he told the captain, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (v. 31).

This time the captain listened. He ordered the ropes cut and let the boats fall into the open seas. The ship was then driven into the mouth of a river where its bow stuck in the sand. With the front of the ship aground, the back of the ship was easily broken apart by the violent waves. The passengers and crew were then commanded to jump into the sea and swim for the shore. Those who could not swim were to grab hold of boards broken from the ship and they would be washed ashore. By following the commands of Paul, all 276 passengers survived the storm.

What sustained Paul in this experience? What enabled him to survive this storm? It was his knowl-

edge of God's will and God's word. The Lord had promised he would be with him and save him. Knowing this helped him survive the storm.

This experience, straight out of the teeth of a storm, teaches us how we can survive a storm in our own life also. Three things are important to know:

- We need to know what to believe.
- We need to know how to grieve.
- We need to know when to leave.

Giving God a Bum Rap

First, to survive a storm you need to know what to believe. Paul tells us what to believe in no uncertain terms when he said, "Sirs, I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me." If in the midst of the storms of life you have an unshakable faith in God and his unfailing word, then you will have an anchor for your soul to steady you.

What do we need to believe to weather a storm? There are four things specifically.

- For one thing, we need to believe that ***God is not the author of our troubles***. God has gotten a bigger bum rap over suffering than any other single thing I know about. The tendency is, when trouble comes, to blame everything on God.

When I was a pastor a lady called me for counseling. She told me her 21-year-old son had recently drowned in a work-related accident. Twenty years earlier she had lost another son in infancy. In both instances, she said, she cursed God.

When her other children, including this last son, had made a profession of faith in Christ and wanted to be baptized, she was so bitter and angry at God that she would not permit it. She called me that day to ask if God would forgive a person for suicide. She had come to such a point of despair that she saw no reason to go on living.

What she did, people have done through the centuries — lay the blame for all their troubles at the feet of God. The idea that suffering comes from God, and in particular to punish us for our sins, is the oldest and most erroneous explanation for suffering there is. The book of Job, perhaps the oldest book in the Bible, was written to refute this very idea.

Job, one of the most godly men of his day, suffered the loss of everything near and dear to him — his wealth and his health, his family and his friends, even his reputation. No one knows a man quite as well as his wife, and Mrs. Job knew her husband was a good man. But she, like most others of her day and ours, held God responsible for everything that happened. Since Job had tried to live right and everything had turned out wrong, she told him to “curse God” and die. Job didn’t understand why these tragedies had befallen him, but he did know his wife’s suggestion was not the way to handle life. So instead of cursing God, he affirmed his faith, saying, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him” (Job 13:15).

The message that emerges from the book of

Job is that Satan, not God, was the author of Job's suffering. His troubles didn't come because he was bad, but because he was good. And they did not come because he lacked faith. They came rather to destroy his faith. His suffering was sent by Satan to drive him to despair and to get him to turn from God. This is true of much of our suffering also.

God is not the author of suffering and evil. Calamity is not his handiwork. Disease is not his making. Evil is not his will or design. Jesus looked on disease and death, disaster and deformity, as intruders and aliens in God's kingdom. He did not regard God as their author and neither should we. If you can believe that it will help you survive a storm.

- Another thing we need to believe is that ***God will not allow more to be put on us than we can bear.*** All of us have had the experience of driving down a country road and seeing a sign beside an old bridge that said, "Load limit X number of pounds." The sign was there to tell the amount of weight highway engineers had determined the bridge could safely bear. In the same way the highway department knows the load limit of a bridge, God knows our spiritual and emotional load limit. And he has promised he will not allow more to be placed on us than we can stand (1 Cor. 10:13).

It is with troubles as it is with temptations, every person has his breaking point. And, the scriptures assure us, God knows what ours is and

he will never allow more to be put on us than we can bear. If you believe that it will help you survive a storm.

- And we need to believe that ***God is near the brokenhearted***. When storms come we often feel alone and forsaken. A lady once wrote me, "Please pray for me. I feel God isn't answering my prayers. Maybe he will answer yours." Do you ever feel that way? In the trials of life we sometimes feel the heavens have turned to brass and God has deserted us. We may even feel our prayers aren't going above the ceiling. When that happens, don't despair. God can come below the ceiling.

The crossroads of suffering and sorrows are lonely places. But regardless of how you feel, remember this, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Ps. 34:18). Believing this will help you survive a storm.

- Finally, we need to believe ***God can bring some good from our troubles***. Though God does not send most of life's storms, he is not helpless in the midst of them. He can use them for his good purpose.

One of the paradoxes of life is that we most often learn best from the worst. A little boy was leading his sister up a mountain path. She complained, "This is not a path at all. It is all rocky and bumpy." "Sure, it is," he said. "The bumps are what you climb on."

It has been my experience that I have climbed higher on the bumps of life than I have on the smooth thoroughfares. Character and courage are not devel-

oped in a harbor or on calm seas. They are developed in a storm. And in all probability God will let a storm come into our life to make us what we ought to be.

God, I believe, sometimes allows the props to be kicked out from under us to teach us that underneath are the everlasting arms.

In Romans 5:3-5 Paul writes, “But, we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”

Beginning with tribulation, Paul shows us the process and progress of spiritual development in our lives. He shows how God uses hardships to strengthen us and develop us into the kind of people we ought to be. If you believe this it will help you survive a storm.

If in the midst of life's storms you, like the sailors in Paul's experience, feel all hope is gone, don't despair. Keep believing God and his word. It will help you to survive a storm.

See You at the Bottom!

The second thing we need to know to survive a storm is how to grieve. Storms build up emotional and spiritual pressures in us. If we don't find a way to release them, they can destroy us. One way to do this is through healthy grief.

But one of our problems today is that no one tells us how to grieve. We are inundated with books and

tapes and seminars on how to succeed, how to win, how to get to the top. But no one teaches us how to fail or how to lose.

One of the best of these success books, and I recommend it to you, is Zig Ziglar's *See You at the Top*. Someone ought to write a book entitled *See You at the Bottom*. Because eventually everyone bottoms out. And, when we do, we need to know how to grieve.

In the television miniseries *Lonesome Dove*, Sheriff Johnson learned that his pregnant wife, Ellie, had left him and their son for another man. He began to weep.

Two little girls, seeing him, asked their mother, "What's he doing?" The mother replies, "He's crying." The girls then said, "But he's a man." The mother responds, "Men got tears in them too."

They sure do. Men, like women and children, got tears in them. And there is help and health in releasing them. We all need ways to deal with the hurts and disappointments of life constructively. We all need to cry occasionally. Knowing how to grieve will help us survive a storm.

Two things will help you to grieve:

- First, when troubles come you can ***pour out your heart to God***. Say what you will to him, he can take it. If you are angry, say so. If you are bitter, tell him. If you don't understand why you are having trouble, ask him, "Why?" Voice your deepest feelings to him. He will not mind.

On the cross Jesus cried out, "My God, my God,

why hast thou forsaken me?” In those times when you feel godforsaken, it’s okay for you to ask, “Why?” also.

- And second, when troubles come, ***share your burden with other people***. When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane in his hour of sorrow, he took Peter, James and John, his closest friends, with him. If Jesus needed human companionship as well as divine guidance as he faced the awesome storm of Calvary, surely we need people with us in our hard times also.

But where do we find such people? You will find them at a church. The church is the family of God. It is a caring fellowship where you can find love and support.

Now is the time to form those relationships. Don’t wait until the storm clouds are gathering, don’t wait until the boat is sinking to seek friends who will help you. Find a church and make friends today. Otherwise, you will one day find yourself alone at sea with no one to stand by you and help you.

A lady in the last church I pastored was dying of cancer. She had a nephew who had dropped out of church, so she called him to her bedside and said, “Frank, stick with your church and when the chips are down, your church will stick with you.”

I can bear witness to that, and so can millions of others. Sharing your grief with God and with others will help you to survive the storm.

A Time to Walk Away

Finally, to survive a storm you need to know when to leave. There is a time, a right time, to get off the sinking ship. In Paul's experience, the crew wanted to leave too soon. It was only when the time was right that he told them to cast themselves into the sea and swim for safety. If they had stayed with the ship they would have all perished. Because they left at the right time, they were all saved.

The same is true with us in a spiritual sense. There is a time when we need to leave our sorrows and heart-aches behind and move on into the future.

In the television miniseries I mentioned earlier, *Lonesome Dove*, the trail riders were crossing the swollen Nueces River. As they did, the young Irish boy fell from his horse and into a nest of water moccasins, where he was bitten so many times he died instantly. His fellow riders quickly rescued him, but it was too late. By the time they dragged him ashore he was dead.

They dug a grave on the banks of the river and buried him there. This was the first time some of the young wranglers had looked death in the face. They were visibly shaken by the sudden tragedy. As he closed the brief memorial service, Gus, who was somewhat of a philosopher, said, "Boys, I've learned it's best to ride away from death."

It is the same with all of life's storms. When they come, we grieve . . . and we ought to. But don't live in the past. There comes a time when we need to

bury the past, mount up, and ride away.

You may have been through an economic storm and wound up in bankruptcy. And you have grieved over that. Rightly so. But there comes a time when you must leave that tragedy behind you and get on with your life. You have to realize you are not the first — nor the last — to suffer such a loss. And, by God's grace, you can come back again.

You may have been through a marital storm that ended in divorce. That's the nearest thing to living death a person can experience. And you have grieved over your loss. Rightly so. But there comes a time when you have grieved enough. And you must put that failure behind you and look to the future.

You may have been abused physically or sexually by a parent or a relative. What a grievous experience that is. But you do not have to be forever bound by the past. There comes a time when you can and you need to mount up and ride on, leaving that in the past where it belongs.

Or you may have lost your nearest and dearest in death. And you have grieved over that. And grieve you should. But you are not to live in grief. In due time you should laugh and love again.

Recently a lady who had lost her pastor-husband 15 years earlier said to me, "I just realized today that I had never thrown the last shovel full of dirt on my husband's grave." What she meant was that until then she had not fully accepted that her husband was dead, he was not coming back. And that it was time for her to get on with her life. It is the same with us.

We are to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. There comes a time when we must mount up and ride away from the past.

And Christ enables us to do that. The psalmist said, "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain thee" (Ps. 55:22). We can take our burdens to the Lord and leave them there. And when we do, he will sustain us.

Robert Louis Stevenson is one of the best known authors of English literature. His father was an engineer who built lighthouses on the coast of England and Scotland. One day he took Robert with him on an inspection trip. Near Bell Rock, off the Irish coast, their ship was struck by a gale that lasted more than 25 hours and terrified young Robert. His father went on deck where only the captain stood. The captain had bound himself with a rope to the foremast to keep from being washed overboard. After approaching the captain, Stevenson returned to their cabin below. "Will the ship break up and sink, Father? And will we all drown?" asked young Stevenson. "No," said his father in calm assurance. "We will outride the storm. I looked into the pilot's face and he smiled."

When the storms of life rage, if you will get close enough to Jesus, whom the writer of Hebrews calls "the captain of our salvation" (Heb. 2:10), you will hear him say, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Put the helm of your life in Christ's hands, and he will make you an overcomer also — especially when the storms of life come.

2

Shaped by Crisis

Philippians 1:12-19

When Eva Hesse, the sculptor, died of a brain tumor at the age of 34, a critic wrote, “Hesse may be said to have been shaped by crisis” (*Time* magazine, January 1, 1973).

Born in Germany of Jewish parents in 1936, she was wounded by separation from her parents in America and the later suicide of her mother. Then in the prime of life she herself had a brain tumor.

Crises have a shaping effect on all of us. The blows of life, like the blows of a sculptor’s mallet, slowly chip away at us until they shape us into what we are.

These blows can take many forms. They may come as a death, as a disease, as a divorce, as a difficulty, or as a disappointment. But regardless of their form, they play a significant part in shaping and molding our lives.

I have observed that there are three factors in the shaping process of any experience: There is the external, the internal, and the eternal. The external is

that which happens to us; the internal is that which happens in us; and the eternal is that which happens through us.

If that which happens to us (regardless of what it is) does not destroy that which is within us (our courage, our confidence in God, our hope and our optimism) then God can do something wonderful through us.

The apostle Paul testifies to this in his own life. He was imprisoned in Rome for preaching the gospel. When the church at Philippi learned of this, they were greatly concerned about him. They knew imprisonment would curtail his missionary activity but what would it do to Paul himself? He was such an activist, such a tireless worker.

Would imprisonment crush his spirit? Would it dampen his enthusiasm? Out of deep concern they sent a member of their congregation to minister to him.

When Paul learned of their concern he wrote the letter of Philippians to help them understand not only what had happened to him, but what was happening in him and through him.

He was emphatic; what had happened to him had resulted in the “furtherance” of the gospel. The word *furtherance* in the Greek language means *to cut an advance*. It describes the work of woodcutters who preceded an army to clear a path through the forest to expedite the army’s advance. In ancient days, before highways and modern transportation, armies on the march cut across the countryside. When they came

to a forest they either had to go around it or cut their way through it. In either instance it would slow their advance and exhaust their energy. So to expedite their mission a group of woodcutters preceded the army to clear a path for them.

That, Paul said, was what his imprisonment had done for the gospel. It had cut a new path for the gospel, enabling it to make a pioneer advance. It was now going into places it otherwise would never have gone.

He names two of those places for us. It had gone into the palace, the very seat of imperial authority in the Roman Empire and into all other places.

How did this happen? Paul was chained, 24 hours a day, to a Roman guard. The guards were changed every four hours. In a course of a day he was chained to six different guards. That, in effect, gave him a captive audience. If he was chained to them, they were also chained to him. If he couldn't get away, neither could they. Never one to let an opportunity slip past, Paul witnessed to these guards who could not get away.

Moreover, when he prayed they had to listen to his prayers. When he dictated his letters, they had to listen to his dictation. When he counseled Christian friends, they had to listen to his counseling. As a result, some of these Roman soldiers who otherwise would never have heard the gospel were converted. And as they were given new assignments in the palace or in distant places in the empire, they went as Christians and they carried the gospel with them.

Moreover, Paul's imprisonment led to a complete turnaround in the church at Rome. The Christians there had been cowed to silence by persecution. But seeing Paul's courage and confidence in the face of imprisonment, they began to speak out more boldly for Christ. By the way he responded to his imprisonment, he became an inspiration and encouragement to the whole church.

Paul was under no illusions. Not everyone in Rome who was preaching the gospel was doing so out of pure motive. Some were preaching out of jealousy, with a competitive spirit. They were taking advantage of Paul's incarceration to promote themselves. But this did not trouble Paul. Though their motives were not the best, still Christ was being preached, and he said, "Herein I rejoice [present tense], and I will rejoice" [future tense].

Then he expresses his confidence that all this would ultimately result in his salvation — his personal well-being. Isn't that a marvelous spirit? Paul refuses to question God or give way to self-pity. There is no hint of bitterness, no note of self-pity, no word of complaint about prison life — neither the food, the living conditions, nor the treatment he received from his guards. There are only expressions of confidence and courage and joy. He saw this crisis as an opportunity, not as an injustice. And that's what made the difference.

What sustained Paul in this crisis? It was his confidence, his absolute confidence, in God and in the gospel. He was convinced that while God did not cause

this he could and would use it for his own purposes. He would bring good out of a bad situation. This kind of confidence in God can sustain us also. It can help us survive the storms of life.

A sign in my son's office says it well, "Attitude is everything." Outlook always determines outcome. Paul's faith helped him see this experience as an opportunity for the gospel, not an obstacle to it. He saw it as shaping him into a better, a more effective servant for Christ.

He did not allow that which happened to him to destroy that which was within him, thus God was able to do something wonderful through him.

Look at these three aspects in the shaping process of life:

- The External — that which happens to us.
- The Internal — that which happens in us.
- The Eternal — that which happens through us.

Life Hammers Us

The first factor in the shaping process of any experience is the external — that which happens to us.

Adversity is no respecter of persons. Whether you are a Hollywood starlet, a budding politician, an all-pro athlete, or a dedicated Christian makes no difference. To expect bad things not to happen to you because you are good is like expecting a mad bull not to charge you because you are a vegetarian.

After Helen Hayes suffered the loss of her young and gifted daughter, Mary, she wrote, "When God af-

flicts the celebrated of the world, it is his way of saying, 'None is privileged. In my eyes all are equal.'"

I am careful not to lay the blame for all affliction at the feet of God, but one thing is sure, God doesn't build a wall of protection around anyone — even his own children. It is clear in scripture, God promises us no exemptions from any of life's hurts nor does he feel an obligation to explain why things happen to us.

Life hammered Job. By God's testimony, Job was one of the best men who ever lived. He had vast wealth, robust health, a large and loving family and a sterling character. Then, through a series of tragedies, he lost everything — his health, his wealth, all his children, everything except his faith in God. Out of deep sorrow he said, "Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). And, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (Job 14:1).

Life also hammered Jesus — eventually to the old rugged cross. Even before Jesus was born, Isaiah said of him, "He is . . . a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3).

God does not shield us from the basic laws of life. We all get hammered occasionally. If life hurt Jesus and Job, who are we to expect exemption?

Albert Schweitzer, who earned five doctoral degrees and who distinguished himself in the fields of music and medicine and missions once said in an interview, "Every man must bear his share of the world's suffering."

The Last of the Human Freedoms

The second factor in the shaping process of any experience is the internal — that which happens in us.

We do not always have control over what happens to us, but we do have control over what happens in us. And what happens in us is far more important than what happens to us.

Swiss psychiatrist, Viktor E. Frankl, who survived the atrocities of a Nazi concentration camp in World War II tells in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, how some people responded to the privation, cruelty and despair that pervaded the camps.

He observed that under such deplorable conditions some men sank to an animal level, lying about and stealing from their fellow prisoners. But, he wrote, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Washington Square Press, Inc.; New York, 1966, p.104).

We are like the crippled boy who sold pots and pans from door to door. One day he called on a lady who was not interested in what he had to sell. As he turned to walk away she noticed his limp and called to him, "I didn't know you were crippled. Come back

and I will buy something from you.”

The boy was selling pots and pans, not sympathy, and he told her so. She said to him, “Being crippled must color your life.” He said, “Yes ma’am, it does. But I choose the color.”

We have the same choice. As someone has said, pain is inevitable. Misery is optional.

Some people, when crises come, choose the blackness of despair. Recently I was paired in a golf game with a man who had lost both his wife and his father to cancer. He told me from the beginning of their marriage he and his wife had planned and saved so he could retire at the age of 55. They would spend their remaining years traveling and enjoying one another. Then, at 54, they discovered his wife had cancer. By age 55 she was dead. A few months later his father also died with cancer. He was left alone with nothing but shattered dreams and a bitter spirit.

As the game progressed, I discovered that he had once been active in church, but no longer attended. So I invited him to my church. He said, “Thank you, but God and I aren’t on speaking terms just now. When my wife and father got cancer I prayed, but the Lord didn’t hear me. I feel like he let me down.”

Trouble can do that to us. It can leave us angry, bitter, disillusioned. But it doesn’t have to. It can also tender and mellow us. It can leave us kinder, gentler, sweeter. The choice is always ours.

Singer Ray Charles was blind by the age of seven, probably from glaucoma. He could easily have sunk into apathy and lived out his life on welfare. What

saved him was the intelligence and courage of his mother. “You’re blind, not stupid,” she would tell him. “You’ve lost your eyes, not your mind.” And, painstakingly, she arduously made him into a self-sufficient human being. She had him scrub the floors, sweep, even chop wood. Ray Charles said, “She made me understand that if I thought about something enough, I could figure out a way to do it myself. She used to tell me, ‘Someday I’m not going to be around to help you. You’ll have to help yourself.’”

Ray Charles had no more control over his blindness than the golfer did his wife’s cancer. But he did have control over his response to it. And he responded with courage and determination — not self-pity or bitterness.

Robert Louis Stevenson, who thrilled the world with his writing, spent much time bedridden because of poor health. When asked how he could possibly consider his days wonderful, he is said to have pointed to the sunlight streaming through his window and replied, “I will never allow a row of medicine bottles to block my horizon.”

Someone has said, “We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust our sail.” Ella Wheeler Wilcox captured this spirit in her poem *A Straight Course*.

*One ship drives east and another drives west
With the selfsame winds that blow.
'Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
Which tells us the way to go.*

*Like the winds of the sea are the ways of
fate,
As we voyage along through life;
'Tis the set of the soul
That decides its goal,
And not the calm or the strife.*

Like a Tea Bag

The third factor in the shaping process of any experience is the eternal — that which happens through us.

A crisis does not have to be the end for us. It may be the beginning. When Grammy-winning country singer, Naomi Judd learned she had an illness that would take her off the road and into retirement, she said, “This is not my tombstone; it’s a steppingstone” (*Reader’s Digest*, page 91, January 1992).

Adversity can be either and we decide which. That’s how Paul saw prison, as a steppingstone, not a tombstone. He used his experience to witness to people who otherwise would not have listened to him, to encourage others in their Christian living and to write much of the New Testament. Others have done the same thing with prison.

John Bunyan was locked up in prison and wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Martin Luther was locked up in prison and translated the New Testament into the German language.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was locked up in prison and wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*.

John was exiled on the island of Patmos and wrote the book of Revelation.

All of them took what could have been a tombstone and turned it into a steppingstone. They did not allow that which happened to them to destroy that which was in them. Therefore, God was able to do something wonderful through them.

Turning tombstones into steppingstones is a part of the redemptive work of God. His redemption is for time, not just for eternity. It is for earth, not just for heaven. It is for the nasty here and now, not just for the sweet by and by.

He can turn man's worst into God's best. He can bring resurrection out of crucifixion. He can turn Calvary into Easter. He did it once. He can do it again.

Someone has said that Christians are like tea bags, not worth much until they have gone through some hot water. I have lived long enough to know that the hot-water experiences of life have taught me more and helped me more than the easy times. They have brought out the best in me.

It has been said, for almost anything good to be made, something else must first be broken. To build a house, a tree has to be broken. To raise a crop, the soil has to be broken. To make a loaf of bread, grain has to be broken. And sometimes God has to allow us to be broken to make us better examples, more effective witnesses, and more Christlike. Sometimes it is from our brokenness that our clearest witness and our greatest influence comes.

Myron Madden said, "The essence of despair is

relegating God solely to the past.” We sometimes forget that what God did once in Philippi he can do again today. If we respond to the crises of our life with courage and confidence, with joy and hope, he can use them to shape us for more useful service as he did with Paul.

It is this confidence that kept Paul positive, optimistic, joyful. It can keep you also. The choice is yours.

3

Trusting God With the Mystery of Suffering

In 1990 Ted Turner, founding genius of Cable News Network, owner of the Atlanta Braves baseball team, and husband of Jane Fonda received the Humanist of the Year award. In his acceptance speech, in Orlando, Florida, he shared a moving story about a sister who became critically ill when he was just a child. He said he had been raised in a God-fearing family and when she became ill he prayed desperately that the Lord would heal her. But instead she got progressively worse and died.

Turner then told the audience, “From then on I knew, even as a kid, there was no God up there. What kind of a loving God would have allowed my sister to suffer and die?”

He then said the rest of his life he depended on himself only, “Not on an unfeeling phantom-being that did not exist.”

Russell Baker, Pulitzer prize-winning columnist, chronicles his deep pain in his best-selling autobiog-

raphy. When he was five years old in a depression-ravaged hamlet in Virginia, his father suddenly died in a diabetic coma. When they brought the body back to the house, they sent the boy to a family friend, Bessie Scott.

"God loves us all just like his own children," Bessie said. The boy asked, "If God loves me, why did he make my father die?"

"Bessie said I would understand some day, but she was only partly right. That afternoon, though I couldn't have phrased it this way then, I decided that God was a lot less interested in people than anybody in Morrisonville was willing to admit. That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted.

"After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me dearly in pain. At the age of five I had become a skeptic. . . ." (*Growing Up*, 1982, Congdon and Weed, New York)

I read a newspaper account of a family in California that filed a \$50 million lawsuit against four aspirin companies. The couple charged that their son, who had been ill with chicken-pox, suffered permanent brain damage and contracted Reye's syndrome by taking aspirin. When the court ruled that the boy did not have Reye's syndrome and was not entitled to damages, the mother said, "We were hoping for the best. I had hoped that the truth would prevail and it hasn't. It is going to be hard to put my faith back in God again."

Things like these happen all the time — tragic things, things hard to understand, things hard to explain; things that are hard on faith. And when they do some people lay the blame for all that happens at the feet of God and become bitter and cynical toward him.

Arthur John Gossip once said, “Some people, when belief comes hard, fling away from the Christian faith altogether. But, in heaven’s name,” he asked, speaking himself from the depth of personal disaster, “fling away for what?”

Life is a mystery. Much of what happens in life is beyond us. We do not understand why some people have cancer; why some people are involved in tragic accidents; why some people suffer premature heart attacks; why some people live in constant pain while others live relatively trouble-free lives. And even if it was explained to us we probably wouldn’t be satisfied with it. The only sensible stance for us, therefore, is one of faith and trust in God. It is to take the posture of humility.

We find ourselves, in the face of the mystery of suffering and death — the hard questions of life — in the same position of the first disciples of Jesus. Jesus had given some hard sayings and many of his fair-weather followers turned and walked with him no more. He then turned to his disciples and asked, “Will you also go away?” Then Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). When confronted with the mysteries of life, we must either swim with Jesus or sink in

despair.

In the face of the unexplained mysteries and the seeming injustices of life we need an undaunted faith in God.

We need the faith of the three Hebrew children who, when they were about to be cast into the fiery furnace, said, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Dan. 3:17-18).

They expected a miracle, but if it didn't come it would not shake their faith in God. Their faith didn't require a miracle. They would be true to God without it.

We need the faith of Job who said from the depths of sorrow, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). Job had already lost everything but his life. Now he said if he lost even that he'd keep trusting God.

We need the faith of Jesus who prayed in the garden, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). He prayed for deliverance but if his prayer was not answered and if deliverance did not come, he'd stay committed. He'd keep trusting God.

Perhaps the greatest expression of undaunted faith ever penned came from the prophet Habakkuk. He lived in times that were hard on faith. He saw the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering and

he asked God why he allowed these things to happen and how long before he would rectify them. Habakkuk was the first of Israel's religious skeptics. Most prophets spoke for God to the people. Habakkuk spoke for the people to God. The ministry of most prophets was characterized by proclamation. Habakkuk's ministry was characterized by interrogation.

The Lord told Habakkuk that he would work a work in his day that he would not believe if it were told him. Then the Lord revealed that he would raise up the Chaldeans as instruments of his judgment. Habakkuk was astonished. The Chaldeans were worse than the people he had just complained about. Then the Lord told Habakkuk, "The vision is yet for an appointed time" and "though [the vision] tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come."

Then he reminds his skeptical prophet, "The just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4).

With that, Habakkuk realized that though he did not understand the ways of God and did not agree with the timing of God, still he could not doubt the wisdom of God or the love of God or the reliability of God. That's when he wrote this great affirmation of faith: "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places"

(Hab. 3:17-19).

Habakkuk was saying if everything he had trusted in and relied on failed, if everything that gave stability to his life crumbled, still he'd trust the Lord. What sustained Habakkuk when he was confronted with evil and suffering? It was his faith — his undaunted faith in God.

If Habakkuk were speaking today he would say, "Though the stock market crashes; though the savings and loans and banks fail; though the oil patch dries up; though the economy falters, if everything I trust in and rely on, if every basis of stability in life falters — still I will trust in the Lord. My confidence in God will not waver."

That's the kind of faith we need today for the trials of life. Corrie Ten Boom said, "The older I get the less I question and the more I trust." That's a good posture for us. Such faith is not a gift. It is an achievement. It grows through experience and exercise.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon expressed the kind of undaunted faith we need when he said:

*God is too kind to be cruel;
God is too wise to make a mistake;
When we cannot trace the hand of God,
we must trust the heart of God.*

For the mysteries of life we need an undaunted faith. We need:

- A faith that trusts the ways of God.

- A faith that trusts the love of God.
- A faith that trusts the timing of God.

Victims of Street-Level Watching

First, we need a faith that trusts the ways of God, understanding and believing that God is too wise to make a mistake. The Lord said through Isaiah the prophet, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is. 55:8-9).

The Hebrew word translated *thoughts* comes from a root word that means *to plait, to braid, to weave*. The idea is that the God of the universe has a plan for the world and our lives and he is busy weaving it out in time. But it is not always easy to discern. It is often above and beyond us.

Our problem is that we are victims of street-level watching. We are like a child looking at a parade through a knothole in a fence. We see only one event at a time. We see only that which is immediately in front of us, whereas God is high above us and sees all of life at one glance. He sees both the beginning and the end of things while we see only the present.

The apostle Paul spoke of our limited understanding when he wrote, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

The “glass” he refers to is a mirror. In the ancient world before the discovery of quicksilver and the development of clear glass, mirrors were made of polished metal. At best they gave an imperfect and distorted reflection. Paul was saying that in this life our vision is clouded and our knowledge is partial. But in heaven we will see as if we were face to face with a person and we will know as we are known. Until then, until we can see clearly and understand completely, we must trust the ways of God.

Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, said that life must be lived forward, but it is only understood backward. Expanding on this idea, W. B. J. Martin said, “We are always wise after the event. While the event is still proceeding, we are unaware of what is going on. Only after we reflect upon it does it strike us that God was in it all along.”

So, we live by faith, trusting the ways of God. Believing that he is too wise to make a mistake.

The Shining Face of God

Second, we need a faith that trusts the love of God, believing he is not only too wise to make a mistake, but that he is also too kind to be cruel. Over the marble fireplace in the mathematics building of Princeton University, written in original German is the scientific credo, “God is subtle, but he is not malicious.”

It is interesting that the word *subtle* comes from a Latin word that means *woven fine*. The idea is that the pattern of God’s tapestry in our lives is often so

fine, so delicate, we cannot make it out. But, even when his design cannot be discerned, we can be absolutely sure that God is kind and gracious in all he does. He is never malicious in his dealings with us. Whatever he does, he does for our good.

William Cowper wrote about both the mystery of God's ways and the grace of God in his poem, *The Mysterious Way*. He wrote:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

We are familiar with that stanza. But there is an additional verse that speaks about the grace of God.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

Can you believe that behind what is happening in your life, the things you cannot understand, the pattern you cannot discern, there is a God who loves you? If you can, it will help you through times that are hard on faith.

The apostle Paul spoke of the smiling face of God and his amazing grace when he wrote, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his

purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:28-29).

These verses are as important for what they do not say as they are for what they say:

- They do not say that everything that happens is good — it isn’t!
- They do not say that God causes everything that happens— he doesn’t!
- They do not say that everything will turn out okay for everyone — it won’t!

What they do say is: God is at work in the world, especially in the lives of his children. His glorious purpose is to make us like his son, Jesus Christ. And to that good end, God can and does use all things — the good and the bad, that which he causes and that which he only permits. It assures us that no experience has to be a total waste. If we give it to God, he will take that experience and bring something good out of it.

The Greek word translated *work together* comes from the field of medicine. It describes a doctor or a druggist blending chemicals to make a medicine. Some of them, when taken separately, might be harmful or even deadly, but when mixed in the right proportions, can have a healing effect.

That’s what God does with the events of our lives. He mixes the good and the bad, that which he sends and that which he only allows, and uses them to make us more like Christ.

So we live by faith, believing that God is not only too wise to make a mistake, he is also too kind to be cruel. And, when we cannot trace the hand of God we can trust the heart of God.

Eternal Standard Time

Third, we need a faith that trusts the timing of God.

Modern Americans are the most time-conscious people who have ever lived. We continually reduce time to smaller and smaller segments, and then allow it to dominate us.

This dawned on me in a fresh way one fall when we moved from daylight-saving time and set our clocks back one hour. I started adjusting the time-pieces at our house and realized I had 22 of them to change. I started in the garage and reset the two clocks in our automobiles, the timer on our sprinkling system and our front-yard lights, and the wristwatch I keep in my golf bag. I then went to the kitchen and set the clock on our microwave. In the den, I changed the time on a TV, the VCR and our mantle clock. In the bedrooms, I reset three bedside clocks, a clock radio and another VCR. Then in my closet, I reset our five wristwatches and my travel clock. Finally I went to the backyard and set the timer on our back yard lights and our swimming pool sweep.

By the time I got through I had lost the hour I had saved! And, I was a nervous wreck. Have you ever

tried to get 22 clocks all set on exactly the same time? As someone said, "The man who has one watch knows what time it is. The man who has two is never sure."

With all our emphasis on time we become increasingly impatient. If our forefathers missed the stage, they caught one coming through the next week. If we miss one section of a revolving door, it upsets our entire day.

Then we try to impose our timetable on God. That was a part of Habakkuk's problem. He wanted God to act and to act in a hurry. He wanted God to operate on his timetable.

That's why the Lord told Habakkuk. The vision was "yet for an appointed time." And, "If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will certainly come."

We need to remember that we operate on Central Standard Time, or Eastern Standard Time, or Mountain Standard Time, or Pacific Standard Time, but God operates on Eternal Standard Time. "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). We must not run ahead of him and we must not lag behind him. We must walk beside him and wait patiently on him. In his own time he will do what he promised. He can be trusted.

Some promises must be waited for. They are not always fulfilled immediately. The Hebrew word translated *wait* means *to adhere to*. Habakkuk was to keep trusting until God's time came. He was not to give up on God. He would be faithful to his promises.

The truth is, life is a mystery. Much that happens is beyond us. We do not understand and we cannot explain why things happen as they do. But though we may not have *answers*, we do have *the answer*. *The answer is the Lord himself.*

So Habakkuk says, "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hind's feet, and will make me to walk upon mine high places." The hind was a mountain-climbing deer known for its sure and steady feet. On the most treacherous terrain it never fell. This is the Lord's promise to us. He will keep us on our feet as we travel the treacherous paths of life. He may not get us out, but he promises to get us through.

When David Livingstone returned to his native Scotland after 16 years as a missionary in Africa, his body was emaciated by the ravages of some 27 fevers that had coursed through his body during the years of his service. His left arm hung uselessly at his side, the result of being mangled by a lion. Speaking to the students of Glasgow University, he said, "Shall I tell you what sustained me during the hardships and loneliness of my exile? It was Christ's promise, 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end.'" Then he said, "This is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor, so there's an end of it."

There is one thing you can trust, that's the promises of our Lord. He is a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor. If he ever says a thing, you can bet

your soul on it. And that's why we believe God is too wise to make a mistake. He is too kind to be cruel. And, when you cannot trace the hand of God, you can trust the heart of God.

4

Learning From the Bullring

Irving Berlin said, “Life is 10 percent what you make it and 90 percent how you take it.” Attitude is important in all of life, but it is never more important than when we are dealing with adversity. When troubles come to us, how we take it is far more important than why they happen to us.

James is talking about “how we should take it” when he writes, “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations” (James 1:2).

Here James prescribes a most uncommon way of looking at the common problems of life. He admonishes, “Be happy when you find yourself in the middle of difficulty.” In fact, four times in the first 12 verses of the first chapter of his book he either states or implies we should rejoice in times of adversity.

When troubles come, we always have two choices. We can sulk or we can sing. When adversity strikes, some people sulk. They whine and complain. They

become bitter, angry, and resentful. Some even curse God. They make life miserable for themselves and for everyone else around them.

Others choose to sing. They refuse to allow the circumstances of life to overwhelm them. They don't simply endure their trials, they rise above them and become better people because of them. Adversity causes some people to break and some to break records. It is our attitude that determines whether the experience makes us bitter or better.

James does not tell us to rejoice *about* our adversities, but to rejoice *in* them. How can we rejoice *in* the midst of trials and adversities? It is because of what they can teach us and how God can use them. They can teach us some of life's most enduring lessons. And, as James suggests, these experiences can be instruments of spiritual growth and advancement for us. The Greek word translated *temptation* in verse 2 means *a fiery trial, a test, or a proving*, which is for the purpose of building fortitude in the believer.

According to James, adversity both proves and improves the quality of our faith. It tests us and it teaches us. A person who has never had his faith tested doesn't really know if his faith is real. A thing that can't be tested can't be fully trusted. So, God sometimes lets us go through tough experiences to prove to us and to others that our faith is genuine.

But it not only proves our faith, it can also improve it. Periods of testing can be instruments developing in us the strength of character that is a necessary part of Christian maturity. As James says, pres-

sure produces patience and patience leads to perfection.

There is a Spanish proverb that says, “Talking bull is not the same as being in the bullring.” There are things we learn in the bullring that could never be learned in a bull session. Experience is a great teacher. Adversity is the greatest teacher of all.

There are at least three things which trials can teach us. Knowing these things enables us to rejoice in our troubles even if we can’t be happy about them.

- Trials can teach us patience.
- Trials can teach us to pray.
- Trials can teach us the right priorities.

Not Made of Sugar Candy

First, adversity teaches us patience. James says we should rejoice in our trials, “knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh [produces] patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (vs. 3-4).

The Greek word translated *patience* does not suggest that we passively endure hardships. It does not mean to sit and twiddle your thumbs. Patience is the strength of character to face life triumphantly. It is the ability to stand up to life without going to pieces or going to the liquor/tranquilizer bottle.

The Greek word translated *perfect* (v. 4) is *telios* and means the *end* or *completeness* of a process or thing. Some trials are designed to bring about spiritual maturity or completeness in the believer (v. 3).

As someone has said, the devil tempts us to bring us down and God tests us to bring us up.

One reason the Lord allows adversity, according to James, is not to punish us, but to perfect us. It is not to make us miserable, but to make us mature. God's goal for our lives is not to make us comfortable, but to conform us to the image of his son, Jesus Christ. God's ultimate concern is our character, not our immediate comfort.

Strength of character is not something we inherit or something that is given to us. It is something we develop. But how is it developed? How is Christian character built? It is built through life's experiences and our response to them. Troubles and hardships mixed with faith make us into the kind of people we ought to be.

Character does not come cheap. It usually involves suffering on the part of someone. When the football coach wants to build a team, he does not send his players out on the field to play against soft pillows. The coach puts them to work against rough opponents, a blocking frame, a tackling dummy, and through strenuous exercises. God may do the same thing with us. To give us strength of character, he sometimes marches us, at times, against tough opponents, against temptation, against public opinion, against discouragement, against hardships.

Great civilizations and great people are made the same way — not in softness but in challenge and response to that challenge. Sir Winston Churchill noted this when in one of his rousing speeches he said, "We

have not journeyed all this way across the centuries, across the oceans, across the mountains, across the prairies, because we are made of sugar candy.”

The apostle Paul learned humility through the things he suffered (2 Cor. 12:9). Even our Lord Jesus was perfected through suffering (Heb. 2:10). He was made complete through his experiences that he might better minister to us. It took Calvary to do it.

So the Lord often allows us to go through painful experiences and endure hardships because these are the things that develop us into the kind of people we need to be. God allows some suffering and some difficulties because there are some things to be accomplished in our character that can be brought about only by suffering and trials (1 Peter 1:7).

As carbon under the tremendous pressure of tons of earth produces a diamond, so God allows our character to be formed under the pressure of our circumstances.

- Remember, it is the irritant in the oyster that produces the beautiful pearl.
- Remember, the strongest steel is forged in the hottest fire.
- Remember, it is the crushed flower that produces the perfume.

So, when God wants to develop us he often allows irritants in our lives, he often permits us to go through the fire; he often allows our hearts to be crushed. That's how he proves us faithful and himself faithful to develop strength of character in us.

Some unknown poet expressed it this way:

*When God wants to drill a man
 And thrill a man,
 And skill a man,
 When God wants to mold a man
 To play the noblest part;
 When he yearns with all his heart,
 To create so great and bold a man,
 That all the world shall be amazed,
 Watch his methods, watch his ways!
 How he ruthlessly perfects,
 Whom he royally elects!
 How he hammers him and hurts him,
 And with mighty blows converts him
 Into trial shapes of clay which
 Only God understands;
 While his tortured heart is crying
 And he lifts beseeching hands!
 How he bends but never breaks,
 When his good he undertakes;
 How he uses whom he chooses,
 And with every purpose fuses him;
 By every act induces him
 To try his splendor out —
 God knows what he's about!*

That's why we can rejoice in tribulation. We know what it produces. Charles de Gaulle put it well when he said, "The man of character finds a special attractiveness in difficulty since it is only by coming to grips with adversity that he can realize his potentialities."

When Life Knocks You Down

Second, trials teach us to pray. When times of testing come we may wonder, "How can I go on? How can I face this?" When that happens, James tells us what to do. He says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5).

Prayer puts us in touch with God who can give us both the wisdom and the strength we need to stand up to life. As long as we feel we are in control of our life, we are not apt to turn the control over to the one who ultimately should have control. So God occasionally permits trials to teach us humility. He allows them to remind us of our inadequacy and his sufficiency, of our weakness and his strength.

From the writings of the apostle Paul we get the impression that humility was not an easy or automatic virtue to him. He wrote concerning his missionary activities, "We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). Paul was a brilliant man with a keen mind, and a strong will, and a powerful testimony. He could easily have been puffed up. Apparently the constant dangers he faced kept him on his knees — looking to God for his safety.

On one occasion he tells of being translated into the third heaven, where he saw things so wonderful and mysterious he could not speak of them. Apparently, this too was a temptation for him to be puffed up with pride.

So, Paul writes, “lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me” (2 Cor. 12:7).

We do not know what Paul’s affliction was. The word “thorn” suggests it was intensely painful. The phrase “in the flesh” locates it. It was a physical affliction.

The word *buffet* means *to punch, to jab, to hit*. It was the word that is used to describe what the soldiers did to Jesus during his trial. In the same way that the soldiers beat Jesus down, so Paul says he had an intensely painful physical affliction that kept him beaten down.

Three times in prayer he asked God to remove his affliction. Three times he pounded on the gates of heaven. The answer came back, “No! It is for your good.” God answered Paul by saying that his grace would enable him to live with his infirmity. Paul concluded that the problem was being used to make him aware of his total dependence upon God. It was in his weakness that God’s strength was being revealed. Paul’s response was, “I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weakness in order to feel the protection of Christ’s power over me. I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul accepted his weakness as God’s opportunity to make himself known. He now sees that the hard and continued discipline of pain and ill health was God’s way of saving him from pride that is fatal

to the Christian spirit and usefulness.

Paul saw in all this a divine purpose has been worked out through the physical ailment he has to suffer. It has kept him from pride and arrogance, which he might have felt as a result of his special vision. He saw this as God's way of saving him from pride that is fatal in the Christian's spirit and usefulness. The same can be true of us.

Trouble should never get a Christian lower than his knees. Ethel Barrymore said, "When life knocks you to your knees, and it will, why, get up! If it knocks you to your knees again, as it will, well, isn't that the best position from which to pray?"

The best posture for a Christian is always knees down and chin up. And when we pray, in faith, James says, the Lord never becomes impatient with our asking. He responds by giving us wisdom and strength. As the poet wrote:

*No one ever sought the father and found he
was not there,*

*And no burden is too heavy to be
lightened by a prayer,
No problem is too intricate and no sorrow
that we face,*

*Is too deep and devastating to be
softened by his
grace,*

*No trials and tribulations are beyond what
we can bear,*

*If we share them with our father as we
talk to him in prayer.*

Bless You, Prison

Third, adversity teaches us the right priorities in life. It is so easy to lose perspective in today's world. Gordon Dahl put it succinctly when he wrote: "Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disfigured faster than they can keep them in repair, and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot (Gordon Dahl, *Work, Play and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972, p. 12). But when troubles come we re-examine our values and our relationship and reprioritize our lives.

Nothing causes us to sift through the chaff of life to discover that which is lasting, permanent, and eternal like adversity.

James had this in mind when he wrote, "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: but the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away" (James 1:9-10).

Trouble is also a great equalizer. It teaches both the rich and the poor what's really important in life. In adversity the poor man learns just how rich he is. He learns that he has wealth in friends, a treasure in his church, and abundant resources in God. Through adversity the poor man realizes he is a rich man.

And, it can teach the rich man how poor he is if all he has is money. It reminds him that money can buy

a house, but not a home; books, but not brains; a bed, but not sleep; food, but not an appetite; finery, but not beauty; medicine, but not health; luxuries, but not culture; amusement, but not happiness; a crucifix, but not a savior.

A pastor friend of mine tells of visiting a fellow minister who was dying of cancer. In the course of their visit, the conversation turned to the controversy that has plagued our convention for years. My friend asked his fellow minister what he thought about the controversy. The man replied, "You know, none of that is of interest to a dying man. Furthermore, it's not even of interest to a dying world." Death has a way of changing our interests in life.

George Stringer, a friend in Tyler, Texas, died from cancer several years ago. During a pastoral visit he told me that during his lengthy illness, his nap was interrupted by a call from a person selling investments by telephone.

The caller began talking about the price of gold. George interrupted, "I'm not interested in gold." The man then started talking to him about the price of silver. Again George interrupted, saying, "I'm not interested in silver either."

Finally, the man said in exasperation, "Mr. Stringer, what does interest you?" He replied, "I have cancer, and living concerns me some."

When you have cancer, the price of gold and silver doesn't matter all that much. A life-threatening illness does remind us of what's important and what's not.

So do other troubles. Soviet novelist Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was placed in prison in Siberia for his dissident writings. After 10 years in prison he wrote, "Bless you, prison, bless you for having been my life." Then he added, "It was there, lying on that rotten prison straw, that for the first time I understood that the purpose of life is not prosperity as we have been made to believe, but the maturing of the human soul."

God, therefore, sometimes allows us to be confined to a bed or left in a difficult place to help us realize the true values of life. For it is in adversity that we best learn what really matters in life.

There is an old Jewish saying: "You can't feel warmth until you've been cold." It is also true that a person can't appreciate the light if he's never been in the darkness. He can't appreciate food if he's never been hungry. He can't appreciate health if he's never been sick. He can't appreciate wealth if he's never been poor. And he can't really appreciate freedom if he's never been in prison.

I've lived long enough to thank God for my trials and my troubles. What I thought at one time was the benediction to my ministry turned out to be the invocation. What seemed to me to be the worst thing that could happen to me has turned out to be the best. Trouble has been perhaps my greatest teacher. It taught me patience, it taught me humility, it taught me the true values of life.

Robert Hamilton captures this entire sustaining truth when he writes:

*I walked a mile with Pleasure,
she chattered all the way,
I was none the wiser for
what she had to say.
I walked a mile with Sorrow,
ne'er a word said she.
But, oh, the things I learned from her
when Sorrow walked with me.*

Terry Waite, a longtime hostage in Lebanon, wrote of his experience: "I have been determined in captivity, and still am determined, to convert this experience into something that will be useful and good for other people. I think that's the way to approach suffering. It seems to me that Christianity doesn't, in any way, lessen suffering. What it does is enable you to take it, to face it, to work through it, and eventually to convert it" (Terry Waite, quoted in *Church Times*, December 27, 1991).

That's one of the wonders of our faith. It enables us to convert liabilities into assets, trials into triumphs. That's one of the reasons why we should "count it all joy" when times of testing come.

5

It's One Thing After Another

Out of deep distress Job said, “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble” (Job 14:1).

Dr. Klaus Festermann, an able German scholar who has done some work in the Hebrew of the book of Job, says that the phrase “full of trouble” is the picture of a parade. You stand watching a parade, and one segment goes by . . . and another . . . and then another. Trouble seems to come in that fashion. We could express it like this: “Man who is born of woman is of few days, and trouble passes before him like a parade. It is one thing after another.”

I know some people whose lives are like that. One family I know lost a child by drowning, then their house burned. A few years later the wife was murdered and a few days after that the husband was found dead — either by murder or suicide. Four years later a grandson was killed when a basketball goal fell on him.

Another family I know lost five of their six sons, all in different tragedies. One was electrocuted, one died of a sudden illness, one was found shot to death, one died of an accidental overdose, and one a suicide. The strain of all this led to the breakup of a long and happy marriage.

Job's life was like that also — his trouble passed before him like a parade. It was one thing after another.

The book of Job, that contains his story, is probably the oldest book in the Bible, and perhaps the oldest book in existence. It is fitting, I think, that it grapples more earnestly than any other book in the world with man's oldest and most perplexing question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The book of Job is a real-life drama that begins like a fairy tale. Job is one of the wealthiest, most respected and best men in the east. He is surrounded by what are commonly regarded as unmistakable tokens of divine favor — great wealth, a loving family, robust health, and a sterling reputation. Every cloud in Job's sky seems to have a silver lining. But soon the dark clouds of tragedy begin to gather over his pleasant life. And before the storm is over Job has lost everything he values except his life and his faith.

He is suddenly plunged into such depths of sorrow that he feels abandoned by God. His wife and his friends add to his misery by offering him poor advice and easy explanations for what has happened to him. They mean well, but they do great harm.

In all of this Job's faith bends, but it does not break.

And in the end God vindicates Job's character by restoring to him more than he had originally lost.

The story ends as it began, with Job blessed and happy. But in between he grapples with life's most common and most distressing question: "Why do the worst of things happen to the best of people?" As we walk with Job through his gut-wrenching pain, he teaches us how to respond to the hurts of life.

A Drama in Five Parts

There are five scenes in Job's drama. The book opens on earth with Job introduced as a highly successful, God-fearing, clean-living businessman. This is the essential premise of the book. Job is a good man who doesn't deserve what is about to happen to him.

Scene 2 shifts to heaven where Satan appears before God to question Job's religious faith. What do you believe about Satan? The Bible presents him as a person, not just as an evil influence. The name "Satan" means "adversary" or "opponent." So, Satan is presented in scripture as the personal enemy of both God and man.

Satan has set his heart on Job. He knows if he can get this good man to become bitter and doubting, he will not only have destroyed his faith, but will cast a shadow over the credibility of God in the minds of others also.

He can't deny that Job is a good man, so he insinuates the only reason Job serves God is for what

he can get out of him. Satan accuses God of putting a hedge around Job to protect him from evil so that everything that Job does prospers. Who wouldn't serve God under those conditions?

If these things are taken away, Job's faith will melt away. He is sure that a few trials will reveal that Job's faith is shallow and superficial. If he can afflict Job, he will turn from God.

The Lord knows better. He knows that Job's faith is genuine and sincere. But Satan doesn't know, and Job's friends don't know, and even Job doesn't know himself. No one knows the quality of his faith until it is tested. So, the Lord grants Satan permission to test Job. The charge has been made and God will defend the character of this good man.

Scene 3 shifts back to the earth where Job is suddenly crushed by overwhelming calamities. Part of his vast herds are either stolen or lost in natural calamities. Then all 10 of his children are killed when a cyclone hits the house in which they were staying.

Job finds himself as desolate and bereft as a human being could be. But, through it all, Job hangs on to the slender thread of faith, saying, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In it all he, "sinned not, nor charged God foolishly" (Job 1:21-22).

This is not the response Satan had hoped for. He had hoped that Job would become bitter against God and curse him. He was such a good man with such a far-reaching influence that if his faith in God could be shaken, the tremors would be felt everywhere he

was known. Others would be watching Job and his reaction would affect their faith also.

Scene 4 shifts back to heaven again. This time Satan contends that the test of Job's faith has not been severe enough. So, he asks for permission to afflict Job's body. If allowed to do so he feels confident that Job will then curse God. Again God risks the faithfulness of Job's character. Satan is granted permission to afflict Job with pain, but he is forbidden to take Job's life.

Scene 5 shifts to the earth again. This time Job's body is smitten by hideous sores. In excruciating pain he goes to the city dump, the place for discarded things, and sits on an ash heap in despair. What a pathetic scene! Job, once one of the greatest men in the east, is now sitting in the place for discarded things. His wealth gone! His children gone! His health gone! His pain is made even more unbearable because he cannot understand why all of this is happening to him.

Lessons For Life

Before we continue with the story, let me pause to make three truths clear.

- First, it was Satan, not God, who caused Job's suffering.

It was not God who sent robbers to steal Job's livestock; it was Satan. It was not God who sent lightening from heaven to burn up Job's sheep; it was Satan. It was not God who sent a violent storm

that killed Job's children; it was Satan. It was not God who afflicted Job's body with sores; it was Satan. But God got the blame.

One of Satan's greatest acts of deceit is to cause sorrow and pain and then blame it on God. It was God who gave Job all that he had in the first place. Why, in heaven's name, would God then have taken it all away from him?

To be sure, over every trial you experience must be written the word "permitted." God is sovereign. But he does not cause everything. There is a vast difference in the two.

- Second, these tragedies did not come to Job because he was bad, but because he was good.

They did not come because he lacked faith, but to destroy his faith. If you wonder, "What had Job done to deserve this?" The answer is easy — he's done nothing. God himself calls Job one of the best of all men.

- Third, Job never knew about the scenes in heaven.

We do, but he didn't. Job didn't have the book of Job to read as we do. He was left to suffer without ever knowing why. All he knew was that his wealth was gone. His children were dead. His body was wracked with pain.

We Need Spouse Support

While Job sits and suffers in silence his wife speaks. She urges him to "curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). Remember, Mrs. Job has suffered too. The loss

of her family, her possessions, and now, last of all, her husband's health leaves her faith in ruins. Her conclusion was: "Job, you have been true to God, but God has not been true to you. We can't change what is happening to us, but at least you can have the last word. Why don't you curse God and die?"

If anyone knows a man, it is his wife. She knew Job was a good man and did not deserve what was happening to him. She couldn't understand why this was happening and she wouldn't accept it. To her, death was preferable to his present hopeless lot.

This compounds Job's misery. As if his other losses were not enough, he is now left without the emotional and spiritual support of his wife at a time when he needed her the most.

Job was wiser than his wife. While there was much he did not know, he at least knew this was not the solution to his problem. He had taken the good of life with gratitude. Now he would accept his loss with quietness and courage. There would be no word of bitterness from his lips.

Friends Can Hurt

In time, three of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zorphan, came to visit him.

Job had been numbed into silence by his troubles. Nearly everyone has this initial reaction to the trauma of loss. There is so much within us that doesn't want to accept tragedy when it happens. So they sat with Job for seven days and nights without saying a word.

They realized that Job's agony was such that anything they could say would be of little comfort. So they wisely kept quiet.

In time, the awesome reality of what had occurred begins to dawn on Job and he starts to complain about his condition. At this point, everything looks utterly hopeless to him. Depressed and distraught, he wishes he could die. He wishes he had never been born. He is not even sure about eternity anymore. He asks himself, "If a man die, shall he live again?" And feeling that God had deserted him, he cries out, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him! That I might come even to his seat!"

Sorrow and suffering can do that to you. They can so shake your faith that they cause you to question almost everything you once held to be true.

Have you ever felt like Job? You may be feeling that way now. You are afflicted and you don't understand why. You see no light at the end of the dark tunnel you are in. You are saying, "Oh, God, if you are a loving God, why did you let this happen to me? Why did you take my husband? Why do I have cancer? Why are my children unsaved? Why did my wife divorce me?"

When Job starts to complain, his friends felt compelled to explain why all this had happened to him. They mouthed the oldest and most common explanation for suffering. While they argued from different perspectives, they all came eventually to the same conclusion. It can be summed up in the words of Eliphaz: "Remember, I pray thee, whoever perished

being innocent? Or, where were the righteous cut off? Even as I have seen, they that ploweth iniquity, and sow wickedness reap the same" (Job 4:7-8). They pointed to the law of harvest — we reap what we sow. Their explanation: Job was suffering because of his sins. The judgment of God had come upon him.

They all thought suffering was sent upon persons as a punishment for their sins; and, if we are great sufferers, it is proof that we have been great sinners.

There is just enough truth in what Job's friends say to be disturbing. The law of the harvest is real. We do reap what we sow. Judgment day is coming. But, on the other hand, we should not expect justice immediately. We all know of good people who suffer and evil people who prosper. Complete justice is never promised until the end of time.

They made another mistake. They tried to explain to another why he was suffering. This is the height of presumption. We may know why we are suffering in a given circumstance, but God doesn't reveal to us why another is. He may reveal it to them, but he won't reveal it to us.

Job was not perfect and he knew it. But his sin was not serious enough to merit all that was happening to him. After all, you don't treat dandruff with a guillotine. You don't burn down a house to kill the termites. So Job vehemently and consistently denied their accusations.

Job's friends came to him with the best of intentions, but instead they hurt him deeply. If we are wise in trying to help our hurting friends, we will not

make the same mistake. The ministry of silence is often of more value than the ministry of words. Sitting quietly with a suffering friend is often the best comfort we can give. We should take more the position of humility before sorrow and pain, realizing that there is no one answer and often no answer at all that we can be sure of.

Man's Arguments, Not God's

At last Elihu came to Job. He is a young intellectual. Intellectuals are people who deal in second-hand experiences. All they know is what they've read or what they have been told. Elihu emphasized the creative value of suffering. His idea was that Job's suffering was to teach him things he needed to learn; it was corrective rather than punitive.

There is some truth in Elihu's explanation also. Suffering does instruct. God can use all kinds of experiences to teach us. And some testings are even designed by God for this purpose. But not all suffering is sent to discipline or to teach. Some is, but not all. That was Elihu's mistake.

Before I complete the story of Job let me make one more observation: The arguments of these men are not God's arguments. They are God's record of man's arguments. And the arguments are wrong. God renders a final verdict on their arguments when he says to Eliphaz, "My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of

me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath” (Job 42:7).

God is the Answer

Finally, God appeared to Job (chapter 33). He came in a whirlwind and took Job on a mental tour of the universe. God pointed out the constellations in the heavens and said to Job, “Where were you when I put the stars in their orbit?”

God then took Job on a tour of the animal kingdom. He pointed out the features of several animals and asked Job, “Can you explain why I made these animals as I did?” In all, God asked Job 65 questions about creation and the government of the universe that he could not answer. Stumped by God’s questions, Job realized that men, with their finite minds, ought not to expect to understand all the mysteries of God’s working in the world. If he could not explain the physical universe, how could he presume to question God’s running of the moral universe? It was all much above human capacity.

Awed to silence, Job was driven to his knees in humility at the power and wisdom of God. In all of this God did not answer any of the questions in Job’s mind, but he did answer the need of Job’s heart. God did not give Job an answer; he rather gave himself as the answer. And that’s what Job needed most — not an explanation from God but an experience with God.

In God’s presence Job’s doubts melted away. He learned that God cared about him and that he rules

the world in wisdom and power. That was enough. Now Job was able to face his suffering without knowing why all this had happened.

This is the great message of Job: God does not owe us an explanation of life, nor is he likely to give us one. And if he did we couldn't comprehend it. If we are to survive and thrive in life, we must trust his wisdom and sovereignty. We must keep trusting, loving, and serving God even when we don't know why bad things happen to us.

Job's life reminds us that whatever suffering may come to us in the permissive will of God, may be met by the grace of God. He never allows heavier burdens on us than we can bear, for he is always present to share our burdens. If we depend on him, God either lightens the load or strengthens our back to meet all of the demands of life. He will enable us to bear the unbearable, to face the impossible, to get through. We can, no matter what the circumstances, always count on him.

The importance of the experience of Job is that it teaches us how to cope with the hurts of life. In fact, that's the purpose of the book of Job. It is not to teach us why the righteous suffer. It's to teach us how they suffer. There are four ways we can respond to adversity — all of them wrong except one.

- We can grope our way through.
- We can mope our way through.
- We can dope our way through.
- We may hope our way through.

Why Me, Lord?

First, we can grope our way through. We can go through life asking questions, searching for answers, wanting to know, “Why me, Lord?” It is not wrong to ask, “Why?” but God never answers the question, “Why me?” The reason is that it is not a request for information; it is a cry for help. The person who asks, “Why me, Lord?” is not wanting an answer, but is wanting a change of circumstances.

Like Job, we most often must live in ignorance of what is going on “behind the curtains.”

Woe is Me!

Second, we can mope our way through. Instead of asking, “Why me?” we can give way to self-pity and lament, “Woe is me.” Self-pity is easily the most destructive of the non-pharmaceutical narcotics; it is addictive, it gives momentary pleasure, and it separates us from others and from reality.

Don’t let your feelings become the most important thing in your life. Don’t brood resentfully over what happens to you. When you add self-pity to your problems, you simply compound them.

I have a longtime friend who, years ago, lost a leg in a work-related accident. As a result, he has spent the last 30 years walking on an artificial leg. He said to me recently, “Paul, if you ever get crippled, major on what you can do, not on what you can’t do.”

That’s the positive approach of life.

Dry Tears, Dull Joys

Third, we can dope our way through. We can take a drink, smoke a joint, pop a pill. To the secularist, the single most acceptable way to cope with hurt is drugs. Doctors even say at times, "Don't worry, I'll give you something. . . ." But I have learned from experience that if drugs can dry your tears, they can also dull your joys.

Though He Slay Me

Fourth, we can hope our way through. Job did not take his hurts lying down. His speeches contain some of the most profound expressions of pain, despair, and outrage in all of literature. In them he wanders to the edge of blasphemy. But though he questions God's fairness and goodness and despairs of his life, Job refuses to turn his back on God. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him," he defiantly insists (Job 13:15). He may have given up on God's justice, but he stubbornly refuses to give up on God. At the most unlikely moment of despair, he comes up with brilliant flashes of hope and faith. And, that's what sustained him.

You, too, can cope if you have hope. But how do we get hope? We find it in Jesus Christ.

We do not understand the problem of suffering one bit better than Job did. We come to life having nothing whatsoever to do with bringing ourselves here and we often suffer unjustly. Why? How could a

good God make a world like this? We do not know.

But, even though we may not understand the problem any better than they did in Job's day, we have more reason to be reconciled to it. For, in the meantime, God himself came down here, and in the person of Jesus Christ, became a partaker with us of our suffering. The story of Jesus, the world's most righteous man, and the world's greatest sufferer, is an illustration of God's suffering with his creation. And we ought not to have any difficulty in believing it can accomplish some good, even though we cannot now see what it is. And, one day, when all has come to fruition, we shall praise him for having given us such an existence.

6

When God Takes Us to the Woodshed

A quotation from *Reader's Digest* captured my attention recently. It said, "The believer in God must explain one thing, the existence of suffering; the non-believer, however, must explain the existence of everything else" (*The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*; Simon & Schuster; Dennis Pranger and Joseph Telushkin).

It may seem easier to explain the existence of everything else than it is to explain the existence of suffering. But in our efforts to understand why adversity comes into our lives we must not overlook the possibility of chastisement.

For it is clear from scripture that some suffering comes from God as a chastisement on his children for their sins. It is sent, or allowed, whichever the case may be, to discipline us.

The word *chastisement* in secular Greek had reference to the general education of a child. In scrip-

ture, additional content is poured into it. In the Christian context it refers to the education of the moral and spiritual side of life — principally in the eradication of sin from our lives. It suggests that if a child of God sins and does not repent, God will discipline him so that the child will repent.

The scriptures speak of God's chastening in Hebrews 12:5-11. In this passage the writer compares our heavenly father to an earthly father. He tells us that just as earthly fathers must occasionally discipline their children to correct them, so God chastens his children to correct them and to help them to grow to be what they ought to be.

The focal verse in this passage says, "Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?" (v. 9).

The term *fathers of our flesh* refers to our earthly fathers. The term *father of spirits* refers to God, our heavenly father. The responsibilities of fatherhood are more than biological and economical. They are also moral and spiritual. A good father not only provides for the material needs of his family, he also gives guidance and instruction to his child. Just so, God disciplines us.

He uses two words to describe that discipline. He uses the word *rebuke* and the word *scourge*. The word *rebuke* means *to censure, to scold, to say no to*. The word *scourge* means *to whip* or *to spank*.

Every earthly father must occasionally scold his

child and forbid him to do certain things. He must say “no” to him. And if the child will not heed the warning, the father may spank him to teach him what he will not learn otherwise. Just so, our heavenly father occasionally scolds us and sometimes even spansks us to correct us. He brings or allows trouble to come into our lives, not because he hates us or wants to hurt us, but because he loves us. He loves us too much to let us go on in our sin and ruin our lives.

The lesson from this teaching is simple. God is our spiritual father. If we who are his children do not live as we should, he will chasten us. He will not let us go on in sin without some form of correction. He loves us too much to let us ruin our lives without trying to stop us.

So when adversity comes we should look for the unseen hand of God. It may be that God is trying to tell us something. If so, we need to respond lest he, out of necessity, deal more severely with us.

God takes sin seriously and so should we. If we are his, we can’t live as we please and get away with it. We can expect to either live right or be taken to the woodshed. It is as simple as that.

Jonah didn’t live right and God sent a storm in his life — and eventually he ended up in the belly of the great fish. Samson didn’t live right and he wound up bound, blind, and buried. The Corinthian church desecrated the Lord’s Supper and some members became ill and others died.

This text, then, is set like a torch in a dark night

to explain to us the consequences of not living as we should. It is a solemn warning against rebellious participation in sin.

Read carefully, because I don't want to be quoted out of the twilight zone. Not all suffering comes as chastisement from God, just some of it. It is only one of several reasons why people suffer. We must not think in every instance that suffering comes to a person's life because they have not been living right.

And, we can never know when God is chastening someone else. We can only know when he is chastening us. God would never discipline us without telling us why. If he did it would not accomplish his purpose. If God is correcting us for our sin, we will know it. But others will not. So, don't try to judge why some other person is having a hard time. Just take a position of humility and look at your own life to make sure you are right with God.

This passage suggests three things we need to know about chastisement.

- It suggests the pattern for chastisement (v. 5-8).
- It suggests the purpose for chastisement (v. 9-10).
- It suggests the progression in chastisement (v. 11).

God's Love Is Not Variable

First, look at the pattern for chastisement (vs. 5-8). It is seen in the relationship between earthly fathers and their children. Here, the earthly becomes a pattern for us of the heavenly. The way a good father deals with his children is the way the heavenly father

deals with us.

If a father really loves his son he will occasionally scold him and, when necessary, spank him for the child's own good. And, in the same way, if necessary, God will spank us to correct us. He does this for two reasons — first, because we are his, and thus his responsibility; and second, because he loves us.

When trouble comes we sometimes wonder, "How can God love me and allow this to happen?" when the fact is, it is because he loves us that he allows it to happen.

Hebrews 12 contains a rendering of Proverbs 3:11-12, which reads: "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (vs. 3:5-6).

So, far from being a denial of God's love, chastisement is an affirmation of his love. If God did not care about us, he would let us go. But because he loves us and feels responsible for us, he will not let us go on without correction.

What is your view of God's love? Do you see it as soft, permissive sentiment? Or do you see it as tough and demanding? God's love is tough love. If he didn't care about us, he wouldn't bother with us.

An old Quaker farmer once made a weathervane with the words, "God is love," carved on it and placed it on top of his barn. And whenever the wind blew the weathervane turned with it. One day one of the elders of his church saw the weathervane and said to him, "Friend, I don't like that. God's love is not vari-

able. God's love doesn't change with the wind."

The old farmer replied, "Friend, you have misunderstood its meaning. The point is, regardless of which direction the wind blows, God still loves me."

Paul declares this truth when he asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Then he lists everything that might conceivably do that. He says, "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus the Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39).

These things may separate us from health and wealth, from family and friends, from comfort and ease, but they will never separate us from the love of God.

So we can know beyond any doubt that whatever happens to us, God still loves us. And, in our hour of deepest suffering and agony, when we think God does not care about us, he may be expressing his love for us in the deepest and most personal way. It may be an effort on his part to get our attention and turn us back to himself.

Chastisement is also a proof that we are the sons of God (Heb. 12:8). If we really are God's children, he will chasten us. And, if we are never chastened, it is an evidence that we really are not his.

When my boys were growing up, our yard was the neighborhood playground. Children from all over gathered there to play. Occasionally they would mis-

behave and I had to intervene. Many times I disciplined my two boys, but I never punished anyone else's children. I didn't have the right or the responsibility to spank them. But I did have the responsibility to discipline my own. It is the same with God.

So if you are never chastened by God, you had best check on your relationship and see if you are really his child. If you can go on and on in sin without ever being chastened, it is a sign you are not his child.

It Knocks Nonsense Out Of Us

Second, look at the purpose of chastisement (vs. 9-10). The writer tells us it is "For our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness" (v. 10).

Lou Holtz, head football coach at Notre Dame, set discipline in perspective when he said, "Discipline is not what you do 'to' someone; it is what you do 'for' someone."

The chastening of life that come to us come for our good. They come to help us develop spiritually. The way to make the strongest steel is to forge it in the hottest furnace. Christians who have gone through fiery trials are, similarly, often the most dedicated to Jesus Christ.

God doesn't delight to discipline us. He finds no pleasure in our being hurt. But there is a purpose in it. It is for our good. It is that we might be partakers of his holiness. Often parents say to their children, as they prepare to punish them, "This is going to hurt

me more than it hurts you.” It’s hard to convince a child of that, but the parent knows it’s true. It hurts us to hurt our children, but love demands it if they will not learn any other way.

Trouble knocks a lot of nonsense out of us. I have a friend who went bankrupt several years ago. Afterwards he said to me, “Before my bankruptcy I was about as carnal a Christian as a person could be. I hadn’t prayed but three times in the last seven years. When I got married I prayed, ‘God, bless my marriage.’ When my first child was about to be born I prayed, ‘God, help my child to be healthy.’ And when I was thinking about buying that business I prayed, ‘God, help me to get it.’ I didn’t want God to help me run it. I could do that by myself. I just wanted God to help me get it. Then I went bankrupt. I learned things out of that failure that I never would have learned any other way.”

His economic reversals brought him to his knees, not only economically but also spiritually. After that, his life was changed. Trouble can do that to you and to me also.

A deacon in my church once shared his testimony in a deacon’s meeting. He recounted a series of trials that had come to him: Three years earlier he developed cancer and had to have a kidney removed. The company he worked for had some financial reversals and he lost his job. And he was an incumbent candidate for a public office and he lost the election. He joked that his mother didn’t even vote for him.

Then he said, “I know why it happened. It was

chastisement from God for a secret sin in my life. I want to tell you that God has been good to me and I praise him for all this. Through my troubles I have learned to trust him more and serve him better.”

Wait Till God Gets Through

Third, look at the progression in chastisement (v. 11). There is one word in Hebrews 12:11 that for the suffering believer, perplexed by his present trials, acts as a ray of hope. It is the word “afterward.”

Here is the whole verse: “No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” It speaks to us of the progression in chastisement. In the moment when we are experiencing chastisement from God, there is no pleasure in it. But afterwards, if we are patient and responsive, the fruit of righteousness will come forth.

The word *yielded* means to *give back*. It is an agricultural term which suggests that the soil gives back fruit in due time. If you plant a seed in the ground, the earth responds by giving back fruit. So if we receive the chastening of the Lord in the right spirit, it can give back to us the fruit of righteousness.

One of our problems is we tend to judge everything for the moment. But we must wait until God gets through with an experience before we can adequately evaluate it.

There was once an old Chinese man who owned a

beautiful stallion. It was the only horse he had. One day the horse broke out of the corral and ran away. His neighbor learned what had happened and said to him, "That's a terrible thing to happen. I am sorry for you."

The old man said, "I don't know about that. It may be too soon to say." Three days later the stallion came back with a dozen wild horses following him. He led them all right into the corral. When the neighbor learned of this he said to the old man, "That's wonderful. Whereas you had only one horse, now you have thirteen." The old gentleman replied again, "I don't know about that. It may be too soon to say."

The next day his son, trying to break one of the wild horses was thrown to the ground and broke his leg. The neighbor, learning of this, said to the old man, "That is a terrible misfortune. Your son will be laid up for weeks."

Once more, the old man said, "I don't know about that. It may be too soon to tell."

The next day a Chinese warlord came through the country and conscripted for his army every able-bodied young man in the village, except this one boy with a broken leg.

Don't write any experience off too soon. If you cooperate with God and you respond to God, out of it can come the fruit of righteousness.

The writer uses two analogies to teach us patience in our chastisement. One is from the field of agriculture; the other from the field of athletics.

Look at a field, newly plowed. It lies open to the

elements, its face deeply scarred by the plowshare. If it had feelings, it would be in pain. But is that the whole story? We know it is not, for the plowing is but a means to an end, and that end is the harvest.

In those furrows will be dropped the precious grain. Then, after months of sunshine and rain, there will be a golden harvest, the fruit for which the farmer waits.

That is a parable of life. Now, the chastening; afterward, the fruit. Now, the agony; afterward, the joy of the golden sheaves.

Is it worth it? Ask the field. Without the pain of being plowed the field would be covered with thorns and thistles. But since it has been plowed, there is hope now that one day the field will be covered with wheat waving in the wind.

We have that choice in life, too. If we ask to be without pain, we run the risk of having lives filled with weeds. But as we submit to the divine "chastening" we know there will be a blessed "afterward."

Let this word, then, perform its therapy on your soul. Cling to it when you feel you cannot bear the pain a moment longer. It is part of God's promise of an abundant harvest.

The second analogy is from athletics. The writer says that chastening produces the fruit of righteousness unto them which are "exercised" thereby. The word "exercised" means "to strip down." It is borrowed from the Greek gymnastic games. It had reference to an athlete's stripping himself of his outer garments so he could participate in the games. Afflic-

tion has a way of stripping us of pride and self-sufficiency. It reminds us of how dependent we are on God.

Advise yourself that nothing is final until God is finished. God deals in commas, not periods. Abraham had to wait until he was 100 years old before the son of promise was born. Joseph spent 13 years of constancy from the pit to the prison to the palace. Moses waited 80 years to know God's will for his life.

If we had been at the cross of Calvary we would have been in despair. But on Sunday morning God turned the darkness into light, the despair into hope, death into resurrection. Don't rush God. Don't evaluate too soon. If we make a judgment too soon, we may miss out on the lesson God is trying to teach us.

The key to whether God's chastisement accomplishes its purpose is in our response. So we are told not to "despise" or "faint" when we are rebuked of God. We are rather to "endure" the chastening and to "reverence" and be in "subjection" to God. The word *despise* means *to regard lightly* or *to shrug off* without due consideration. The word *faint* means *to give up* or *to lose heart, to abandon all effort*. When God disciplines us we ought not to shrug it off and disregard it as though it were nothing. Nor should we become discouraged and give up trying. Rather, we should stand up under it and learn from it. We ought to listen to God and learn from God.

Like Job we need to pray, "Show me wherefore thou contendest with me" (Job 10:12). In the midst of his suffering Job wanted to know why God was

dealing with him as he was so he could respond to God in the right way. So should we.

When troubles come, do not become bitter or discouraged, but rather soft and pliable to him. If we do, it will work for our good.

The safest policy is to always assume that God has a controversy with us and to humble ourselves before him.

Life is a grindstone. And, whether it grinds us down or polishes us up depends on our response to it. If we respond to chastisement with reverence and respect, God's purpose can be accomplished. He can polish us so the image of his son can be seen in us.

7

Unexpected and Unexplained Tragedy

Why do seemingly innocent people suffer? What is the relationship between sin and suffering in our lives?

Let me illustrate. On October 16, 1991, just one day after his 35th birthday, a lonely, angry, and frustrated George Hennard rammed his blue pickup through the front window of a Luby's cafeteria in Killeen, Texas. He got out of the truck, drew two semi-automatic handguns, and savagely vented his frustration on the lunchtime patrons. After 10 minutes of methodical marksmanship, 22 people were dead and 23 were injured. Another of the wounded died a few days later.

As police closed in, Hennard put one of the 9mm handguns to his head and took his own life. It was the nation's worst mass murder.

"Why?" Why do crazy, bizarre things like these happen? What about the innocent victims?

- What about an army colonel, a Vietnam veteran, who was two weeks away from retirement?
- What about a Missouri woman on her way to her granddaughter's wedding?
- What about two women in town for a church conference?
- What about a Wal-Mart manager who was working on his day off?
- What about a retired couple about to celebrate their 47th anniversary?
- What about a local veterinarian whose friend just popped in around lunchtime and said, "Let's go eat"?
- What about three veteran schoolteachers who had taken their boss to lunch in celebration of "Boss's Day"?
- And what about the people left to struggle with their sorrow and wonder, "Why did this happen?"

Jesus encountered a comparable incident in his day. As he was teaching about the judgment of God, someone brought him the tragic news that Pilate's soldiers had slaughtered a group of Galileans while they were worshipping in the temple.

We know nothing of this incident apart from what is recorded here. It was the kind of thing that might have happened almost anytime. We know that Galilee was a breeding ground for insurrectionists. We know that the Galileans were constantly giving the Roman officials problems. We also know that Pilate, the Roman governor, was a tyrant. What happened here was completely in keeping with his character.

Probably, a group from Galilee came to Jerusalem to worship and while they were there created a disturbance, so Pilate dispatched his troops to quiet them. An altercation took place and the result was a massacre. The slaughter was so great that the blood of these worshipers ran on the ground and mingled with the blood of the animals that were being sacrificed.

Obviously the person who brought this news to Jesus thought it was an illustration of the judgment of God he had been talking about because he said to them, "Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things?" (Luke 13:2).

I can answer that. That's exactly what they thought. That was the popular explanation for all tragedy and suffering in Jesus' day. It was the common belief that if a person suffered an illness or a tragedy it was because they had sinned and God's judgment had come upon them. On the other hand, if a person prospered, and enjoyed good health, it was a sign of divine favor.

This belief goes back at least as far as the book of Job, the oldest book in the Bible and perhaps the oldest book in existence.

As Job struggled with tragedy piled on top of tragedy in his life, one of his friends asked him, "Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off?" (Job 4:7).

Job's friend believed that all suffering was due to sin and they were convinced that, though all appearances were contrary, Job must have done something

horribly wrong for these things to be happening to him.

That belief was prevalent in Jesus' day. Once, when he encountered a man who had been born blind, his disciples asked, "Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

They were convinced that blindness was due to sin. It was only a question of whose — the boy's or his parents'.

There are people today who still hold to this idea. Let tragedy strike, let misfortune come, and we usually ask, "What have I done to deserve this?" "Why has God done this to me?" We, like they, act as if we believe all that happens to us is a direct result of how we have lived.

Jesus then answers his own question. He said, "I tell you, nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3).

While they were on this subject, Jesus brought up another incident on his own. He reminded them of 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. In all probability these were construction workers who were killed in an on-the-job accident. Apparently, while they were in the process of building the tower, it collapsed and they were crushed to death.

Once again Jesus asked, "Think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?" (Luke 13:4).

Again, that's exactly what they thought. Again, Jesus answered his own question before they could.

He said, "I tell you, nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).

Two things should be noted about this experience: First, Jesus categorically rejects the idea that there is necessarily a relationship between sin and suffering in a person's life. Jesus was a realist! He knew that suffering and sorrow are indiscriminate. They come to all people alike. Some of God's greatest saints suffered the greatest of tragedies. Some of the world's worst sinners have enjoyed long life, good health, and endless success.

We must remember this lest some well-meaning but misguided friend lay a guilt trip on us as Job's friends tried to do to him. Also, we must beware lest we yield to the temptation to believe that God is always punishing us when tragedy befalls us.

The second thing we should note is that Jesus offers no other explanation for why these things happen. He does not tell us why tyrants rule and he does not tell us why towers fall.

He does not tell us why they happened. He only tells us why they did not happen. They did not happen because these people were worse sinners than anyone else. Beyond that he offers no other explanation. He could have, but didn't. Apparently he felt no obligation to satisfy our curiosity about life. He leaves most of that to our speculation.

There are two possible reasons Jesus did not tell us why these tragedies occurred. First, maybe it was because the answer is obvious. The explanation for

these two incidents was human evil and human error.

In the case of the Galileans, the explanation for their massacre was human evil. Pilate was a ruthless tyrant. What he did was an outcropping of sin in his life.

In the case of those in Siloam, it was human error. Somebody made a mistake. Perhaps the architect did not draw the plans for the tower correctly. Perhaps the contractor did not build it according to specifications. Perhaps the workers were careless in doing their job. No evil was intended by anyone. What happened was due to carelessness.

These are the only explanations for much of what happens to us.

A person under the influence of alcohol drives his automobile too fast and has a collision that kills an innocent family. A person on drugs holds up a convenience store and murders a hard-working night clerk. An ex-convict breaks into an apartment and rapes a young girl. That's human evil.

A car skids out of control on a rain-slick highway and hits a child on a bicycle. A person is not paying attention as he approaches a busy intersection and runs the stop sign, hitting an oncoming motorist broadside. A young person dives into a lake without checking the depth of the water and is paralyzed for life. That's human error. The people responsible were just negligent.

We dare not lay at the feet of God the blame for what people do. If God is at fault, it is only in that he

made us free.

We are not like robots with no choice. We are not like animals with limited choice. We are like God with free choice. When we make the wrong choices we or others may suffer because of them. There is an inter-relatedness in life that we cannot escape. The good that people do often splashes over on us. And so does their evil. It is just a part of life. If we blame anyone or question anyone, it should be ourselves.

The television miniseries, *Wallenberg*, was about Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat, who was executed by the Nazis for helping to save hundreds of Jews during World War II. In a very moving scene, a young Jewish boy is talking with an aged rabbi. The boy had long since given up belief in God. He said to the rabbi, "Rabbi, you know how the German soldiers drown our people in the Danube River. You saw how they shot our children in the back. I don't see how you can believe in God."

The old rabbi responded, "I don't see how you can believe in man."

Human evil and human error explain much of the tragedy in our world today. Beyond this, most of it remains a mystery.

However, the primary reason Jesus did not give them an answer as to why these tragedies happened, I think, was because he knew the crucial question is not "Why has this happened?" or "Who is the worst sinner?" but "Am I ready to meet God?" The worst thing that can happen to a person is not that they should be killed by a tyrant or crushed by a tower or

shot by a terrorist, but that they should die unprepared to meet God.

So, rather than give an answer to unexplained tragedy, Jesus gave a warning. He said, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

There is some suffering in our lives just like these two experiences — there is no explanation for it apart from human evil or human error. We may never know why a thing happens, but God can still use it to give us a spiritual “wake-up” call. He can use it to remind us of our need to be ready to meet him. Nothing should awaken us to our need to be ready to meet God like unexpected and unexplained tragedy. It should remind us of three things:

- That sin is universal.
- That life is uncertain.
- That repentance is urgent.

We Are All Alike Sinners

First, the unexplained and unexpected tragedies of life should remind us that sin is universal. While Jesus was quick to point out that the victims of these two tragedies were not the worst sinners *of* all, he never suggested that they were not sinners *at* all. Quite to the contrary, he linked all men together in this respect by saying, “except ye repent you shall *all* likewise perish.” So, the first truth that emerges from these passages is that we all are sinners.

George Bernard Shaw once said, “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable Chris-

tian doctrine." The scriptures agree. They say, "There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (Ecc. 7:20). I assume that includes you and me. Again the scriptures say, "There is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22-23).

Buckner Fanning expressed this truth succinctly when he said, "We haven't all sinned alike, but we have all alike sinned." The difference among people is not that some are sinners and others are not. The difference is not in the fact of our sin but the degree of our sin.

Gospel singer Ethel Waters was, before her conversion, the premier blues singer of America in the twenties and thirties. She was the first black singer to draw white crowds and their money to a Harlem nightclub. In her testimony, she said, by her singing and dancing, "I converted Edmonds' cellar from a low-class dump into a high-class dump."

We all know what a low-class dump is. It is a honky-tonk where men and women sit around in work clothes, listening to a jukebox, and sipping beer out of a longneck.

A high-class dump may be a country club where men and women sit around in business suits and party dresses, listening to a piano player, and sipping champagne out of long-stemmed glasses.

If one is a dump, the other is a dump. If one is sin, the other is sin. The only difference is the type of dress, the kind of music, and the price of the drinks.

Sin sometimes takes on a high polish. It even sits

among the saints on Sunday mornings. There is high-class sin and there is low-class sin. There is gutter sin and there is glitter sin, but they are both sins just the same.

What is sin? Sin is a raised hand, a clenched fist, a slap in the face of God. And we are all guilty of it. And unless we repent of our sin we will suffer a fate worse than being killed by a tyrant or crushed by a tower.

You Can't Presume on Life

Second, the unexplained and unexpected tragedies of life should remind us that life is uncertain. When Jesus said, "Except ye repent, you shall all *likewise* perish," he was suggesting that what happened to these people can happen to us — we can become victims of unexpected and unexplained tragedy.

It happens all the time. We go to church one day and a massacre takes place. (That's happened at least three times in recent years.) We go to work one day and someone is killed in an accident.

This world is a dangerous place. Only two people ever got out of it alive — Enoch and Elijah. When you consider the billions who have lived since Adam and Eve, the odds are not very good that we will make it.

James warns us, "Go to now, ye that say, today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what

is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4:13-14).

We can't presume on life because we cannot predict death. There is a prayer in the Book of Common Prayer that reads: "From lightning and tempest, from earthquake, fire and flood, from plague, pestilence and famine, from battle and murder and from sudden death, good Lord deliver us."

Sudden death can come to any of us. That fact alone should remind us to be ready to meet God today.

All I Need is a *Lite* Religion

Third, unexpected and unexplained tragedy should remind us that repentance is urgent. It was not sin in the lives of these victims that Jesus' listeners were to be concerned about. It was sin in their own lives. That's why he warned them, "Unless *you* repent something more tragic than what happened to these people will happen to *you*. You will die without being ready to meet God."

All tragedy should be a warning to us, but sometimes it takes a personal tragedy to wake us up. Jerry Levine was the first American taken hostage by Muslim extremists in Lebanon in 1984. On March 7 he was on his way to work when he was captured. For 11 1/2 months he was kept chained in solitary confinement until he managed to escape.

According to his testimony, he had no religious

training as a child. He was raised in a Jewish home, the son of a father who had rejected God. His grandfather had been a Jewish rabbi, but he also had rejected the faith of his fathers and became an atheist. So he had no religious heritage.

The ordeal, he said, gave God a chance to break through his unbelief and bring him to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

When asked what led to his spiritual awakening, he replied, "I was all alone except for being escorted to the bathroom one time every day. I felt that if I talked to myself I would go crazy. But I had to talk to someone. So, I decided to talk with God. At first I felt uncomfortable. Then I remembered people had been talking to God for thousands of years. So, I began. In time, I discovered a meaningful two-way conversation was taking place. After about two weeks of talking with God I came to trust Jesus Christ as my savior."

Someone asked him, "If it were possible, would you change anything that happened to you since March 7, 1984?" He replied, "If I could have come to faith any other way, then fine. But I couldn't. In my captivity I experienced total privation."

What happened to Jerry Levine happens all the time. Tragedy often shakes and awakes. It shakes our self-confidence and it awakens our God-consciousness. A pastor friend told me of a layman in his church who had recently learned he had terminal cancer. As the layman shared his testimony in a Sunday evening worship service he said, "All I used to

want was a 'lite' religion. A sermon with just one point, no poem, and lasted only 20 minutes. That's all the religion I needed. God sure got my attention with this cancer. If he hadn't, I'd be home right now watching *Sixty Minutes*."

In our world it is easy to forget God, to live only to enjoy the banquet hall without thinking about the painful exit door. But God will not permit this; he interrupts the banquet with tragedy. "God whispers to us in our pleasures," C.S. Lewis wrote, "speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. The pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Don't wait for some personal tragedy to strike before God gets your attention. Let the tragedies all around you be a warning. Repentance is not optional. It is essential. Repent today and you will be ready to meet God no matter what happens.

8

When is a Person Ready to Die?

W. Somerset Maugham tells a story about the prince of Baghdad. The servant of the prince went to a bazaar one day and while there chanced to meet death face to face. Surprised and frightened, he rushed to his master, told him what had happened, and asked to borrow his fastest steed so he could go to the city of Samara and thus escape death.

The prince granted the request. The servant mounted the steed and as fast as the wind rode away to the city of Samara to escape death. That afternoon the prince of Baghdad went down to the city and as he walked the streets, he too came face to face with death. As he engaged death in conversation, he said, "Tell me, sir, why is it that you so surprised my servant today and frightened him so."

Death responded, "It was not I who frightened your servant and surprised him. It was your servant who surprised me. You see, I never expected to find him

on the streets of Baghdad, for I have made an appointment with him tonight in the city of Samara.”

We all have an appointment with death. Whether a king or a street sweeper, we must all eventually dance with the grim reaper. As the scriptures declare, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Though we know by observation and scripture that life is fleeting, we act as if we will live forever. Sigmund Freud once wrote, “At bottom, no one believes in his own death . . . every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.” Hours pass into days, days pass into weeks, weeks pass into months, and months pass into years, and the first thing we know our life has passed altogether.

We ought to prepare to live. God wants us to enjoy life and be prepared for it. However, death is a fact of life and we ought not only to prepare to live but also to prepare to die.

How do we prepare for death? When is a person ready to die? The scriptures give us the answer. The apostle Paul tells us when he writes, “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

When Paul penned these words, the end was very near for him. He was a veteran of many a campaign,

but the time of his discharge had come. He must now leave the battle to younger men. As he describes his approaching death, he helps us to know when a person is ready to die.

He describes his death as a *departure*. The Greek word *departure* means *to unloose* or *to undo*. It was a nautical term that described a ship hoisting its anchor and setting sail. It pictures a great ship taking leave of a harbor to move out into the open seas for which it was built.

I grew up on the sea coast. Many times I have stood on the shore and watched a ship pull away. Gradually it became a mere speck and finally it disappeared beyond the horizon. Occasionally someone standing by would say, as it disappeared, "It's gone." I've often thought, as they said that, "Gone where?" Not out of existence, only out of sight.

That's a picture of death for a Christian. Death is a passing — not out of existence, only out of sight. Out beyond our sight is a whole new world of existence that simply is not visible to us. That's what Paul had in mind here.

There is no dwelling on the morbid side of death for him. His outlook is filled with optimism and hope. It is a powerful and positive view of life and death that he expresses. Paul stood on the edge of life and looked death in the face and, without the slightest fear, said, "I am ready." That should be the attitude of every Christian.

What enables a person to have this kind of calm assurance in the face of death? When is a person

ready to die? A person is ready to die when three things are true:

- When he is unashamed of the past.
- When he is unanchored to the present.
- When he is unafraid of the future.

Live With the End in View

First, to be ready to die, we must be unashamed of our past. The apostle Paul was a man on mission. He was saved and set aside to be the apostle of the Gentiles. The Lord had entrusted to him the gospel of grace. Now he is at the end of his life and says, “I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.”

While he uses some strong words to sum up his life, the primary emphasis is not on life as a struggle. In the Greek the definite article “the” is used before the word “fight.” What Paul is saying is, “I have been involved in the right cause. I have given myself to the right purpose. The Lord gave me a task to do and I completed it. I was true to the trust he put in me.”

So when Paul looked back on his life he had no regrets. He had done his best. That’s why, as he faced death, he could say, “I am ready.”

If we are to be ready to die we must live so that we have no regrets either. We must give attention to our relationships with both God and man. Our first concern must always be our relationship with God. We should live so that our life is pleasing to him.

Some unknown poet put it best:

*When I turn my face
To the setting sun;
When the race is ended
And the course is run;
When the trials are past
And the triumphs begun;
May I hear in heaven
The Master's "Well done."*

If we are to have no regrets we must make sure our relationships with others are in order also. When there are fractured relationships and neglected opportunities, regret is almost inevitable.

John Powell, the outstanding Christian author, relates the account of his father's death. He was weeping and one of the nurses in the hospital tried to console him, and he told her, "I'm not weeping because my father died [the man was in great pain and death was a release], I'm crying because he never told me he loved me."

Apparently his father did love him. The mother reassured the son on that point. But the father had never said so. It reminds us all we can never express love too soon, because we never know how soon it will be too late.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was right in her reminder, "The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone." Don't let that happen to you.

Some regrets, of course, are inevitable. None of us is ever totally pleased with all he has done. But we must strive to keep regrets to a minimum.

Following the death of Lyndon B. Johnson, his wife, Lady Bird, wrote, "Invariably there are some regrets about vanished opportunities. There are so many little things I wish I had done. But I put my thoughts into two categories, the 'aren't you glad that's' and the 'if onlys.' I try to keep that second column as short as possible. We should think about the first column ahead of time and savor things more when we have them. To be close to death gives you a new awareness of the preciousness of life and the extreme tenuousness of it. You must live every day to the fullest as though you had a short supply, because you do. I said that glibly for years, but I didn't know how intensely one should live."

My friend, Cliff Jones, who died in 1993, did about as good a job of keeping that second column short as anyone I know. He called me Super Bowl Sunday to tell me that his cancer, which had been in remission for three years, had reappeared and spread to his liver and lungs. Doctors gave him only a few months to live. He had decided long before he didn't want his friends to remember him as an 85-pound weakling, so he had opted to forego all treatments and enjoy whatever time he had left.

Then, in a matter-of-fact way, Cliff said, "Fifty years ago I bought my ticket and made my room reservation. Now I've had all these years to study the road map and I'm excited. It's a lot like packing for a

trip. In a way, I'm looking forward to it."

Then he added, "I don't have any skeletons in my closet. I'm not ashamed of anything. I'm ready."

Cliff was not perfect. He, like every person, had to confess his sin and find peace in the grace of God.

To some degree, we all need to make peace with a sinful past so we can face death unashamed. The prophet Jeremiah foretold a new covenant by which the Lord promised: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). When God cleans up a life, it is a new day, a new person. Even the shameful can become unashamed.

You can't live wrong and die right. When you live so you are unashamed of your past, you will be ready to die.

To live with the end in view would help all of us to be ready as Cliff was. We would all do well to pause and think how we would like to be remembered when that time comes. And then begin working our way backward by beginning to be those things — loving, serving, giving — that would most likely cause it to happen.

Anchors Away

Second, to be ready to die, we must be unanchored to the present. The apostle Paul loved life and poured himself into it. But he did not allow himself to be absorbed by it or entangled in it. And when the time came to leave it, he found it easy to do.

We must be careful about "things." They so blind

us to heaven and bind us to the earth that we may not be ready to die. Haven Peck was a poor Vermont farmer, who more than anything else, wanted to own his farm. In the book, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, his son tells how he worked tirelessly for it. The book got its title from the fact that Haven Peck slaughtered pigs to supplement his income so he could pay the farm off sooner.

When his son, Rob, was just 13 years old, Haven took sick and had a premonition he was going to die. He called Rob to his side and told him he knew he was going to die just as animals know when they are going to die, and that come spring he would not be the boy of the place, he would be the man. Whatever needed to be done to the land, he would have to do it. Then he reminded Rob that he had only five years left to pay on the farm. Then it would belong to the family and Rob must do everything necessary to pay for the farm so they would own it.

And what was Rob's response to his father's premonition? "I didn't believe it, and I couldn't say anything. I just hoped he'd reach out and touch me and kiss me or something. But he just got up from his chair, wrapped a hot rock from the fireplace in a sack for his bed, and went upstairs. Mama and Aunt Carrie had left the kitchen and gone up too. The parlor was still dark. I sat watching the red cinders turn gray. I stayed there until the fire died, so it would not have to die alone."

Before spring, Haven Peck died. The family and friends gathered, built a crude wooden casket and

buried him in the apple orchard. After he was buried the friends went back home and Rob finished all the chores around the place.

Then Rob writes, "After the supper dishes were washed and dried, I could see how tired Mama looked. Carrie too. So I sent them upstairs, each with a hot cup of tea.

"As I knew I couldn't sleep, I put my coat on and walked outside. . . . I don't know why I walked out toward the orchard. All the work there was done. But I guess I had to give a good night to Papa, and to be alone with him. The bugs were out, and their singing was all around me. Almost like a choir. I got to the fresh grave, all neatly mounded and pounded. Somewhere down under all that Vermont clay was my father, Haven Peck. Buried deep in the land he sweated so hard on and longed to own so much. Now it owned him."

"Good night, Papa," I said. "We had thirteen good years."

"That was all I could say, so I just turned and walked away from a patch of grassless land." (*A Day No Pigs Would Die*, Robert Newton Peck; Dell Publishing Company, Inc.; One Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, New York, p. 138.)

Things are that way. We start out to own them and they end up owning us.

A wealthy man showed his minister around his vast estate. They saw his luxurious mansion, his well-kept gardens, his acres of pastureland and his herds of cattle. Then he said to the pastor, "These are the

things that make it hard to die.”

It's true for all of us, the more we drive our tent pegs in this world and live at ease down here, the less we care about heaven and the harder it is to leave.

An old saint prayed, “Teach me, oh Lord, not to hold to life too tightly. Teach me to hold it lightly; not carelessly, but lightly, easily. Teach me to take it as a gift, to enjoy and to cherish it while I have it, to let go gracefully and thankfully when the time comes. The gift is great but the giver is greater still. Thou, oh God, art the giver and it is a life that never dies. Amen.”

When we can say that . . . and pray that, we are ready to die.

The Greatest Trade of Time and Eternity

Third, for a person to be ready to die, he must be unafraid of the future. Having looked at his past Paul then turns to the future and says, “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day” (2 Tim.4:8).

The Greek word translated *henceforth* literally means *what remains*. The crown Paul talks about is the victor's crown that was given to the winner of an athletic contest in the Greek games. It was made of oak or ivy leaves and was symbolic of immortality. So, what Paul was saying is, “What remains for me is immortality.”

When Paul penned these words he was in prison

awaiting execution. His death was imminent. He had run out of time. While he had run out of time, he had not run out of hope. He looks beyond this life and sees heaven ahead.

We all run out of time eventually. As George Bernard Shaw said, "Life's ultimate statistic is quite impressive. One out of one dies." But while we do run out of time, if we are God's people we never run out of hope. For Paul goes on to say the crown is "not for me only but for all those who love his appearing." The crown that awaited Paul also awaits all of us who wait with expectation for the coming of Christ, the king.

A few years ago I spoke at the vespers services for the Baptist Student Union at East Texas Baptist University. As a part of the service, a young man named Danny shared his testimony. For three summers he had been a part-time youth director at a church in Lake Jackson near Houston, Texas. His first summer there he met a vivacious, dedicated young girl named Joy. Her name fit her well, because she radiated the love and joy of Christ.

In the next three summers Danny saw Joy grow and mature in her faith until she became one of the most dedicated young people in the group. After he returned to school following the third summer, he received word that Joy had just learned she had cancer of the pancreas and was not expected to live beyond the Christmas holidays. As soon as he could, he went back to Lake Jackson to visit with her. By the time he got there she was in the hospital, her body already

emaciated by the ravages of cancer. They chatted about many things for a while and then Joy said to him, "Danny, do you know what it's like to be without hope?"

Danny was speechless. He couldn't even look Joy in the eye. He just ducked his head, dug the toe of his shoe in the carpet, and finally said, "No, Joy, I've been very fortunate in life. I really don't know what it's like to be without hope."

Then Joy replied, "Neither do I."

No matter what happens to us in this world, as the people of God, we are never without hope. The promise of eternal life is always before us: He "will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18).

An unknown poet expressed this hope when he wrote:

*The hands of Christ
Seem very frail.
For they were broken
By a nail.
But only they
Reach heaven at last
Whom these frail, broken
Hands hold fast.*

In a revival in Gladewater, Texas, several years ago I met John Currington, who for 27 years was H.L. Hunt's chief confidant. H.L. Hunt was a wheeling-dealing Texas oil man who made millions and mil-

lions of dollars. In accumulating his vast wealth he made many a trade. John said time had little meaning to Hunt and he would call at any hour of the day or night. He said about two o'clock one morning his phone rang. On the other end of the line was H.L. Hunt. He said, "John, I have just made the greatest trade of my life. I have just traded the here for the hereafter." That was the night H.L. Hunt became a Christian. The trade H.L. Hunt made you can make also. You can trade the here for the hereafter. And it all begins at the foot of the cross.

Pope John XXIII once said, concerning his own death, "My bags are packed. I am ready to leave." Are you?

9

Heaven: The Land of No More

General George S. Patton commanded the Third Army as it swept across Europe in the closing days of World War II and sealed the final victory for the Allied forces. The day before he was to return to the United States for discharge, he was involved in an automobile accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. As it became apparent he would not survive, he said to his doctor, "I'm not afraid to die, only curious." Then he quoted this poem:

*So up he rose and forth they went
Away from battleground, fortress, tent,
Mountain wilderness, field and farm,
Death and the general, arm in arm.*

I think we are all curious about death, or at least about life after death. The nearer we get to it and the more loved ones we have go through it, the more cu-

rious we become about it.

Jesus told his disciples not to worry about death and then gave them a reason: "In my father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2,3).

Heaven is not a figment of the imagination; it is not a state of mind; it is not a fairy-tale land. Heaven is a real place. We have Jesus' word on that.

And, because it is our future home, we want to know: "What is heaven like?" Perhaps the simplest and most profound truth about heaven is, it is life as God meant it to be. The word most often used in the Bible to describe it is the word "new." It is called a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1, 2 Peter 3:13). It is called the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). And as the Lord reveals what it is like to John, he says, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

There are two Greek words translated *new* in the New Testament. One means new in appearance and the other means new in kind, i.e., that which has never existed before. It is the latter word that is used here. Heaven is a new kind of place. It is a life completely different from this life. Heaven is more than just another life; it is an infinitely better quality of life. It is life as God meant it to be.

To adequately describe the newness of heaven, John was forced to use some great negatives. It is only as we understand what won't be there that we

can really appreciate what the new life in heaven will be like. Look at how John describes heaven and the things that will not be there:

- There will be no more sea (21:1) — nothing that separates.
- There will be no more tears (21:4) — nothing that saddens.
- There will be no more death (21:4) — nothing that grieves.
- There will be no more pain (21:4) — nothing that hurts.
- There will be no more night (21:25) — nothing that frightens.
- There will be no more curse (22:3) — nothing that defiles.

So exhaustive is John's list of things that will not be in heaven that we can safely say that heaven is the blessed land of no more.

The Reunion of Tomorrow

First, in heaven there will be nothing that separates — there will be no more sea. When God pulled back the curtain of eternity and showed John the things that were to come, he wrote: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Rev. 21:1).

Why are we given this strange information about heaven — that there will be no more sea? What does it mean?

The sea has always stood for mystery, turmoil, and separation. Before man developed seagoing vessels, the ocean was a mystery. He looked out beyond the horizon and could imagine all kinds of monsters in the water. He even envisioned the end of the world out there. He believed that if he sailed far enough, he would eventually drop off into nothingness. Since they could not sail the seas and explore the great beyond, they stood in awe before the ocean.

More than that, the ocean represented turmoil and unrest. They saw the surf continually pounding the beach, relentlessly, day and night, year after year, always churning, always moving, always dashing. The sea was never a peace, never calm, never still. To them it represented the turmoil of life. Isaiah wrote, "The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest . . . there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked" (Is. 57:20-21). So when John thought of heaven, he thought of it as a place where the mysteries would be cleared and the turmoils of life would vanish away.

But more than anything else, the sea is a symbol of separation. When John wrote the book of Revelation he was in exile on the island of Patmos for preaching the gospel. Patmos was a barren, treeless island off the southwest coast of Asia Minor. John had served on the mainland as pastor at Ephesus for years. He had come to love the people and they loved him. There were bonds of friendship and kinship that nothing could ever break.

But John was separated from these people by the sea. How lonely John must have been on Patmos.

Gone were all the other apostles. Gone was the fellowship of the church and all his Christian friends. No matter which way John looked, there was only the ocean. Many days, he must have stood on the shore and looked out across the horizon toward Ephesus and in his mind's eye seen his friends whom he loved and longed for so much. The one thing that stood between John and his beloved Christian friends was the ocean. The sea was a barrier. He longed for the time when the barrier that separated him from them would be gone.

Then, as he thought of heaven, the Lord revealed to him that there would be no more sea. The things that separate us from God and our loved ones will be gone forever.

You and I are exiles on this earth, separated from our loved ones and from the saints who have gone before. I think of family members and close friends of days past who have gone to be with the Lord. And I long for the time when that which separates us shall be no more.

An elderly Christian woman was grief-stricken after the death of her daughter. To adjust, she boarded a ship from England to New York City to visit her other daughter. While at sea a severe storm struck. Passengers frantically raced for lifeboats. The elderly lady showed no signs of panic. A young seaman excitedly said, "Lady, don't you know we may sink and all die?" "Young man," she quietly replied, "I have one daughter in heaven and one daughter in New York City, and it really doesn't matter to me which one I see first."

Many of our loved ones are already there awaiting us. And the Lord is there. God hasten the day when there will be no more sea!

When the Tears Shall be Wiped Away

Second, in heaven there will be nothing that saddens — there will be no more tears. Tears are part of life. They are the normal expression for the emotion of sorrow. However, to modern society, they are portrayed as a sign of weakness.

In the filming of the movie classic, *Gone With the Wind*, the director tried to get Clark Gable to cry during the scene when Rhett discovers that Scarlet is alive and has not died of a miscarriage. Gable, fearful that tears would hurt his leading-man image, refused. No amount of arguing could seem to change his mind. Such is the view of modern society concerning tears.

Tears, of course, are not a sign of weakness. Jesus wept at the graveside of his friend Lazarus. He wept in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wept over the lostness and rejection of Jerusalem.

There's enough evil in society — injustice, racism, poverty and squalor — to make us weep. And there are heartaches aplenty in our lives.

But John tells us in heaven God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes and there shall be neither sorrow nor crying. Former things will have passed away. The reasons for crying will be gone forever.

Think about it for a moment — no broken homes

and no broken hearts in heaven. No drug abuse and no child abuse up there. No cancer and no crime in mansions above — and no reason to cry. That will be a new kind of place. It will be life as God intended it to be.

Empty Chairs — Empty Tables

Third, in heaven there will be nothing that grieves — there will be no more death.

Death is the oldest and most persistent enemy of man. Since the first person died, man has stood terrified in death's presence. Francis Bacon was right when he said, "Men fear death as children fear to go into the dark; and as the natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other."

We all desire to cheat death, but none of us succeeds. We all have the sentence of death upon us. The Bible says, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" Rom. 5:12).

And what grief death has brought to the world. In *Les Miserables*, the musical based on Victor Hugo's novel, Marius' haunting voice reminds us of the tragedy of death. During the French Revolution his young comrades die in the streets of Paris on the barricade at dawn. Marius' reflective contemplation characterizes every one of us to some degree.

*There's a grief that can't be spoken
There's a pain goes on and on
Empty chairs at empty tables
Now my friends are dead and gone.*

*O my friends, my friends, forgive me
That I lived and you are gone
There's a grief that can't be spoken
There's a pain goes on and on.*

*Phantom faces at the window
Phantom shadows on the floor
Empty chairs at empty tables
Where my friends will meet no more.*

*O my friends, my friends, don't ask me
What your sacrifice was for
Empty chairs at empty tables
Where my friends will sing no more.*

We all know about “empty chairs at empty tables and friends we’ll see no more.” At least, not this side of heaven.

But, there is a land where there will be no more death. In heaven death will be swallowed up in victory. Then we will shout, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:55, 57).

Think of it — no ambulances screaming down

golden streets there. No funeral wreaths hung on mansion doors in the sky. No obituary columns in heavenly newspapers. No stone chisellers carving epitaphs above. No cemeteries on windswept hill-sides up there. There will be no more death.

The Ultimate Healing

Fourth, in heaven there will be nothing that hurts — there will be no more pain. Studdert Kennedy says that the person who is undisturbed by the problem of pain suffers from either a hardening of the heart or a softening of the brain.

Those of us who have walked the road of sickness and death, who have watched our loved ones waste away in pain, who have cried to God and received no answer, look forward to the land where there will be no pain.

Helen Keller was a remarkable woman. Born blind and deaf, she was taught to speak by the painstaking efforts of Anne Sullivan. As a result of her triumph over adversity she became an inspiration to millions around the world.

When she was in her 70s Miss Keller was asked by a friend, “Do you believe in life after death?”

“Most certainly,” she said emphatically. “It’s no more than passing from one room into another.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then, slowly and very distinctly, with uncharacteristic clarity, Miss Keller spoke again: “There is a difference for me, you

know. Because in that other room, I shall be able to see.”

John Broadbanks was a faithful New Zealand pastor who served his people with a loving heart and tender hands for more than 30 years. After his death, his wife, in a letter to his longtime friend, F.W. Boreham, told of his last day. He had always been a sturdy, vigorous, robust man. While having breakfast on Sunday morning, a message came saying one of his parishioners had taken a critical turn in the night and was about to die.

John had visited her faithfully, so he left the table, completed his preparation for the morning worship service, and set out for her cottage.

She wrote, “He must have stayed longer than he intended, and, as a result, had to hurry back. The rush, added to the emotional strain of taking farewell of Gladys, as well as the anxiety as to whether he would be in time for the service, was too much for him. He was looking very pale, the officers say, when he arrived at the vestry. He just smiled; walked around to his big-armed chair; threw himself into it; and was gone. God had ‘laid his hand upon his heart and healed it forever.’”

Think of it — no blind eyes in heaven. No hand gnarled by arthritis. No twisted legs hobbling down celestial sidewalks. No one there ever again wasted by cancer. God will lay his hand on us and heal us forever. There the sea is gone. Tears are gone. Death is gone. And pain is gone. It will be life as God intended it to be.

Afraid to Go to Sleep

Fifth, in heaven, there will be nothing that frightens. There will be no more night there.

Psychologists tell us that fear is the most universal emotion. From infancy we are afraid of loud noises, of the dark, and of a thousand other real or imaginary things.

Life was meant to be an exciting adventure; yet for millions of people, the adventure is haunted by fear. We fear cancer, storms, crime, and losing our job. We fear losing our health, our wealth, our friends, and our family. George Bernard Shaw said, "There is only one universal passion, and that is fear."

Darkness especially frightens us. Who among us has not whistled while walking down a dark road at night just to bolster his own courage? Who has not sat by the side of a sick child in the dark hours of the night and longed for the morning? There is something dreadful and fearful about the night.

I stood by the bedside of a young mother dying of cancer. She said to me, "Pastor, I'm so afraid to go to sleep at night. I'm afraid I won't wake up."

But in that city, "the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there."

The things that frighten and terrify will be gone forever. The gates will never be closed because it will never be dark and there will be nothing to be afraid of.

The Curse is Gone

Finally, in heaven there will be nothing that defiles — there will be no more curse. When Adam and Eve sinned, the reverberations were felt throughout all creation. When they sinned, physical nature fell as well as human nature (Gen. 3:17-19). Few people realize the far-reaching effects of sin on the natural order. When man sinned, all of creation was affected.

The apostle Paul tells us the state of the earth is as bad as the state of man and that all creation groans for redemption (Rom. 8:22). This means that the physical order is under the curse of sin, just as humans are.

Some people are puzzled by all the devastation and loss due to natural calamities. They wonder, “How can God love us and allow this?”

But God is not to be blamed for these things even though they are often labeled as “acts of God.” They are not his direct handiwork. They are the result of the curse of sin on the natural order.

Cyclones, hurricanes, famine, pestilence, and volcanoes are just the groans and sighs of nature. Man’s sin put thorns on roses, fierceness in beasts, and storms in the wind. But in heaven there will be no more curse. God’s final redemption will include heaven and earth as well as man (2 Peter 3:13).

And, if there will be no curse in heaven, then there are some people who won’t be there either.

John writes, “And there shall in no wise enter into

it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27).

The Greek word translated *abominable* refers to all kinds of immorality. It literally refers to those who engage in filthy, disgusting, shameful things. Those who make a lie are those who live and speak deceitfully. These shall "in no wise" enter into heaven. The Greek word translated *in no wise* literally means *by no means*, or *under no circumstances*.

Heaven is a holy place and nothing that defiles man will have a place there. Those who practice these things will be cast into the lake of fire (v. 8).

Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter into heaven. Who is the Lamb? Let John the Baptist tell us. He met Jesus on one of his preaching missions and announced, "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Is your name written in the Lamb's book of life? It's not enough to have your name written on the church roll. It's not enough to have your name written in the old family Bible. It is not enough to have your name written on a baptismal certificate. It must be written in the Lamb's book of life. And, it is written there by faith when we commit our lives to him.

I don't like tears, and in heaven God shall wipe away all tears from my eyes. I don't like darkness, and up there will be no night. I don't like clouds, and that will be the land of unclouded days. I don't like

pain, and neither shall there be any more pain. I don't like death, and nobody dies there. I don't like sorrow, and over there we do not weep. I don't like separation, and there will be no more sea.

There in the blessed land of no more the curse will be gone. If you feel that life is unfair, if you believe there is no justice in this world, wait for heaven. There, for the first time, we will know life as God intended it to be.

H.C. Morrison, following a lifetime of missionary service in China, was returning home for the last time. It so happened that he was coming to the United States on the same ship which carried Teddy Roosevelt. The president had been on a safari in Africa. As the ship passed Sandy Hook and came toward New York Harbor, there were signs of welcome all around. Barges floated out with blaring bands; flags, banners, and streamers were everywhere in sight. Firefighting boats sprayed their welcome to the sky.

Morrison realized that all of this fanfare was for the president returning from a holiday. He then fell into the grip of self-pity. He knew that no one would be meeting him at the dock. As he recalled what he had tried to do in China he realized how little anyone cared. So he folded his hands and leaned on the deck rail, feeling sorry for himself, and thought, "I gave most of my lifetime to China, and he gave only two weeks. Yet there are thousands welcoming him home and nobody here to welcome me." Then he heard a voice come to him like the sound of many waters. It said, "But you are not home yet!"

When you get to heaven, it will be life as God intended it to be. It will be the land of no more.

Hallelujah! And amen!

